

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Ipul Powaseu,
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.

Ipul Powaseu has been an advocate for disability rights and disability inclusion for almost two decades. She was instrumental in advocacy that led to Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability in 2013 and in developing a draft Disability Bill. In 2009, she established the PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons, which she led until 2018. Her leadership saw the creation of a network of subnational organisations of people with disabilities across PNG’s 20 provinces as well as a nation-wide network for women with disabilities. Ipul has contributed to regional and global discussions on disability issues, including the intersection of climate change and disability, and indigeneity, gender and disability. In 2021, Ipul’s significant contribution to the disability sector was recognised with a Queen’s Honour medal.

In this discussion, Ipul shares with Mercy Masta what leadership looks like in her everyday work. For Ipul, everyday leadership is about influencing change for people with disabilities, drawing motivation from her own lived experience. She understands that meaningful change takes time, and she focuses on identifying and nurturing “champions” who can help drive that change forward.

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

I guess it depends on what you mean by leadership or leader. For me, a leader is someone who leads — not someone who directs. I always say, this is my type of leadership: I may know the path forward, whether it's a new area of responsibility or a new way of doing things, but if the people I'm guiding don't understand it, then I'm not a good leader. My approach is to move forward alongside others, showing them where the opportunities are, but allowing them to take the initiative and open the door themselves.

What does leadership mean to you?

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders develop their identity as a leader by reflecting on themselves and the roles they play as well as through their observations about how others act towards them.

I think it's about building the next generation of people to take on the roles they aspire to lead in. I want to build the capacities of those that are working with me to take the lead, and I can take a step back. For me, leadership is leading for transformation.

What have been some of the challenges you have experienced in your leadership, and how did you overcome them?

When I was first elected president of the PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons, people's understanding of disability was still very limited. People with disabilities saw themselves as *turangu* (helpless) and as victims. If you want something to change, you have to change yourself first.

So I developed a set of training programs for the disability leaders in the country. It took quite a while for them to change that mindset about being victims. But over the 10 years that I led the movement, I've seen a lot of changes in terms of them now fighting for their rights.

But the big challenge was that while we could fight for our rights, we also had to help the government understand how to implement what we were asking for, to see that transformation needs to happen both at the individual and societal levels — including changes to policy and institutional barriers. That is still a struggle in this country.

I've now moved into the development space to help transform understanding of what we're fighting for. It's still a big task.

But there are a lot more discussions around disability now. It's no longer just GEDSI, where disability was the silent "D." It's becoming more prominent. People are talking about it, and I think there's momentum for all development partners to start focusing on this area.

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

When I was working with leaders in the disability movement, I realised we couldn't do it alone. We needed to work with duty bearers — government and civil society organisations. We started meeting with both groups to discuss issues and identify where each of us could contribute to change in PNG. That's when people began seeing disability in a different light, and policies started being developed. There were more consultations with people with disabilities and greater support from development partners. That understanding became more real.

How did you do that? How did you connect people together?

It's about knowing who's who. For me, being in this space, I've often said I never wanted to be identified as a person with disabilities — but I realised that was my identity. And I saw that many people were still struggling and crying out for help. That's how I got into the movement and took on leadership, encouraged by the leaders at that time.

I was able to do that because I knew the government system — I worked in it. So, knowing the networks and stakeholders was crucial. You have to tread carefully, because there are still cultural norms and social structures that need to change. As a leader you need to know who is going to help you to make change happen. I actually surveyed who was out there. I started looking for champions within different spaces. When I tried to get political will, I looked at the wives of political leaders, and I worked through them, so they would talk to their husbands or partners.

At end of 2024, we did an infrastructure review and accessibility audit for one of our partners. I told one of the senior staff to use my wheelchair. I said, “I want you to feel how people feel when they come to your centre.” After that two-hour exercise, he said, “I really feel it.” That experience stayed with him. That’s how I create champions — through strategies like that.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Lived experience of exclusion and marginalisation can motivate leaders and give them a different kind of legitimacy.

That’s very powerful. Can you tell me about a time when a change you were pursuing involved some people losing power — even if the change was good for development — and how you handled that?

When we started the disability movement, some service providers told me they felt threatened. I said, “You shouldn’t see us as a threat. The fact that we’re raising our own voices means you can provide better services to us.” I explained that we each have our own roles to play. If you really want to improve your services, we should be your allies. We can tell you which services aren’t working, and together we can talk to the government to change policies. That creates more opportunities for everyone and improves service delivery. For me, it’s about finding that common ground to work together.

As a woman leader, have you faced challenges linked to gender? How do you think men and women lead differently?

Yes, especially in terms of cultural roles for men and women. My grandson calls us the Baby Boomers — he’s Gen Alpha — and I know there’s even a Gen Beta now! It’s about understanding different generations, because with each comes different perspectives on gender roles and norms.

If we haven’t made enough progress on gender, it will also be difficult to advance disability rights, because both are about inequality and oppression. For me, because I understand my male counterparts, I don’t find it difficult. But within the disability space, I’ve had situations with men who resisted my leadership. When that happens, I sit down with them face-to-face to talk it through.

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

The biggest challenge is getting people to truly understand the cause. You need to know *why* you’re doing what you’re doing.

I see young people in my village forming groups, and I tell them: “If you’re setting this up just to get funding, forget about it.” Leaders need the right attitude and a clear purpose.

I tell young women who want to contest elections: “You need to know why you’re taking on this role. Leadership is a tough job — the weight of your province and of women in this country will be on your shoulders. If you’re doing it for the title or the position, forget about it.” Leadership is about carrying people’s burdens, listening to their needs, and finding ways to ease them.

What things do you think have helped you to become a leader?

When I look back, I realise I was actually a leader from a young age. In primary school, I was a class captain. In high school, a class leader. When I went to national high school, I was the only female ombudswoman for the school.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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.

Everyday leaders help others understand that they have an important part to play in change.

My mother was my role model. She only went to grade two or three, but she was a leader in the village — the women’s club president. I admired how she carried herself and spoke so confidently, even without formal education. She was the daughter of a chief, and I think I gained confidence from her example. Parents can be powerful role models.

Who is your support system?

It's interesting — because of my disability, my parents didn't want me to go to school. But deep down, my father wanted me to be someone, even if he never said it aloud. When I graduated and returned to the village to say thank you, he finally said it. So, in my early years, my parents, especially my father, were my support system.

My teachers also supported me. In high school, I was very sick in my second year and missed the whole first term. I was ready to withdraw [from school], but my English teacher said, "No, we want her to come back." He made sure I got all the materials to catch up — and in the end, I won the English prize. So, my teachers were my support system from primary school to university.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Leaders' identity and legitimacy is shaped in both positive and negative ways by social and cultural norms including gender, ability and education.

In my professional life, it's been people who believed in me. For example, Dame Carol [Kidu] saw my potential and pushed me to take on leadership in this space when they were asking for the reserve seats. She said, "You should put in your application." I said, "For what?" She said, "We're trying to choose at least three women." And I looked at her and said, "Do you see any leadership in me?" And she said, "I do." So I put in my application and I went for an interview. I guess it's the people who saw that in me, as I didn't see myself as a leader. It's someone's confidence in you which pushes you on.

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

You have to believe in a higher power that gives you strength. For me, it's about meditation and spending quiet time with God. There are moments when you feel like you're walking this road alone, but reading about others who've walked similar paths gives me courage.

Ultimately, I draw my strength from God. It's a lonely journey — a road less travelled. I always say, "If you want to walk with me, walk with me." Otherwise, I'm walking this journey because I've set my mind to it.

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