

# Communication, governance and multiply-owned Maori lands

O Barrett-Ohia

*AgResearch Ltd., Ruakura Research Centre, Private Bag 3123, Hamilton, New Zealand*

www.socialsystems.co.nz Email [orewa.barrett-ohia@agresearch.co.nz](mailto:orewa.barrett-ohia@agresearch.co.nz)

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**Abstract.** Based on the premise that communication is critical to effective governance, this research examines the communication mechanisms used within Maori organisations. It is part of an objective funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology to "Define the important elements in building a governance structure to achieve alignment with the goals of owners on multiply-owned (Maori) lands". It contributes to both government and Maori agendas to accelerate Maori economic development while acknowledging the challenge in reconciling economic imperatives to increase profit with Maori cultural obligations to uphold spiritual and cultural (*kaitiaki*) obligations. Previous studies undertaken by AgResearch with groups other than the 'traditional farmer' highlighted the need for approaches and methods that embrace a culturally conducive, participatory, and mutually beneficial research relationship. In keeping with an essentially qualitative research approach, five case study groups were identified and nineteen people took part in in-depth, face-to-face interviews. This study highlights a range of communication mechanisms used by Maori organisations.

**Keywords:** Communication, governance, multiply-owned Maori lands.

## Introduction

As a consequence of colonisation the Maori people lost substantial amounts of land. During the last decade, however, some Maori have had large areas of ancestral land returned to them as part of the Treaty of Waitangi claims settlements. This has reinvigorated Maori attention to farming and agriculture. Gradually Maori are re-emerging as major contributors to the New Zealand economy in the way they were when British and European people first arrived. In 2005 Maori agriculture provided 7.4 percent of New Zealand's total annual output from agriculture.

Despite the significant contribution by Maori agriculture to the economy, there is room for improvement. There are many instances where farms and land blocks are performing well below the national average, leading agricultural scientists and Maori farmers to assert that greater attention must be given to increasing the 'readiness' of Maori farming authorities to receive the lands returned to them through Treaty settlements so they are better equipped to utilise and manage these lands and the lands still in their ownership.

Effective communication is considered one of the key areas where improvements will result in greater benefits for land owners and beneficiaries according to the Federation of Maori Authorities (FOMA, representing Maori leaders) and agricultural scientists. This is particularly applicable to Maori because much of their land is characterised by the ethic of

providing for the collective interest through having multiple owners.

The aim of this research was to identify communication mechanisms that permit more efficient decision making within Maori organisations. This involved the researcher identifying the communication processes and mechanisms already in place and being used by the Maori farming sector, and gauging their effectiveness and where improvements could result in better understanding between boards and their shareholders. The results of this research will provide useful information for Maori farming authorities seeking to improve their internal and external communication processes.

## Communication theory and Maori governance

Bordow and More (1991, p.44) found that organisational studies often "failed to make explicit their epistemological and ontological underpinnings". Post-modern critiques of organisational theories often focus on rational, coordinated concepts of efficiency and effectiveness (Burrell 1988). According to Rosenau, "the representation of the organisation as a homogenous whole rejects diversity and difference" (Rosenau 1992, p.131). Maori worldviews and cultural traditions are not well catered for in post-colonial, modernist views of organisations whose primary focus is confined to concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in the quest for

financial gain. Communication is central to these worldviews.

As *Ngati Porou* (a Maori clan) academic Whai Dewes points out, the Maori culture is orally based and Maoris respect those who are proficient in their ability to debate, orate and recite. An ability to speak with passion and conviction and 'from the heart' is admired. So too is one's knowledge of and ability to recite one's *whakapapa* (genealogy) and make known one's *turangawaewae* (land-based, tribal roots). Maoris use these traits to measure the capability of a communicator.

Turning to communication theorists, Jewell (1998) describes organisational communication as a process that is affected by, and in turn affects, all the defining properties of an organisation. He highlights some of the tenets of communication as being the exertion of influence, cooperation, imitation, and leadership. Similarly Muchinsky (1987) describes organisational communication as comprising the processes of leadership, influence, control, planning, and decision making.

Leadership, influence and the ability to achieve cooperation were found to be tenets conducive to Maori and academic theorist views about what communication ought to comprise, and this research sought to gauge the effectiveness of the communication mechanisms used in each case study group.

## Method

A case study approach was used because of its contextual relevance to the research. Five participating Maori organisations were each considered as a single case.

