



## CONTEXTUALISING LEADERSHIP:

## LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE EVERYDAY

KABINI SANGA, SEU'ULA JOHANSSON-FUA,  
MARTYN REYNOLDS, DAVID FA'AVAE, RICHARD  
ROBYNS, DANNY JIM

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government.

DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

[dlprog.org](http://dlprog.org)  
[dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk)  
[@DLProg](https://twitter.com/DLProg)

Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham, B15 2TT  
United Kingdom

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The 'Appreciating Pacific understandings of school leadership' project looks at how leadership is culturally understood in different contexts across the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

The project investigates ideas about leadership in education held by school leadership and school communities across the three island nations. In particular, it looks at how school leaders negotiate understandings of leadership brought from their community with the leadership demands of the educational systems.

Storying is indigenous in the Pacific, used for teaching and learning in many contexts, and the research captures the lived experience of educators through a wealth of experiential, cognitive, emotional and spiritual data about how leadership is understood in the Pacific. Storying will develop data about the way practitioners support each other, understand their influence, and curate followers.



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# CONTENTS

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<b>Key Findings and Implications</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Interrogating Leadership in Context</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Looking for Leadership - Methodology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Case Studies</b>	<b>6</b>
#1 Leadership on a Sailing Canoe	6
#2 Leadership on a Beach	7
<b>Takeaways and Implications</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>11</b>

# INTRODUCTION

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## KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Leadership interventions that do not make everyday sense to people lack deep contextualisation.
- To move forward, effective strategies for learning about leadership in context are required.
- Leadership may be a shared practice in which a key obligation involves passing valued information intergenerationally.
- Leadership can be a matter of shared identity, navigation of direction and relationship management.
- Leadership in some contexts aims at distribution and cohesion.

## INTERROGATING LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

Leadership is a significant issue in the development context because much work takes place with or through leaders. Often, development policy aims to build the capacity of existing leaders in government, civil society and so on, understanding leadership as a lever to support positive change. However, leadership is contextual: leaders practice leadership in many contexts across every society.

A broad definition of contextualisation would be an endeavour to fit policy-driven interventions to local circumstances. If leadership is tacitly assumed to be a universal or easily transferable set of orientations, dispositions and/or practices, contextualisation mainly looks at who is doing the leading, and support involves outside groups helping local leadership to meet a pre-set model. This is an impoverished understanding of the potential of contextualisation (Sanga, Maebuta, Johansson-Fua, & Reynolds, 2020). To move forward, effective strategies for learning about leadership in context are required.

To move further when looking at leadership in the development field, it is helpful to erode assumptions by posing some searching questions. This paper asks key questions of leadership in context; what it is, what kinds of contextual evidence are appropriate for leadership claims, and where to look for evidence of leadership. These questions are important in reaching complex development problems, and in finding ways of addressing them that are practical, appropriate and sustainable.

## LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP - METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper is strengths-based. We assume that people in every context know much about leadership; what it is, how it is practiced. In addition, we assume that ideas of leadership are located in wider philosophies about the nature of social life. For example, thought-traditions frame ideas about who is or could be a leader. Within the logic of each culture, matters of authority and power relate to notions of leadership. The everyday is where logics of leadership are developed, tested, adapted and are subject to sense making. Consequently, leadership interventions that do not make everyday sense to people lack deep contextualisation.

In order to support contextualisation, a strength-based approach means valuing what people already have in order to co-create development or solutions that fit their lives. The quality of fit contributes to sustainability because the structures that support change should continue to exist after outsiders leave, funding stops, or the project timeline is up. For this reason, it is essential to find effective strategies so that practitioners can learn about leadership in context. In this paper we use *tok stori*, a Melanesian everyday practice, to investigate leadership frameworks in two societies.

### LEARN MORE

*Tok stori* is a Melanesian term for what Solomon Islanders do everyday – telling stories, creating a joint narrative, and making sense of life. But that's not the whole story. *Tok stori* has relatives, it creates and maintains relationships, it comes in multiple forms, and is being recognised as helpful for an ever-increasing range of purposes.

Read more about *tok stori*: [Talking about tok stori](#)

*Tok stori* is a Melanesian orality, a discursive form that has been used for leadership education (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019; Sanga, Reynolds, Houma, & Maebuta, 2020), evaluation (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020) and research (de la Torre Parra, 2021; Sanga & Reynolds, 2019; Sanga, Reynolds, Paulsen, Spratt, & Maneipuri, 2018). *Tok stori* involves narrative interactions in a safe space where hierarchical relationships are minimised.

