



'Arms open' approach to managing change

Management is a term that invokes several things. It's a group of people in an organisation making decisions; it's the way in which you tackle tasks and achieve your desired outcomes in a specific time frame; it's a legal frame of reference that applies to administering a business or someone's affairs. Basically, it's about control. And when you think about it in this way, the importance of how you manage becomes clear.

We all know someone who is a bit too controlling, or a micro-manager. On the other end of the spectrum there are those that don't apply enough control to situations and desired outcomes are lost, or diluted along the way. In between, there is a myriad of approaches to manage people, things and/or processes.

Where does feminist management sit on this spectrum and is there even such a thing? This is something we started to ask ourselves as the Women's Fund Fiji navigated, documented and 'managed' multiple, concurrent processes of change in becoming an independent entity. In our experience, we found feminist management to exist outside this typical management spectrum - like a parallel path that is designed to reach a similar outcome but is internally motivated, uses alternative, transformative practices, and is more inclusive and holistic. We think of it as having an 'arms open' approach where nothing is off-limits - especially the impact of such processes

on people's realities - and we promote the value of relationships.

The major change processes we undertook to become independent were the development of our Trust Deed, the establishment of a new governance structure, and the creation of a new vision, mission, shared values and strategic plan. No small feat! It was like a rebirth. Overarching all of these parallel activities, was the change being guided and directly experienced by Fund staff and major partners like the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and members of the Transitional Steering and Grants committees and managing contractor Cardno.

Throughout these interlinking localisation processes, a central learning that anchored their success was management: management of change, uncertainty, risks, relationships, communications, and stress, plus the pandemic which heightens all of these factors. In all of these facets of management, we have been focused on a single valuable asset: people. Whether it's our governance personnel, management team, donors, or our staff - we recognise we are all in transition together.

Focusing on relationships and taking an empathetic approach is where we enact our feminism as a method.

A transformational approach



Our change management approach is grounded in a feminist transformational leadership framework¹ rather than being transactional. That is, we work to consider and lift everyone involved in the process and in doing so contribute to the larger objective of social change, applying the feminist principle: *how you do things is just as important as why you are doing them.*

Thus, our approach has been **mindful, human-centred, and appreciative**, allowing us to apply feminist principles and non-hierarchical means of managing our transition. This approach strives for empathetic, just, and gender-sensitive processes to be role-modelled in every step. And, in instances where we may not have been mindful, we choose to learn from them and adapt.

Our feminist change management principles:



Inclusivity

we prioritise including every stakeholder in the process to help build trust and cohesion, even if this takes more time. This includes the feminist and women's groups we work with and for.



Empathy

we emphasise listening to and learning each other's perspectives so we can come to a shared understanding of what is important and practice being less judgemental.



Holistic, integrated approaches

we leverage the best of multiple approaches – behavioural science, participatory, rights-based, holistic wellness, risk management, evidence-based – to achieve our goals in ways that truly reflect the different elements and functions of our organisation and people.



Asking for Help

when we encounter difficulties, we seek help from experts who can guide us through these turbulent waters.



Courage

when encountering difficult circumstances and decisions, we are courageous and face challenging situations and conversations with vulnerability, authenticity and respect. We are also not afraid to try new things.



Playful

we prioritise enjoying the journey together, taking time to step back, have fun and laugh.

¹The concept of transformative leadership was first developed by James V. Downton (1973) then further by James MacGregor Burns (1978). Cited in Batliwala, Srilatha, Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud, CREA - Creating Resources for Empowerment and Action, May 2010. <https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/feminist-leadership-clearing-conceptual-cloud-srilatha-batliwala.pdf>

Community consultations² undertaken as part of our Trust Deed development laid the foundations for other processes such as setting up new governance structures and undertaking strategic planning. One of the biggest findings of the consultations was the need for change management approaches to help guide relationships, strategic priorities, resourcing needs and operations of the Fund as it moved toward localisation. We responded by working with a change management expert who accompanied us from beginning to end, facilitated the development of our feminist change management principles, and introduced us to various change management tools and approaches,³ such as design thinking and biomimicry.

The goal was for all stakeholders to co-create and feel ownership of and motivation towards these key organisational change processes, whilst never losing track of why the Fund was created in the first place: to support feminist and women's rights movements.



Developing our new governance structures

The Fund was shifting – from a program managed by an Australian contractor with a governance structure that included our funders – to an entity that appoints Fijian nationals to our boards and is grounded in the needs of women's rights and feminist movements. The key change is the shift in power, which is a critical aspect of being independent. It means that whilst our core work as a women's fund is to mobilise and redistribute resources, we do so with the freedom of not being bound to the politics of any given religious entity, political party, national or state government, or any corporate actor. For a women's fund, being independent is critical to our accountability to feminist and women's rights movements and our ability to be true to our vision and mission.

