



Calling the island to you

**BECOMING A
WAYFINDING
LEADER**

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► Polynesian navigators offer
powerful leadership lessons

LENGTH : 11 min (2700 words)

Without magnetic compasses, sextants, or maps, and long before European ships had entered the Pacific, Polynesian voyagers were finding their way across 25 million square kilometres of ocean. Over time they discovered and settled a vast number of widely scattered islands, including Aotearoa New Zealand, using navigation techniques, such as reading star paths, swell frequencies, and cloud formations, that were handed down through generations. The feats of the Polynesian navigators have been likened, relative to the technology and knowledge of the times, to the modern moon missions.

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The double-hulled sailing waka that were built to survive rough, ocean-going expeditions have been the inspiration for America's Cup racing catamarans.

And today's GPS systems echo the methods employed by wayfinders to judge position in relation to place markers. Modern day voyagers regularly sail waka around the Pacific and on longer journeys, such as from Auckland to San Francisco. One group is even sailing a waka around the world using traditional navigation techniques, to raise awareness of the plight of the world's oceans.

The great wayfinding tradition of the Polynesian navigators offer a powerful approach to leading people in an uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing world. Wayfinding leaders are able to more effectively release the potential in others and in situations. The practice of wayfinding deepens discernment about what is really going on, while at the same time enabling leaders to be more responsive to subtle shifts and nuances. It develops integrative thinking and perceptiveness – the ability to see connections between things that others do not see and to make sense of complexity. Wayfinding leaders adapt more naturally to change and harness the potential of uncertainty, ambiguity, and the unknown. And they experience greater relaxation, presence and calm – especially in the face of adversity.

Learning to be a wayfinding leader meets the desire of people such as Unilever CEO Paul Polman to enable everyone in the organisation to understand and use their "inner compass". The wayfinding approach resonates with the recent interest in mindfulness training as part of leadership development, as evidenced by the popularity of programmes such as Search Inside Yourself developed by Google.

In writing Wayfinding Leadership I worked with master navigator Hoturoa Barclay Kerr and his Waka Quest business partner John Panoho. Subtitled Ground-breaking Wisdom for Developing Leaders, the book is a home-grown leadership development programme that draws on the distinctive experiences of island people in the South Pacific. It builds bridges to contemporary leadership ideas from around the world while challenging many imported ideas.

To guide the leadership development path we created a framework which we call "The Five Waypoints". Waypoints are reference points for the purpose of navigation and have long been used for journeying. Each of the waypoints connects metaphorically to one part of a double-hulled oceangoing waka. The five waypoints are:

- Orientation on how to lead: relates to the whole waka as a needle and introduces key principles of orientation in wayfinding and leading.
- Implementing values: relates to the hulls of the waka and presents guiding values to orient the leader.
- Human dynamics: relates to the rudder, mast, sails, and mauri stones of the waka and covers identity and self-knowledge, alignment, collective will and wellbeing.
- Deepening practices: relates to the cross beams on the waka and is about

the planks of connectivity that connect values with practices, supporting a holistic view that secures interpersonal relationships.

- Exploring and discovering destinations: speaks to the island where the end is a new beginning. It uncovers new worlds of possibilities for leaders.

Wayfinding Leadership covers many practices, three of which are introduced below.

FOSTERING A PURPOSE OF BECOMING

For the wayfinding leader, "Purpose" is not a static slogan for the boardroom wall or annual report; it is something people are willing to share in and become. A key role of leaders is to foster this shared sense of becoming. From a Māori perspective this concept of becoming is known as tupu, which means "to unfold one's nature". In an organisational context, this means developing people so they are able to express their true nature and fulfil their potential, personally and collectively. It is an integral part of the "Five Wellbeings" approach, in which organisations seek to create economic, social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing.

Such a strategy has been shown to support more conventionally defined views of purpose, including achieving financial goals. Without it, functional purpose

statements miss the fundamental truth that it is the nature of the people that primarily determines the quality of an organisation's journey and what is produced. Our approach aligns with that of Dee Hock, the founder of Visa International, who said: "A purpose is not an objective, it's not a mission statement—a purpose is an unambiguous expression of that which people jointly wish to become".

Wayfinding requires that we become explorers of our world, seeking to discover and shine light upon that which is not seen.

According to philosopher Māori Marsden, the achievement of authentic being is an unfolding process of living an authentic life. In unfolding true nature, wayfinding leaders are drawing from the realm of potential, known as Te Kore. The intention is to transform potential into mauri ora – wellbeing. Viewed from this perspective, the leadership challenge we all face, and our individual and collective purpose, is to be awake to the potential of ourselves, others, and situations, and to then consciously manifest that potential.

Wayfinding requires that we become explorers of our world, seeking to discover and shine light upon that which is not seen. To do this is to sail beyond the compass of our existing knowledge and to traverse uncharted waters in ourselves and the world.

