

# THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING BETTER

*Maseina Koneferenisi, Chief Executive Officer (Lutra Ltd.)*

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## **ABSTRACT**

New Zealand was a very different place when I was growing up in the 70s. Back then we were called 'half castes', my siblings, and I. I felt like we weren't really accepted by Dad's family because we were too fair, and we weren't accepted by Mum's because we were too dark. The mix of my dad's Samoan blood and my mums NZ European blood gave us priority seating in what I very quickly learnt was a minority group. At times a feeling of not being accepted, not being good enough and not being equal because I was different would bubble up to the surface, often in response to discriminatory behaviours.

This is the place where I started my career in the water industry. With the combination of being mixed race and female, I've experienced a wide range of both exceptional leadership and confronting workplace behaviours. Many manifested in being subject to judgment from peers, leaders and decision makers who knew nothing about my skills, talents, or me as a person. This happened in ways that are not accepted today, but likely to still be occurring but in a less overt way.

Fast forward to 2022, having now spent 24 years working in the water and wastewater industry during the time when it was heavily dominated by Caucasian men at every level, I am now the Chief Executive Officer of a successful, vibrant, and meaningful engineering, software, and solutions company, Lutra. It is unfortunate to say, but I still remain in a very small minority group within the water and wastewater industry, and this is not only at the executive level, but all levels within Industry. Where are our Pacifika, Maori, and all minority group female leaders, technical experts, industry contributors?

As an industry, we need to be far more curious about and ask ourselves how much has really changed? Not enough is the answer. We can do better. I am in a position now to take Lutra through this ongoing journey. We are far from a typical consultancy, in that we are focused on operations – where there is a huge need for industry workforce. We are building our company consciously, to support this

with initiatives such as deliberately focused personal development for our people, funded memberships to institutes such as Woman in Infrastructure, internal KPIs on female/male salary ratios, scholarships for young Māori and Pasifika peoples and so on. In doing so, we hope to grow the future leaders of tomorrow, both within Lutra and in our clients' operations teams.

## **KEYWORDS**

Diversity, inclusion, thought leadership

## **PRESENTER PROFILE**

Kia ora koutou katoa!

Maseina Koneferenisi is the Chief Executive Officer and Director at Lutra. She has been in the water industry for 26 years and has accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience through a range of perspectives. She has held the roles of Network Manager, Assets, Compliance & Engineering Manager for Greater Wellington Regional Council, Water Services Manager for Horowhenua DC and Principal Advisor, Business Performance at Wellington Water. She has worked at the executive level in the private sector for the last 3 years. Maseina is passionate about developing our young people and helping others.

She is quite likely the first pasifika woman to hold a CEO role in an engineering consultancy firm in NZ.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

My name is Maseina Koneferenisi, I am a wife, a mother of 2 strapping young lads and a proud Samoan woman. I hold the privilege of leading the amazing company, Lutra Ltd.

I don't mind telling you that I submitted my paper late, I spent so much time vacillating over what I really wanted to say today and what I think needs to be said that when it came time to put pen to paper so to speak, I was a little nervous.

I am a typical pasifika woman, I loathe talking about myself and don't particularly enjoy being the centre of attention. And I've never had the platform to speak freely about my journey in the water industry, so I have had to filter through all the highs and lows. It took some time; this kind of reflection can be challenging.

I was born in Christchurch in the 70s, the youngest of 5 children. My mum was European Kiwi and my dad full Samoan. My father was one of 7 children, he came to New Zealand on his own in his late teens. He wanted to find a better life for himself and support his family back home. He couldn't speak any English but his parents had done their best to give him a good education back home. As kids we used to joke that mum and dad's connection was obviously physical because it took a lot of learning on both their parts to be able to communicate, but they got there.

At that time Christchurch was very conservative when it came to diverse families both in the palagi (white) culture but also pasifika. My parents were the only mixed marriage amongst a massive extended family for a very long time. This made us unique; we were always at a crossroads – are we palagi or are we Samoan, neither culture welcomed us as their own. The schools, churches, and communities we lived in were a sea of white faces so most of us kids did what we could to align with our palagi culture because we didn't want to stand out, we didn't want to be different. We didn't like taking island food for lunches for fear of our friends judging us saying 'eew whats that'', we were embarrassed when dad spoke Samoan around our mates, we were embarrassed to introduce our cousins that lived with us. We were also unsure of ourselves around our Samoan family. They treated us differently, our aunties and uncles put us on a pedestal (we were special because our mum was palagi) but with our cousins it was different, they weren't impressed with their half caste cousins at all. And so we knew we were different,

and despite what we did we couldn't escape that, so what do you do? You don't talk to anyone about it, you learn to live with it, you rise above it and hope that 'things will get better' or that you will find yourself in a position one day where you can make a positive impact so others don't have to endure this.

