

Emerging Diversity and Inclusion Winner: Downer New Zealand



Video Link <https://vimeo.com/178545417/28528bf288>

A Māori leadership programme is one of the first steps on the diversity journey for Downer New Zealand as it aims for a better community representation in its workforce.

Downer has been helping shape New Zealand since 1870, when it was the original Public Works Department and Post Office. Today, the business in New Zealand has around 5,000 employees providing services to clients across several sectors including roading, major civil works, telecommunications, facilities management, water, open spaces and energy.

“Our company has had to reinvent itself to be successful in the private sector and developing people is part of our core business. Part of our reinvention is to have an active diversity plan where all Downer employees understand and embrace diversity,” says Downer Executive General Manager - People and Culture Jan O’Neill.

Downer recognised that to support the recruitment and development of Māori employees, it was important to develop Māori leaders. Currently the company employs about 800 Māori but there are few Māori leaders to represent this workforce.

After applying to Te Puni Kokiri for funding for the Whakahiki i Nga Rangatira Māori (Empowering Māori Leaders) programme, senior Downer leaders visited Ngati Porou Runanga in Gisborne to discuss developing the initiative. The goal was "to identify and develop Māori employees at all levels of our business to become influential leaders and role models both within Downer and the wider community".

After a successful pilot programme, Downer committed to launching three courses across the North Island, fully funding the first one and partnering with Te Puni Kokiri on the second two.

Employees are nominated for the course by managers and these referrals are assessed by Downer's newly formed Māori Development Advisory Board.

The programme consists of three two-day workshops - two marae-based and one at Sudbury Farm in Raumati - and typically takes place over a nine-month period. The content was designed by Downer Māori leaders, with input from Downer's operational business and human resources, and includes visits and stories from influential Māori leaders, marae Kaumatua sharing their vision for Māori, sessions on developing strong support networks, Tikanga and Te Reo, mentoring, self-awareness and career planning. Two days are spent working with horses to help develop leadership presence and provide an arena to practice those skills.

Throughout the programme participants are supported by their line managers and are assigned a mentor, often a previous participant, to support them on their development journey.

The Downer Executive team fully support this initiative and take an active role as sponsors, providing guidance and direction when requested. The Māori Development Advisory Board was formed to provide support and guidance to the programme and the wider Downer diversity strategy.

The programme has been regularly profiled on the company monthly video and is well known and supported around the business, Jan says.

"Our goal is to be an employer of choice with a reputation for promoting inclusiveness and diversity and having a workforce reflective of the communities we work within," she says.

"The Māori Leadership programme helps to meet these objectives. Downer is specifically targeting and attracting Māori to our workforce through this programme."

It's also helping keep staff - the retention rate of employees who have completed the programme is 86 per cent, higher than Downer's overall retention rate.

"Downer is 'lifting' concepts and practices that are experienced as part of this programme and applying them to the everyday business environment. Time is being taken to establish relationships and get to know the people around the table rather than delving straight into business. The wider Downer teams are learning the value of understanding a person's story," Jan says.

By the end of August, 70 employees will have completed the Māori Leadership programme, with 13 of the first group of 30 already receiving a promotion and others taking a step up in their current roles. Participants all have a detailed development plan, which includes personal goals around whanau and community involvement, and are developing leadership skills.

Feedback from programme participants reads: "I've realised my time here was a journey of self-discovery, identifying who I am as a leader currently and what I am possible of

becoming by applying myself. With such clarity, I feel like I can be so much more now."
- Anonymous

"I want to climb the ladder. I have had enough of shovelling and spreading cement bags by hand. I would like to step up into the corporate side of things and learn on that side of the table, how the business works."

- Rob Matete, recently promoted Supervisor

Participants in this programme are seen and celebrated as leaders and role models within Downer and are using this to encourage other Māori to develop in their careers.

"What's exciting about this next phase of Māori leaderships groups is that these people that started the first one can't wait to be involved in the next one as mentors. They want to nominate their own crew members and people in the workforce because they have found such value in this, and then they want to be mentors so that we can just keep this ripple effect going."

- Debbie Kirby, Senior HR Business Partner

It's also allowed employees to strengthen their Māori identity and connection with the community.

"When I was first nominated for this course I thought no, it's not me. Yes, I am a leader but I didn't really see myself as a Māori leader. Having done this I actually feel like a Māori leader and I actually feel like I've got something to give back to young Māori and I look forward to bringing them through."

- Dan Gerrard, Operations Manager