



## ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

### BACKGROUND

The Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) is a regional initiative of the Australian Government that recognises the pivotal role that leadership plays in development. The program aims to build, apply and share knowledge on 'developmental leadership', that is leadership involving collective action in pursuit of policy and institutional reforms at regional, national and sub-national levels. It supports influential Pacific leaders to shape and lead constructive change and provides them with opportunities and resources to do so. One of PLP's key offerings for Pacific leaders of change is training and support in adaptive leadership.

### METHODOLOGY

Adaptive Leadership training focuses on the practical exercise of leadership. It doesn't offer textbook solutions but rather a range of diagnostic and management tools that leaders can draw on when leading change within an organization or sector. This approach is helping Pacific leaders develop new skills, perspectives and insights to progress their work, build a support base, and overcome barriers and opposition.

Adaptive leadership training in the Pacific has been spearheaded by PLP and the internationally renowned Cambridge Leadership Associates. Training has included a formal leadership development program delivered through three training modules interspersed with strategic coaching to support participants to address their own specific work-based challenges. Through a training-of-trainers component, some participants will also be able to teach the adaptive leadership framework to colleagues in their own countries.

### Key Points

- Leaders from within Pacific regional organisations and civil society organisations are receiving training and coaching on adaptive leadership under the Pacific Leadership Program.
- Participants apply these adaptive leadership skills to build alliances and progress change within their organisations and sectors.
- The adaptive leadership framework is likely to have maximum impact when supporting leaders already actively engaged in reform processes. It is particularly suited to those groups that are traditionally marginalised in Pacific society.

### What is adaptive leadership?

Adaptive Leadership is a practical leadership framework developed by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Heifetz defines adaptive leadership as the: 'practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive' (Heifetz, et al., 2009, p. 14). Adaptive leadership training is designed to help individuals and organizations lead change in times of uncertainty. It gives people skills to identify the right problems to solve, ideas for how to mobilise your stakeholders, and a toolkit to better address future adaptive challenges.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Adaptive leadership training is most effective when there is a careful focus on participant selection; some people will derive more impact from the training than others. Criteria should include those managers who are already leading change or engaged in reform processes, exercising leadership and strategically positioned and committed to making a difference. Ongoing political will and institutional support / cover is needed to undertake Action Research in complex political settings where there are risks associated with thinking and working politically.
- Women, people with disabilities, and people with diverse sexual identities seem to identify the most readily with the adaptive leadership framework. These groups are used to working in more creative, collaborative and politically informed ways to progress their agendas and mobilise support because of their position within Pacific society. They are also used to exercising 'hard' (more formal) and 'soft' (more adaptive, subtle) leadership to achieve their objectives. These factors may give the adaptive leadership training extra resonance.
- Adaptive leadership training is likely to be more effective when trainers can take contextual factors and influences into account. In the Pacific, issues such as- culture, tradition, loyalty, religion, family, titles and roles all impact on the way in which the leadership of the is exercised - and in many cases, resisted. The training-of-trainers funded by PLP will help by providing a pool of trainers who can deliver the training through a Pacific lens. This will create a unique application of the adaptive leadership framework.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- The Adaptive leadership framework views leadership as an activity that anybody can engage in, irrespective of their place in the social system or organization. This makes it an excellent tool to empower minority groups or marginalised people in Pacific societies. Following their adaptive leadership training, activists from marginalised groups often feel that they have a new way to understand reality and move forward with changes that are otherwise very difficult.
- Implementing regional policy reform in the Pacific can be difficult due to diverse cultures, large distances, competing regional and national priorities and divergent stakeholder interests. Adaptive leadership can help by assisting people to understand group dynamics and negotiate solutions. One participant from a Pacific Regional Organisation said that she now approaches negotiations in a new way by: "clarifying the shared purpose, addressing the perceived losses and (ensuring) that everyone involved feels that they have ownership of the solutions."

- Development challenges faced by Pacific leaders are also frequently complex, with no clear or quick technical fix. These adaptive challenges require experimentation and learning as you go. Adaptive leadership is helpful in encouraging leaders to think creatively, take informed risks and work with others (including opponents) to bring about real - and lasting - change.

## REFERENCES

Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow & Marty Linsky, (2009). The Practice of Adaptive Leadership; Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press.



## PLP Briefing Notes

PLP Briefing Notes summarise key findings and lessons learned from research, coalitions and other activities implemented or supported by PLP and its partners. The aim is to inform policymakers and practitioners on emerging themes and issues in PLP's current work and consider the implications of these for wider development policy and practice.

For further information on PLP visit [www.plp.org.fj](http://www.plp.org.fj) or contact Georgina Cope (PLP Team Leader) on [georgina.cope@plp.org.fj](mailto:georgina.cope@plp.org.fj)