In the Samoan culture our parents are paramount to us, they are our foundation and our family was no different. My dad can only be described as a hard-working pioneer. He taught himself how to read and write in English, became the first Pasifika locomotive engineer in NZ and was studying law in his 60s at the time he passed away. My mum was equally as diligent, her work was on our family and our home, her emphasis was growing us to be good people, good citizens.

Knowing what I know now, I look back and really understand how hard working my parents were. They had to be. When you look at a pasifika person you are not looking at an individual, what stands behind them is their family, their people. We are one. I know many of you would have had wonderful holidays in the Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga – all the islands. They are magical places and time can stand still and you can really feel life. Yes, wonderful if you are a holiday maker but a completely different lifestyle if you live there and are growing a family there. Life in the islands can be very hard. The average weekly income is \$85NZD, to put this into context, a bag of taro (one of our staple carbs) is \$12NZD.

As pasifika people, we never let go of our roots, we never leave our families to fend for themselves, this means we financially support them, we do what we can so they can stay on our land, look after our land, grow their families, eat, have power, have water. For many NZ based pasifika families we have and still are financially supporting more than our own immediate family. My parents faced this all their married life.

This drove my dad to be very passionate about education and the necessity for hard work, he was a firm believer that education was the key for us. We all went to very good single sex schools, the college I went to had 3 Polynesian students out of 400 and 2 of them were myself and my sister! And we had to get top marks, a B+ wasn't good enough, in fact an A wasn't good enough – whatever our result his answer would be 'why didn't you get the next grade up'? The pressure!!! Oh, it was horrific, but I know I have much to thank him for.

Dads' mantra was that we had to work twice as hard as everyone else because of the colour of our skin. We pooh poohed dad, we didn't believe him, but he never stopped the message.

So not listening to my father at all, I left school when I was 16 after school certificate (level 1 these days). I was nonplussed about school, I could do relatively well with little effort, but I sure as hell wasn't going to carry on at school when I could get out in the big wide world, start my own life, and earn some cash!

It wasn't until I entered the world on my own that I found so much of what dad had prepared us for was unfortunately, true. The very first hurdle was when my boyfriend at the time (now my husband) and I had great trouble getting a flat. My husband is a 6foot tall strong full Samoan chap, the 2 of us fronting up in the late 80s trying to get accommodation from white folks with investment properties was a real challenge. Their natural assumption was we would be getting drunk every night, put holes in walls, have all our mates around, not do the lawns – and so on. OK this wasn't going to be so easy after all – maybe dad was right?

Now we were in the late 80s and the buzz words in central government at that time were Equal Employment Opportunities – it was basically a programme to try to get more pasifika and maori into the workforce (sound familiar) – this is how long this has been going on for! Government agencies were given specific KPIs relating to how many maori and pasifika staff they had, the salaries they were on, points were given for providing them with additional opportunities and so on. I managed to secure a position in the Justice Department through the State Services Commission through a cadetship scheme, one of many initiatives that became known as 'positive discrimination' opportunities.

I embraced the opportunity, but despite being young and naive I wasn't that naïve that I was unaware of the stirrings around EEO. It was not embraced, particularly by my peers. In some ways EEO was patronising, and it entrenched discriminatory attitudes even more. It implied that without being a Samoan woman I would otherwise not have the skills and talents to get the job or do the work. I lifted my head and ploughed on leveraging off this as much as I could, I subconsciously did everything dad and mum taught me, I worked very hard (it felt like much harder than my colleagues had to), it was the only way I could show that I was worthy, I had to let my work speak for itself.

I was very competitive, with myself. I set goals and worked to achieve those. And in the main I did very well, I was given my first team to lead when I was 21, I was the first pasifika person (let alone woman) to reach the level I did in NZ in the field I worked in.

At this point in life, I was getting a thicker skin, what my parents taught us over all those years was resonating with me, they were teaching us to not only prepare but prepare for the worst, push through, build resilience.

