



# Te Kakau Case study

SUPPORTING LEADERS DURING COVID-19

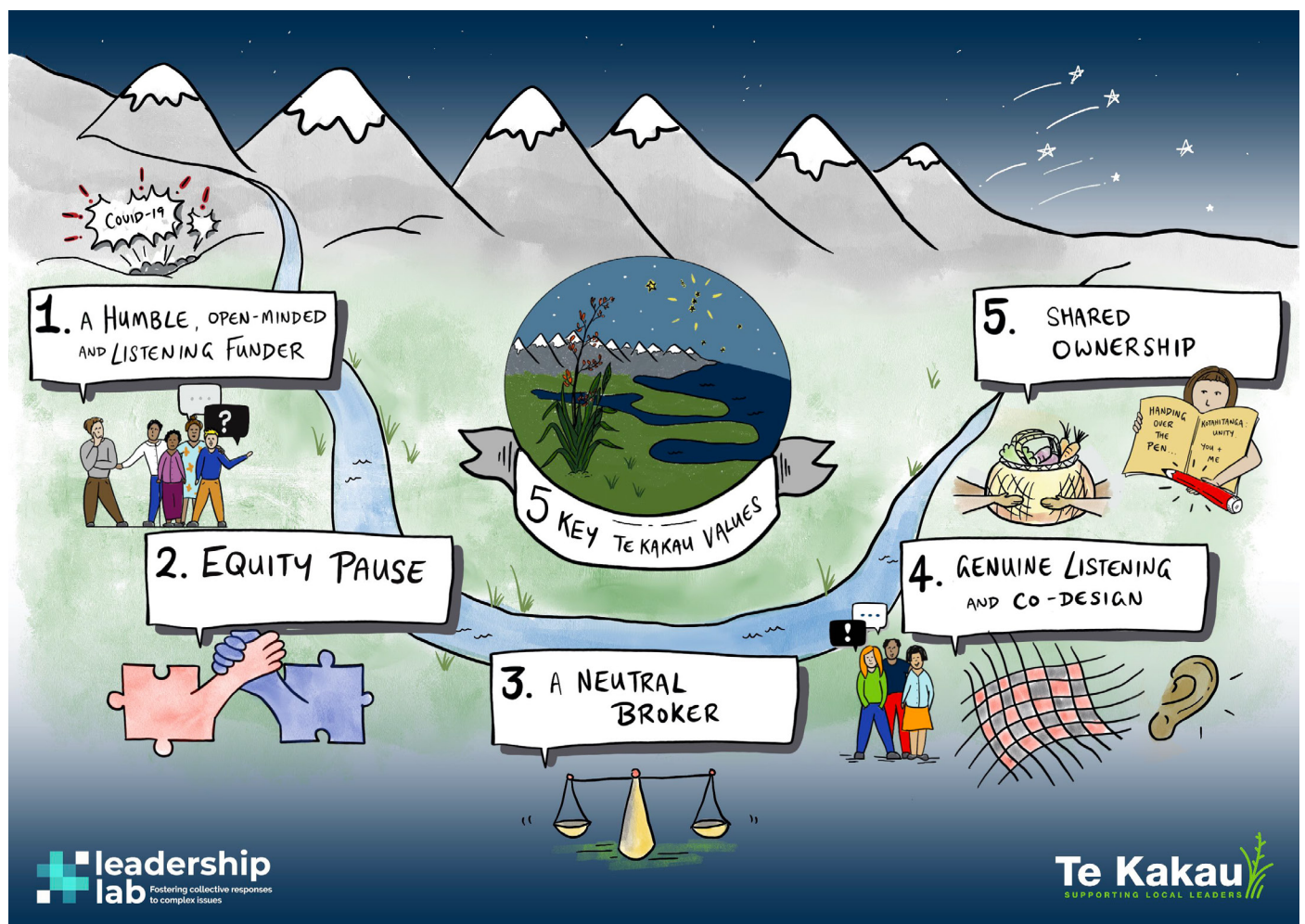




# Scene-Setting

Te Kakau is the 'stalk in the centre of the harakeke, the flax bush, providing leadership and support for the inner and outer leaves.'

Te Kakau are our valuable and vulnerable leaders within communities. Te Kakau is also the brightest star in Orion's belt and has been used to refer to the thoughts and wishes of leadership. This case study provides a guide for how communities may support their key leaders during times of pressure. This **short film** outlines the key components of Te Kakau and the impact it had on key leaders across the region. **Five key principles** (below) emerged throughout the project that are applicable to other contexts, communities and organisations attempting to address complex issues.