Native American scholar and philosopher Gregory Cajete also captures the ethos of becoming,

which he describes as a movement toward completeness: "... emergence into the world is an evolutionary tale of gradual development towards this concept of being complete as a man or as a woman ... humans are questing for or on the path towards becoming ... it might even be said that we're pre-human, we're questing towards becoming truly human ...".

In Wayfinding Leadership we symbolise the journey to one's true nature as the rudder or hoe – the long-handled steering oar at the stern of the waka. The hoe is very influential; it steers the waka, and helps prevent it from being pushed sideways by prevailing winds and swells.

CALLING THE ISLAND TO YOU

Central to fulfilling the wayfinding purpose of becoming is learning and applying the practice of "calling the island to you".

Some eight years ago, I was sitting at a dinner table with Professor Charles Royal of the University of Auckland, whose field was indigenous development. He enraptured guests with a story about Polynesian navigators. For the purposes of navigation, Professor Royal explained, the wayfinder would conceive of the waka as stationary, whilst the world slid past, much as a train passenger

looking through a carriage window sees the world moving.

By staying "still" wayfinders align to the star path at night, and adjust to the ocean swell by day. Steering is done through sensation as well as sight. They gain important information from observing the tell-tale cloud formations that develop over high islands and over coral atolls and note their colour – islands with heavy vegetation produce a dark tinge and those with white sand give a brighter sheen. They also observe the frequencies of ocean swells that can help identify land as far as 90 kilometres away, and the flight paths of homing birds that return to land at night. Such navigation is not just about the stars, sun, clouds, swells, or the wind – it is based on a deep understanding of the relationships between them.

As the world continues to move past, the waka's destination island eventually appears on the horizon. The wayfinder continues to adjust to signs, possibly even changing direction in a dog-leg fashion. The task of the wayfinder is to stay in communion with the unfolding processes of the surrounding world and by moving from stillness, bringing the island to them through "be-coming". Conversely the task of the

Western navigator typically involves taking the most direct route possible, relying heavily on maps, sextant and compass to make landfall.

Not long after that dinner with Professor Royal, I was discussing the idea of "calling the island to you" with Professor David Williams of the University of Auckland's Faculty of Law. He told me the contrasting story of the steam corvette HMS Orpheus which highlighted, amongst other lessons, the folly of being too focused on a particular plan or chart. The captain of the Orpheus had access to two charts of the treacherous entrance to New Zealand's Manukau Harbour; one from 1856, which was ratified but out-of-date, and the other, a revised pilotage guide from 1861, which showed that a sandbar had altered considerably.

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As the vessel approached the harbour under clear skies on 7 February 1863, it needed to navigate the series of dangerous sand bars. Edward Wing, the 21-year-old signalman who was on shore guiding ships into the harbour that day, signalled to the vessel to keep to northward. However, the captain insisted on being guided by his ratified – but outdated – chart. Even the warnings of the former quartermaster, Frederick Butler, who knew the harbour and tried to alert senior officers to their peril, was ignored. The vessel hit the

sandbar and swung around, exposing the port side to the pounding surf. HMS Orpheus sank, becoming the worst maritime disaster in New Zealand waters. Of the 259 people on board, 189 died.

All cultures have their tales of such disasters. The story of HMS Orpheus highlights the terrible consequences of a leader not reading the signs and instead being fixated on an outdated "map".

MOVING FROM STILLNESS

To acquire the wise perspective of the wayfinder, including mental resilience, courage, and resolve, is to operate from a relaxed state in all circumstances, – whether in the midst of a raging storm, or caught up in the unpredictable and dangerous winds of the doldrums. Master wayfinders have the ability to move from stillness; they possess a steadfast calm clarity.

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Paradoxically, when the going gets tough the tough get relaxed. When we relax, we are more likely to find a creative solution. Leaders who operate from a base of stillness and presence that is very grounded and clear can better see what is going on and respond appropriately. It is essential on board the waka that everyone acts from a grounded stillness, not from reactivity, agitation, distraction, or being fixated. Therefore, the invitation for leaders is to aim to cultivate this purposeful and active stillness in everybody.

A story by master Hawaiian wayfinder Nainoa Thompson illustrates the power of moving from stillness. He was nervous about entering the doldrums where, due to frequent cloud cover all visual clues are often removed, and with winds that can change direction without warning. When he did so, at night and in heavy rain, there was 100 per cent cloud cover and the wind was variable and blowing at 25 knots. Thompson explains how he was struggling to see in the darkness and became so exhausted by the effort that he gave up the fight. It was then that a feeling of relaxation washed over him, and "there was something, a mechanism, that allowed me to understand where the direction was, without seeing it." In that moment, which he describes as a kind of "warmth", he knew where the moon was even though he couldn't see it and he was able to lead the turning of the waka with all the confidence that he had lacked moments before. As the vessel turned there was a break in the clouds and a shimmer of moonlight confirmed that they were now heading in the right direction. Thompson says that he now focuses more on being in touch with this internal relaxation in order to access what he describes as a "special realm". His story points to a state of deep knowing built through experience and discipline that we can all benefit from.