Data were gathered using qualitative methods, which included 'in-depth', face-to-face interviews, focus group discussion, and note taking at *hui* (gatherings) and at Maori conferences. The research approach is '*kaupapa Maori*', the preferred Maori-centred approach deemed by Maori to be compatible with this research (Smith 1991; Bishop 1991).

A 'strength-based' view conducive to the notion of self-determination or '*tino rangatiratanga*' (Smith 1991; Bishop 1991) was used as opposed to an approach that seeks to solve a problem.

A range of potential participant farming groups was approached during a six-month period. In some instances it was regarded as good practice to notify the local recognised tribal authority that this research was being conducted in the area. Interviews were conducted with two AgResearch farm scientists, who had worked with Maori farms and farmers for many years.

## ***In-depth, face-to-face interviews***

At the request of two participating authorities, two group interviews were conducted before individual in-depth, face-to-face interviews. This is a practice in keeping with Maori collective aspirations and their preference for a transparency between members.

In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with consenting individuals who were nominated by their committee. Participants were selected to achieve a range of people according to gender, role and age. Interviews took place in private rooms.

Most interviews were recorded and a transcription was returned to the relevant farming group for their comment and/or records. Some individuals, in particular *kaumatuas* (Maori elders), were reluctant to be taped. In such cases, field notes and photographs were used to document the discussions during the interview.

Both transcribed interviews and field notes were analysed for common themes. The current literature was reviewed and comparisons were made with the findings of this research.

## ***Use of documentation***

Documents were made available by all the groups to the researcher. They were used to find out how the organisations communicated with their shareholders.

## ***Participants***

Initially twenty-one individuals were approached to identify potential participant groups. Out of the referrals, five case studies were organised. These five case studies comprised sixteen individuals who would take part in the interviews. The case studies came from the following areas: Far North, Waikato King Country and King Country/Taupo. Twelve groups either declined or were unavailable to participate.

**Group One:** The Far North (two people were interviewed). Using known networks, the researcher located an elder and retired dairy farmer, and a younger organic crop farmer. An in-depth face-to-face interview was conducted and field notes were taken because the interviewees did not wish to be taped. The elder of the two participants preferred to relay his information from an historical perspective.

**Group Two:** Opotiki (five people interviewed). The process that led to the researcher meeting with a collective of Maori

land owner/farmers began when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the collective and AgResearch. This enabled the researcher to contact the chairman for the collective of farm owners and have time put aside at the collective's meeting to meet the farm leaders, explain the intent of this research and invite each farm group to participate.

As a consequence of that initial meeting with several farm groups, one group was identified for a case study. Several people were interviewed from the consenting farm. They included a business owner/operator, farm staff and a farm advisor.

**Group Three:** King Country/West Taupo (three people interviewed). Several farming groups in the region were approached. After two months and several visits to potential farming groups one group agreed to take part. Their decision to participate was in part due to the group's existing relationship with AgResearch and their interest in participating in the Maori Farmer of the Year Awards. Contact was made via telephone, email, and a letter to the board chairman. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were held with the board chairman and two administrators.

**Group Four:** Waikato/King Country - scattered land blocks (three people interviewed). Several owners of Maori land blocks were invited to participate. Three were interested initially but time constraints prevented them from taking part in a formal discussion or interview. Eventually, one group of three owners agreed to participate in the study. Their land blocks are scattered in small pockets through the southern Waikato region. In-depth, face-to-face (taped) interviews were conducted with these owners.

**Group Five:** A national network of well established farms (three people interviewed). The researcher was introduced to the network through senior AgResearch staff. In-depth, face-to-face (taped) interviews were conducted with three senior managers in the network. Further information about this group was obtained by the researcher at the group's annual conference and from its annual reports. This group differed somewhat from the others in that it was made up of a network of established autonomous economic authorities and membership of this organisation was drawn from throughout New Zealand.

## Data analysis

A database was compiled of the main communication channels, mechanisms and forums used within Maori land authorities. The strengths and weaknesses of these communication channels were then examined using data from the interviews. Each channel was categorised according to whether it was being used for inter-personal, intra-organisational and/or inter-organisational communication. Communication flow within the organisation was classified as either downward or upward.

The technologies and mechanisms being used by Maori authorities were examined by drawing up tables and lists, based on information obtained from the interviews. Each was given a weighting according to how prevalent it was across all case study groups.

A range of common themes emerged from the analysis of the data from each group.