# Context

In July 2020, Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC) released a request for proposals (RFP) as part of their Community and Economic Recovery plan – the response to COVID-19-induced economic downturns. Titled “Key Talent Retention and Community Leadership Programme”, the request was for:

*“a supplier that can develop and deliver an interlinked programme designed to identify and ensure key/critical talent essential for business & community recovery is retained within the district – and a community leadership programme designed to foster performing and future leaders to lead others through business and community recovery.”*

This case study documents the process Leadership Lab went through in the fulfilment of this request, with the intention that others may learn from or otherwise benefit from a view into the inner workings of the successful initiative that became known as [Te Kakau](#).



# What Happened

## RFP Response

Through the RFP process, a small team of Leadership Lab members reached out to individuals in their own personal and professional networks who were based in the Queenstown Lakes region. The objective was to gauge the mood, feel, and perceived challenges of the place and the people. This fundamentally informed the response to the RFP and subsequent work. Our basic response had two parts. It was twofold. Firstly, we could deliver a leadership programme, as requested, based on successful models like our 8-year-long [LinC Initiative \(Leadership in Communities\)](#) in Ōtautahi Christchurch. But, secondly, we were not sure that was what was needed to address the issues leaders in the region we facing, or that QLDC knew that either. We also weren't sure that QLDC knew exactly what was needed to address the issues for leaders in the region. Instead we proposed kicking off the project with a community co-design process, one that would help us to collectively understand: Who are the people that the region can't afford to lose? What are the challenges they are facing? What supports might help them stay in the game and stay in the region?

## Phase 1: Community Co-Design

**September – November 2020**

On successful receipt of the contract, our team spent a few days in Queenstown and Wānaka exploring variations of the questions above over many cups of tea and a few group hui. This included a mihi whakatau with a large group of members of the local Māori community.

What emerged was an overall picture of good humans doing everything they could to keep things moving and keep supporting other people, often at great personal cost. The notion of “community-minded business people and business minded community people” emerged, people who “wear multiple hats”. These individuals were hard to define demographically but could be found within existing networks and communities active in the region. Several thematic groups were identified within the target group, and a series of cohorts were formed in collaboration with QLDC and other key local partners:

- Māori Community;
- Experienced Senior managers and Business Owners/ Operators – Large and small;
- Women – specifically the ‘Queenstown Lakes Women’ online community of ~1200 members;
- Wānaka community leaders;
- Queenstown community, education and health sector leaders;
- Human Resource / People and Capability Managers

Having identified the broad ‘target group’ as above and spoken with a fair sample of them, what emerged was a fundamental challenge relating to connectivity. It appeared that people tended to be ‘falling over or leaving’ when they lost more than one type of connection:

- Connection to self: who am I? Who am I now? What can I offer? Am I of value?
- Connection to employment: can I afford to be here still?

- Connection to community: who has my back? Whose back do I have? Do I belong here?

Recognising our inability to provide direct employment, the project brief became clearly focussed on fostering connections to self and connections to others – community building. This, in turn, became a three phase plan:

Phase 1: Community Co-design

Phase 2: Connection to self and ‘others like me’

Phase 3: Fostering community networks

You can read the summary report for [Phase 1: Community Co-Design here.](#)

## Phase 2: Connection to self and ‘others like me’

**December 2020 – June 2021**

Two main strands of work unfurled through Phase 2: 1:1 coaching for 100 individuals; and targeted cohort-specific group interventions.

The 1:1 coaching consisted of two 90-min sessions based around Gallup Clifton Strengths for 5 cohorts and a more business-focussed “design-your-life” approach for 1 cohort. Strengths based coaching was specifically chosen for its applicability to times of pressure and change. This process helps individuals identify their [top 5 strengths](#) out of a range of 34, and then explore the ways in which these strengths work together to create their unique contribution to life and work. By supporting people to connect more deeply with what makes them special and unique, their decision-making becomes easier, whilst confidence and energy rebound as people start working intentionally with what comes naturally and easily to them.

Group interventions centred around issues of relevance to all members of a cohort. For example, one cohort was Human Resource or People and Performance Managers, who gathered a number

of times to explore innovative ways of working through significant staffing challenges and how they might collaborate to address common issues they were facing.

