

Treaty Application Case Study: Volunteer Service Abroad

It's interesting reflecting on the journey. At this stage we've just done a social audit of the organisation featuring the importance of the Treaty principles of partnership, manaakitanga, self-determination and good faith and integrity. Like a lot of organisations we've struggled in terms of trying to find our own way and we've probably mirrored the process that the rest of New Zealand has gone through.

The journey probably began post Springbok Tour, in the early 80s. This time was such a huge period of growth and discussion, and that's when VSA started to look closely at its obligations. In the late 80s VSA had very supportive CEOs and management and a Māori Chair of Council. This resulted in the creation of a tangata whenua representative position on our Council. The appointment of a kaumatua is relatively recent, maybe only in the last five years. At the time we were lucky to get, as our tangata whenua representative on Council, a very energetic Māori woman who felt that having a kaumatua was important for the organisation. The kaumatua has now been on board since the late 90s.

Like a lot of places we followed what many government departments were doing at the time, in thinking about working biculturally, with initiatives such as being given a Māori name by the Māori Language Commission and having Māori language lessons. In the beginning there was huge energy and commitment, but then there might have been a decade or so where people became frozen because we were concerned about being tokenistic. We had found out, through an internal audit of our obligations under the Treaty and the accessibility of our services for Māori, that not a lot of what we do was institutionalised. It was all down to the personal commitment of individuals. Then as more questions were asked about how what we were doing was benefiting Māori, and the answer was, 'We're not sure, possibly not much', people stopped doing anything. There was a feeling that we don't want to be doing something tokenistic — we don't want to be doing something that's going to be patronising. Then things just stopped.

Also, there are the sensitivities of tauwiwi when we get into the issues of colonisation. I think that was one of the mistakes in terms of the journey that I wasn't aware of when I started. I was very keen to look at things like powhiri and te reo, and naively believed that everybody would be as committed and enthusiastic. What I found out was that a number of people in the organisation, not just Pākehā but from other cultures as well, had some concerns about the organisation pursuing these issues.

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We've got a Council, a President, a Chair of Council and a CEO. The membership can vote on who makes up the Council, and any changes to our constitution have to be put to the membership beforehand. Since the annual congress of 2004 some acknowledgment of the Treaty of Waitangi has been written and endorsed by the membership for inclusion in VSA's constitution. There was some groundwork for these references in the constitution to be put through - huge groundwork - by the kaumatua and the tangata whenua representative on Council. Over the last few years there has been a range of training courses about the Treaty of Waitangi and the outcomes of colonisation, not only for staff, but also for Council members and outgoing volunteers.

The President and the kaumatua sit side by side in the organisational structure. The kaumatua will come to Council meetings and be part of various committees, making sure that the role of the kaumatua is very much a living one. We needed the kaumatua because he was able to give us guidelines so at least we had a sense that we were being told it's OK to do this and this. It has taken away a lot of organisational anxiety. At the moment we also have a very dynamic, very committed tangata whenua representative on Council. I think one of the exciting developments for New Zealand and for VSA

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with people paying lip service to it. Whereas I think that VSA, to its credit, was busy trying to do something practical and meaningful, while forgetting about the policy side and the need to institutionalise these initiatives. What we did was to come up with something in relation to the Treaty that seemed meaningful and appropriate. We probably didn't articulate it, we probably didn't explore it, and we probably didn't engage our members with it as well as we could. Now we've got some things built into our strategic plan like the goal of increasing our links with tangata whenua. We have institutionalised the recognition that a Treaty of Waitangi course needs to be inbuilt on a cycle, and understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi is one of the organisational competencies in most job descriptions at VSA. It comes back down to education in the end.

David Panckhurst, Ngāti Porou (VSA)

NOTE: The views expressed here are the participants' own, at the time of the interview, and do not necessarily represent their current views or those of their agencies.