

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Adimaimalaga
Tafuna'i, Samoa

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.

Originally from Fiji, Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i is a social entrepreneur and co-founder of Women in Business Development Inc. (WIBDI), an organisation that empowers women in rural Samoa through village-based economic development. She also helped found the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community, which works with agricultural communities to promote organic agriculture. Adi's work has been recognised through numerous awards. In 2014, she was appointed to the Order of Merit of Samoa. She is also a member of the WLI Steering Committee.

In this discussion with Ruth Faleolo, Adi shares what leadership means to her and what's helped her become a leader. For Adi, leadership is not about being at the front but guiding from behind the scenes. She has developed her leadership by learning from mistakes, sharing knowledge with others, and mentoring emerging women leaders from the Pacific. Teamwork, collaboration, and paying it forward to the next generation are central to her approach.

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

I'm one of the founding members of the organisation Women in Business Development Inc (WIBDI). We're over 30 years old and operate in Samoa and 11 other Pacific Island countries. But when I think about my leadership journey, I realise I'm not a leader who leads from the front—I'm actually a leader who leads from behind.

Since 2012, I've been mentoring young women leaders in the United States and the Pacific for the University of Hawaii. One thing I've realised through this is that our style of leadership in the Pacific is very different.

What's important to me is being part of a team and making sure that as I work with people, especially with the emerging leaders, that we're asking them to pay things forward in their journeys. I feel it's very important that we try to encourage each other and raise each other up. That's what leadership is all about, paying it forward.

When you were a young woman, what made you to step into a leadership role?

I didn't see it as something I had to consciously choose—it just happened naturally. People say leaders aren't born, but from a very young age, I was already taking on responsibilities, like being head girl in primary school. I often wondered why they chose me—I've never been that upfront person. I'm from Fiji, from the northernmost tip of Vanua Levu. We're from the bush—and yet here I am.

Can you tell us about your journey from Fiji to Samoa and how you established WIBDI?

I married a Samoan and moved here in 1966. It wasn't something I was specifically seeking. I trained as a radiographer and worked in a hospital. But in the early 1990s, Samoa experienced two devastating cyclones and a taro leaf blight. Can you imagine waking up one morning and finding no taro and no leaves to make our *palusami*? So, we decided to try to help people cope with this. From there, it grew into an organisation where we could come together and be more helpful to the community.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leadership is not about the position you hold; it's about working with others towards the collective good.

How did you convince others to support you and your ideas?

It was really difficult in the beginning. We started basically using our own resources. We had no funding. We had nothing. But we just felt so strongly about this that we went ahead and did it. It was also challenging because I wasn't Samoan. For example, one of our projects revived the Samoan fine mat, which was at risk of being lost. Now it's an income-generating project: people can sponsor a fine mat and get paid while weaving. But years ago, I was told off for even thinking of doing this, because I wasn't Samoan. That meant I had to work from the background most of the time.

How did you approach that challenge?

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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

I let the Samoan women I worked with take the lead on everything. My father always taught me, if you start something, you must finish it. I can't remember a time he berated me; he always explained things calmly. That approach stayed with me. I try to do the same with my team. We have a sign in our office that says, "There's no 'I' in team."

Have there been times when the change you have been advocating for involved risks?

I think everything we do involves risk. When we started this organisation, we made so many mistakes, doing things that we didn't really know too much about. But we learned from those mistakes. When working across the Pacific, we share what we've learned and how we handled challenges. We never go into a country telling people, "This is what we do, and you must do it this way." Instead, when someone asks for our help, we invite them to spend a week with us—to see how we work and discover what might be useful for them. Then, once they've seen everything, we send our staff to their country to collaborate and adapt the ideas together.

As a woman leader, have you faced challenges linked to your gender?

Yes, definitely. Even with all the things we do in our organisation, we are still seen as women. And it's not really as important as if a man had gone out and done that. But we continue anyway.

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

People have helped, but it really comes down to how we interact with others. Even now, as I talk about retirement, they still want me as an advisor. When we started the NGO and saw it growing rapidly, I realised I didn't know much about managing an organisation—I was a radiographer! So, I completed a graduate diploma in management to better understand my work. Later, I got involved with the Pacific Island Association of NGOs (PIANGO) and even chaired it for a while. I encouraged other NGOs across the Pacific to take similar courses, because passion alone isn't enough—we need the skills to manage effectively. To support this, we formed a group, went to New Zealand, and worked with UNITEC trainers to make the course more Pacific-oriented. In the end, we delivered around 300 trainings across the Pacific.

You also mentioned mentoring young women in the United States. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

It was an amazing experience. I still remember sitting around the table at first, thinking, "What am I doing here? These kids are so bright—they could mentor me!" One of them has become a well-known poet in America now. She did the prayer at President Biden's inauguration. We had mentors from all over the world, and I was the only one from the Pacific. I would wear my *pule tasi* (two-piece formal gown) and tuck a flower behind my ear. I remember meeting Hillary Clinton and she would always recognise me because I had a flower behind my ear. Once, when I was accepting an award at the UN, two women came by—one of them, a Tongan, said, "I've worked here for so long, and I've never seen a Pacific person here." And she was working there! I felt so proud of her.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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

Who is your support system? How do you manage your energy levels and care for yourself?

My faith in God. I couldn't do anything without that.

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