The *tok stori* process privileges a jointly woven contextual, dynamic and organic understanding of the world (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020b). The narrative is not hemmed in by parameters drawn from outside expectations or theory. Instead, new understandings can be generated from the act of storying. In this way, everyday life provides its own contextual knowledge. Here we use *tok stori* for exploratory and pedagogic purposes – to develop ideas about leadership and where to find it.

The *tok stori* in question was conducted online with a diverse group of people familiar with Oceanic oracles who wished to contribute to a discursive investigation of leadership. It began with a strand focussed on understanding leadership through literature. After this, the dialogue ranged far and wide, articulating knowledge about leadership through the experiences, feelings and thinking of contributors. Habitual discursive activity of this type offers abundant opportunities to learn from people's observations and understandings of significant but everyday activities. Consequently, it is helpful when interrogating leadership, and seeking appropriate evidence to justify leadership claims. Here, we give two *tok stori* derived examples, one drawn from the Republic of Marshall Islands, one drawn from Solomon Islands.

... *leadership is developed, legitimised and exercised through relationships.*





## CASE STUDIES

### #1 LEADERSHIP ON A SAILING CANOE

The Marshall Islands is a series of atolls in the north Pacific. First occupied by migrating peoples in the second millennium BC, various atolls have since been colonised by Spain, Germany, Japan and the US. The territory is currently in a Compact of Free Association with the US. What is leadership to Marshallese and how might the development sector learn about it?

Written accounts of ancient narratives of origin and migration (Dobbin & Hezel, 2011; Hage, 1998; Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014; Walsh, 2003) such as those of Loktanur, a mythical mother figure from the sky, provide the development sector with a background to Marshallese leadership. These tales frame leadership as a genealogical matter and associate it with traits such as generosity and obedience towards elders, as demonstrated by the figure of Jebro, who received the first sail from his mother (Ahlgren, 2016) by these means. In a race between brothers, only Jebro would carry his mother, Loktanur. Where the others feared encumbrance, Jebro's respect for her resulted in the gift of the sail (Ahlgren, 2016).

These narratives may seem limited in significance to the development community. However, the immediacy of these stories can be appreciated through a *tok stori* episode that draws together Marshallese stories of origin, navigation as practiced in the present day, and one person's experience of a voyage. A *tok stori* narrative offered by a visitor to the Marshall Islands that concerns a slow *vaka*

(canoe) journey between atolls has much to offer.

As a guest on a long voyage, the *tok stori* speaker had plenty of time to interact with the crew. A young Marshallese sailor asked him about his origin, to which the visitor replied in employment and geographical terms. When the inquiry was reversed, the young crew member replied to 'Who are you?' by referencing stories of Loktanur and Jebro such as those mentioned above. The contemporary relevance of ancient narratives in Marshallese society suggests that cosmological frameworks for leadership are of immediate significance, an aspect of identity that provides leadership legitimacy. In these terms, claims of leadership come through lineage and by identification with the exploits and qualities of ancestors.

The voyage also revealed leadership as a practice of knowledge transfer. The storyteller recalled: 'You can see the leaders on the vessel, sharing knowledge and opportunity around navigation, reading the forecasts, working their way through the currents, sun and so forth.' These actions, executed for survival and education, point to leadership as a shared practice where a key obligation is to pass valued information intergenerationally. Ancient skills are still relevant in a context where neither the threat nor the bounty of the ocean have changed. As we will see, the significance of transfer as a central tenet of leadership extends beyond sailing into navigating other aspects of life.

On arrival, the young sailor made a solo visit to the atoll's traditional chief: *'I've been telling the chief where we have come from, what you've been doing, who you are. And at the end of that, the chief has given you permission to carry out your work.'* The *tok stori* narrator explained: *'People who consider themselves to be 'we' all share the similar story of where they originated in the atoll chain and... the cosmos. The young man was paving the way and giving us permission to start walking towards the [atoll's] people to discuss things such as educational leadership.'* This explanation points to leadership as a matter of shared identity, navigation of direction and relationship management. Leaders take responsibility for safe passage on and off the water, exercise care by bridging relationships, take responsibility for mutual understanding, and communicate for those not qualified to do so.

This first-hand 'on the water' experience provides evidence with which to decode the relevance of the *Kanne Lobal* educational leadership framework to the Marshallese (Jim et al., 2021). This frame is metaphorically constructed around the Marshallese activities of steering and sailing. Developed through *bwebwenato*, a Marshallese oracy or dialogic form, it includes a focus on where the male and female booms (*rojak maan* and *rojak kōrā*) meet and strengthen the sail so that progress can safely be made. This refers to the mother and father relationship propelling the *jouj*, the lower part of the main hull, the heart of the vessel. The key to leadership that ensures the progress of the vessel is the kindness and love which strengthens families and sustains them into the future. The *tok stori* suggests that leadership in this context weaves cosmological references, knowledge transfer and relationship-based activities as acts of service. When well performed, leadership ensures well-navigated movement and produces harmony and sustainability.