Throughout the coaching periods, our team of coaches would participate in regular debrief conversations, reflecting back in an anonymised way the nature and themes discussed in coaching sessions and the challenges being faced by people in the region. Anonymous feedback was also gathered from participants/coachees through a brief online form after each coaching session. Content from both processes fed into a thematic analysis process that served three purposes:

- Developmental evaluation of the programme: *What has been useful? What else might be useful next?*
- Design of Phase 3: *What content and form would be of most use for participants moving forward?*
- Light peer supervision and debriefing for team members as they worked with individuals under sometimes extreme pressure and stress

You can read the [Phase 2 summary report, including key themes, here.](#)

## Phase 3: Fostering Community Networks

**July 2021 – December 2021**

This phase saw the hosting of ~100 local leaders (*community-minded business people and business-minded community people*) at a one-day hui in July and in November. The majority of these leaders had participated in coaching or the other group initiatives throughout Phase 2. These hui were jointly hosted by mana whenua, Leadership Lab, and QLDC. Around this time, as the programme was taking shape, we were gifted the name *Te Kakau* by local Kaumatua Darren Rewi, alongside a rich description of the applicability of the metaphor as described in the opening of this case study.

Experience has taught us that bringing a diverse group of people together with a common agenda and shared language tends to result in new and better collaborative solutions. Therefore, the purpose of these hui was to foster connection and learning through the involvement of a variety of speakers, break out workshops, and opportunities to cross-pollinate ideas and opportunities across the whole group.

The themes that ran through these hui were:

- Whanaungatanga (connections and belonging)
- Manaakitanga (support for self and others)
- Mahi tahi (collaboration and innovation).

Content for these hui was informed by the evaluation and team debriefs from Phases 1 and 2. A formal Māori welcome in the form of a mihi whakatau was co-led by Darren Rewi and the Māori community.

At the conclusion of the second hui, the Leadership Lab contract formally concluded, yet participants unanimously agreed to a wish to continue the programme. As such, a group of local leaders decided to pick up the mantle and carry Te Kakau forward.

You can read the [Phase 3 report here.](#)





# Impact

A number of impacts have been seen as a result of the whole Te Kakau programme.

- Direct individual support of key leaders facing considerable pressure. We know from the evaluation of 1:1 coaching that a great majority of participants found the process personally and professionally very valuable. This was, for many, the first time they had received any support of this kind.
- Direct practical support and solutions unlocked within cohorts
  - Local Māori community leaders able to gather and focus energy on most effective actions
  - Women's Network gathering unprecedented data into the experiences of women in the region
  - Human Resources / People and Culture leaders creating tangible solutions and resource-sharing initiatives to alleviate staffing pressures
- A lifting of the floor of knowledge and capability on collaboration, as well as collaborative networks among a wide network of leaders
- Community level buy-in to a vision of a better future and healthier way of thinking about the nature of the region's economy and way of working

**Perhaps the most profound direct impact was the weaving together of otherwise disparate networks and groups through the region.** This was reflected back through discussion at a hui, with participants noting that Te kakau provided the first context they had seen where multiple traditional 'divides' were being bridged with all parties as equals:

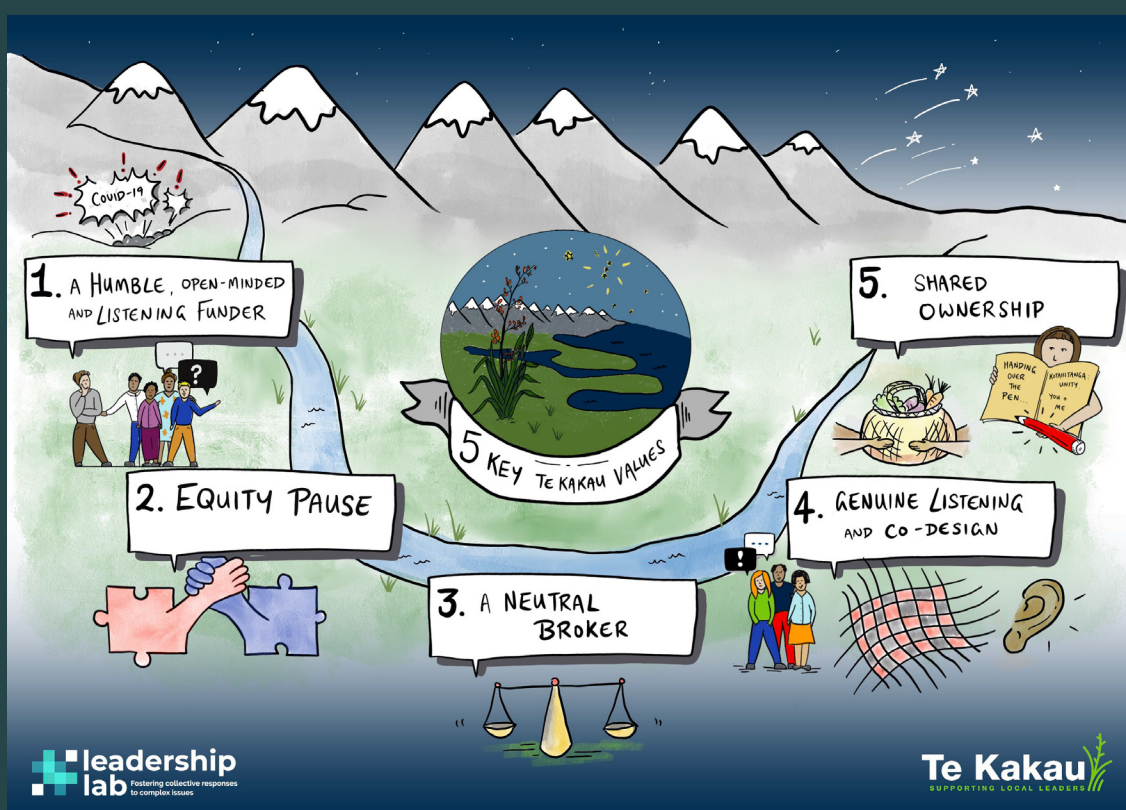
- Between Council and Community and Business
- Between mana whenua and non-māori community
- Between business leaders and leaders from communities, education, and social services
- Between Wānaka and Queenstown communities

