



**SUPPORTING MĀORI
APPRENTICESHIP SUCCESS
THROUGH MENTORING AND BUILDING
EMPLOYER CAPABILITY**

Catherine Savage



Ako Whakaruruhau - Supporting Māori apprenticeship success through mentoring and building employer capability

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project. We knew that the trainees had been successful in their pre-trade training and had the qualities and abilities to achieve their apprenticeship. All the students had passed the literacy and numeracy requirements for the course. The focus for the project team was the environment in which the students were learning and ensuring that it would be conducive to success. The focus of the project was therefore less on the individual and more about the context in which that individual was learning.

Our process involved meeting as a project team at least monthly for planning, implementing, gathering feedback, and analysing the data. We would meet to discuss what we had found that either affirmed what we had done and helped us to forward plan, or required us to revisit our assumptions about what we were doing and change our strategy. For example, after analysing the data from our industry breakfasts and marae learning experiences, we decided to provide site specific cultural knowledge as a practice rather than general information about Māori culture. This brought about the development of site-based toolbox cards.





WHAT WE FOUND – MENTORING AND MĀORI APPRENTICES

We became very aware, after our initial interviews with mentors, that we needed to support them to change their trainee and apprentice support practices. Mentors talked about being quite punitive with their apprentices and saw their role as keeping them in line; some even talked about making it as difficult for the apprentices as it was for them. There was a pervading attitude that if apprentices failed it was because of their own weaknesses and the organisation was not responsible. Changing this attitude and ensuring the organisation understood they had agency (the ability to make a difference) and took responsibility for apprenticeship success has been a focus of the learning sessions. Our objective was to change the existing culture of mentoring to a culture of support for apprentices, particularly for Māori.

The gap between Māori and non-Māori apprenticeship completion is quite significant in New Zealand. One contributing factor is the cultural dissonance between non-Māori employers and their Māori apprentices. The project team hypothesised that if organisations were more aware of Māori culture then the level of dissonance between the employer and the apprentice would decrease and that this would support apprenticeship success.

As the project developed we found that the organisation did shift significantly and that interventions were created independently by people within the organisation to support Māori apprenticeship success. This included gaining regular feedback from apprentices about their worksite, developing mentoring structures within the business, creating online information sessions and leadership sessions, and creating an environment focused on learning.



KEY FINDINGS

This section focuses on the project team’s important learnings from the project.

Sub-contractor variability adds complexity to the implementation of support initiatives.

As Hawkins is a project delivery company/lead contractor, most of the construction work that they are contracted to do is undertaken by a variety of subcontractors. These subcontractors vary greatly in capacity, and in their ability to take on and support trainees and apprentices. While the project team was able to influence the practices of the company, it was more challenging to reach all the subcontractors. In response to this, we looked at how we could influence the messages the lead contractor gave to the subcontractors about the ‘way of working’ on the site. As a result, we focused on developing site culture and produced a set of toolbox resources that was aimed at reaching subcontractors.

Raising awareness in the sector brought about a demand for new learning.

It was evident to the project team that most companies and organisations were keen to be involved and had not seen anything like this project in the sector before. There was clearly a need within the sector to understand more about supporting apprentices to succeed and how the



organisation, the worksite and the mentor could play a part in this success. A decade ago the sector faced a similar challenge - to change the ‘culture of safety’ in order to improve safety practices for employees. Similarly, the ‘culture of learning’ within the sector requires intervention and support to bring about change.

Stereotyping and deficit attitudes about Māori were evident and embedded.

The project team was aware that stereotyping and deficit attitudes toward Māori apprentices impacted upon their success, but we were unaware of the extent to which these attitudes were embedded in organisations. These attitudes have been one of the biggest barriers for the project team to address. The feedback we gathered during the project indicated that many participants were unaware of how embedded their views were. By raising awareness, key leadership staff and support personnel were able to reflect on their assumptions regarding Māori and work positively to support Māori success.

High staff turnover and change impacts on relationships – the provision for the mentor needs to be ongoing but not always on-site.

Within the construction sector, staff turnover and change is a part of the nature of the work. This may not mean that people move, but rather that projects are constantly changing and therefore where staff work and who has contact with the apprentices can change regularly. Establishing connections and ensuring that apprentices have a person that they can maintain regular contact with is important. Throughout the project, we worked on understanding the role of the mentor within the construction sector and we determined that this person does not necessarily have to be on-site daily (as this is often not achievable) but needs to be someone that the apprentice can develop a trusting relationship with and have frequent contact.

The ability to recognise and respond to cultural difference needs to be a part of the culture of the organisation.

Every organisation, no matter how big or small, has a culture that can be described as ‘the way things are done around here’. This is often taken for granted and is therefore not obvious to the individuals in the organisation as it is the normal way of doing things. In Christchurch, the organisations were heavily influenced by western cultural

norms that impacted on the way they operated. It was clear from the outset that the culture of the organisation and the culture of the apprentices was incongruent. This did not mean that the culture of the organisation had to become Māori but rather that recognising and responding to cultural differences would need to be part of the organisational culture.

Where possible, placing Māori apprentices to work together is best.

Hawkins' staff involved in the project noted that when Māori apprentices were put together on a project they appeared to be happier, have less difficulties and be more successful. Over the length of the project, the apprentice coordinator focused on clustering Māori apprentices and this had a significant impact on their success. The apprentices were a strong, encouraging source of support for one another. In some cases, apprentices naturally took on a tuākana role and supported the less experienced apprentices. They reported that these relationships helped them to succeed.

Providing apprentices with leadership opportunities positively impacts their performance.