## #2 LEADERSHIP ON THE BEACH

Situated in the Western Pacific, Solomon Islands is an archipelago of six major and over 900 smaller islands. It was first settled by the Lapita people, became a British protectorate in 1893, and gained independence in 1978. Leadership in the Solomon Islands has been discussed in relation to the Big Man (Sahlins, 1963) and Big Woman (Pollard, 2006), clan or traditional chiefs (Ruqebatu, 2008), and the *lida*, a form of leadership present in business and church life. These leadership forms are evident in public life,

but what of other leadership frameworks, ubiquitous but at a smaller scale?

A *tok stori* contributor described time spent observing village life in his home province of Malaita, Solomon Islands. The commercial and urban hub, Honiara, is a boat ride away. Day by day, small dinghies set off and arrive back with cargo. The *tok stori* described the way Solomon Islands village women watch carefully as cartons, sacks and so on are unloaded at the beach. From each other these women learn, *'who is carrying what when it comes to the shore... information that will be shared at the river'* at dishwash time, for instance. This is leadership through networking. No one woman can see all; some unpacking happens in more distant spots. Valuable information is not hoarded for personal advantage but spread around for the benefit of all. This kind of leadership aims at distribution and cohesion.

According to the observer's story, the focus of this form of leadership is *'the daily survival of their families'* achieved by women who are leaders of *'skill and ability...in their homes...[and] families.'* Day by day, they practice leadership built around reciprocity. These family leaders need *'to know and to weave the connections at the community level, to be able in the evening, to get some kumara (sweet potato) and take it to the lady who received some sugar during the day - she will receive the kumara and then give in exchange a packet of tea or a packet of sugar.'* Such reciprocity relies on maintaining close and well-configured relationships over long periods of time. It involves the willingness to ask and to honour the obligation to give. The process also involves food production so that exchange is possible because one has something to give.

This *tok stori* points to the need to consider three elements when looking for leadership in context. First, leadership is developed, legitimised and exercised through relationships. The interweaving of obligation and reciprocity at a village level frames individuals' leadership actions as legitimate to others. Second, leadership activities are best understood as moments in an extended sequence that may have intergenerational antecedents. The relationships through which leadership makes sense provide longevity and continuity.

Finally, this is leadership exercised at small scale but which has deep significance for the well-being of those involved.



## TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS

Lessons from the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Solomon Islands offered by these short *tok stori* episodes address leadership and contextualisation and provide indicative answers to our focussing questions.

First, what is leadership? The stories ask us to think about leadership in terms that stretch well beyond institutional models. Claims to leadership can be intergenerational, matters of identity embedded in cosmology or rooted in deep social cohesion. Leadership can be centred on everyday activities such as navigation and food distribution. This is leadership that is organic, ever present, for the benefit of many and performed in concert with others. Sustaining life by providing continuity is a significant driver of such leadership actions. Harmony amongst the group is both the means and the product. A crew that argues or ignores expertise; a family leader who refuses an obligation to exchange: these disharmonious situations point to disaster.

Leadership operates through, and cares for, relationships. A leader may prepare the ground for a stranger to approach a leader of another kind. This action cares for both sides of the interaction, warming relationships through explanation and understanding. A leader also shares information

appropriately. While some knowledge may be secret (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a) such as navigation protocols, sharing knowledge in the public domain such as the reason for a visit has the potential to benefit many. Thus, leadership involves recognising, understanding and respecting the relationships that either restrict or distribute knowledge. Knowing who to ask for what, recognising the currencies of exchange and the structure of obligations that provide context, and being embedded in exchange networks are relational matters.

Second, what kinds of contextual evidence are appropriate for leadership claims? In these contexts, several forms of evidence for leadership can be given. Among these is identity: how a leader locates themselves. In the Republic of the Marshall Islands *tok stori*, the young crew member did not need an outside agent to name him as a leader. Instead, the cosmological element of his origin was his claim. For the village women of Solomon Islands, responsibility for a family is an aspect of identity that calls forth leadership. In each case, the evidence of leadership is everyday. This includes the way relationships are shaped in order to fulfil roles and obligations, actions on behalf of others, the skill to contextualise events in ways that make sense to others, and the ability to weave harmonious social and spiritual arrangements.





Hard work over weeks in the garden provides an object made valuable in an exchange system by the knowledge of who has what. Understanding culturally sanctioned male-female relationships and the significance of love as a metaphor for stable progress; this is evidence beyond riding the waves of the significance of navigation to the way the world can be understood.

