



## People, place, reflective practice and transformational change: Makerita's story

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**Initiative:** Good Cents Porirua.

**Theme:** Leading in and leaderful.

**Personal journeys are interwoven with the places in which we live. Context can be critical, and this is just as important in work situations as it is in personal spaces. At Good Cents, creating an environment that supports, enables and encourages is a key aspect of the personal, relational, structural, and cultural changes that support transformational change.**

The first thing you notice about Makerita Makapelu is her positivity. She's a "the glass is half full" kinda gal. As a self-described angry person she was when she was young, Makerita has since recognised that the context in which she lived was a key part of how she presented herself, and how she was assessed by society. At that time she felt like an "invisible outsider" who was set up to fail, rather than being the recipient of compassion and support from wider society: "It was cold and non-forgiving. It was not a good space to be on that other side. And I've always remembered that. I learnt about compassion then by feeling the lack of it...but even back then I was wondering how to change that, and I thought 'I'm never gonna be like that'".

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Makerita embarked on what was to be a somewhat difficult personal journey. The future did not look flash. In fact, at times, it wasn't even considered.

However, as life unfolded Makerita's pathway turned out not to be as was initially expected. In fact, those early experiences have provided Makerita with a very rich foundation from which to draw from in her work as team leader for the Wesley Porirua Good Cents course.

When she was young, Makerita felt the only thing she had any power over was to speak out when she saw injustice. Her leaderful qualities were already emerging, albeit with mixed results: "I had to get older to learn how to do that effectively and respectfully though! I learnt, you know, you get more bees with honey and I could still show them what it was like on the other side and not get them angry about it".

Reflecting on different situations gave Makerita insight into effecting change, and knowing when and how to step up or pull back. Learning to notice change and communicate and engage effectively has been a key foundation for the many pathways Makerita has walked, and the way she now works in Porirua. For example, understanding that environments reflect and perpetuate how life is experienced was made very clear to her when, after living elsewhere for some time, Makerita returned to Porirua. Almost immediately she noticed that the city had changed and thought "If this city can change who it is and what it looks like, then so can I."

Looking back at that time Makerita reflects on how when she was young, those in her peer group reinforced her experiences of being out of place, angry and invisible. These relationships helped perpetuate the situation, and the systems she was involved with didn't respond positively or constructively either. Learning to look for and see the perspectives of others has been hard going at times that's for sure. Yet it is also those experiences that give her insight now with regard to the importance of environment, of relationships and of structures and systems. "Environment is really important to me... and I think being away for some time meant I could see things differently. It's something about seeing what you are looking for only, and not knowing what you don't know," she says.

There is nothing like having been there and these experiences and insights contribute to what Good Cents is doing too. With a focus on financial wellbeing, Good Cents is working towards transformational community change in all four dimensions of the quadrants of change as described by Lederach and colleagues (2007).

At a personal level this means connecting with individuals working to identify the response and contribution that each person can make whether that is in the way they take ownership of their own finances or the way that they can support and encourage others towards greater financial stability whatever their role (from community leader to employee of a local lender). Relationally it means working to overcome the social taboo that personal finances and especially personal debt has, especially in its tendency to create shame and isolation that paralyses movement to change.

Good Cents also works to grow understanding of and influence in the structural systems that support financial stability and reduce dependence on borrowing including participating in government forums and local conversations to share perspectives and grow expertise. At a cultural level this means identifying and building trust and relationships with cultural leaders that ensure

that Good Cents is appropriate and effective cross culturally while also encouraging a culture of growing financial stability. This stability could be a number of things from setting up savings accounts for children through to community based workshops.

Working in this way involves individuals, groups, organisations, and communities working together. It requires many leaders and relies on the development of a reflective practice that allows experiences to be generative, experimental and developmental. Skills develop through a range of life experiences that may not always be perceived or experienced as positive, but can be reflected on, understood as assets and channelled into constructive outcomes, at all levels.

### **Intent**

Effecting change through reflective communication and leadership.

### **Key learnings:**

- Some things are only learnt through experience. We each have a history and what we bring as individuals is as important to community-led development as what we create together as communities. All experience is valued, and contributes to our community 'expertise'.
- Drawing strength from aspirations can be a significant starting point for both individuals and communities. Learn to know when to lean on others. Seek them out and, working together, small steps will become exponential over time, bringing dreams into reality.
- You get more bees with honey. Rather than tackling a situation confrontationally with a head of steam, being sweet-tempered and constructive tends to create more positive changes as well as developing effective and enduring relationships along the way.
- It's hard to see what you are not looking for, and to know what you don't know. A period of distance can help illuminate different perspectives and support new ways of being and doing in a place.

### **Key outcomes:**

- A personal shift from invisible outsider to compassionate community leader who is valued and recognised.
- Effective reflective practice and well-honed communication and comprehension skills, as an individual, team and organisation.
- Recognition of the importance of context and how to modify that via transformational change in all four dimensions.
- Inclusion and valuing of a range of experiences within an organisation.

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### **Reference**

Lederach, J.P, Neufeld, R. and Culbertson, H. (2007). *Reflective Peacebuilding: A planning, Monitoring and Learning Toolkit*. The Joan B Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.

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