Appreciating and advancing bicultural organisational practice

Kia ora, greetings,

During recent weeks, as I go about developing my business practice, I am encountering some uncertainty about how to achieve bicultural practice in a range of areas of my organisation. I expect others before me have encountered similar challenges and others will do in future. For this reason, I have decided to begin a conversation that discusses some of the challenges and hopefully some of the developments I make along the way. If you are reading this and resonate in some way, please join me in conversation and share any resources or ideas. Perhaps, as a collective community of interest, we can create productive ways to progress biculturalism in organisational practice and a useful resource in the process.

My question is, “How do I find appropriate ways to demonstrate bicultural appreciation and practice in an organisation that is founded primarily upon Western, postmodern theories and approaches”? My organisation is primarily located in the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand and my cultural identity includes Māori and Pākehā (foreign) ancestry. Māori-Pākehā relationships are negotiated through the framework of The Treaty of Waitangi (Thomas & Nikora, 1992) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, two versions signed by a number of representatives of Māori and The British Crown in 1840. Further signatures were added by Māori as Te Tiriti circulated through New Zealand. The Treaties, often referred to collectively as The Treaty of Waitangi or abbreviated to The Treaty, initiated partnership between Māori and Pākehā (Thomas & Nikora, 1992). I would like this partnership to be visible and active in appropriate ways in my organisation.

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As director, and co-founder, I whakapapa (have ancestral links) to Māori. Rongowhakaata is my Iwi (kinship group) and Manutūke Marae is the meeting place of my whānau (extended family). I have an association with Te Aitanga a Mahaki which I am in the process of learning more about. I also whakapapa to Ireland, Scotland and England with Anglo-Saxon ancestors beginning their settlement in Aotearoa between the late 1820s and early 1900s. My upbringing did not include any significant experience of Māori or teaching of tikanga (values, customs, protocols) and very much reflected...
dominant Western colonising attitudes. Later in life, I set out to address this concern and developed some knowledge and understanding of tikanga, particularly over the last 25 years. My whakapapa link only became known to me recently - almost two years ago.

How then, do I acknowledge, appreciate and include Māori tikanga into my organisation;

- When my knowledge, qualifications and experience are primarily associated with Western theory and practice and minimally informed by Māori tikanga
- Without risk of assimilation or integration which is assimilation by another name (Thomas & Nikora, 1992)
- Without making claims to knowledge and experience that I don’t have access to
- Without presuming inappropriate entitlement
- Without the risk of these efforts being no more than a token gesture?

How do I acknowledge, appreciate and include Māori tikanga into my organisation appropriately?

As I contemplate this complex question, one which I have also considered in my tertiary teaching practice and before that, my counselling and professional supervision practice, I am aware of the many social stories or discourses that have developed over time to define and prescribe characteristics of ethnocultural identity. Examples of some of these discourses follow. They are discourses that;

- measure ethno-cultural validity and belonging by blood quantum (half, quarter or eighth Māori). Once used by NZ government to determine what electoral role people could enrol on. This measure ceased to be used in 1975 (Hayden, 2018). I continue to meet people who use this measure to categorise cultural identity.
- measure validity by skin colour (darker skin determines Māori identity and lighter skin determines Pākehā)
- consider validity solely by virtue of Māori whakapapa connection. If you have a Māori ancestor “you’re Māori. Kia ora cuz” (Hayden, 2018).
- provide guidelines for considering cultural identity based on defined degrees of identification to traditional Māori cultural background (see Davies et al., 1993, cited in Jonson, Su’a & Chrichton-Hill, 1997)
- judge a claim to Māori identity as ‘playing the Māori card’ for personal gain and an example of inappropriate ab-use of privilege
- claim we are all ‘Kiwi’ and part of a collective ‘melting pot’
- claim it is not possible to know or experience the effects of colonisation if upbringing was shaped by the dominant Western colonising culture and the privilege associated with that upbringing
- are inclusive of multiple cultural knowledges, experiences and identities
- involve insider/outsider binary cultural identity options
- measure tentativeness of cultural claims as shame, reluctance or denial
- measure tentativeness of cultural claims as an act of respect and humility
- measure pride of cultural claims as arrogance and inappropriate entitlement
- measure pride of cultural claims as valid and honourable
These discourses do not just describe the terms that validify identity, they shape the identities and have effects for those who subscribe to the discourses, or not.

