

Empowerment Award Entrant: Māori Women's Development Inc



The women working at the Māori Women's Development Inc (MWDI) have been empowered to fulfil their roles with complete trust, enabling them to realise their own potential, and to change the lives of the women they serve in the community.

Individual growth is supported and each kaimahi (staff member) is encouraged to explore and recognise their own strengths, says MWDI Kaiwhakahaere Rangatahi (Project Manager for Youth Programmes) Soroya Simeon.

MWDI is a unique Indigenous charitable trust formed by Māori women, managed and operated by Māori women, to provide loans and wrap around support for wāhine Māori in business. The trust was set up in 1987. It grew from members of the Māori Women's Welfare League, who recognised that there were Māori women at home running or wanting to start businesses who had no access to loans. At the core is the provision of low interest micro loans of between \$30,000 and \$50,000, and stemming off from that are a number of support programmes that wāhine Māori need to be successful in business.

The group secured funding from the Ministry of Māori Affairs, and MWDI was born under the leadership of Dame Georgina Kirby who was the first CEO. Teresa Tepania-Ashton has been the CEO for the past seven years, and under her leadership MWDI continues to empower women and their whānau into the workforce with an ever-increasing suite of holistic initiatives.

"We also benefit as a diverse workforce because of insistence that whānau comes first. Need to bring your baby to work? OK. Need to leave early to pick up your nana for a doctor's appointment? OK. Need to attend a tangi? Don't even think about it – just go," says Soroya

"That kind of aroha engenders more loyalty than any "manager" can and empowers a diverse workforce to be loyal, committed, and highly productive. One outcome of that is reduced stress for each of us. And that improves productivity. And that enables us to be a stronger, more successful, diverse workforce," she says.

“We know we can solve problems, make decisions, and drive our projects using our best judgement. In return, we feel committed, motivated, and we give our work everything we’ve got. And since the people we serve are the definition of diversity, then we are supporting diversity on every level.”

Kaimahi, in turn, upskill, inspire, and support other wāhine Māori, their whānau, rangatahi, and marae communities to contribute to diversity in the nationwide workforce.

The women at MWDI draw from a wide range of programmes to support women.

The first programme, HINEPRENEUR™, was established in 2015 to support wāhine Māori to further develop their business ideas or review their business goals and aspirations. MWDI built its capacity to do this in partnership with RP Enterprises and Empower-World who trained a pool of coaches.

He Papa Pūtea and He Rautaki Marae were likewise developed in response to a growing awareness that an ability to make money and an ability to manage it are two separate things, says MWDI CEO Teresa Tepania-Ashton. “The two programmes support wāhine entrepreneurs, marae trustees and individuals to understand and better manage money,” she says.

In 2015 and 2016 MWDI trained more than 120 wāhine as facilitators who could empower women, their whānau, and marae communities to have increased financial literacy and capability. In 2017 it is running He Rautaki Marae programme with 25 marae.

HineBOSS is a three-day programme which provides a toolkit for wāhine Māori to explore and develop a business idea or review their current business. The toolkit is designed with a coaching framework and covers the different segments of business.

HineTimebank, (accessed via MWDI’s website), creates a space for wāhine Māori to trade their skills with other wāhine without the exchange of money. The only currency in the HineTimebank is time.

“An example of this is if I needed support around business structures I could borrow an hour of your time to teach me. In return you receive one Timebank credit that you can use in exchange for skills from another Timebank member,” says Soroya.

MWDI also delivers two rangatahi (youth) programmes to start planting the seeds of business acumen and empowerment at a young age.

The MaiBiz in Schools programme has been running for 10 years. About 1500 year 12 and 13 students from low-decile schools around Aotearoa, attend a three-day entrepreneurial programme annually which alerts them to business possibilities and gives them tools to start planning for a future in business.

Te Wero Pakihi takes students selected from MaiBiz and sponsors them to complete an accelerator business programme in Auckland, where teams are given a challenge to make impactful and effective change within a corporate organisation. Both programmes encourage teams to come up with a business idea, then support them to bring that idea to life.

“In our rangatahi programmes we often see youth who schools have written off, but after our programmes they take on leadership roles like prefect or head girl,” says Soroya. “We watch them transition from school and beyond. At the end of our Te Wero Pakihi programme we hear from students who were close to dropping out of school but after doing the programme they have found their purpose and are more engaged in school and focused on their future.”

MWDI's programmes ensure support for not just the individual or business but their wider whānau. This inevitably raises not only the whānau but the communities they're in.

"In our financial capability and marae programmes we watch people become empowered to manage their own finances wisely, and then extend those abilities to management of their business and marae. They sit alongside their children and learn how to be better with money," says Soroya. "It's changing lives."