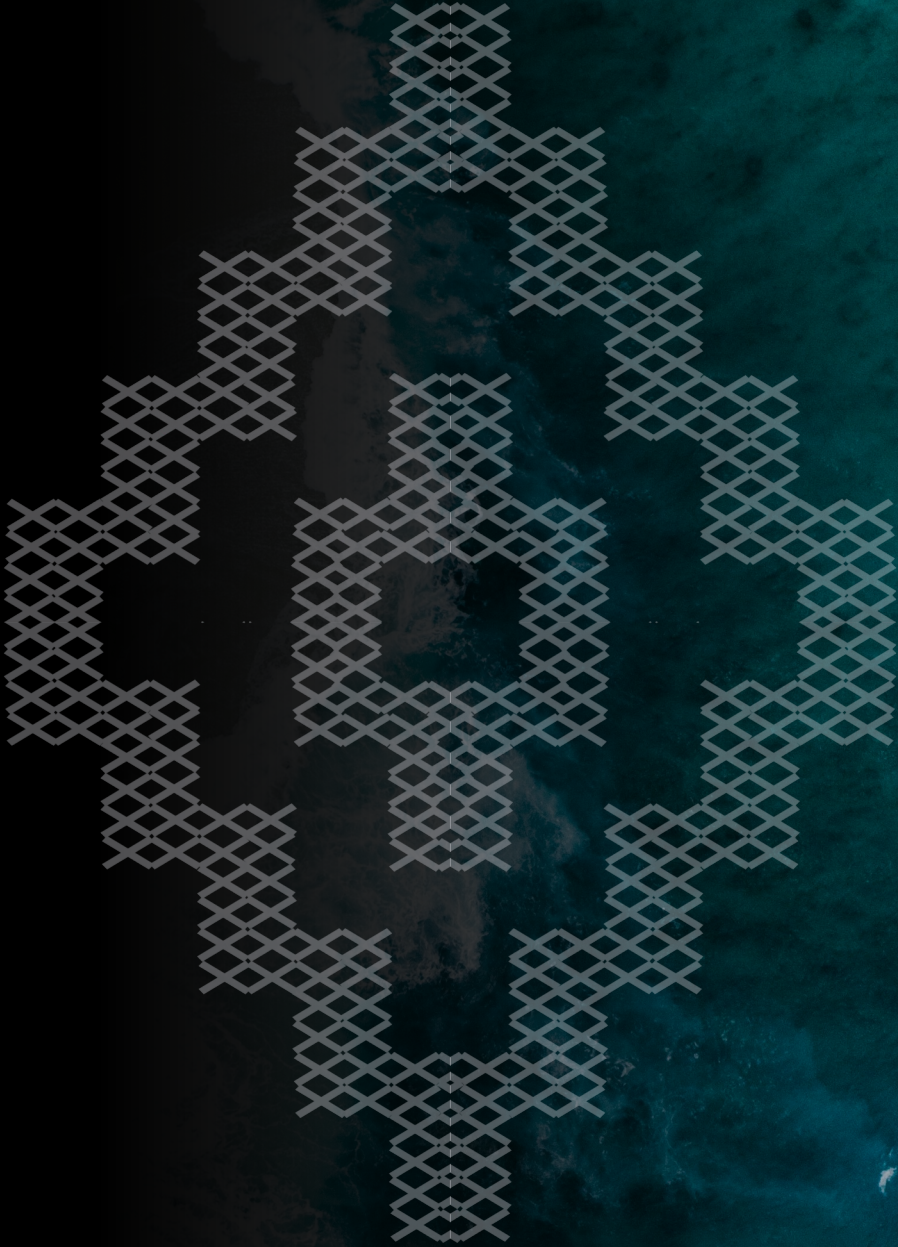




# **Māori Governance Guide**

A Practical Introduction to Māori Governance

## The Purpose of this Guide

Māori governance plays a critical role in protecting and advancing the aspirations of whānau, hapū, iwi, and Māori organisations. As Māori entities continue to grow in complexity, scale, and influence, the need for strong, culturally grounded governance has never been more important.

This guide has been developed to provide an introduction to Māori governance and to support both new and experienced governors in understanding the unique responsibilities that come with governing Māori organisations. It explores the foundations of effective governance through both contemporary governance practice and a te ao Māori lens, recognising that Māori governance is shaped not only by legal and organisational obligations, but also by whakapapa, tikanga, collective responsibility, and intergenerational stewardship.

The guide is intended to support governors, trustees, board members, and emerging leaders to strengthen their understanding of governance roles and responsibilities, navigate common governance challenges, and build strong governance practices that are both culturally grounded and fit for purpose.