Over the length of the project we have seen apprentices develop their own skills. In particular, our first apprentices are now leaders in their respective organisations. One apprentice completed his apprenticeship during the project and several were on track to successfully complete their apprenticeships in the near future. These apprentices have provided ongoing feedback to the project team and their organisation, and have supported the younger, less experienced apprentices. This has had a positive impact on their own performance and identity.



LESSONS LEARNED FOR WORKPLACE LEARNING

Like schools and tertiary institutions, worksites are places of learning for apprentices. In the past, educational institutions have attributed student failure to deficit explanations (including their culture, home background, and perceived intelligence) rather than examining their practices to support student success. When we began this project, we could see this perspective pervaded the construction sector and the worksite as a place of learning. The project team wanted to shift this view and ensure that the workplace would support apprenticeship success. In particular, we hoped we would enable site supervisors and mentors to look at what they could do to support apprenticeship success, for example, giving good instructions, and providing positive and focused feedback to support apprentices' learning.

The impact of the workplace on learning was the focus of a recent Australian study, which identified employment related issues as the most commonly cited reasons for not completing an apprenticeship (Bednarz, 2014). These reasons included experiencing interpersonal difficulties with employers or colleagues, being made redundant, not liking the work, and changing career. By contrast, issues with off-the-job training were the least frequently cited reasons for not completing an apprenticeship. This indicated that apprentices could manage the training requirements off-site but found on-site learning difficult (Bednarz, 2014). The study found that the influence of the employer in apprenticeship success should not be minimised. Given that Māori and Pasifika apprentices are most often employed in workplaces where they are in the

minority, these challenges may be compounded through cultural dissonance and thus contribute to failure. We have to improve the conditions for learning on our worksites.

The actions that create helpful conditions for learning are also positive for construction practice in general. The increase in communication skills and the use of tacit knowledge on construction sites has been found to increase productivity (Nesan, 2012). Tacit knowledge is the everyday situated knowledge that workers apply in the workplace. Mentoring is the interaction that supports learning on a daily basis, the 'know how' that is not taught but acquired through experience and application of knowledge in a variety of situations. Research demonstrates that this tacit knowledge is particularly crucial in the construction sector (Nesan, 2012).

Tacit knowledge is hard to formalise in an educational context, making it difficult to communicate or teach. There are critical construction employee qualities that influence tacit knowledge sharing such as trust, creativity, motivation, ability and openness to learning. Mentors in the project were made aware of the importance of tacit knowledge, of knowledge sharing on-site and the skills that need to be developed to ensure the transmission of tacit knowledge. Essentially, mentoring needs to be relational, collaborative, strong on communication skills and transparent about the importance of tacit knowledge in the apprentice's learning, as they apply their taught knowledge on different worksites.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES SUPPORTING APPRENTICES

This project was built on the foundation of the work of Kerehoma et al. (2013), which identified the key characteristics present when Māori learners are successful in work-based learning. This project focused on developing and creating an environment to support apprenticeship success. We have identified six elements that supported success for apprentices within the project.

Your company's leadership must be strong and committed to supporting and enhancing diversity and organisational change.

The project was supported by the leadership within Hawkins. They valued the project, provided time for mentors to attend professional learning sessions and encouraged feedback and new ideas. The leadership within the company incorporated the language of diversity and learning into their communications and demonstrated that they were committed to raising Māori apprenticeship achievement. Within the organisation, agents of change in leadership positions ensured that the key messages of the project were communicated consistently and that they were valued.

The culture of your organisation needs to be open to supporting change.

A key enabler of change was the openness of the organisation to changing their culture to support Māori apprentices. While not all the employees recognised the need for change, particularly at the beginning, the project team had enough momentum to bring about change and begin shifting the culture. While there were staff who continued to hold deficit views at project completion, the critical staff, who supported, mentored and supervised apprentices, were committed to supporting change. Organisations are ever changing and an openness to questioning current assumed ways of operating is critical to continuing to improve effectiveness.

Connections with iwi and mana whenua will strengthen your initiatives with your Māori apprentices.

This project has been supported by Ngāi Tahu and this has meant that the relationship between Hawkins and

Ngāi Tahu has continued to develop over the length of the project. Having support from iwi has meant the project team has been able to run events with iwi involvement, ensuring they had cultural integrity. Iwi and mana whenua expertise was accessed to support the development of resources and print media.

Your businesses need to be prepared to address deficit attitudes.

Deficit attitudes toward marginalised people including Māori are embedded in our society and workplaces. They can have a significant impact on the learning and achievement of apprentices in the workplace. Organisations need to be prepared to have challenging and difficult conversations with staff and expose them to alternative ways of viewing the world. Embracing diversity in the workplace is becoming increasingly important as society and workplace cultures become more diverse.

Creating a project culture can support positive learning practices and workplace relationships.

Developing the 'culture' of a project contributes to supporting a learning culture on-site. Large construction worksites are made up of many subcontractors and can be highly variable in terms of project culture. Developing a positive culture on-site about 'how we do things around here' can support positive learning practices and workplace relationships.

Supportive mentoring relationships work.

Workplace mentors are crucial to supporting apprentices through their apprenticeship. Providing training focused on providing feedback, supporting learning and developing positive learning relationships improves the quality of mentoring. Organisational structures should be developed to support time for mentoring and opportunities for apprentices and mentors to meet.



CONCLUSION

Over the length of the project we have seen a significant development in the willingness of staff to take responsibility for apprenticeship success in whatever role they are in. We have seen an increase in Māori apprentices' success when the support initiatives identified in this project are evident in the workplace. The resources produced to support the continued development of work-based learning support are being used on-site and in organisations involved. These resources are available for download at: www.akoatearoa.ac.nz/maori-trade-training.



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