

Article

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6006011>

E LUTIA I PUAVA AE MAPU I FAGALELE

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

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E lutia i puava ae mapu i fagalele is a Samoan proverb that comes from sailing. Sail through Puava Point, where the sea is rough and turbulent, before reaching the calm waters of Fagalele Bay.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19's impact has been significant and far-reaching. It caused disruptions and changed how we did business, worked, and interacted within our communities. The pandemic caused disruptions in production, exports, and both air and road travel. Several businesses in New Zealand were forced to close their doors, while some industries lost business locally, regionally, and nationally. Industries like hospitality and tourism lost business overnight (Kalemli-Ozcan et al., 2020). Some have recovered, and some have never been able to open again or restart their businesses.

The turbulent Puava Point in our organisation was undoubtedly the COVID-19 global pandemic. The organisation was considered an essential service, so staff and shareholders felt they were expected to work. Whilst it was not compulsory for everyone, over ninety-five percent of the staff and shareholders decided to stay at work. The added stress came about as everyone worked in isolation from one another. Not being able to have social interaction in the workspace and not being able to socialise outside work created a mental challenge for many of the shareholders and staff.

Several shareholders had families abroad while they were working in New Zealand. The lockdown meant they could not travel home to see their loved ones. Most of them decided to work and provide essential services to the community, and by doing this exposed themselves to the risk of contracting the virus.

COVID disruption brought many issues in organisations to the fore (Hossain et al., 2023). During COVID, roles shifted, and decisions were often made in haste to ensure survival. As the pandemic dissipated, many systems and organisational dynamics did not revert to their previous ways of acting. It is well known that this dynamic contributed to the difficulties faced by organisations (Kalemli-Ozcan et al., 2020).

In this article, my focus is on the disruption in the New Zealand passenger service industry and how I used a Samoan indigenous knowledge system to communicate, attempt to make sense of the situation, and bring about sustainable and positive change.

BACKGROUND

"DT-45 Ltd" (I anonymised all names in the research) is a locally owned and operated passenger service business established in the 1940s during World War II. While in wartime women managed the day-to-day operations, the board of directors was predominantly male. At that time, three similar companies existed in the city. Following the war, returning servicemen joined DT-45 Ltd and decided to merge the three companies into one entity. In 1965, the company was formally registered as a limited liability company amidst strict regulation by the central government.

To ensure transparency and accountability, the company holds an Annual General Meeting (AGM), where shareholders and the board of directors review the company's performance. During these meetings, shareholders can ask the board questions and receive updates on the company's progress.

The board of directors for DT-45 is composed of five members, all elected from among the shareholders. To maintain continuity and fresh perspectives, the board operates on a rotation system: three of the five directors are up for re-election at one AGM, while the remaining two face re-election at the next. To be eligible for nomination as a director, a shareholder must have been with the company for at least two years. This governance structure ensures that the company remains responsive to its shareholders while allowing for regular input and oversight from experienced members.

Over the years, DT-45 Ltd has been a pillar of stability and employment within the community. Its rich history has fostered a culture of trust, integrity, and loyalty among shareholders, friends, and associates in the industry. Key to its success are long-standing shareholders who have dedicated three decades to the company, many of whom have surpassed retirement age yet remain actively involved in both the company and their communities.

One such shareholder is "Mr. 179." Aware of my successful ventures in the industry, he approached me for assistance in revitalising DT-45 Ltd. Given my positive rapport with the company's staff and stakeholders, Mr. 179 extended an invitation to a directors' meeting in 2021. This gathering occurred amidst the widespread impact of COVID-19, which was significantly affecting businesses, communities, and families nationwide. During this tumultuous period, DT-45 Ltd faced substantial internal conflicts that threatened its financial stability.

MY FIRST MEETING

Upon my arrival, I inadvertently entered the building from the rear, which led me directly to a corridor and into the boardroom. Inside, I encountered three gentlemen of foreign nationalities along with a local kaumātua (Māori elder), "Mr. 115." Mr. 115 greeted me in te reo Māori, expressing curiosity about my presence. As a competent speaker of te reo Māori, I responded in kind, and after we exchanged a hongi (traditional greeting), I explained that I was there at the request of Mr. 179 for a meeting with the board. After greeting the other gentlemen, they escorted me out through the opposite exit.

