

## Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

### CASE STUDY

#### Elizabeth Erasito, Fiji

Elizabeth Erasito, whose leadership story is featured in this case study series, passed away in October 2025. WLI honours her legacy and the lasting impact of her work across Fiji and the Pacific.

**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.**

As Director of the National Trust of Fiji, Elizabeth Erasito leads Fiji’s efforts to conserve its natural and cultural heritage. She oversees nine protected areas in Fiji, including the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park, Waisali Rainforest Reserve, and the Yadua Taba Crested Iguana Sanctuary. During her almost 25 years with the National Trust, Elizabeth has been instrumental in securing funding for initiatives that protect Fiji’s special places and connect people to their heritage.

In this discussion with Lorissa Hazelman, Elizabeth shares what leadership means to her and how to lead complex change. For Elizabeth, leadership is about building the capacity of others and supporting their growth. She recognises that meaningful change takes time, as it requires people to think and act differently. She understands that conservation efforts must be approached in ways that are socially, culturally, and historically sensitive to the community.

## To start with, do you see yourself as a leader? Why or why not?

Yes, I see myself as a leader. I lead to achieve change for the better. I'm not only participating—I'm leading and making decisions that influence that change. I look at the big picture and what it means for the organisation.

I work individually with staff to help them develop their own vision and see where they want to be in five to ten years' time. We build a bridge from where they are now to where they want to be, and I help them cross that bridge. The key element is helping them believe in their capacity to achieve it. In doing so, this contributes to change at both the strategic and individual levels. That's how we get the whole organisation moving forward.

## What does leadership mean to you?

For me, leadership means growth—and growth can take many forms. First of all, I have to grow myself. I can't grow my team if I don't grow personally. I must be continuously learning.

Leadership is also about having a collective vision and working together to achieve it. It means being aware of my team. Every day, I make a point to get up from my desk, walk around the office, and talk to individual staff. My purpose is to connect with them so they know I'm present and available.

Leadership is also about integrity, compassion, and trust. I must walk the path of integrity, be compassionate, and foster trust. To do that, I have to truly know my team.

## Can you tell me about a time when you had to bring people with different interests together to achieve change?

I chaired a national-level committee focused on natural protected areas. Before that, we didn't have a formal committee to oversee this work, even though we had been trying to establish one. We also lacked protected area legislation—these areas were governed by around 24 to 26 different pieces of legislation.

### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

**Everyday leaders build the capacity and confidence of others to lead, nurturing their growth and professional development.**

The first step was to set up a committee and give it a legal mandate. We structured it under the Environment Management Act, and I chaired it for six years. By the end, we had achieved a national protected areas system for Fiji—both terrestrial and marine. This was challenging because we had representation from various government ministries as well as local, regional, and international NGOs, which often held differing or opposing views

## How did you manage that process?

The National Trust received the funds to support this work, and we shared those funds among committee members to help them carry out required activities. Sharing the grant helped build ownership of the process.

As chair, I guided the meetings and ensured that trust, integrity, and communication remained central. These positive relationships enabled us to achieve the goals the committee had set.

## How do you convince others to support you and your ideas?

We grounded the action plan in the International Convention on Biological Diversity and national policy frameworks such as the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. We then developed terms of reference outlining the roles and responsibilities of the technical committee, linking it to the Environment Management Act.

The key lesson here is that if you have a good idea and want to implement it, you must ground it in policy and legislation. That gives you the mandate for what you're doing—especially when working at the national level.

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

On Monuriki Island, there is a critically endangered species—the Fijian crested iguana. Our program involved getting approval to take breeding pairs off the island, breed them in captivity, and then reintroduce their offspring back onto the island.

The difficulty was that the community used the island to keep goats, which were an important source of livelihoods for them. For the program to succeed, the goats would have to be removed. The community had previously resisted conservation efforts for this reason.

We began by sitting down with the community—without government officials—and simply talked. We didn't start by proposing to remove the goats. Instead, we talked about the iguana: how unique it was, and its endangered status. Once they understood, they agreed to let us take breeding pairs.

As an organisation, we were committed to a rights-based approach to conservation. While removing the goats would help the iguanas, it would also affect the community's livelihoods. We discussed this at length with the community and explored alternatives, including the potential for tourism income from the iguanas.

#### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

**Everyday leaders work with others toward a shared vision, fostering collaboration and trust.**

Eventually, the decision came from the community: they would put their goats elsewhere to safeguard the iguanas. We agreed on a cost per goat. The community was involved in mustering the goats and they were all taken off the island to a new location the community had identified. The proceeds were used—at the community's request—to purchase a boat for tourism activities and other community needs.

It took ten years, but eventually the breeding pairs were successfully reintroduced. It was the first captive-bred reintroduction of an endangered species in Fiji.

#### **This was originally a five year project?**

Yes, but it took longer than five years, because it takes time to implement conservation efforts successfully. Unfortunately, the donor discontinued funding after the first five-year period because not all goals had been met. In reality, the timeline wasn't realistic, but we considered the project a success. We understood the donor's limitations but didn't let that deter us. The funding ended in 2015, and we continued with our own resources until completion.

#### **Have there been times when the change you've advocated for has involved risks? How have you handled this?**

Yes. The National Trust has limited resources, so in order to progress, we have to take risks. Because otherwise you won't grow. You'll just be limited by the resources that you have. So, risk taking is a big factor of my work. I just wear the consequences. I think about ways that we can mitigate the negative outcomes, and ultimately, we go ahead and take the risk.

An example is building staff capacity and finding new projects to retain them once existing projects end. This always involves risk, but planning together from the start helps. Everyone at the National Trust understands that this organisation is a stepping stone—they're encouraged to grow and move on when the time is right.

#### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

**Everyday leaders listen to people's concerns and work toward solutions that respect the community and its social, cultural, and historical context.**

#### **What do you think is the most difficult or challenging thing about leading change?**

People are often comfortable with what they know—they stay in their comfort zone. Anything outside of that is met with resistance. When you're leading change, you really have to understand the context of the community. If you come in without that knowledge, even with all your good intentions, the change you're trying to implement will be difficult.

#### **What things have helped you become a leader?**

Creating strategic partnerships—understanding our work from a global perspective while connecting it to what we're doing locally—has been key.

Other important factors include ensuring opportunities for others, learning to build trust, and acknowledging mistakes. When I make a mistake, I own up to it. I'm not afraid of that. Having good mentors for advice and guidance has also been invaluable.

### Who is your support system?

At work, my support system is the management team. They're an extension of me and they're critical to my work. Without them, I don't think I would be successful. They're empowered and trained to run the office without me if needed. Having that support allows me to focus on strategic work like fundraising and proposal writing.

At home, my support system is my family—my husband, parents, aunt, and siblings.

#### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

**The day-to-day work of everyday leaders involves creating and nurturing the relationships that enable people to work together.**

### How do you manage your energy levels and care for yourself?

I'll start by saying that I didn't always do this—I learned the hard way. I used to give 110% to everything.

Now, I take regular visits to the spa and hairdresser, do stretching exercises, get routine medical checks, and spend time with close friends. I schedule breakfast, lunch, or dinner dates with them. I take family holidays throughout the year, eat healthily, and make sure I sleep well. My spiritual life is also very important to me in everything that I do.

I'm also a mother and grandmother and I have responsibilities to my extended family and so forth. I'm also a cancer survivor. That's when I learnt self-care; sitting down and thinking that I might not be here for my daughter and every milestone in her life. It really changed my perspective and I realised time was important – taking time for myself and time for my family.

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