Loto'i Tonga: Success by Achievement—A Case Study

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Abstract

Loto'i Tonga—"the big heart"—is a term describing all that is Tongan: the passion, joy, spirit, and the mind. This quality of being Tongan shapes the way in which Tongans work together to achieve successful outcomes. *Loto'i Tonga* influences activities such as community development projects, social and health services initiatives, as well as the passion seen when Tongan engages in sporting activities. This case study describes a community development project in West Auckland, New Zealand, which brought together the Tongan community. The primary aim of the project was to improve the health and wellbeing of Tongans living in West Auckland. Conducted over several years, the project resulted in the establishment of vegetable gardens, a Tongan pre-school centre, and a woman's home-based development initiative resulting in the production of a variety of crafts as well as well-being activities. These successful outcomes provide a clear message to both Tongan and non-Tongan leaders that a way to success in Tongan community development is to empower Tongans to be able to lead and take control over determinants of their life and their well-being. *Loto'i Tonga* is a key cultural value that determines such outcomes.

Keywords

Loto'i Tonga, Tou'anga, Tokanga, Falehanga, empowerment, Talanga

Tongans are quite unique in the way they engage with each other to achieve success with what they do. They have within them the passion and the big heart called "*Loto'i Tonga*" to work together and, share their all in order to do and achieve something big (Ofanoa and Raeburn 2014). Tongans demonstrate this passion when they involve themselves in social, health, and community development works. This participation includes building churches and community halls, fund raising to construct roads, schools, and health facilities in the Islands, and flourishing in sports as they have shown in successive rugby world cup.

The *Loto* (or heart) is a Tongan construct that is central to understanding Tongan subjectivities, values, ways of being and doing. Its principles include *Loto too* (humility), *Lotofaka'apa'apa* (mutual respect), *Lotomamahi'ime'a* (loyalty), and *Lotolelei* (free and

peaceful heart). Tongans believe that the heart is the seat of authority, hence issues in life come out of their *loto* (hearts). When actions are not framed from a heart that acknowledges the principles and values stated, then benefit is either short-term or superficial.

"*Loto'i Tonga*" on the other hand is a Tongan metaphoric term used to describe "the passion, the spirit, the joy, the mind of and the big heart of Tongans" (Manu'atu 2009). This passion is said to be part of their genetic makeup, and is inherited and passed on by their ancestors from generation to generation. James Egan Moulton wrote of the

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significance of “*Loto’i Tonga*” in the motto of the very first Free Wesleyan secondary school named Tupou College, and established in Tonga in 1886. He wrote that, “Tonga’s Strength is its Heart”—“*Tonga Mo’unga Ki he Loto*”. It is this essence of “Tonganess” (Churchward 1959) that is seen as the most significant passion driving Tongans (Ofanoa and Raeburn 2014).

Loto’i Tonga is also reflected in Tongan culture (Alaimo 2005; Manu’atu 2009). The four golden pillars that underpin Tongan culture (Tuita 2012; Manu’atu and Kepa 2006) are *faka’apa’apa* (respect), *tauhiva* (taking care of relationships), *mamahi’ime’a* (loyalty and commitment), and *fakatokilalo* (humility). “*Loto’i Tonga*” is the “glue” that drives and holds Tongans together and gives them the “mana” to succeed in what they do (Ofanoa and Raeburn 2014).

“*Loto’i Tonga*” is assumed to be a key motivating force for Tongans and to be acknowledged and used when engaging in their health, social, and community development activities. This premise is demonstrated by the following maxim: “when a Tongan heart is hot (*Loto vela*), they can do anything in this world but when it is cold (*Loto momoko*), nothing would ever be done and accomplished”.

This paper presents a case study that was initiated and led by a Tongan group named “*Tokanga* and *Falehanga*” (*Tokanga* means man of the land, and *Falehanga* refers to the woman of the house) in West Auckland, New Zealand during 2000–2014. Since the lead author was actively involved in this project from the beginning, the group did agree for him to publish and share their experiences to benefit others especially during this very interesting time. The case study clearly exemplifies the successful application of “*Loto’i Tonga*” in a community development initiative, and how it impacted on the overall project outcome.

TOU’ANGA PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN WEST AUCKLAND

“*Tou’anga*” is a name given by a group of Tongan

men to an ethnic-specific community development project that they initiated in Ranui, West Auckland between October 2000 and 2012. The primary aim of this project was to improve the health and well-being of Tongans living in West Auckland. “*Tou’anga*” means “working hard and cooperatively to achieve the most”. The Tongan men felt that this brand name clearly describes their passion to empower themselves and achieve a better life migrants living in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

However, the *Tou’anga* project was inspired by the thoughts of a group of Tongan men belonging to a social Kava Club called *TOKANGA* Club, which was established in 2000 in Ranui. Initially, the club had 21 male members and 20 female members who were mostly the wives of the male members. The members were not highly educated, with most having only up to primary school level formal education and very few going on to secondary school or tertiary education. Most were educated in the Islands and were among the first migrants to New Zealand. They met every Friday night at their Kava party venue to socialise and share their personal and family experiences of challenges and hardships they faced as migrants. With no financial support available, the projects of the club depended solely on personal and voluntary contributions donated by group members each week.