Following my time at the Justice Department I moved into the water supply industry. The challenges I encountered being a pasifika woman up to this point were nothing in comparison to what I was about to face.

I started out in my first role in the water supply as I intended to carry on, all go, doing what I was supposed to do plus, always going above and beyond. I could see the value I could bring this organisation and I just went for it. One thing led to another and within 6 months I was appointed as the Network Manager – this role was responsible for around 40 field workers who fixed water leaks in the wellington metropolitan area, undertook leak detection work, read and repaired water meters, laid new services, upgrades, renewals and so on. Given that I didn't even know what a toby was when I started there was a steep learning curve in front of me. But I learned, and I worked.

It was at this time I became exposed to behaviours that were clearly both racist and sexist, this is where I really grew my resilience, my determination to dig deep and not give up. The most astonishing thing was that it was not the leaders of this organization who displayed these behaviours towards me, it was staff, colleagues, and staff from other parts of the business.

But -this organisation were forward thinkers; they did something they had never done before and was very unique. They put a young pasifika woman who wasn't an Engineer in charge. They put me in a role that had previously always been held by an Engineer, a white male, over 50. What the hell was going on? It was a changing of the guard. And from this role I moved on and up to others.

The fallout from my positioning ran deep but my Leaders held firm, they let me prove myself again and again. And I did, but it wasn't without a high price to pay in terms of my personal wellbeing and that of my family. For example:

- Complaints were made about my appointment to every position I attained, the thrust seemed to be that it was because I wasn't an Engineer (was that really the reason?). I don't think some people could bear the idea that a young Samoan woman with no university degree had a seat at the table where key decisions were being made. Regardless of the previous roles or success I had achieved, I wasn't welcomed, it was a tough pill for them to swallow.
- When I moved into another role in a new department after returning from starting my family many of the staff there wouldn't talk to me. They didn't know me as a person, but they knew I had previous successes, they knew I was the former Network Manager! What mattered to them was that I was a young woman, a young pasifika woman. I was not entitled to, nor should be given, the opportunity to fulfil this role.
- Things got very uncomfortable for me when some staff who held private information felt they were permitted to share my salary information. This was then group emailed amongst not only those who had vied for various roles I secured (with demeaning content about my value and suitability over others) but to all department staff. I discovered this by accident, and to this day when I think back on this, it still conjures up emotions.
- One company executive never supported any of the positions I held; it reached a point where he felt he could be overt about this. He specifically designed a fixed term role to transition me to so there would be an easy method to exit me. Why would someone do this? There was no reason for it. I found myself in anguish having to write to the CEO (whom I had immense respect for) outlining the various evidence I had signaling this individual was racially discriminating towards me. My own immediate Manager felt that strongly about it that he stepped out to support me.

And by the time I was going through the worst of this my dad had passed on, but the foresight he had in preparing us for life as half cast people in this world was well and truly in my DNA, it carried me through. I now have 2 young adult children of my own. What an arduous journey life would be for them if this was still the world we lived in. I look back and realise how lucky as a family we now are to not have to teach our children about this kind of resilience, resilience is required for sure, but not so much because of their skin colour or heritage.

Fast forward to my current role as Lutra CEO. This was also not by accident, it was through bloody hard graft, passion for my industry, passion for the organisation I belong to and real commitment to the people I serve – our staff. But that would have potentially all gone to waste (or I would have moved on) if it wasn't for the totally unbiased, non-judgmental, and accepting way of both of the former CEOs and the company board that are responsible for this positioning. By their good grace and that of the Greater Wellington Regional Council Executive Team at that time, I have been acknowledged and recognized, because of the value my differences add to me as a person, not because of the different colour of my skin.

My unfortunate experiences are just a tip of the iceberg for many of our people who have been through a lot worse than myself. Worse still they have not been able to push through for a variety of reasons. And of course – they should not have to push through. I share these stories so you get some real insight of the actual reality for many pasifika and maori leaders.

So yes, the world has moved on in such amazing ways but there is still a long way to go. Going as far back as my entry into the water industry in 1996 I have never, not once – to this day, sat around a decision-making table with either a woman or a man who is either pasifika or maori and who is an equal, or a superior. I expect this may be in part a localized challenge, I know of a number of pasifika leaders with a strong presence in the North but it is still very much a work in progress.

