

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Angela Mandie-Filer,
Papua New Guinea

This case study is one in a series exploring how ten Pacific women working in diverse roles and contexts understand and practice ‘everyday leadership’. Regardless of their formal position or title, these women are undertaking the day-to-day work that helps influence positive change for their communities, organisations and countries.

Angela Mandie-Filer has almost 40 years’ experience in leadership roles in academia, private consultancy, and the public service in the areas of gender equality and community development. As an academic at the University of Papua New Guinea and later as a researcher at the Commission for Higher Education, Angela sought to expand access to higher education, particularly for women. Her interest in gender issues has also been a key focus of her consultancy work over the last 25 years, where she advises government and development organisations on women’s rights, health policy, and social development. Angela’s commitment to making a difference in her country has also seen her run as a candidate in national elections in 2002, 2012 and 2017.

In this discussion with Mercy Masta, Angela shares what leadership means to her and how to lead change. For Angela, leadership is about being accessible to her community and standing up for important issues. It can be challenging, but she emphasises putting principles first and choosing battles wisely. Managing expectations is key, and she stresses the importance of being able to support the change you are advocating for—through time, resources, or financial support—rather than simply talking about change.

When did you first recognise yourself as a leader, and who inspired that sense of leadership?

I assumed leadership at a very young age, during my teenage years. I was 17 or 18 years old and had just started university when the National Council of Women had its first convention in Vanadidir, Rabaul in 1976. Felicia Dobunaba and I were invited as young leaders. I don't know exactly how they chose us, but that particular meeting, I think, sealed our fate. The women leaders at the time, people like Rose Tokiel and Nelly Tololo, they were very serious women leaders. By serious, I mean they took the contribution of women in developing Papua New Guinea very seriously. They weren't graduates; the highest among them may have completed only grade six or seven. But they were fierce leaders, committed to ensuring women's presence in guiding our young nation. It gave me ideas about being a women leader, just watching these women. It was something that I probably unconsciously put in my head, that I will follow these ladies, and I will continue to stand out and be a leader and do what I can to help others.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders pay close attention to how they relate and present themselves to those around them, focusing on being approachable and listening to others.

What does leadership mean to you?

For me, leadership is about being accessible. It doesn't matter what time of day or what day of the week—I expect to meet someone when I'm out. You also try to be yourself, because no leader is exactly like another.

Leadership also means standing up and taking action when no one else will take the risk. But it's also about choosing your battles. You don't need to react to everything. You have to consider why you're intervening and for whom.

Can you tell me about a really difficult or complex change that you have tried to implement?

In the context of running for parliament, all candidates encounter corruption. There's always someone saying, "I'll give you special protection, or 20 votes, if you give me this amount of money." That's difficult, but you have to put your principles first.

I want to get into parliament because I feel I can contribute. From the outside, no amount of shouting will make a difference. You need to be inside and at the table where decisions are made. That's why I've been trying to get into parliament. We've been shouting for so long, but it's because we are not at the table where decisions are made.

During my campaign, some men tried to speak on my behalf. I had to make it clear from the beginning that anything about my path to parliament would come from me. Working with men can be tricky—they can become the focus while you become the shadow.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders contribute their own time and skills to address issues they feel strongly about.

If you think of a time when you had to bring people with different interests together to achieve change. For example, through your work in rural communities, how did you identify the people you needed to work with, and how do you convince others to support your ideas?

First, you have to be resourceful and follow through. Don't make empty promises just for the sake of appearances. Check whether you have the capacity—financially or in terms of time—before you commit. Don't talk just because everyone else is talking. You need to really assess your capacity to meet the expectation.

Second, no two people show up to a meeting on the same page. You need to be aware of the context and who else is present. That helps guide what you say and how you say it.

Have there been times when the change you've advocated for involved risks?

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders understand that change takes time and that new ideas need to be framed in ways that are sensitive to the social and cultural context.

One key change I advocate for is educating all the girls in my clan. That means putting pressure on my nephews and nieces to send their girls to school. If they don't have the money, I contribute to school fees. If you want to create change, you have to make it happen yourself. People in the village often want girls to go to school but can't afford fees. If you just shout "school, school" without support, it's empty advocacy. You have to make part of the change you're suggesting happen yourself.

If I'm suggesting something that needs external resources which they don't have, I have to find a way of supporting them. I've also helped one group in the community by securing funding from the Canadian Development Fund to generate income from coffee processing so children could attend school.

Everyone isn't in the same thinking space, so communication matters. If you talk too much, people might even marry off their girls to remove the concern. My nephews are younger than me and seniority matters in the village context. As their auntie and matriarch, my words carry weight.

Have you faced challenges as a woman in leadership?

Sometimes the discrimination or exclusion comes from educated men—CEOs, chairmen of boards—men you would expect to be gender-savvy and appreciate women for who they are and what they can contribute.

They're also often intimidated by smart women. If you're in the same room, you can see it—they fear we might take over the space because they're sharing it with us. But we know that men can share power and leadership without losing any.

How do we help men to see it's about sharing power?

We need to open up the gender space. It shouldn't be limited to gender advisors. Gender equality and equal participation should be public knowledge, inclusive for all. Then men will recognise it's not about women taking over.

What is the most challenging thing about leading change?

The hardest part is ensuring people understand where you are trying to take them. Change is unknown, so you have to explain very clearly how the change will lead to a good thing, or where it is likely to end up.

Some issues have existed forever, and there's a knowledge gap between older and younger women in PNG. Young women often don't know the efforts women have made because it hasn't been documented or taught.

That's why I'm thinking of a reset—to remind ourselves of the last 50 years and map out the next 50. I don't want to be in my grave and see that, 100 years later, there are still only three women in parliament. So we need to reset for the change we want to see happen—more representation by women in parliament.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders derive legitimacy from their relationships and their embeddedness within communities.

The younger generation needs to be inspired by what we have achieved, and it is our responsibility to make sure they know. I believe the community needs to understand that a great deal of effort has already been invested. It is time for the community to recognise and reward women for their contribution.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Everyday leaders recognise that fostering leadership in others, particularly the next generation, is essential for achieving lasting, collective change.

What has helped you become a leader? Who is your support system?

Initially, it was my father. He didn't have sons at that stage, only daughters (our brothers came much later), so he decided to educate us all.

I also get great support from my husband. He doesn't overload me with expectations of being a wife and mother, even though I take those roles and responsibilities seriously. At the same time, I know he won't tell me what I should be doing. It's my responsibility to not be selfish, to consider the family, and to acknowledge that there are times when I need to be available for my family—and times, which is most of the time, when I am available to the public.

All of this can be quite draining and takes up your time and resources. How do you manage your energy levels and care for yourself?

You have to prioritise what is important for you at the time and acknowledge that priorities change. You need to choose your battles. You don't need to be everywhere. It's okay to skip a church mothers' meeting.

I try to eat well and manage my phone, turning it off after 10 pm to give myself some personal time—unless, of course, there's an emergency. So many people want to communicate with you that you need to ask yourself, "What am I going to contribute here? Or can I suggest they do something else or see someone else?" I delegate whenever I can. I also play golf and enjoy gardening—that's my me time.

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