These forms of evidence can be thought of as small-scale. Indeed, that is their power. In both cases the orientation of individuals towards leadership is less a matter of role and more of being. To pass and receive navigation knowledge is to be part of the crew. To exchange information on behalf of families at washing up time is to be part of the village. However, in both cases, coming to that state of being is a matter of being integrated into a social system so that the evidence of leadership displayed fits the leader's position within the system. This can change, for example between the times when a village woman has or does not have sugar to exchange; or between times when a crew member is receiving or has mastered navigational knowledge. What matters is that the leadership displayed supports rather than disrupts sustainable life.

Finally, where to look for evidence of leadership. The *tok stori* episodes suggest that if we understand leadership as influence through relationships rather than as position, the evidence of leadership may be all around us. The signs of leadership become visible through everyday observation and subsequent interrogation. The discursive methodology of *tok stori* provided a safe space for weaving everyday experiences. The topic of leadership provided a critical lens for the speakers to decode their experiences and focus their narratives. On the day, this facilitated the weaving of understandings of leadership. In this retrospective account, the methodology provides material where context and leadership are welded.

Looking for the evidence of leadership in the everyday provides a window on the values and other schema that people use to shape their existence. As underlying aspects of people's lives, these culturally-sanctioned pointers show what matters in context. They form the parameters through which leadership is claimed, practiced and understood. Reciprocation, care, harmony, intergenerationality, cosmology: expansive notions such as these can be found in fractal arrangements across multiple moments of leadership. This suggests that looking for evidence of contextual models of leadership in what people do in the everyday is logical and potentially fruitful.



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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings are an invitation to step out of the comfort zone of how contextualisation is generally understood by re-addressing what leadership is. This involves embracing methodologies that position members of the recipient community as the experts of process and product. It also means positioning oneself as a learner who is seeking to understand at increasing levels the values that frame leadership. It means demonstrating what has been learned in this regard in day to day conduct and programme design. For some, it will mean challenging aspects of development work such as the time frames and evaluation methodologies that undercut or conflict with the way leadership is understood in context. A relational approach to leadership suggests that when development applies to all in a context, contextual programmes in leadership are most likely to flourish.

### TAKE A BROADER APPROACH TO CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Those who believe contextualisation in development is significant may want to consider taking a wide consultative net to environmental scanning. The lessons of this paper suggest that observing what people do in their lives or accessing this vicariously through the stories of observers can be beneficial. This is because context is not only a matter of which country one is in today, but also a matter of what thought-world is inhabited by those we seek to serve. This world is not confined to the lives of navigators or village women, but comes into schools, government departments, businesses and the like with and through those who are integrated into the context. Effective contextualisation of leadership programmes and/or support articulates these understandings, values them by listening, and learns from what they have to say.

### CONSIDER USING DIALOGIC FORMS TO EXPLORE DEEPLY HELD BELIEFS

Development practitioners may want to employ methodologies, such as *tok stori*, that provide opportunities to collate material to inform contextualisation at deep levels. In many of the places where development work is undertaken, one or more oracy or dialogic forms will be endemic. These are routes that provide access to information significant to deep contextualisation precisely

because they 'belong' to the people in question. They are the experts and can advise on protocol, location, attendance and so on. As we have demonstrated, this is true to some degree in the virtual world as well as face to face.

### INVEST TIME IN CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A further recommendation is the investment of time spent observing in context, whether it be on a vessel, in a village or elsewhere. Time spent developing deep contextualisation will have pay offs. Time allows relationships to grow, trust to develop, and aspects of context to change. Since relationships are the stuff of leadership and leadership needs to adapt to change, these are important currencies. Developing leadership that is sustainable because the structures that support change exist after outsiders leave, funding stops, or the project timeline is up is the key to effectiveness.

### RE-UNDERSTAND LEADERSHIP AS LEARNING

A final recommendation to the development community is to re-understand leadership as learning. This affects the way development professionals understand their roles as leaders. In both *tok stori* episodes, learning can be seen. The crew member wanted to learn about the visitor in order to be able to serve through leadership. The village women learned from each other about the basis of exchange on that particular day in order to serve their families. It is tempting to see the recipients of donor aid as the 'learners' and the donors as the 'teachers'. Such a situation does not embrace what leadership is or could be; neither does it provide effective contextualisation.

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*... if we understand leadership as influence through relationships rather than as position, the evidence of leadership may be all around us.*

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[dlprog.org](http://dlprog.org)

[dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk)

@DLProg

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Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham, B15 2TT  
United Kingdom

Design | [squarebeasts.net](http://squarebeasts.net)



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