## Results

### Communication channels used

It was found that Maori authorities overall use a wide range of channels to communicate information. The traditional channels are face-to-face meetings and direct telephone contact. Written reports are regularly tabled at meetings of boards, however, it is still the preferred practice that the author will be available 'face-to-face' to speak to that report.

Table 1 shows the various communication channels used and the groups that used them. Noticeably absent from the channels of communication identified was text messaging. Appendix 1 shows the approach taken in explaining the process to participants.

National groups used the greatest range of communication channels and technologies, however, all groups used a variety of channels.

The Opotiki and King Country/Taupo groups used more traditional face-to-face and inter-tribal channels of communication because of the close distances between resident group members. In these areas communication between members was described as being very good.

Most groups maintain regular communication by participating in *hui* (gatherings) and meetings both within their organisation, within their own local area and across regions by attending inter-tribal and cultural events.

*Marae* (Maori community), church and family events such as weddings and birthday celebrations are still described as key

opportunities for both formal and informal communication.

As well as the channels described above, the North groups use their local Maori radio station for communication. This channel of communication is particularly suited to their rural context and relative isolation.

## Themes

### **Communication and Maori beliefs**

While traditional beliefs, values and practices are still important, Maori use both traditional channels and modern technologies to communicate. Most new technology, for example, video and Maori radio, is conducive to traditional beliefs and values.

### **The marae and hui**

The *marae* (community meeting place) is still an important forum for Maori to communicate collectively. It is still seen as a place where it is acceptable to conduct vigorous discussion and debate. It is seen as a forum where the rules are well known to Maori and parameters are well defined. *Hui* are frequently held on the *marae*. Where Maori authorities are working in tandem with their local *marae(s)* this research shows there is a vibrant flow of information to local shareholders and within the community.

Another theme was the *hui*. Tribal and national Maori gatherings always attract large numbers of 'senior' Maori and *hapu* (a group of extended families), *marae*, and agency representatives. Maori prefer the face-to-face exchange of information that occurs in the culturally familiar proceedings of a *marae*-like event and therefore these *hui* remain a key communication mechanism by which Maoris are kept informed and updated about all that is happening in their area and on their farms. Oral communication and deliberations are still favoured and used by Maori.

### **Te Reo**

*Te Reo Maori* (Maori language) is still, for a range of reasons, very important to most of the people who took part in this research. Their ability to use their own language to communicate is treasured.

### **Key informants**

Key informants play an important role in keeping family and *hapu* members updated. This informal means of disseminating information to *hapu* members is a critical component of Maori social structure and is regarded as a legitimate communication channel. Most *hapu* and families will turn to a

reliable communicator/networker to pass on information and notices about matters of importance to them.

*Hapu* informants keep up to date by attending most of the *hui*/gatherings in the district. They often have the tools and technology needed to communicate with others. Often they are farm and/or community decision makers, and frequently they are women.

### **Maori land and current business practices**

Although some aspects of traditional Maori cultural values, beliefs and practices are readily integrated into modern business practices, others are less easily integrated. This proved true in the five case studies in this research project. Some important aspects of the five case study groups are briefly discussed below.

### **The challenge of different worldviews**

The data indicate that some Maori believe that the oral traditions and face-to-face *hui* traditionally valued by Maori do not always translate well to the specific requirements of boardroom meetings. Boardroom meetings are seen as being governed by a different set of norms and practices. Many Maori also have a view about time keeping that is seen by some as being diametrically opposed to the business view that 'time is money'. Where serious decisions need to be made that will affect collective interest, Maori would usually invite full discussion and consultation before a final decision is made. In business terms this is problematic because opportunities can be lost if action is not timely. The profile of what constitutes a successful individual is changing. Many respondents felt inadequate in the modern business environment, which they felt favoured the fast, decisive decision maker and those who are quick to identify and seize opportunities as they arise.

The primary imperative of modern business practice is financial profit. In some cases this does not sit easily with Maori cultural imperatives of preserving the land for future generations, particularly in the current climate of increasing intensification of land use. Respondents were in two minds about the extent to which they would intensify their farming operations because of their view that intensification occurs at the expense of the environment and at substantial social and economic cost to the wider community. The larger case study group continues to explore ways to address these conflicting realities and its efforts have resulted in the co-existence of

both commercial and traditional cultural imperatives.

The importance of communication and the democratic process for identifying and resolving potential conflicts in a range of areas should not be underestimated in the process of aligning on-farm practice with owner expectations.