However, members agreed to extend their community consultation and *Talanga* (engagement) from the Kava Club venue to the wider Tongan community. This aim was not easy to achieve because the *Tokanga* members had no hierarchical relationships with the other Tongans living in the area. Thus, to empower others and engage more members, they agreed to work together with the Tongan Methodist Church in Ranui whose congregational members included most Tongans living in West Auckland. It was the *Vai ‘oe Mo’ui* Tongan Methodist Church that provided the venue for their first community consultation meeting (*Fono*) in March 2001.

RESULTS FROM THE FIRST COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

When Tongans met and talked about their health and well-being, they expressed the following needs as their top priorities beyond any illness or form of diseases.

Children and Youth Problems

Tensions were identified between the rights of parents to raise their children on the basis of their own experiences as a parent and a child in the Islands versus the rights of their children living in a democratic society like New Zealand. A particular concern related to their children leaving home to live independently, this being a new experience for many parents.

Importance of Education

Most Tongans explained that their main reason for leaving their home land and migrating to New Zealand was to increase educational opportunities for their children. They wanted to provide every opportunity for their children to be educated in New Zealand. Many described how they work long hours in factories and on farms to earn money to educate their children. Only their “*Loto’i Tonga* or their passion” inspired them to work hard to ensure the education of their children. Most of the group perceived a major advantage in having a pre-school facility in West Auckland. They agreed to investigate this vision despite acknowledging that none of them yet had the knowhow and resources to undertake such a venture.

Development of an Income Generating Project

Their discussion further revealed that, although there were a number of early immigrants, most Tongans living in West Auckland were new arrivals to this area. Some of them came from the Islands and some had migrated from other suburbs in Auckland. As mentioned above, the majority were not highly

educated and most depended on welfare as their major sources of income. Creating work and an economic strategy to meet their needs was a priority.

Needs of Adult Men and Women

The community consultation revealed that when Tongans migrated to New Zealand, they often brought their parents with them. Their parents had been hard-working people in Tonga, who would go to their plantation, raise animals, and go fishing to address their social obligations on the Island. In New Zealand, the environment is different. The weather is colder and these elderly Tongans hardly socialise with their closest neighbours and friends. They said that they felt bored living inside their house and watching TV for much of the day.

The Food That Tongans Eat in West Auckland

A major concern expressed by the Tongan men, particularly those who had migrated earlier and lived in West Auckland, was the unavailability of Tongan foods and food products. Many expressed a desire to grow their own food and vegetables, although they did not have access to any suitable land where they lived. These discussions led them to the idea of growing their own vegetables. They started with a “home-based gardening” approach, which leads to a “communal gardening” project in West Auckland. This project started in the latter part of 2000 with Tongan men claiming themselves as the champions in initiating it.

FROM NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO PROJECTS DEVELOPMENT

The outcome of the community consultation process identified the priority needs and aspirations of Tongan men living in West Auckland. They agreed that projects would be developed and implemented to empower themselves to address the priority needs of their community. They elected a small sub-committee

to steer and take the lead in developing the vision, mission, structure, and business plan of the various projects.

The sub-committee was comprised of six members who met weekly and discussed the vision, mission, and strategies to implement. This group reported back to the overall group in a monthly meeting. The following recommendations were adopted by the larger group.

AIM OF THE PROGRAMME

To enable Tongans living in West Auckland to improve their health and well-being.

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

The group adopted some principles and cultural values that underpin the key strategies and programs to implement in West Auckland. These cultural values include: community participation (*ngauefakataha*), community involvement (*ngaumateaki*), *Loto'i Tonga* (passion, big heart), empowerment (*fakaiviamofakamafai*), inspiration (*faka'ai'ai*), *tou'anga* (work hard to achieve the most), cultural appropriateness (*'ulungaangataau*), and cultural development (*langafonua*). Since Tongans gain strength from working in groups, most of the values and principles that were adopted were based around caring for, and sharing with each other, as well as social relationships (*tauhiva*).

STRATEGIES

As a result of their numerous *Talanga* (or interactive talk), the *Tokanga* Club members adopted four strategies to address their priority needs within their limited resources.

Establishment of a Pre-school Centre

The *Vai 'oeMo'ui* Tongan Methodist Church also

shared the vision of having a pre-school centre. Numerous previous attempts in this area had failed owing to the lack of knowledge and ability of members to initiate and move such a project forward. So the strategy adopted was to collaborate with the Ministry of Education to establish a pre-school centre.

Development of New Men's Projects

The only men's project was one social Kava Club called *MOHETAHA* that operated on a small scale in West Auckland at the time. This social club provided a venue only for its members to come together and socialise when drinking kava. No other Tongan community development activities were implemented during 2000.

Development of Women's Projects

A proposal made by the female members in the *Tokanga* Club was to empower all wives of all the *Tokanga* men members to address priority issues challenging them in their homes and in West Auckland. These issues included those related to health, social, and cultural issues within their community.