The forging of these trusting relationships and the shared aspirations that emerged were a key outcome of Te Kakau. We believe this will be the lasting change that Te Kakau can claim as a contribution to the region and its people. These relationships are enduring, and have created a platform of shared respect and understanding among Te Kakau participants.



# Key Principles

There are principles that can be gleaned from our work with Te Kakau, that we believe can be transferred into other contexts as a helpful guide for working on similar challenges.



## 1. A humble, open-minded and listening funder

From the outset, the commissioning body/funder was humble in their recognition that while they had a general understanding of the problem they were trying to solve, their own opinions came second to the realities of the real people the programme was for. A downstream effect of this was the creation of a powerful positive tension: the individuals the programme was for were needing community and connection to self, but the programme was being paid for by an economic recovery budget (through an economic development unit).

A more traditional and rigid approach would disallow such creative use of funds, but the humility/open mindedness of the funder here allowed them to listen to their stakeholders and recognise that the best thing for economic development was to support the individuals with much less tangible solutions than an initially-requested traditional 'leadership development talent retention programme'.

***Be humble and make genuine commitments to listen to, and believe, the voices of people you are trying to serve.***

## 2. Equity Pause

Every community faces challenges of latent inequity. Severe disruptions, like COVID-19, tend to exacerbate these inequities, so those who are typically marginalised are often further marginalised by the extra layers of challenge. Compounding this, there is often an observable phenomenon of 'the usual suspects' gathering around a problem or proposition in any given community. When these factors all occur together, the solutions that emerge are often blind to the realities of the most marginalised, and latent/underlying inequities are further entrenched.

Understanding this, the approach within Te Kakau was to take an 'equity pause' where focussed energy was directed towards finding and including the silenced or overlooked voices. This process brought mana whenua community members (among others) to the table, starting a very meaningful dialogue that became central to the success of Te Kakau. Much of the spirit of the solutions that emerged were inspired and introduced by mana whenua, and the result was a much more inclusive, human, and honouring set of experiences.

By specifically focussing on bringing in a broad array of different perspectives, much time is spent simply figuring out how to be together. In time, this becomes a powerful skill set and experience, but also a key outcome.

***Speak with people who aren't normally spoken with, seek them out and welcome them as equals.***

## 3. Neutral Broker

As a co-design and facilitation team from Leadership Lab, we were predominantly 'outsiders' from another city. This allowed us to be separate from the politics inherent in communities, whilst offering a genuine impartial ear to listen and reflect back the conversations being had. Our energy stayed focussed on the kaupapa, the task at hand, providing a facilitative container rather than directly getting involved in the local matters being worked through.

Everyone was unknown to us, so through the co-design process we found it natural and easy to explore and ask about those who are typically marginalised, as everyone was unknown to us. Our bias was towards including people, even when there was push back. This bias proved generally helpful and created space for latent tensions to be brought into the room and resolved together.

***Engage facilitators who are genuinely neutral and committed to the process and the outcomes, allowing local energy to then be invested into the specific issues that the project seeks to address.***

## 4. Genuine Listening (And Co-Design)

The importance of genuine listening and actually hearing what is being said by people cannot be overstated. It would have been easy for us to respond with a "proposed solution" (as requested in the RFP) to deliver a "talent retention programme". However, previous experiences delivering such work have taught us that the perceived needs of a group are often markedly different from their actual needs. A predetermined solution from an outside provider (or dictated by a commissioning body) is completely inappropriate in such cases, as it assumes a similarity between contexts that is unrealistic.