Many of you will be very aware of the number of LinkedIn articles being posted where organisations are being very overt about new maori and pasifika people they are bringing into their organisations. I love seeing these posts, it makes me feel very proud of the individuals and it influences my perspective of some of these organisations. But it also makes me feel sad, the fact that we have to shout from the roof tops that we have recruited a non-palagi person! It is clear evidence that there is still much to be done. When we get to the point of sharing our new team members, just for being part of the team, not for the colour of their skin then we know we are in a good place.

This must be a reflection point for us. Progress, yes, but we must do better.

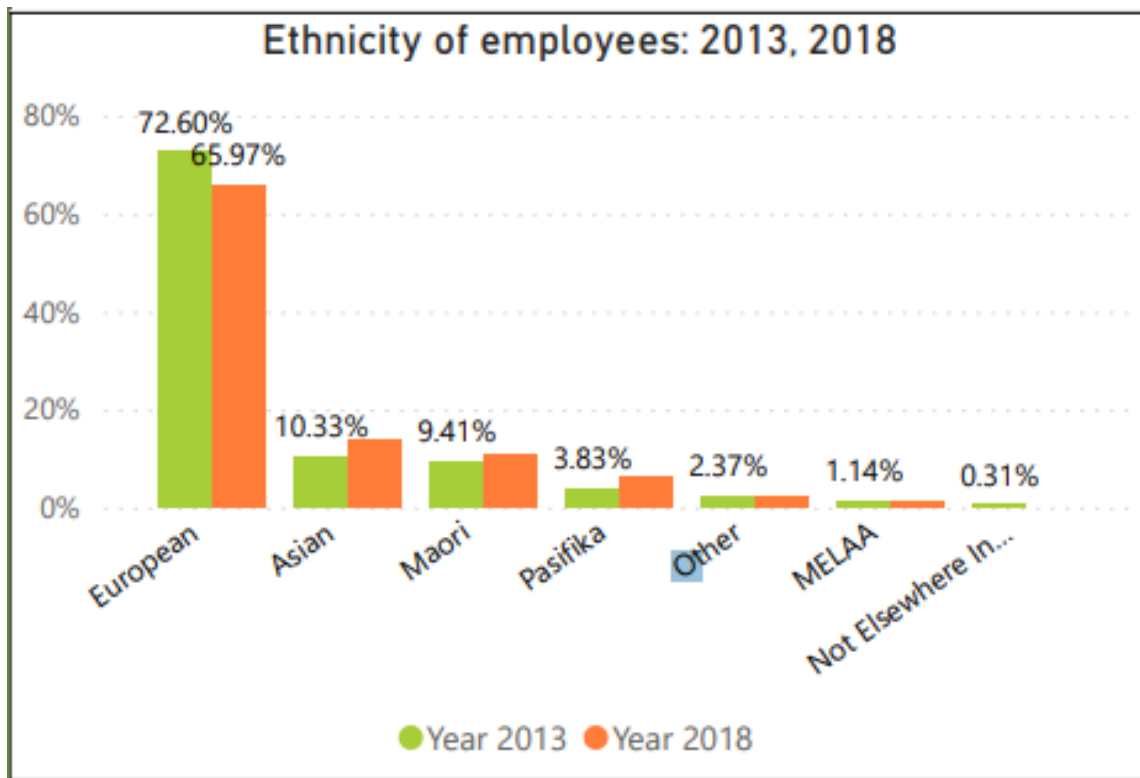


## **2 DISCUSSION**

### **Why should we focus on increasing pasifika and Maori in our industry?**

Pasifika people have a unique perspective on life, we look at things through the lens of collectiveness, through collaboration. It is our nature to want to work together rather than in isolation, this is evident in the strong sense of community we have, we are very family and people oriented. We are somewhat different from more western cultures where people are more focused on themselves independently, they tend to be better at self-promotion and more self-centric. The pasifika culture moves together collectively. Having more of this dynamic in our industry will have huge benefits to us all.

We know and have heard and will continue to hear over the following days about the thousands of staff we are short in our industry, the gap in training and upskilling, lots of initiatives around engaging with Iwi and so on. What needs to happen is less chatter and more action. We need to be deliberate about this to really effect change. We often wait for others to take the lead on industry wide challenges – why? What’s holding us back? My guess is that this feels like a minor insignificant low priority issue amongst everything else that is going on. In one sense it may well be, but heck this is also a massive opportunity to help solve some of the staff shortage challenges. We know there are only 9% of maori and 4 % pasifika people in our industry at present. We also know that combined, they represent 26% of the population. Clearly, we do not have a reasonable representation of them in our industry.



