

Youthline Otago



Youthline Otago is a volunteer-led support service focussed on the needs of young people. It is an independent legal entity, based in Dunedin, that collaborates with other Youthline organisations throughout the country. The organisation has 1 paid staff member and approximately 35 active volunteers – the majority of whom identify as Pākehā.

In this interview, Brian Lowe (Chinese), Youthline Otago's Manager, shares reflections on the organisation's engagement with the Treaty. This case study shows an organisation which has had a long-term stated commitment to the Treaty, and has regularly engaged in Treaty training, but hasn't always known how to put the training into practice. Recent changes to the way the organisation does Treaty training have made the training more meaningful and have led to practical steps and enthusiasm for expanded application of the Treaty within the organisation.



The role of the Treaty for Youthline

At a national level, Youthline has had a commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi for many years, with leadership provided by Youthline Auckland. The Treaty of Waitangi policy is one of our organisation's paramount policies. The Treaty of Waitangi is a component of all Youthline worker training. When we began workshops in the 1980s it was still relatively new for an organisation like ours to do Treaty training – it wasn't the norm. For many years we felt that was all we could attempt to achieve, as that was pushing the boundaries enough.

The workshops were delivered by outside agencies. Initially we held two-hour workshops, then they were lengthened to one day. In the early days the workshops were challenging for people, as most of our volunteers had very little knowledge of New Zealand history from their schooling, and they had limited understanding of cultural difference. A generation on, there is a better understanding of the Treaty amongst our volunteers. We recently did a review of our training and found that while our volunteers found it interesting, they didn't know what to do with it. It was out of sync with the rest of our training which had a stronger focus on practical application. So it was time to move the boundaries.

We are an organisation that wants to engage with our policy. So a key issue was making the Treaty training relevant to the organisation, getting volunteers to see that there was a need for it, and creating changes in practice when we came back into the organisation after the training. One thing missing in the training was the connection to the spirituality of what was being taught – the connection with the land. Running it in a classroom divorced it from that. This year we moved the training to Ōtākou Marae and it was facilitated by A3 Kaitiaki, a Ngāi Tahu education organisation.

The training went really well. Many volunteers had not been on a marae before so it was about experiencing that as well. Many Youthliners, without being prompted, did their mihi in te reo Māori and for a number of them it was the first time they had done that. We didn't know that so many of our volunteers could mihi in te reo. That led to questions about why it took going to a marae for us to use te reo Māori; we could have been doing that in the office. It was about understanding the context and being encouraged to

give it a go. People had been worried about being tokenistic. The trainers were supportive and made it safe. Now people have confidence and are using the words they know. It is a little thing, but people are answering the phones saying “kia ora.” There has been a change in practice.

The workshop content was similar this year to previous years'. Next year the plan is to extend the content, to build on the learning from Treaty 101 to Treaty 201. We want to provide an opportunity for people to be able to bring their questions. A lot of volunteers are training as social workers so are asking, 'How do we take this knowledge about the Treaty and use it when we are working with clients, especially those who identify as Māori?' The aim of the training is to help volunteers to understand the history and its impacts, in terms of the Treaty. As we are in the social work space it is about volunteers recognising that people are coming from a different places of knowing — so that we are not imposing culturally inappropriate solutions. We are wanting to change practice through that understanding. When you open people's eyes to one culture, to opens them to others as well, which is another success of the training. Giving people an insight into one culture made them think about differences in other cultures and about how we respond to those differences.

Organisational relationships and structure

As an organisation we believe in honouring the Treaty. We don't want a dusty policy on a shelf. If we are honouring it, we need to be in relationship with Māori.

We established contact with iwi trainers through our existing networks. It was a big step for both organisations – for Youthline being on a marae, and for A3 Kaitiaki because our request was different as we were interested in training specific to social work and counselling. In the initial training we decided it was easier to keep it straightforward and to focus on history, and to look at specific training as a next step. The collaboration with local iwi was good, so we need to build on that. While initially the training was the focus for collaborating, we now have to ask, 'Are we paying lip-service to this or are we going to do something about it?' Also, partly because of the way social work delivery is split due to funding streams, there is not a lot of collaboration between organisations and we do not really have relationships with Māori organisations.

Our organisation is not Treaty-structured. There have been discussions since the recent training about what do we do at governance and operational levels. We are thinking about where next for governance and how does that translate operationally – how do we apply our policy? There are key issues like how do we extend our practice in terms of engagement with Māori? There are questions of relationships with local iwi and with local Māori agencies that we do not currently collaborate with. We also have questions like, 'What if someone came through the helpline and wanted to speak te reo?' At the moment we don't have an avenue for that. There are discussions about our name too. There are all these conversations about how to bring this into the organisation at all levels.

Currently we recognise there is something not quite right, but we don't quite know yet what is wrong in our organisation. We have a very non- Māori volunteer base and we know it should be more inclusive. That will likely mean change at governance level. A Māori volunteer has just joined the board, but that was not as a result of thinking 'We need a Māori member on the board'.

We need to think about whether our processes and procedures exclude Māori from joining as volunteers. What is it about us as an organisation, is it systemic, is it our advertising, how the training works, or our programme that excludes people from joining us? There is a lot we can do to support people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, not only Māori, to get involved with Youthline. That is going to take a bit of work to

sort through. Some of the answers are not that easy. The Youthline training has an underlying philosophy of individualism which doesn't work well with cultures which value collectivism. We need to work on that.

Learning and reflection

Having the policy base and undertaking Treaty training, then reviewing and extending that training, has been critical to us getting to where we are now. The annual Treaty training that we had been running was clearly not enough, as the training review showed.

It would have been good to sit down with other organisations who are further along on this journey to hear about what they are doing and what they have learned. Even though organisations' experiences are different, it helps you reflect on what you are doing. Everything is contextual but you can learn from others.

As an organisation it is important that we take feedback, we reflect, we keep improving and pushing the boundaries. In applying the Treaty you need to take an honest look at yourself and ask, 'Are we applying our policy or are we paying lipservice? Where is the evidence of our policy in practice?'

We are just embarking on the next stage of our journey, maybe two years from now there will be a lot more successes.