### ***Policies and procedures***

Policies and procedures are an important aspect of modern business communication. All groups involved in this study placed great importance on following policies and procedures. Government agencies such as *Te Puni Kokiri* have been tasked with assisting the government agenda of accelerating Maori economic development for the benefit of the nation. As part of this, some funds can be accessed to assist Maori groups to establish legal entities and develop constitutions.

### ***Administration and management***

Effective management and administration are keys to success in modern business practice. A well-trained administration team and/or a skilled secretarial assistant was regarded by study participants as the most effective means for Maori authorities to implement effective sustainable communications with shareholders and other key stakeholders.

In our sample, where an organisation has employed a trained administrator/communicator, the results are clear, with most landowners/shareholders considering that they have been kept well informed. Effective administration helps ensure successful communication through regularly scheduled meetings and the use of meeting agendas to ensure that all key items are discussed.

Meetings are a pivotal communication mechanism in organisations today. They are a vital aspect of any business. The effectiveness of meetings may impact on an organisation's profitability. It is therefore important to improve all skills related to planning and running a meeting and in the post-meeting follow through. It was found that some groups have yet to establish suitable communication processes for conducting efficient meetings. For example, agendas may not be prepared or may be prepared too late to be useful, and meetings may finish without clear records of actions to be taken or who is responsible and in what timeframe.

### ***Communication and key events***

Business competitions and awards are an important means of publicising and rewarding success, communicating best practice, setting exemplary standards and encouraging other business entities to do likewise. In the last few years, there has been increasing interest from Maori in the Maori Farmer of the Year competition. One of the five groups has taken part in these awards.

The Maori Farmer of the Year competition provides contestants, scientists, and industry representatives with another valuable forum to communicate, share views, and potentially produce benchmark indicators for achieving success. The competition recognises excellence in Maori farming and displays this to the wider Maori and farming communities, highlighting successful governance, financial performance and management.

### ***Field days***

Field days have played an important communication role for many years, promoting education between and to Aotearoa/New Zealand agricultural businesses by helping promote new practices and technologies and providing a forum for informal discussion. Maori governance groups are also turning more and more to 'on-farm field days' to inform, update, and involve owner/shareholders in farm activities.

### ***Federation of Maori Authorities***

Being a member of the Federation of Maori Authorities and attending the annual FOMA conference is crucial for many farmers for networking, remaining up to date with current directions and cutting edge ideas and technologies. For organisations to survive, their rate of learning must be equal to or greater than the rate of change in their environment. Four of the five groups are regular attendees at FOMA meetings.

### ***Communication plan/strategy***

Of the five case studies, only the national group had developed a formal communication strategy or plan. Other groups were keenly aware of the importance of communication, and were actively striving to improve their communications, however, not to the extent that they would invest money in a communication strategy.

### ***Accessibility to shareholders and others***

Three of the five entities each have a town or city-based office staffed by at least two people. For communication purposes, the key purpose of the office base is to have an

identifiable address where the group can be found by shareholders, other stakeholders and agencies, and the public.

### **Global awareness**

Small, geographically isolated rural community groups are part of a nation that needs a presence in international markets and needs to be looking to both add value and increase the ratio of exports compared with imports. Maori groups are engaged at all levels of the value chain and they indicated a real interest in producing goods that are unique and good value for money. They all showed a willingness to explore new opportunities and to go as far as they could with those opportunities but they were not prepared to take financial risks that may jeopardise their assets. However, few respondents had gone beyond New Zealand in search of information and raised awareness about farming and business.

### **The adoption of new technologies**

Adoption of new technologies is important not only for farming practices, but also for improving communication at the interpersonal, intra-organisational and inter-organisational levels. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are developing rapidly and opening up new forms of communication that may be of considerable benefit to Maori multiply-owned land businesses. These ICTs include mobile phones, teleconferencing, video-conferencing, email, and the Internet. There has also been recent growth in Maori broadcasting; both radio and television. Some of these communication channels are already being used by some of the case study groups.

All five case study groups are embracing the technologies of the modern world to help them communicate and remain informed about new developments in farming. Three of the five groups currently use ICTs to maintain communication with individuals and agencies beyond their local district.

The more established authorities use a range of technologies to communicate with shareholders, to engage in discussions and meetings, and to keep in touch with other stakeholders and businesses. Email, video conferencing, teleconferencing, and websites are communication channels being used by at least three of the groups involved with this study.