Development of Youth Projects

A priority of the *Tokanga* members was to empower Tongan youth living in West Auckland to take the lead in improving their health and social well-being. It was decided to focus on the church youth as a starting point during 2000 and then to work outwards from the church youth into the wider West Auckland Tongan community.

Organisational Structure

The *Tokanga* Club members agreed that, everything to be done must be simple, understood, and transparent to all members. This included: what to do, how to do it, where to do it, and with what desired outcomes. Figure 1 shows an organisational structure that reflects how the Club's major projects linked together, and

Figure 1. Organisation Structure of Tokanga Project.

functioned within the Tongan community. Each project aligned with the four main strategies developed and adopted earlier by the group.

The structure shows four different names used to differentiate the main projects that the men chose to implement. One is *TOKANGA* which means the “man of the land”. This project deals with vegetable gardening and any other activities related with the land. The second is *FALEHANGA* which refers to the “women of the homes”. It deals with women’s projects related to flower gardens, kitchen utensils’ improvements and women’s arts and crafts making. The third project was the *VAI ‘OEMO’UI* Tongan youth (*Vai ‘oeMo’ui* means “Water of Life”). It related to the needs of youth including the development of music and fine arts. The fourth was *FALEMAAMA* Pre-school (“*Falemaama*” does not mean a house with a light; rather it means a House of Education). This project related to the need to improve early childhood education among Tongans. Each

project name signifies its own cultural significance in terms of how each activity should be conducted to achieve success.

FROM DREAMS TO MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

The 2000 West Auckland *Tou’anga* initiative transformed a dream by the *TOKANGA* Social Kava Club into a reality through hard work and a clear vision sustained over many years. All the accomplishments were based on the passion and *Loto’i Tonga* (Big heart) that each member had. The following were tangible outcomes from the various projects:

TOKANGA Vegetable Gardens

The home-based vegetable gardening project started in 22 Tongan homes in 2000. They were situated in West Auckland suburbs with each vegetable garden

Figure 2. Pictures of a Home-Based Vegetable Garden During an Inspection.

financed by an individual member of the *TOKANGA* Social Club. Every year the group inspected the gardens in the homes to ensure that each member still maintained their garden (see Figure 2). The *TOKANGA* Club managed to sustain the gardens until 2008 when the President of the social club died and the Deputy became engaged elsewhere in a church leadership role.

Establishment of the Falemaama Pre-school Centre

Although there was much passion and *Loto'i Tonga* among members of the *TOKANGA* Social Club, this project was challenging. First, the group did not own any land, and second, they did not have the resources

and skills needed to negotiate with the Ministry of Education and the Methodist Church in order to get their agreement to partner on this project. It took many years to plan, negotiate, consult, dialogue, achieve deadlines, seek external financial resources, and develop the human resource capacity for the school. However, the outcome was the construction of the *Falemaama* Pre-school in West Auckland, officially opening in April 2005.

Falehanga: The Women's Home-Based Development Project

This project for women was developed alongside the men's projects and promoted by the wives of the *TOKANGA* Men's Club members. The wives suggested

that in order for a Tongan family to actively participate and be involved in any community development activity, both the husband and the wife should be involved. The wives concentrated on projects like home-based flower gardening, kitchen development projects, fine mats, and making Tapa cloth.

These projects were very popular, visually attractive and favourably supported by the 22 women participating in the *Falehanga* project. As a result, other housewives joined the *Falehanga* project. Women also had capacity—building activities and skill-based training built into their projects. These included flower bed layout and presentation, how to plan and grow flower gardens, how to market flowers, how to budget in time of crisis, how to save money, how to cook more healthily, and aerobic exercise classes. In addition, they inspected members' kitchen facilities and other cultural activities on a quarterly basis. The Tongan women celebrated their achievements at the end of each year.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study has demonstrated a successful community development project in West Auckland, New Zealand, and significantly influenced by the "*Loto'i Tonga*" (the passion or big heart of Tongans) of the members of the Tongan community living in West Auckland.

The journey was not easy or straight forward, with many challenges, unrealistic expectations, and limits on financial resources, human power and knowledge. However, since Tongan participants had "*Loto'i Tonga*", success on each of the projects materialised through the "mana" of dedication, commitment, respect, hard-working, and reciprocity.

Tongans and non-Tongan leaders can learn from this programme to empower Tongans to lead and take control of determinants of their life and well-being. To do that, their passion or "*Loto'i Tonga*" is a key cultural value to acknowledge, identify, encourage,

promote, and use. Tongans work better when they are actively involved in identifying their priority needs, are empowered, and remain involved from the beginning to the end in any health, social, economic, and community development initiatives that address their community's priorities.

Finally, while Tongans have demonstrated great success due to their *Loto'i Tonga*, sufficient economic resources continue to be needed to support their community development initiatives. "*Loto'i Tonga*" (big heart) can drive successful outcomes on projects with limited resources, but with appropriate levels of funding, so much more could be achieved.

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