

Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative

Leadership in Times of Uncertainty Summary Paper



Introduction

Whether navigating multiple natural disasters, global pandemics or political shifts, life in the Pacific can be uncertain; forcing leaders to adapt and evolve constantly. But what does effective leadership look like when the future is so unclear? And what could it look like?

To explore this issue, the Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) hosted a virtual panel discussion on *Leadership in Times of Uncertainty*. Key findings and recommendations arising from this event are documented below.

The Panel

Looking at leadership through the lens of COVID-19, TCs Harold and Pam, and other events, the panel of Pacific experts – from development, academia, government and the private sector – shared their first-hand experiences, advice and lessons learned.

- Dr Tess Newton Cain (Convenor), Pacific Hub Project Lead, Griffith Asia Institute

- The Hon. Gary Juffa, Governor of Oro Province and Member of the National Parliament of Papua New Guinea
- Eleni Levin-Tevi, Programme Coordinator and Head of the Office of the European Union National Authorising Officer of the Government of Tonga
- Glen Craig, Managing Partner, Pacific Advisory

Audience Involvement

Virtual attendees – including Australia Awards scholars, WLI mentors, DFAT staff, and other members of the Pacific and Australian development communities – partook in break-out discussion sessions, asked panellists questions, and contributed their own insights and experiences to the conversation.

Panel Reflections & Recommendations

“Leadership needs to be new and bold, yet comforting and compassionate... unprecedented times call for unprecedented action” – Eleni Levin-Tevi

“The good has come from those who have offered an authentic leadership style and listened to people in a collaborative manner ... and given people what they want and need” – Glen Craig

“This is where you demonstrate you’re there for the purpose of loving your people enough so you can create the better future they want” – Hon. Gary Juffa

Adapting leadership during uncertainty

- Authentic – using a truly collaborative style to listen and response;
- Bold – doing things that haven’t been done before;
- Collaborative – setting aside political, cultural or ideological differences and titles;
- Discerning – making potentially unpopular choices needed for community wellbeing;
- Empowering – supporting others to ‘step up’ and be part of the solution;
- Patient – understanding that different people process and respond to crises differently;
- Reassuring – lessening the negative impacts of stress, anxiety on staff and communities;
- Transparent – building community trust and understanding through openness; and
- Visible – allowing closer proximity between leaders and their communities.

Communicating effectively

“You can’t just disseminate pamphlets and expect everyone to know what’s happening. You need TV, radio” – Hon. Gary Juffa

- Don’t only rely on the dissemination of hard-copy resources.

- Avoid potential miscommunication by simplifying messages, including through translation.
- Communicate with and through entities people trust – such as churches and other community organisations.
- “Nip misinformation in the bud” quickly to reduce team and community anxieties and stress.
- Be as transparent as possible.
- Don’t only communicate during crises – build trust in chosen communication channels during “normal times”.

Planning during uncertainty

“Know your team, know your skillset, and take forward those lessons. And make sure you constantly review what you’ve been through so you can plan for the future” – Glen Craig

- Don’t spend too much time and effort on things that need to be done quickly.
- Invest time in sharing and managing information between teams, sectors, and institutions.
- Consider ‘business continuity planning’ and take time to record experiences and lessons learned to take into the future.

Self-care tips for leaders

“Promote a positive mindset ... maintain a robust immune system” – Hon. Gary Juffa

- Have a good team or support group around you to share the load and scale impact.
- Take time out for yourself at the end of the day to recharge and take stock of how you’re feeling.
- Maintain physical and mental wellbeing through regular exercise, sleep, and a balanced diet.
- Use technology to stay in touch with friends and loved ones.

Opportunities

Making leadership more inclusive & culturally aware

- Put aside traditional titles, especially when interacting with communities, to see leaders emerge.
- Observe and be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication and cultural etiquettes.
- Practice good manners and try to integrate them within your team.
- Partake in critical thinking and self-reflection to examine whether your own actions are contributing to inclusivity or not.
- Support young people to speak up “the right way according to culture” by inviting them to leadership meetings.
- Mentor women and young people.
- Women can try to influence male leaders by sharing their opinions in social environments (e.g. kava drinking).

Building local expertise, skills & outreach systems

“The whole response had to come from within Vanuatu, unlike before when people from Australia and other countries were coming in to help offer aid. It was interesting to see who stepped up and who didn’t ... the Chiefs really stepped up” – Glen Craig

- Reduced humanitarian support available meant that in many instances, leaders emerged and expertise was gained – including women and young people traditionally left out.
- When COVID-19 forced Tonga’s Catholic churches to close their doors, the institution reverted back to previous methods of community outreach. Governments then worked with the Church to deliver community services through these mechanisms.
- In some instances, local expertise was tested beyond capacity and contrary to design. This highlighted a need for “dramatic change” in the

way donor partners deliver aid to Melanesian countries – “people had the capabilities but not the skillset or experience”.

Returning to tradition & local goods

“Everyone is afraid, anxious, worried, so we come out with simple instructions that are practical for survival ... and going back to something that is already known to be present in Tonga through our traditional knowledge and culture” – Eleni Levin-Tevi

- Times of uncertainty encourage many to go back to traditional “survival practices” and ways of life, such as fishing and land cultivation, and to learn these practices from elders.
- Limited access to the outside world and trade also reconnects people with local food markets and produce, encouraging fruit and vegetable-rich diets and local connection.

Conclusion

While the future is rarely predicted, the Leadership in Times of Uncertainty panel highlights that leaders can take steps to mitigate risks, find opportunities for growth, and strengthen local expertise and community connection.

The documented experiences, lessons learned and findings of this WLI Learning and Networking event are shared with event participants and interested members of wider Pacific and Australian humanitarian and development communities.

Interested? Want to know more?

For more information on the WLI and how you can get involved, visit

womensleadershipinitiative.org.au or email: info@australiaawardsleadership.org

View the complete event recording:

<https://womensleadershipinitiative.imagerelay.com/share/LeadershipinTimesofUncertainty>