

Walk the Talk Award Winner:

Peter Potaka - Statistics NZ

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/187112404>

Leading by example

This year's national Census data looks set to be our most enlightening thanks to one man's ability to reach unaccounted communities far and wide.

Peter Potaka has represented Statistics NZ for the past five years, initially as a senior advisor of Maori policy and now as manager of the census community liaison team.

With help from his wide network of contacts, Peter achieved the unthinkable by tapping into large ethnic communities that had previously remained hidden and unaccounted for by Census data.

This data, collected every five years, is invaluable for helping Government departments allocate spending and is also used by councils, community groups, iwi and businesses to plan for the future.

Reaching hidden communities

Gareth Meech, manager census, says Statistics NZ's job is to tell the story of New Zealand's diversity through a national census. But the results fall short when a proportion of the people who need to be counted are traditionally unwilling to respond.

"Fortunately, Peter Potaka emerged to walk the talk for cultural diversity," says Gareth. It is estimated that Peter and his team reached more than one million previously unaccounted people through their work with Maori, Pacific and ethnic audiences.

"Peter committed himself to ensuring that everyone 'counts' in New Zealand, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds," Gareth says.

Strategy

He achieved this goal by devising a better strategy to reach statistical 'under-counts'. His approach centred on recruiting the right people from a range of ethnic backgrounds - 22 in total - who could influence their communities. He also placed advisers in strategic locations that had been untapped by Statistics NZ.

Peter ensured his team knew exactly what they needed to get done, says Gareth.

Much of their feedback reflects this:

"Peter always has his eye on the big picture and created different strategies for ethnically diverse populations - Maori, Pacific, Ethnic, Asian, Indian and others. He knew instinctively that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be effective."

“Peter consistently demonstrates a clear understanding of cultural diversity and team dynamics and always provided managerial support when needed.”

Motivating others

In addition, Peter is described as a humble leader by his staff and colleagues, says Gareth. He lives by the Maori proverb of:

“Ehara taku toa he toa takitahi, he toa takitini ke” - “My success is not through my effort alone, but derived from the success of my team.”

Many of his leadership qualities are based around the same principles he has used to manage the Maori All Blacks for the past 12 years.

From one employee: *“Peter created an environment where his staff could achieve for themselves individually and as a team. He always acknowledged and rewarded success. He developed a reporting system which allowed the team to see how their individual work was contributing to the overall team effort which kept us inspired and motivated to achieve.”*

Lasting impact

The cumulative impact of Peter’s work is a compelling and positive example of what can be achieved with the right leader, says Gareth.

“He is meticulous in everything he does. Census and gathering of statistics through surveys can be a hot topic. But he identified likely risks and took steps to mitigate those. He was able to digest complex issues as they arose and put in place clear and decisive remedies.”

And by creating positive inroads into communities that were previously closed to Statistics NZ, Peter sent a message to these previously hidden groups that “they count, they have a voice and they matter to Statistics NZ and the government as a whole,” says Gareth.

He also came up with some unique contracts with large groups to reach Asian and other ethnic communities - a model that other Government agencies are now looking to adopt.

Finally, Peter’s work will have a positive effect on future Census collections through the strategy he has established and a legacy of positive relationships with ethnic groups throughout the country, says Gareth.

“Everyone at Statistics NZ, from the board through to the reception desk, are all extremely proud of Peter and the work he has delivered.”