Hawaiian academic Manulani Meyer speaks of ike pāpālua, or "second sight", which brings forth a different dimension of knowledge. Her thoughts align with those of Māori Marsden, who observed that in deeply comprehending the natural world it is possible to develop the extra-sensory faculties and techniques that traditionally were used to test an environment and understand new phenomena. Marsden applied and taught these techniques in whare wānanga – traditional houses of learning – to teach



people how to become more aware of reality and to dynamically discern better ways of doing things.

The vigilance of the wayfinder is not an intense, uptight, and exhaustive state of staring out; rather, it is a condition of relaxed nohopuku – "sitting in the belly". Rather than seeking to be detached from a distracting world, it is about being engaged, integrating information and allowing an intermingling with deep knowledge to form creative pathways.

Numerous philosophical and spiritual traditions include mindfulness as a fundamental practice. Mindfulness is generally understood as the act of being present in experience and can be difficult for people to achieve. The busy nature of modern life, combined with an almost constant bombardment of information, has left many people with a consciousness that is extremely noisy and prone to distraction.

The practice of nohopuku helps develop the ability to move from stillness. The wayfinding leader must do this in order to truly read the signs, make clear decisions, act with purposefulness, and build steady mental toughness, even in the most trying of circumstances. In doing so she or he models the way for others.

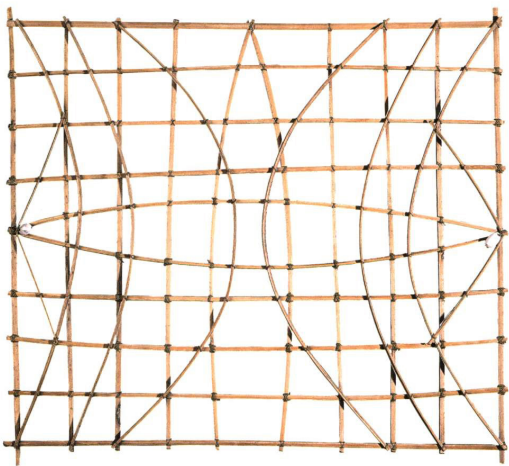
RELEASING POTENTIAL

Wayfinding leaders are kaitiaki – experts in the practice of taking care of people and of place. They create mauri ora – "wellbeing" – and they not only liberate themselves and others, they create a space where all people liberate each other in communion to fulfil their potential. This message of liberation was dear to the heart of one of my mentors, matua Pereme Porter, who would often say that Te Ao Mārama – "the world of light" – is that which has been learned and released into māramatanga – "enlightenment". Te Ao Mārama requires iterative engagement with Te Kore – "the world of potential". He believed that Te Kore is all around us, and that our task as leaders is to release that potential into the world. I will leave you with one final story:

Matua Pereme is sitting beside me at the University of Auckland Business School. Our chairs are facing toward a tree-covered hill called in Māori, Pukekawa, and also known as "the Domain". Pereme has a rich, deep voice and is widely regarded as a fine orator. As we gaze to the horizon he is sharing a story given to him by his elders. The story is of Kupe, the great East-Polynesian navigator-explorer. Kupe, in his mighty seafaring waka was crossing Spirits Bay off the coast of northern Aotearoa when he sighted land. As the waka plied the waters, Kupe turned to greet the land. He reached up, clenched his hand, called out "kapowairua", and grasped

the spirit of the land. Pereme reaches up, calls "kapowairua", and his fist holds that energy. It is an electrifying moment. To hold the spirit is to belong.

We are invited to acknowledge exploration as a defining part of who we are, and to fully develop potential, by applying practices such as "fostering a purpose of becoming", "calling the island to you", and "moving from stillness". If we accept this challenge, we position ourselves and our organisations as wayfinding leaders able to reap the benefits from the world of Te Kore that is released into Te Ao Mārama, the world of light. ■



KEY TAKE-OUTS

- By moving from stillness, the island comes to you, in a "be-coming" approach.
- Tupu – the idea of "becoming" – requires releasing the potential in others and in situations.
- The wayfinding leader is fully present, deeply grounded, aware, and open to being guided.



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Acknowledgement
This article draws on material in the book *Wayfinding Leadership: Ground-breaking Wisdom for Developing Leaders*, co-authored by Chellie Spiller, Hoturoa-Barclay Kerr, and John Panoho. It is reproduced with the permission of Huia Publishers. In conjunction with the University of Auckland Business School's Graduate School of Management, the authors offer a range of leadership development workshops, including a waka quest experience, based on the principles of wayfinding.