In conference situations, electronic presentation methods such as MS PowerPoint were being used. Limiting factors may include access to computers, the speed of Internet

connections, and the skills required to use them. These limiting factors are a particular issue in isolated rural areas. Nonetheless, several of the case study groups indicated that ICTs were significantly improving communication, particularly with geographically dispersed owner/shareholders. Text messaging is a potential channel of communication that was, surprisingly, not used by any of the five case study groups.

Two of the five groups currently have a website. While the use of websites by Maori organisations is increasing, three of the case study groups have not developed a website and had not considered doing so at the time of the interview.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Multiply-owned Maori lands, with ever-increasing numbers of shareholders, pose many challenges to those involved in governance and management. They must distinguish between those channels that are effective and those that are no longer relevant for communicating both within the farm business and beyond the farm and local area.

Each of the five case study groups is aware of the value of good communication and they are all actively trying to 'lift their game' in this area. However, the desire to serve the needs of their owner/shareholders and preserve their lands for future generations, coupled with a lack of access to funds, has meant that development has been cautious. On the other hand, many of the recently developed ICTs are suitable for the needs of multiply-owned land groups, especially for communicating with their often widely dispersed owner/shareholders. Thus, while traditional Maori communication channels are still a valuable means of communication for Maori entities, a range of other options is now available to supplement them.

Communication between members of a community is critical to effective 'whanaugatanga', which is about the 'collective good'. It is about hospitality, reciprocity, and the responsibility that everyone carries to contribute to the creation of a safe and inclusive culture for each other and for future generations. The Maori population is not assisted by young Maori featuring disproportionately in negative statistics related to unemployment or low income. There is potential for engaging the young as a valuable resource in good communication. An example is greater involvement or employment by boards of younger Maori. The younger generation generally embraces all the new means of communicating. They have vibrant networks

among themselves and the ability and means to communicate effectively across these networks. New electronic technologies (email and mobile phones) are increasingly becoming a significant factor in enabling often geographically scattered young Maori to participate in the running of their multiply-owned lands.

Communications between the board and stakeholders are part of a board's overall accountability. Some communications, such as annual general meetings and annual reports may be required by an organisation's constitution. These are considered appropriate forms of communication for maintaining good ongoing relationships, to inform owners/shareholders and other interested stakeholders of issues that may come up during the year, and for aligning on-farm practices with the aspirations of owners/shareholders. In this context, training in running effective meetings, including strategies for allowing a wider range of voices to be heard, should be included as an important component of a communication strategy.

Only one of the groups studied had a formal communication plan and this is something that other groups would benefit from developing. A well-planned, board-level communication strategy and plan would help maintain good relationships between the organisation and all its stakeholders. Such a strategy could include, for example, access to a fax machine, better use of text messaging, and ongoing training in the use of the computer, not only for communicating, but also as a key tool for running the farm.

Another rural case study group has invested time in attending conferences and workshops outside its area and was able to describe the benefits from learning and sharing ideas. Thus, where a farming entity is located in a more isolated area, greater effort needs to be put into inter-organisational communications with other farming groups outside the normal support and learning network. Attendance at relevant international conferences is another communication channel that economic authorities need to consider to increase awareness of new opportunities.

The ability to communicate in Maori is important and can help to:

- increase understanding between first language native speakers and others who are less fluent;

- better harness indigenous knowledge in order to improve current sustainable farming practice;
- better integrate Maori language and culture into the farming operation in order to maintain a Maori 'point of difference';
- preserve the Maori language for the use and enjoyment of speakers.

The ability to learn and to create new ways of farming will require both new and old ways and channels of communication. The ability to adapt to and use new technologies is recognised by Maori farming groups as an essential aspect of modern living. Future workers and leaders will need to have the ability to use a range of communication tools with different styles.

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Table 1. Communication channels used by the case study groups

Communication channel	Case 1 Far North	Case 2 Opotiki	Case 3 King country /Taupo	Case 4 Waikato /king country	Case 5 National
Conferences a) attending conference b) hosting conference		a	a	a & b	a & b
Regional network meetings	✓			✓	
National network meetings	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wananga Workshops	✓			✓	
Committee/Board Meetings	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hui	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Field days on the farm			✓		

**Appendix 1**

In keeping with the marae 'whakaeke/whakatau' process and the value of transparency that underpins declarations of identity, purpose, and intent, the following 'whakatauki' was presented to groups to show the approach taken by the researcher: "My house has four cornerstones, when one corner is weak the whole house is jeopardised". The cornerstones represent spiritual, physical, intellectual, and community/family wellbeing. See Table 1.

