

Emerging Diversity and Inclusion Award Entrant: The Treasury – Te Kaitohutohu Kaupapa Rawa



When a cultural audit held in 2014 revealed that some staff members felt like “outsiders” who were not valued for their different strengths, the Treasury knew it had to challenge and change itself to address unconscious bias in the organisation.

This effort has been led from the top by Gabriel Makhoul, the Secretary to the Treasury since 2011, who has championed diversity and inclusion as a means to building a world-leading Treasury that helps raise living standards for New Zealanders.

A cultural audit of staff from across the organisation’s hierarchy, undertaken by an external specialist in 2014, indicated that women were increasingly being promoted into senior roles and there was better recognition of the need for a range of different expertise, but there were some other disturbing findings.

The Treasury was not fully harnessing the diversity of expertise, skills and experiences of its people, and not everybody felt they had equal opportunity to participate, contribute and progress in their careers, the audit found.

The audit report noted: "Unconscious bias is the most significant barrier to the Treasury's ability to not only achieve its diversity objectives but harness the full value of the people it currently employs."

An initial response to the audit was to run workshops across the organisation, from the executive leadership team down to junior staff, on the findings of the audit and how it affected the Treasury. These workshops had a major impact on managers across the organisation who were eager to reduce unconscious bias in their work.

Additional workshops focused directly on unconscious bias were held for senior staff – this was crucial to addressing the issue, as these senior staff lead and assign work, review the performance of their teams, and have a big impact on the chances of progression for other

staff. If senior staff are unaware of unconscious bias then the Treasury runs the risk of holding back talented staff whose lives and approaches to work were different from their seniors.

The members of the Executive Leadership Team challenged themselves to confront their own unconscious bias. This was an exercise that laid the foundation for their professional relationships with each other and extended how they engage with the rest of the organisation. This approach is particularly pertinent to the Treasury's focus on improving living standards which recognises the multiple drivers behind wellbeing - sustainability, social cohesion, increasing equity, managing risks and economic growth.

The Executive Leadership Team began using their internal communications to talk about diversity and inclusion as it related to the living standards framework. Importantly, they began to share their own life stories to demonstrate their points. In response, they found that staff came forward to share their life stories in ways that they had not encountered before.

The Treasury also made efforts to respond to the knowledge that Māori employees did not feel fully valued for the cultural insights they bring to their work. A number of managers and principal advisors enrolled in the Ruku Ao programme, an experiential leadership development programme that uses principles and practices from tikanga and the arts to broaden participants' skills in leading and working across difference.

As part of this programme, participants are immersed in Manutuke marae for two multi-day workshops across the year-long duration of the programme. This is helping to broaden the minds and skills of leaders to work with difference, including improving the Treasury's engagement in and understanding of te ao Māori.

In addition, work around the Crown-Māori relationship, and achieving a faster improvement in Māori living standards, was given more prominence. Through these activities, along with marae visits and external speakers, the Treasury is building an understanding of te ao Māori, and applying that understanding to improve its work.

As an example of how this has enriched the Treasury's work, Kara Nepe-Apatu, a senior analyst and Māori engagement lead in the Transactions Unit - Social Housing team, says: "As part of our mahi, our team has had a number of discussions about different concepts of land and iwi interests. A common perception is that land is a commodity that can be purchased and sold. At a particular hui, a number of us explained that to Māori the relationship to land runs much deeper. Land is our place of belonging, origin and what we most identify to, other than our parents and whānau. Our identity is intrinsically linked to the land. That can never be bought or sold.

"After the hui, there was a little more understanding of the relationship Māori have to land. Through regional consultation, and face to face discussions with iwi (kanohi ki te kanohi) the relationship to land was strongly reiterated. More conversations will need to occur internally before we see a cultural shift in thinking. This will take time. The important thing is that we are taking steps toward being, and challenging others to be, more culturally aware and intelligent in our work."

The Treasury has taken many steps to improve the cultural intelligence of the organisation by creating a more inclusive workplace that is more understanding and embracing of diversity of thinking, diversity of people, and diversity of skills.