

Born to serve

A conversation with Laulu Mac Leuanae



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Laulu Mac Leuanae brings a wealth of diverse experience and extensive networks to his new role as Chief Executive of the Ministry for Pacific Peoples. Five months into the job, he is loving the opportunity to improve the lives of Pacific people, but is also pragmatic about the significant challenges that poses. The 42-year-old public sector leader and Samoan chief talks with Public Sector's ROSE NORTHCOTT about his vision and a career that is all about serving New Zealand's Pacific community.

Where did you spend the early part of your life?

My parents were part of the Samoan migration in the late 60s and 70s during the manufacturing boom of New Zealand. We lived in Mangere in South Auckland initially and then, through perseverance and hard work, bought the family home out to the "great Massey" in West Auckland.

The experiences I saw my parents go through to navigate New Zealand's legal system back then compelled me to want to serve our Pacific communities as a lawyer. I obtained my law degree from Auckland University and had the privilege to practice law.

Like all things when you're young and passionate, I realised after 18 months that the legal fraternity was not where I really wanted to serve.

But what I also learned in those months was the surety that my career pathway was to advance Pacific peoples. The compelling desire to serve our Pacific communities became much more – it became a calling of my leadership to do more.

How did your career evolve after leaving law?

I moved into a role with the Pacific Business Trust that focused on business capacity building. I then worked for ProCare Health Ltd, one of the largest primary health care organisations in New Zealand serving the largest Pacific population. That's where I learned management and leadership skills and the influence a large organisation can have. I finished my MBA at this time.

From there I moved into a General Manager role at Pure Pacifika, a company that exports horticultural products from the South Pacific, primarily into Asian markets. It was a great experience and was a

stepping-stone for my next role as Chief Executive of the privately and publicly funded Pacific Cooperation Foundation. We worked throughout the wider Pacific region, promoting sustainable economic development initiatives.

Then this role at the Ministry for Pacific Peoples came up and it aligned with all my previous experiences and my values to serve our Pacific communities. I am loving the opportunity to serve and to establish a framework to ensure that our Pacific communities can thrive and excel.

You are also a Samoan chief. What does that mean?

There is a Samoan proverb, "O le ala ile pule o le tautua", which means the pathway to leadership is through service. Being made a chief (matai) comes out of service. It is not a birthright; however it is accessible only by blood and your service to your family and wider village community. It is an honour bestowed by your family who entrust you to represent them at the highest level of our village system.

What is the Ministry's focus?

We are the Government's principal advisor on policies and interventions that improve outcomes for Pacific peoples. We are here to ensure the success of our Pacific young people flowing through the pipeline from early childhood education to schooling, tertiary education and finally the workforce, entrepreneurship and their own families.

The Pacific population is the youngest, fastest-growing urban population in Aotearoa. Our medium age is 22.1 compared to 37 in the whole of NZ's population - we have a whole group of young people moving through the system fast and furiously.

Our vision is to have more successful Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. We have teams around the country so that we can easily connect with Pacific communities on the ground.

Our challenge is addressing the numerous barriers Pacific communities face and to make a difference in their advancement.

We look at the building blocks of any good society - healthy living, a good home, having access to quality education and increasing levels of income so people can live a quality lifestyle. Our role is to work with our colleagues across different government agencies and at different

levels to ensure that our Pacific communities have access to rights that everyone should have.

As a small agency, we cannot deliver on all those building blocks, but we can help our colleagues in different, and larger, government departments to see the issues from a Pacific cultural point of view. The success of Pacific communities requires an 'All of Government' approach.

What do you want to achieve?

I think that the main thing is that the Pacific person gets the same opportunities, and has the same living and education standards, as any New Zealander. We are a long way from that.

For example, one of the issues we are looking at is the ethnic pay gap across the public sector. European males earn the average highest salary, then European females, then Māori males, then Māori females, then Pacific males and then Pacific females who on average are the lowest paid public servants. That is not right.

My ultimate vision is that we have a Pacific society and community that is a high contributor to the New Zealand economy and that every Pacific person can excel and thrive. That is the reason I do what I do. I have the greatest opportunity in my office as Chief Executive to influence how the government allows this for our Pacific community.

What are your solutions?

There are three areas I have been preaching about in the Ministry and sharing with those who want to engage.

Firstly, "one voice". A collective and collaborative "voice". The public spend on Pacific people is around \$100 million annually. What has, perhaps accidentally, happened is that Pacific providers across education, health and social services appear not to be as connected as we should be – which goes right against the Pacific values of being collaborative, connected and collective. To make precious public money work for our Pacific people, we need to be integrated and speak with one voice; that is how we will influence all of government.

The second focus is on our identity - the culture, languages and heritage of Pacific peoples. It is one area where the Ministry leads and is expected to lead. For example, a few of our Pacific languages are dying and if we are not careful, some of our languages are projected to be gone within a couple of generations. This is our point of difference and we are looking at how we maintain those languages. Research shows that children do better when they speak more than one language.

The last piece is 'leap frog'. The easiest way to explain this is to consider how the Pacific region went straight from telephones to mobile technology - it did not have to go through the dial-up stage.

I am challenging our team to identify how we, as a Pacific community, can leap frog in other areas that put us into a leadership position. Part of that is looking at how we can get more Pacific youth to study technology, science and maths. We need to be ready to live and work in a world of automation and globalisation.

What are the entrenched challenges to overcome?

The average Pacific person lives in an overcrowded house, lives on a low income. They also have a lot of cultural responsibilities and obligations that impact on their income.

In the mindset of a Pacific person, the communal comes before the individual. Communal isn't just their family and extended family; it is also their responsibilities to the church and serving the wider community – their village.

Some people think, "I worked hard in my education and hard in my job and because I worked hard the opportunities came". But that is based on the assumption that Pacific people have the same opportunities all New Zealanders have and the same ability you have to take those opportunities. It is not the same for the community I serve and that is the biggest challenge we have.

It's a challenge that we as a New Zealand society need to get our heads around.

The real tension for us as Pacific peoples is that if your family needs money and you are of working age and you want to study law, or a STEM subject, but it takes you away from your cultural obligations within your family, what will you do?

Most of our youth will choose to hold their studies and take on a job because they think they should be doing something for their family. If you are looking at it through a Euro-centric lens, it doesn't make sense. But if you are looking at it through a Pacific lens, it makes perfect, good and sound sense.

That is the challenge and it is a difficult thing to work through.

I want to influence our government departments and my colleagues so that they understand that and know that it is not a level playing field.

How have you personally reconciled that tension?

As a New Zealander, I am as much a Kiwi as I am a Samoan. Once I got that paradigm settled in my mind and heart, it allowed me to thrive in the way I work because I can live in both worlds. I have the independence and ability to negotiate my cultural responsibilities.

The main thing for me is that the spirit of public service aligns so much with my upbringing and what I've been taught by my family about my role and how I serve through my work. I love this role of being a public servant. It comes with great responsibilities and obligations, and gives me the opportunity of doing what I cherish and honour most – more Pacific peoples being the best New Zealand citizens.