Outside, I found myself in a tense atmosphere where shareholders were visibly angry and aggressive. Mr. 115, sharing in their frustration, conveyed a strong sense of urgency for change, warning of serious consequences if their concerns were not addressed. Speaking for the group, he was just as passionate as the shareholders themselves. I greeted the group, and Mr. 115 explained to them why I was there. He then turned back to me and said, "I trust you will do the right thing, as long as it takes," adding, "Ka whaiwahi tonu ake" (the struggle continues). We exchanged a hongi and a hug before they departed.

After they left, I returned to the boardroom, where I found four directors along with Mr. 179. The directors appeared visibly unsettled but remained resolute. When questioned about the commotion outside, I assured them that the encounter had been peaceful, a statement which Mr. 179 confirmed, noting the calm departure of Mr. 115 and the shareholders.

The conflict

Informed by Mr. 179 of recent upheavals within the company, including the resignation of the general manager and subsequent board dismissals and appointments, I attended the meeting unaware of the ongoing power struggle. The presence of irate shareholders indicated a potentially volatile situation, contrasting with the unexpected peaceful resolution initiated by Mr. 115.

It became evident that the company faced multifaceted conflicts, including internal disputes between directors and shareholders as well as staff grievances. Additionally, external conflicts with governmental bodies exacerbated the company's challenges. Despite the directors' admission that they had unsuccessfully sought a manager, they extended the offer of general manager to me based on the events unfolding upon my arrival. I accepted the role for three specific reasons:

- The trust and belief of shareholders like Mr. 179 and Mr. 115, who were not directors but had faith in my abilities, served as a compelling mandate for me to step up and undertake the role of general manager. Their confidence in my capacity to rescue the business from impending failure provided the impetus I needed to accept the challenge.
- Recognising numerous opportunities to apply my leadership skills, I envisioned instigating transformative changes to foster growth within the company, nurture its personnel, enhance my professional development, and restore order amidst chaos.
- The unfolding dynamic when I arrived, and my cultural position, seemed to indicate that I could use my cultural knowledge to effect the required changes.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT AND GATHERING DATA – TALANOA

My initial approach involved engaging in talanoa, a traditional Pacific Islander form of conversation, to gather insights from various stakeholders. Talanoa is broad and multidimensional but inclusive of different interpretations (Vaiotei, 2013–2014). Pacific people's beliefs and values are expressed through cultural practices, which help Pacific people connect with their identity (Cammock et al., 2021). They help people acknowledge their responsibilities and foster a sense of belonging. Even though participants were non-Pacific, using talanoa to communicate and connect provided a platform that aided in the process.

Through dialogue with directors, it became evident that the organisation harboured divergent factions. Talanoa served as a pivotal tool, affording me the chance to delve into individual shareholders' perspectives and converse with leaders of dissenting groups, thereby gaining comprehensive insights.

Understanding the sentiments of in-house staff was crucial. Informal discussions revealed their predicament amidst the conflict between directors and shareholders, underscored by prevalent mistrust. To ensure unbiased information, I prioritised establishing trust among staff, shareholders, and directors during the talanoa sessions.

Direct engagement facilitated the acquisition of firsthand information, minimising the risk of distortion or misinterpretation. I observed instances where individuals merely echoed others' opinions, emphasising the importance of fostering an environment conducive to authentic expression and individual ownership of experiences during the talanoa process.

Through talanoa, we navigated discussions on technology, uncovering diverse perspectives and concerns. While some advocated for technological advancement, others expressed apprehension, highlighting the need for inclusive decision-making and effective communication.

THE METHOD OF HARVESTING INSIGHT AND DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY – SOĀLAUPULE

Recognising the complexity of the conflicts within the organisation, I considered a Soālaupule approach rather than solely relying on talanoa. Each individual and dissenting group I engaged with expressed strong opinions on various aspects of the business, forming the basis for developing questions for our Soālaupulega (noun or subject) sessions.

Soālaupule in practice

Soālaupule serves as a platform where shareholders, directors, and staff can share their stories and experiences through the art of oratory, creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere much like the Samoan tradition of *fōfōla le fāla* (rolling out the mat). The word Soālaupule itself is composed of three words: “soa,” meaning to partner or share; “lau,” meaning your or yours; and “pule,” meaning mandate or authority. While *talanoa* often begins with casual conversations about everyday topics like sports or weather, Soālaupule delves deeper, addressing more serious concerns and recognising each participant as an authority on the issues at hand.

Adhering to cultural norms, I approached the meeting with humility, avoiding the presumption of possessing all the solutions. Entering through the back door, customary in my culture, signified respect for the host’s authority, fostering a sacred connection between participants.