The process of establishing these new governance structures was a key moment to put into practice our feminist change management approach, including managing the transition from Steering Committee to Transitional Steering Committee and ultimately our Governance Board; plus finding our Trustees. In essence, this was a skills-based approach, which was recommended by partners in the Trust Deed consultations. It entailed anticipating our needs as an independent organisation, evaluating the skills already present and those needed, consulting our existing leadership and coming up with a consensual decision on how to proceed with this approach.

We also collaborated extensively with our existing governance personnel, including them in the change management process, which empowered them and allowed them to serve. We used our empathetic nature to build in opportunities for appreciation in the handover process, as guided by relationship management recommendations from the Trust Deed

process. In sum, our approach was human-centered and change-conscious, collaborative and consensus-focused.

We undertook all tasks proactively with research, attention to needs on the ground, and sensitivity to how roles were changing.



²<https://fijiwomensfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/FWF-Summary-Final-24Sep2021-V2.pdf>

³<https://www.alchemusprime.com/holistic-change-management/>

Managing change in the team

Team dynamics and individual staff experiences formed a central pillar of our empathetic and inclusive approach and emerged as the most important aspect to pay attention to as we journeyed through the transition. There were multiple elements to consider, including job security, reaching consensus on decisions, mindful communications and self-care, among others. To deeply engage with these issues, we decided to implement an ongoing series of monthly team dynamics workshops beginning in December 2020 co-facilitated by a counsellor and the change management consultant.

These workshops enabled us to work through areas often overlooked - such as trust, communication, managing emotions, self-care and boundary-setting. We also held monthly team wellbeing sessions, encouraging each team member to engage in physical wellbeing activities. The workshops were not without their interruptions, however, with COVID-19 restrictions forcing some sessions to shift online. Importantly, our needs changed as we went forward, including staff decisions on whether to stay or leave, so we revised our approach, splitting sessions into whole team sessions focused on transition, and smaller group sessions focused on communication. Our approach was always responsive to our needs at the time during this transition.

An internal survey of the team dynamics sessions had some very positive results, indicating that 75% or more of our staff were benefiting from them and wanted them to continue till the end of 2021 and beyond. So far, in our team dynamics work, we have achieved:

More trust in the team and more value for each team member, which has led to better collaboration and working through difficulties

Increased mindful communication, which includes more succinct sharing for some team members, less reactivity, more listening, and more appreciation

Understanding what we can control and what we cannot control, which has led to less stress and anxiety in many situations

Authentic sharing – team members have shared deep traumas and emotions, which have shed light on existing communication patterns and allowed for improvement

Personal transformation in the sense of strong commitment to personal learning and empowerment as a lifelong focus using tools taught in team dynamics sessions

Empowerment and confidence through speech, actions, performance improvement, and collaboration



What we learned

With this incredible journey, we have learned so much that will guide our work and relationships well into the future. While we can't cover everything in this short paper, some of the valuable lessons (and skills!) we learned in the above processes we think are important to share because they nourish our movements and contribute to realities we want to strengthen and/or build. These include:



Seeing change as an ally. This is an advantageous mindset to see change as a companion to learn from and work with, empowering the team through fear and into acceptance, creativity and courage.



Intentionally naming and labelling our processes and structures in explicit and empowering ways. This was important to take charge of transitional activities. We did this by renaming the Steering Committee to 'Transitional Steering Committee' and by naming the governance transition stages as Appreciation, Handover, and Orientation, signaling the importance of each aspect.



Taking a skills-based approach for governance members. This allows for focus, efficiency and direction. It avoids unnecessary tangents and people politics and allows for the strategic selection of candidates with the most optimal skill diversity. It provides a strong backbone for decision-making and justifying those decisions based on actual organisational needs.



Taking the time to consult widely – such as what we did with the Trust Deed consultations. The consultation report provided a clear set of guidelines to optimise the transition to independence and incorporate diverse perspectives. For example, The consultations sought specific recommendations on the key traits of Governance Board members.



Feminism as a method. Being explicit about our feminist principles ensures that empathetic, just and gender-sensitive processes are documented and role modelled in every step. Adopting a transformational leadership framework contributes to gender justice and equality in Fiji and beyond.



Setting up search committees for governance members with external representation from feminist and women's rights movements was invaluable. It allowed the search process to be expedited, leveraging the external member's infusion of new ideas and social capital, which fuelled the brainstorming, nomination, and interview processes.



Devoting time and resources to team dynamics helps develop the whole person and the team in ways that promote mindful communication, better self-care and stronger boundaries.



Self-care is critical to the inner balance of each team member and the Fund's success and psychological safety are important to nurture authenticity and creativity in every team member.



Appreciation is powerful! Gratitude is an uplifting area of focus.



Responsiveness is critical – flexibility in the way we design and deliver processes is important because, in transitions, needs are always changing, and so is the team.

Our arms open approach to the Fund's transition to independence has been a challenging, rewarding and uplifting journey for everyone involved. Through the lens of feminist, human centred management, we know that what matters most are our relationships. When we nurture those well, we are resilient enough to take all the uncertainties as they come and never waiver from our strategic direction. We hope that by sharing this journey with you, our learnings inspire your own change processes, and contribute towards more empathetic, transformativie approaches.

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