Waihanga Ara Rau, Construction and Infrastructure, Workforce Development Council, Three Waters Sector Dashboard – Employees and Businesses

It is very important to note that our needs are not only in the Engineering space, most of the effort and industry talk around Maori and Pasifika is what can be done to increase our intellectual power relating to Engineering. We all know that yes Engineers are critical, but they are not the only important roles, the only areas we should focus on. Much of what we do cannot be delivered without many other skills which are outside Engineering, example – our administrators, asset managers, project managers, data scientists, analysts and so on. We need to be thinking far broader than just the engineering elements of our work.

We also know that having diverse work forces can only add value to our businesses and industry, after all there are organisations set up to specifically teach us about this – such as Diversity Works and The Diversity Accord.

But that all said, we cannot grow our maori and pasifika talent if we do not have them in our organisations. And even after that, it is not enough, we cannot settle for just increasing our numbers either, we must support them to reach great heights as we do with all good people in our industry.

## **So why is this so hard?**

I am a business leader myself, so I understand the conundrum with meeting shareholders expectations, balancing the financials and most importantly of all – looking after our people. We make this hard for ourselves because we don't give it priority, we give it lip service, we don't do as much as we can because its extra work and effort. If we reframe this as an investment, not only into our own organisations but into our industry the decision to prioritise becomes much easier. We will all be much better for it, our industry, our communities, and our people.

There are numerous organisations out there that do some amazing work in this space. Some of the very useful resources that can help with your journey to close the gaps that I would recommend are:

- TupuToa
- First Foundation
- Government grants to assist with development resources
- Mentorship programmes, find out what opportunities we could provide mentorees
- Scholarships, STEM programmes dedicated to PI and Maori
- Get around to schools, training institutes – promote our industry
- Connect with community leaders, seek their advice on how to reach their people
- Don't be afraid to draw in family and friends

And I am certain there are plenty of other things that can be done if we actively turn our minds to this.

## **What are Lutra doing to contribute to this?**

At Lutra we know change takes time and dedication, we are walking towards the work and embracing it. Our plan is to contribute to this space in a way that is meaningful to us and gives us a baseline to grow from, in the last few months we have:

- Increased our own pasifika staff count (now at 2)! Long way to go but a 100% increase in this first quarter

- Started our own cultural discovery journey with Naia (an amazing Maori consultancy that helps NZ businesses grow awareness and an understanding of all things Maori, including how we have meaningful engagements and build stronger relationships).
- Put several staff through the Water NZ Cultural Significance and Importance of Wai training
- Partnered with First Foundation by funding study grants, one for Pasifika and one for Maori. These are focused on children from low decile skills, challenging socioeconomic environments who would otherwise not have the opportunity to have a tertiary education, we want this to impact our industry, society and to be part of their success story, rising them up, against all odds.
- All of our staff involved in recruitment undertake Unconscious Bias training.
- I myself, am a mentor with First Foundation, First Foundation partner mentors up with students whom they think they can best have a positive impact on
- We advertise vacancies on Maori and Pacific Jobs website

### **What can you do to help?**

You would have detected a theme in the personal stories I shared, in general, it wasn't my leaders that treated me poorly, it was those around me. It is amazing how much we each impact one another's lives without giving it a second thought. We all need to be deliberate about how we address this much needed change. We must accept others and embrace differences. We also need to realise that this is not something that sits with organisations leaders, they may sign off policy, make final decisions etc but good leaders are heavily influenced by our people. Influence your leaders, keep being curious about what your organisation is doing, or not doing in this space. Ask why?

Any movement that any organisation makes in this space is for the greater good. We need to be a collective and collaborate on many things. Any new people we bring in may be ours for a time but if we have done our job well, when they move on, they will move on as industry people, they come from our organisation to yours, or yours to ours, or one of the many companies that work in our field. They stay with us.

### **3 CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

In summary, I am not saying industry is not doing anything in this space, we are – it's just not enough. A lot of great work has gone into shaping the future and progressively getting to the right place, All great work, what's next.... Make it happen....

My request of you all is to just get started. If you are already well on the way with your journey I congratulate you, just, keep pushing forward to continually improve.