Soālaupulega, rooted in relational collective decision making and social dynamics intrinsic to Samoan culture, allowed shareholders and staff to voice their concerns authentically, fostering empathy and trust. This trust facilitated open and honest dialogue, enabling me to categorise and address their concerns effectively, laying the groundwork for our succession plan.

Insights from staff

Conducting a Soālaupulega (council meeting) with staff unveiled a plethora of issues. Concerns ranged from conflicts of interest and favouritism to instances of gender-based bullying and professional misconduct. These issues, whether personal or rooted in workplace politics, posed significant challenges due to varying perspectives among staff members. Discussions revealed divergent views on topics such as staff safety, responsibilities, and boundaries, with many attributing the escalation of conflicts to events dating back to 2019, exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Senior staff expressed feeling undervalued by directors and shareholders despite their dedication, which was especially evident during the pandemic. Instances of staff voluntarily working additional hours and shifts underscored their commitment to maintaining essential services. However, confusion arose from unclear leadership, with directors involving themselves in day-to-day operations without clear directives. Inconsistencies in communication and perceived favouritism further strained relations between staff and directors.

Generational disparities in work ethics added another layer of complexity. Staff members spanning Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials brought unique perspectives to the table, influencing the approach to resolving conflicts. Despite these differences, common interests emerged during the Soālaupulega, including a shared emphasis on work safety, job security, and a desire for recognition and appreciation within the organisation.

Staff demonstrated a commitment to the company’s success and expressed eagerness to contribute their ideas. Their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue highlighted the potential for collaboration in addressing organisational challenges.

Dissenting group leaders

The organisation was divided into three distinct groups, each representing different shareholder demographics and interests. Group 1 was predominantly comprised of immigrants sharing a common religious belief, with some local supporters aligned with their cause. Conversely, Group 2 was comprised mainly of European New Zealand men, many of whom held senior positions within the organisation. Group 3, led by individuals like Mr. 179, consisted of immigrants from minority groups and a few locals who remained independent of Group 1 and Group 2, instead advocating for cooperation between the factions and serving as voices of reason within the organisation.

Group 3 posited that the company's challenges were rooted in government policies and deregulation, which facilitated the influx of culturally diverse individuals into the transport industry. The resulting mix of backgrounds introduced varying work ethics and cultures, diverging from the norms familiar to many longstanding shareholders within the company.

Organisational landscape

Upon my initial involvement, the management structure appeared convoluted, with no designated operational manager and the board chairman assuming managerial responsibilities. Addressing this issue became a primary focus, particularly as I transitioned into the managerial role from that of the chairman. A pervasive lack of trust between staff and management, compounded by internal uncertainties, further complicated the organisational landscape.

Governance documents

The organisation operated under four key documents governing its affairs. The Constitution established fundamental rules guiding share issuance, director appointments, and associated obligations. Complementing this, the Facility Supply Agreement (FSA) delineated mutual obligations between the organisation and individual shareholders, outlining rights and responsibilities. The operational rules provided a comprehensive framework for conducting core business activities, detailing processes and procedures alongside associated consequences for non-compliance. Disseminated to all shareholders, these rules clarified expectations and established accountability.

Finally, the Health and Safety (H&S) protocols were codified to ensure adherence to safety standards, safeguarding shareholders and service users. Health and safety protocols were designed in accordance with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. This Act is the principal piece of legislation defining the statutory obligations of New Zealand businesses in relation to the safety and welfare of their employees ("Health and Safety at Work Act 2015", 2024). Violations of H&S guidelines incurred penalties, reinforcing compliance within the organisation.

Impact of culture and governance

The conflict within the organisation was influenced by diverse cultural, linguistic, political, and religious perspectives, reflecting the composition of the board, which comprised 75 percent mixed foreign nationals and 25 percent New Zealand European locals. Interactions with board members underscored their varying interpretations of governance documents, shaped by their respective backgrounds. Some directors, hailing from less democratic nations, exhibited authoritarian leadership styles, which were evident in their approach to rule interpretation and enforcement. These cultural nuances compounded existing tensions, contributing to the organisational discord.

Conflict resolution approaches

I chose Soālaupulega as a conflict resolution approach because it creates a safe counselling space where everyone – shareholders, staff members, and directors – has equal status and can voice their opinions. It was crucial that everyone felt heard and that the resolution was something all parties could agree on.

