



by Julie Middleton

Fishing for the positives

Maori have always done things collectively; that's the way of life handed down from the ancestors. But do Maori feel that Maori values are understood or even embraced at work? And what difference does that make to the way Maori feel about their work, their performance and their personal wellbeing?

That's just what Jarrod Haar wants to find out.

Jarrod, of Pakeha, Ngati Maniapoto and Ngati Mahuta descent, is a researcher at the University of Waikato – his full title is Associate Professor in the Department of Strategy and Human Resource Management.

His latest research *The Role of Maori Cultural Support for Employees and Employers*, has earned him a \$300,000 three-year grant from the Marsden Fund, a government pot of cash for top-class research.

Essentially, says Jarrod, his work looks at the way Maori workers perceive support for their values in the workplace and

whether that helps boost their satisfaction with work, their home lives, their performance, and how long they stay at work – an important issue when New Zealand has serious skills shortages in many industries.

I met Jarrod at the New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology conference, held at the North Shore Campus of AUT University in late 2011. Positive psychology is essentially the scientific study of what enables people and their communities to thrive, and Jarrod makes no apology for seeking the upbeat.

Maori are tired of hearing the negative numbers, he says. "I am fishing for the positives. There has been very little attention on Maori wellbeing in a general sense, such as mental health, satisfaction with life, satisfaction with work, and with family as well."

Jarrod's looking to prove that people whose Maoritanga – including the presence of extended family and a collectivist approach to life – is accepted and accommodated at work, will be happier and more productive at work and

at home. He distinguishes between 'whanau home connections' ("interacting with whanau in your workplace and discussing home issues such as family events while at work") and 'whanau work connections' ("discussing work issues such as workplace problems and deadlines while at home").

Jarrod has done numerous interviews and surveys for his study and has a database of information collected from 500 Maori workers. His interviewees say that a tikanga and whanau-friendly environment is one that lets Maori express their culture in a natural way, which is good for self-esteem. He says "lots of little things" can make a difference, such as being encouraged to answer the phone with 'kia ora' and bosses knowing that it's not OK to sit on food tables.

So far, his research is finding links between tikanga- and whanau-friendly environments and greater career and life satisfaction, lower anxiety and lower stress, which has positive implications for employers as well as for Maori mental health.



“Those who perceive more support respond in a positive way. Maori with cultural support are more engaged. It’s not about building a marae at the workplace, or hiring a kaumatua, it’s about being receptive to cultural difference.”

He adds, “In the workplace, everyone might do the same job, but we may, as Maori, bring different things to the workplace. It’s valuing that and making someone feel that is respected and appreciated.”

Jarrold says a strong theme emerging from his research is the need for employers to support Maori culture in the workplace in practical ways – which sometimes mean thinking beyond strict letter-of-the-law policy. Jarrold once met a cook at Waikato Hospital who, after Dame Te Ata died in 2006, told her boss that she needed time off to go to Turangawaewae and help feed the many thousands of mourners.

Someone taking a strictly HR policy view would say as the cook wasn’t a blood or very close relative of Dame Te Ata, she wasn’t entitled to leave; that was the employer’s initial reaction. The cook felt she had no choice: she said she would go to the tangi, or quit. Says Jarrold: “The boss realised that she was a highly valued employee and he didn’t want to lose her, so he let her go and covered her role some other way.

“Dame Te Ata was really important to the cook and her culture. It’s about understanding that the cook’s actions – being able to offer her expertise with quantity cooking – would be enormously helpful as well as contributing so much mana to her whanau. She probably worked 16-hour shifts in the kitchen, but she would have felt validated.”

Jarrold says that objections to tangi leave are often “predicated on the erroneous belief that Maori abuse tangi leave. I think the reality is ... that five per cent of Maori abuse tangi leave, as five per

cent of all workers abuse sick leave.” Basically there has to be trust. “The employer has to trust, and an employee has to be trustworthy”.

He points out that a little bit of employer effort at the individual level can make a big difference to employee satisfaction and contribution, and it’s about all cultures, not just Maori. While working for Te Wananga o Aotearoa, for example, he had a devout Muslim colleague who prayed for five to 10 minutes five times daily, some of which fell during the working day. “We would rearrange meetings so he could make prayer times. It cost us nothing, but made a big difference to him. And he loved the place.”

So what about the N word – nepotism – that you often hear when relatives work together? Jarrold says that long as people are genuinely hired on merit, having large numbers of relatives in one workplace isn’t a bad thing (and in small towns, it’s hard to avoid).

In fact, having multiple members of extended whanau at one workplace can deliver a raft of benefits. “Working with wider whanau can put pressure to people to perform, and if someone is struggling, it might be easier for them to acknowledge that there’s a problem.”

“Instead of someone saying, ‘Hey Jarrold, I’m going to formally performance-review you but it’ll take me a year to get you out of here’, they could probably say, ‘Hey cuz, I don’t think things are working out so well, to which the reply might be ‘yeah, you’re right, I don’t really like this job’.”

Jarrold says his next move is to interview employers about culture in the workplace. In the meantime, he offers some pointers he has gleaned from his study so far.

What employers can do to help engage Maori employees

- 1) Have respect for culture and be understanding. You don’t have to be an expert on Maori culture. Just be open and encourage people to come and talk to you about things that might be important to do at a cultural level.
- 2) Communicate. Don’t be afraid to ask for input. Ask if there are things that could be done better. Things that we are not doing but are worth doing? Employers may be scared to engage because they fear a request they can’t meet, or looking foolish.
- 3) Have the courage to say: ‘Those 10 suggestions are great but we can’t afford all of them, so we’ll work on numbers one and six.’ The reality is that Maori employees will go: ‘Yeah, this place tries’, and that’s a benefit for everybody.

What employees can do to influence workplace culture

- 1) Seek out engagement with the employer. Workers might want to encourage a colleague with mana to broach concerns. For example, you can imagine a Maori staff member saying, “The CEO parks his bum on the table to talk to us. I know he’s a clean and tidy man, but culturally he’s making a real faux pas around the place we serve food.”
- 2) If you are job-hunting, ask about the culture of a potential employer and how receptive it is to Maori. Asking questions about how receptive a work environment is gives power back to Maori, and you will enjoy working in those places more. ↻