

## Walk the Talk Award Entrant: Teresa Tepania-Ashton, Māori Women's Development Inc

Māori Women's Development Inc CEO Teresa Tepania-Ashton empowers her people to fulfil their roles, knowing they have the complete backing of her trust.

That trust is rewarded by increased confidence. "We know we can solve problems, make decisions, and drive our projects using our best judgement," says MWDI Kaiwhakahaere Rangatahi (Project Manager for Youth Programmes) Soroya Simeon.

Teresa has been CEO of MWDI for six years. Prior to that she was the CEO of Te Rūnanga-a-Iwi o Ngāpuhi from 2004 - 2011, after a 12-year career working internationally with Citibank (during which time she rose from Service Assistant to Vice President). The change of career focus was a conscious decision to put her decades of community and corporate governance experience to work for her people.

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 microbusinesses 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.

Soroya says there is a common thread running through the organisation. "No matter who you speak to at MWDI we'll all tell you the same thing loud and clear: Teresa is a servant-leader who leads by example and trustingly empowers others to realise their own potential. She doesn't micromanage, and that's something we've all experienced in previous roles.

"Each one of us tells a story of the learning curve we went through when we joined MWDI and experienced true leadership. We all started by doing the conscientious thing: seeking her guidance, direction and approval in our roles. But she always gave the power straight back to us. 'What would you do?' she asks. 'What do you think is best?'"

The wāhine Māori under Teresa's leadership appreciate the support and grow in confidence as a result.

"It's easy to follow Teresa because she exemplifies servant leadership. Service is one of her core values, and she keeps it at the forefront of our work," says Soroya.

The wāhine at MWDI are supported holistically.

"We don't call ourselves staff - we call ourselves whanau. And we mean that in the most practical sense. Teresa insists that we put our whānau responsibilities 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. Those things come first. That kind of aroha engenders more loyalty than any ‘manager’ can,” she says.

One outcome of that is reduced stress, which in turn improves productivity. Teresa’s impact then extends throughout homes, communities and other workplaces, through MWDI initiatives which empower a diverse workforce in Aotearoa.

“We, (through our work and our own leadership) upskill, inspire, and support other wahine Māori, their whānau, rangatahi, and marae communities to contribute to diversity in the nationwide workforce.”

Teresa has strong credibility with the wider community MWDI supports - in hāpu and iwi development, Reo Māori development, and governance across all sectors. She is truly a contemporary wahine Māori leader, driving a diverse workforce for Aotearoa.

Teresa was named 2016 New Zealander of the year - Local Hero. That same year she received a New Zealand Order of Merit for service to Māori in business and was New Zealand Woman of Influence finalist. Teresa has three children and a growing tribe of mokopuna.