Genuine listening requires an openness and humility that takes regular refreshing and discussion. Particularly through co-design and developmental evaluation processes, it is critical to talk about what is being has been



heard and reflect on what that means relative to our own impressions. Note that the most important part of the concept of co-design; is the word co – meaning together. Genuine co-design process allows a wide range of expertise to be considered as part of the emerging bespoke solution.

*Find humility and temper it against expertise. Listen to what people say and act in alignment with what they say they need.*

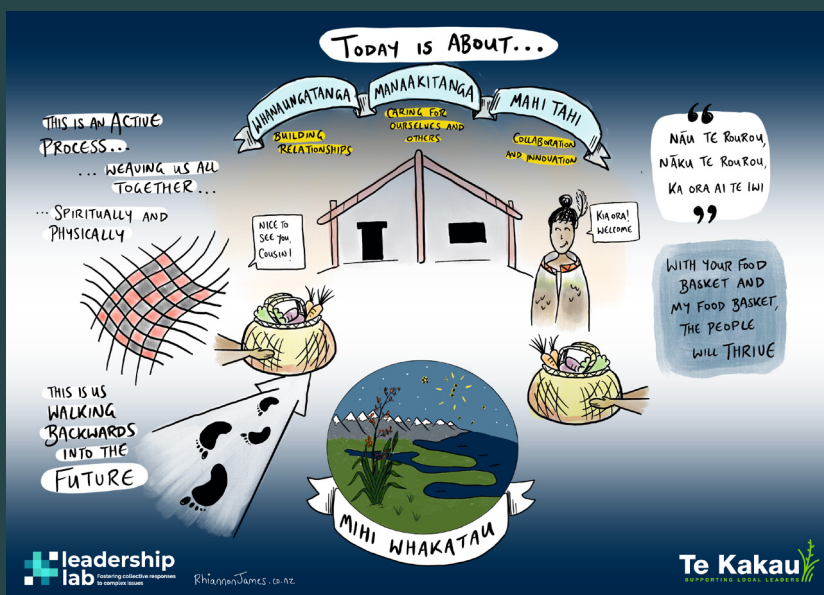
## 5. Shared Ownership

At Leadership Lab we often talk about ‘handing the pen across the table’. This refers to the process of brainstorming, usually with a prospective client or partner, about what might be done, then at a certain point handing them the metaphorical pen and saying ‘what do you think should be done here?’ or words to that effect. This process is symbolic of inviting shared buy-in, shared ownership of a process and project, as opposed to a traditional approach of commissioning a pre-determined solution from a provider. This same ‘handing of the pen’ process happens in conversations with local community members through co-design conversations.

By genuinely listening to the perspectives of others, and through the resulting generative thinking, a powerful shared ownership emerges when it comes to actually doing something. Everyone is in agreement about what matters, what makes sense, and what we don’t know yet. This shared buy-in creates a platform of kotahitanga, unity, upon which more difficult conversations can be navigated in a progressive way.

*Invite others to “hold the pen” early in the process, and keep sharing it around.*

A final comment on lessons came from our funding partner, reflecting on the difficulty of measuring and articulating impact. At regular intervals is it worth thinking about how to effectively measure impact, when that impact may not be tangible. Getting clear about key performance indicators so they can be conveyed and understood by funders and others who are not physically in the room can be both very helpful and very difficult. It is often difficult to convey the impact of transformational experiences, so work on getting key people in the room is vital, and aim to as is capturing the value being created in a communicable way like videos and direct participant voice.



# Conclusion

Supporting leaders during times of challenge is a worthy undertaking, one that is worth doing well. The temptation is to approach it as a technical challenge where the right experts at the right time will roll out the right solution. Our experiences with such work suggest otherwise. While there may be some good practices that can generally help, no two communities are the same and neither are the challenges they face. Our hope is that this case study gives you the confidence to embrace uncertainty and release the desire for a 'quick fix' or the 'best practice solution'. Humans are an adaptive and wise lot when given the space and time to solve things worth solving. Work with your people in a genuine and humble way and you will likely end up travelling much further together than what you had initially envisioned.

*Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*  
*Our strength is not as individuals, but as a collective*

# Acknowledgements

[Leadership Lab](#) is a collective of passionate and diverse consultants all focussed on growing equitable and thriving communities and organisations. We believe that collective approaches provide the key to unlocking complex challenges. We do this through co-designing multi-year collective impact projects with communities and agencies. We are guided by our values of mana ōrite, kotahitanga and manaakitanga. These values in action inform every project we engage in and are reflected in [how we work](#) and our commitment to [Showing up Differently](#).

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