

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Layana Menke,
Nauru

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 Nauru’s youngest female doctor, Dr Layana Menke performs life-saving surgery and provides clinical care for her country’s approximately 12,000 citizens at the Republic of Nauru Hospital. After growing up in Nauru, Layana left her home country to study medicine in Cuba, graduating in 2017. In 2024, she was elected President of the Nauru National Youth Council, where she leads advocacy and programs on youth issues and promotes youth inclusion in decision-making.

In this discussion, Layana shares what everyday leadership looks like in her work. For Layana, leadership is about being approachable, listening to others, and advocating on behalf of her patients and community. She demonstrates leadership by role-modelling how young people can take the lead to inspire the next generation, and by setting an example as a doctor of how to care for both physical and mental wellbeing.

Do you see yourself as a leader? Why or why not?

Being a doctor, you're seen as a leader, but I try to be approachable. I do see myself as a leader, but I try not to show it too much.

What made you choose to be this type of leader?

When I was little—well before I became a doctor—I was already friends with a lot of people. I was president of the youth church group and head class captain, so I was already doing leadership work in secondary school and within the church.

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

When I was training at the hospital, many people and patients would tell me, "We want a doctor who's approachable, who listens to us, and who we're not afraid to talk to."

I was involved in many groups when I was younger, and that experience has been useful now. Back then, I had close conversations with people from all walks of life. Now that I've reached this stage, I try to stay the same—true to myself and approachable.

Can you tell us a little a bit about why you chose to be a doctor in Nauru?

I went to high school in Fiji, and after I graduated, I returned to Nauru. Back then, there weren't many options—it was either education or health. I never actually saw myself as a doctor, but I knew I liked helping people.

When I applied for a job in the health system, I started off as a dental trainee. From there, I applied for a scholarship to study medicine in Cuba because I thought I could help more people as a doctor. Once I started studying, I slowly grew into it. Since then, I've just kept moving forward, never looking back.

Did anyone inspire you to care for others while growing up?

When I was little, I used to take care of my grandmother. I think that's where it came from. I would get her medications, give them to her, and stay with her in the hospital.

We don't always realise it while growing up, but sometimes the path in front of you is already set—you just don't see it until later.

Can you share what challenges you've faced when leading change?

As a female doctor, it's been challenging. In the history of Nauru, there have only ever been three female doctors practising medicine. There's Dr. Angelique, who was the first female doctor and graduated about six years before me, and Dr. Grace, who graduated a year before me. Then there's me.

Dr. Angelique has done postgraduate studies in paediatrics, and Dr. Grace completed a master's in public health and traditional medicine. I'm still a general medical officer and deciding what to specialise in.

Nauru is a matriarchal country, but as female doctors working alongside male colleagues, it can still be difficult. Sometimes when I speak, I feel like I'm not heard, or like I'm not taken seriously. But I don't let that stop me, because I know I'm the voice of most of my people.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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

Experiences of exclusion can be powerful motivations to persist with contesting ideas and changing mindsets.

I'm also the President of the Nauru National Youth Council. As a youth leader, I sit with my colleagues and try to guide them. It's hard, because in Pacific culture, elders often don't listen to young people—they think, "You're just a kid." At first, that was a real challenge. But after a year of standing our ground, we've started to be recognised.

We've met with the Australian High Commissioner, the Minister of Internal Affairs (who is also the Minister for Youth Affairs), and other Ministers. People are beginning to listen. I put myself in that position to be a voice for young people—my patients, my peers—so that they can be heard.

The biggest challenge for me is being heard, not just for myself, but for everyone else. At the start, people laughed at me. But now, they're starting to take me seriously. It wasn't easy, but I kept moving forward and kept challenging.

My community listens to me, but it's in the workplace and in the Youth Council where I face the most challenges—being heard as a leader and as a woman. I know it will continue, but I won't stop, because many people rely on me.

What are some of the concerns that you are dealing with as leader of the Nauru National Youth Council?

The main challenge we face with youth is capturing their attention. Many have been neglected for so long that they believe no one will listen to them. What they forget is that this is the age to start taking responsibility—not just for themselves, but for their families and their communities.

If they learn responsibility now, they can make mistakes while they still have people to guide them and help them up again.

Motivating young people to dream is one of the hardest parts of being a leader—encouraging them to do things that will help our country in the future. They're the leaders of tomorrow, but when they're told that in school, they laugh. That saddens me because it's not a joke. It also frightens me sometimes, because I want to see true leaders emerge for the future.

As a leader, how do you look after yourself and your wellbeing?

There have been days when I've cried—I'm not going to lie. Being a doctor is never easy, and being a female doctor is even more challenging. I've cried myself to sleep and cried to my mum. She would tell me, "You chose this career. You knew what you were getting into. You need to be strong."

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Self-care is important to avoid burnout.

Setting an example and role modelling self-care can be a powerful example for others in the community to take care of themselves too.

I've had relationships fall apart. I'm a single working mother, and my job is demanding. But when I see my patients smile, those little moments push me forward.

About a year and a half ago, I realised I needed time out. I made it my mission to get better mentally and physically—for my son. Talking with my brother and sister-in-law, they joined me in exercising, and it brought us closer as a family.

The community noticed too—people would say, "She's a doctor; if she can do it, we can too." Exercise became my stress release and my healing. Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I put on my sneakers and walk or run a lap around the airstrip.

My family has been my biggest support. My brother and sister-in-law, my four sisters, and my mother have all helped me tremendously. When I need to work late, attend a meeting, or exercise, they look after my son. They've been a big support to me.

What are two things you would say to a young girl in Nauru thinking about whether she can make a difference?

First, focus on your small goals every day. Achieve them little by little, and they'll grow into big goals. Never be afraid to start small—those small steps make a big difference.

Second, the sky is the limit. Never limit yourself. The last thing I was told in high school was: *"Always aim for the moon, because if you miss, you'll land among the stars."* And remember, when one door closes, another one always opens.

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