By contrast, my personal experience with conflict resolution has been through a more Western approach, where a mediator facilitated the process. While I appreciated this method at the time, and it was successful in both cases, such a system often creates winners and losers. Though effective in the short term, I now realise that this approach could have prolonged conflict and potentially harmed the business in the long run. I also realised I needed to understand conflict resolution in a new way (Wallensteen, 2019).

OUTCOMES

During a challenging period at the company, I drew on insights from Soālaupulega to create a comprehensive plan and timeline, involving two key teams: shareholders and in-house staff. As general manager, I emphasised clear communication by sending weekly newsletters to keep all stakeholders informed of our progress. This coordinated effort, backed by the approval of the board of directors, also relied on the vital involvement of the company's accountant and lawyer, both of whom had been excluded during the conflict. Their expertise was crucial for the plan's success and, with their support, we worked toward resolving the issues effectively.

We started by addressing the technological landscape. Despite past investments, changes in industry dynamics rendered our existing technology outdated and inadequate. Recognising this, we committed to upgrading our technology to align with evolving industry standards.

Soālaupule provided a platform for participants to reflect on two key questions: What if our current plan fails? Who else might hold the information we need? This approach encouraged individuals to explore alternative solutions, fostering self-development and empowerment for all involved. By inviting external experts, we gained fresh perspectives and fostered trust among stakeholders, eliminating biases and enhancing the credibility of proposed solutions, especially with the support of Mr. 179.

In addressing operational rules and compliance, talanoa proved effective in eliciting candid discussions, although some challenges arose with irrelevant contributions. Despite these challenges, talanoa revealed diverse perspectives and levels of understanding, highlighting the need for careful discernment in separating pertinent issues from tangential ones.

Through Soālaupulega, we witnessed the resilience of individuals driven by a sense of purpose and supported by external networks. These insights led to a consensus on the importance of prompt decisions regarding technology and management structures, acknowledging the competitive landscape's impact. Non-compliance with regulations posed significant risks, including potential penalties from the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA), underlining the imperative for adherence.

Moving forward, the combined use of talanoa and Soālaupule facilitated the formulation and implementation of an action plan, ensuring timely interventions to avert organisational collapse. While talanoa provided initial insights over three months, the ongoing process remained essential for sustained progress, culminating in resolutions that safeguarded the organisation's future. This collaborative approach, guided by insights from Soālaupulega, enabled us to delineate a clear path forward, bridging divides between directors and shareholders and focusing on common areas of concern. Through continued dialogue and action, we remain committed to addressing challenges and fostering sustainable growth.

CONCLUSION

Soālaupule facilitated a comprehensive exchange of perspectives, fostering a collective commitment to implementing our plan. This collaborative endeavour, spanning eighteen months, was made possible through my approach, rooted in Samoan values such as alofa (love), fa'aaloalo (respect), lotomualalo (humility), and tautua (service). From a traditional Samoan perspective, these qualities are necessary for any leader to learn to be effective in their roles. It is learning by doing. One of my grandfather's words of wisdom always echoes in my ears: "Ia e iloa tautua muamua, o ina e te iloa ai le fa'aaloalo, alofa, saili malo, saili manuia mo lou lumanai." This means: at first you learn to serve, that is where you will learn to respect and gain respect, to care, to love, and to serve with humility.

Alofa was exemplified through inclusivity, dedicating time to engage in talanoa sessions and ensuring everyone had a voice. This commitment to service, or tautua, was a demonstration of respect for the staff and shareholders' efforts to safeguard their business. Humility, or lotomaulalo, guided our interactions as suggestions were offered and considered with mutual respect.

Through this process, we established operational procedures that have transformed our financial standing and enhanced the functionality of our technology. Our collective efforts have propelled the organisation towards profitability and stability, a testament to the efficacy of Soālaupule and the enduring values it embodies. We may have found our Fagalele Bay, where the waters are calm and the sense of serenity is upon us, but we know there will always be another storm for us to navigate.

Our challenge is not to be complacent. We must learn to listen to one another to ensure that our plan remains active and sustainable. We must learn to listen and look out for new challenges that will continue to grow our organisation. We must learn to adapt to changes. "We read the signs, we become more adaptable to change, we see more possibilities than were evident [at] first" (Spiller et al., 2015, p. 142).

Antonio Seiuli is of Samoan descent and is also known by his Samoan chiefly titles of Masoe and Pui-pui-fatu. Antonio has previous experience in social work and as a social entrepreneur in Ōtepoti, Dunedin. His previous work has been about using sustainable practices and capacity building. Antonio is currently studying towards a Master of Professional Practice, part-time with Otago Polytechnic.

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