For example, I recently met a person whose mother was Māori and father was Pākehā of Anglo-Saxon descent. She identified as Māori, was raised by her Māori grandparents in a home where Kaupapa Māori was lived and Māori reo was the first language. Her primary schooling was Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori primary school) and her first introduction to Pākehā educational institutions was college. Her father, or any of her extended Pākehā family were not involved in her life. Whilst she identified as Māori, she didn’t ‘look’ Māori. The discourse many people used to determine her ethnocultural identity was based on skin colour and her skin appeared pale in complexion. However, the primary discourse she used to define her identity was the extent of her traditional Māori cultural background. This shaped her intra and inter cultural experience and created identity crises for her. She told me that People who identified as Māori and Pākehā often questioned her entitlement to join Māori cultural groups and to hold Māori positions in her work place, for example.

What this example shows, is that there are a multitude of diverse positions to consider and be attentive to within and across the various discourses. Some of these positions are complementary and some conflictual. I have found it helpful to identify and appreciate these discourses as they assist me to consider how others, and I, are positioned by them and how I may be implicated in positioning others when I speak or act. I wonder what the characteristics of a discourse of biculturalism might include for an organisational context?

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One suggestion made by Thomas & Nikora (1992) is, “Within organizations, special consideration would be given to removing or changing practices that were inappropriate for Maori people and allowing the use of Maori cultural patterns as part of the regular operation of organizations”. These authors add that “Values related to bi-culturalism include, self-determination, empowerment and cultural pluralism. Understanding the processes of oppression, and individual and institutional racism are also important”. My task is to work towards making these ideas evident by attending to them in my organisation.

“My intentions are for working towards bicultural practice and focusing on the journey towards this more-so than focusing on what the destination may look like. By exercising transparency about my context and experience, and understanding these challenges as an ongoing, dynamic process means I can take intentional steps, which may be fraught with uncertainty, and reflect and review these along the way.”
Some of these steps I have begun to action include;

- Setting up and maintaining this blog
- Accessing and reading relevant literature
- Having conversations with friends, whānau, family and colleagues across a range of ethnocultural and professional contexts
- Considering steps I have already taken for bicultural practice development in other professional contexts including counselling, professional supervision, research and teaching as these provide options for transferring these steps into my current work context
- Continuing to learn and include reo (Māori language) terms, karakia (prayer or blessing), pepeha (introduction that includes whakapapa connections) and waiata (song) in a range of ways (website, marketing, writing, training) where relevant and appropriate
- Finding examples of organisations that model thriving bicultural practice

There is a wealth of literature that addresses Western approaches to business and leadership. Amongst this is some that includes postmodern approaches, which are of particular interest to me. Literature that focuses on Māori business approaches is becoming more available and I list some of this in the reference section below. So far, it seems from my literature searches that there is a dearth of research and literature that addresses bicultural organisational or business practice. I will continue to search for these.

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My experience from working in organisations of varying sizes has been that bicultural practice is often considered and there is interest for it. However, in practice, I don’t believe these efforts go far enough. It is quite easy to find biculturalism mentioned in values and mission statements and perhaps organisations might employ or consult cultural advisors or mentors. However, often, this does not produce adequate results or progress. Anecdotally, I often hear comments like “there is talk about us being a bicultural organisation, but the commitment to it isn’t really there and it doesn’t happen in reality”. This view is evidenced in staffing, meeting protocols, products and production, marketing, training, human resources processes, legislation, dispute management, staff appraisal processes and other documentation. I expect there are organisations who attend to bicultural practice well and I am interested in learning how they achieve this. My hope is that I can learn and achieve bicultural practice in my organisation and find ways to invite others to consider biculturalism in their organisational cultures and leadership practices.

So far, I don’t have too many answers and may never have enough. However, I have begun to ask the questions and search for ways of responding that will hopefully create space for important developments to emerge over time.

The following references, some of which I am yet to read, may be useful to readers who wish to consider bicultural practices in your organisations. I look forward to your contributions to the conversation.
References