## Introduction

The concept of governance has always existed within te ao Māori.

Long before modern boards, constitutions, and governance manuals, Māori exercised governance through whānau, hapū, iwi, marae, and collective decision-making structures grounded in whakapapa, tikanga, rangatiratanga, and collective responsibility.

Today, Māori governance operates across a diverse range of entities, including trusts, incorporations, rūnanga, charitable organisations, post-settlement governance entities (PSGEs), Māori businesses, and community organisations. While governance structures may differ, the underlying purpose remains the same:

To protect, steward, and advance the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Today, effective Māori governance requires balancing contemporary governance practice with tikanga Māori, legal obligations, whānau obligations, and accountability to whānau, hapū, iwi, and our wider community. This guide provides an introduction to Māori governance and outlines the foundations that every governor should understand.

## What is Governance?

Governance is the process of providing strategic leadership, oversight, and accountability for an organisation.

Governors are responsible for determining:

- Why the organisation exists
- Where it is heading
- How success will be measured
- How risk will be managed
- How resources will be protected
- How leadership will be held accountable

Governance focuses on the future. Management focuses on the day-to-day operations.

## What is Governance (cont.)

A useful way to think about governance is:

| Governance            | Management            |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Sets direction        | Delivers the work     |
| Oversees performance  | Undertakes activities |
| Determines strategy   | Implements strategy   |
| Monitors risk         | Manages risk          |
| Holds CEO accountable | Reports to governance |

Māori Governance is unique. While Māori governance incorporates many elements of modern governance practice, it is often grounded in additional responsibilities and relationships. These include:

### Whakapapa

Whakapapa is more than genealogy. It is the organising framework through which te ao Māori understands relationships, identity, responsibility, and the world around us. In governance, whakapapa reminds governors that decisions sit within a much wider web of relationships - between tūpuna, whenua, atua, whānau, hapū, iwi, and uri whakatipu.

A whakapapa-based approach to governance encourages boards to think intergenerationally. Decisions are not only assessed by their immediate impact, but by whether they honour the legacy of those who came before and protect the wellbeing of those yet to come. It also reinforces that governors do not act as isolated individuals, but as representatives within a collective story, carrying responsibilities to the people, places, and kaupapa they are connected to.

### Kaitiakitanga

Kaitiakitanga reflects the responsibility to care for, protect, and enhance what has been entrusted to the organisation. In te ao Māori, resources are not simply assets to be owned or consumed. They are taonga with whakapapa, mauri, and obligations attached to them. Within governance, kaitiakitanga requires boards to act as careful stewards of whenua, pūtea, knowledge, relationships, mātauranga, reputation, and future opportunity. A kaitiakitanga approach is not passive protection, it also involves active planning, courage, and discipline to ensure the organisation remains strong for future generations.

### Manaakitanga

Manaakitanga is grounded in the recognition of mana, the inherent dignity, authority, and value of people. It is often expressed through the uplifting of others. In governance, manaakitanga shapes how boards engage with whānau, staff, communities, stakeholders, and one another.

A manaakitanga-based board does not only ask whether a decision is efficient or legally correct. It also asks whether the process has upheld people's mana, whether affected communities have been heard, and whether relationships have been strengthened or diminished. Manaakitanga supports governance cultures that are respectful, inclusive, and courageous enough to address difficult issues without diminishing the mana of people.

### Rangatiratanga

Rangatiratanga speaks to authority, leadership, autonomy, and the ability of Māori to determine their own futures. In governance, rangatiratanga is expressed through clear decision-making, strategic direction and accountability.

## What is Governance (cont.)

### Rangatiratanga (cont.)

For Māori organisations, rangatiratanga is not simply about occupying governance positions. It is about exercising authority in a way that is grounded in tikanga, accountable to the collective, and focused on advancing self-determined outcomes. This requires boards to be confident in setting their own priorities, challenging systems and making decisions that reflect the aspirations of whānau, hapū, iwi, and communities... and that is not an easy task.

### Whanaungatanga

Whanaungatanga reflects the centrality of relationships in te ao Māori. In governance, whanaungatanga reminds boards that effective leadership is built through trust, reciprocity, communication, and shared commitment.

A whanaungatanga approach requires boards to invest in relationships before decisions are required, not only when issues arise. It encourages genuine engagement and recognises that legitimacy is strengthened when people feel connected to the kaupapa. Strong relationships create the foundation for collective action, accountability, and long-term impact.

### Collective Benefit

In te ao Māori, wellbeing is not understood only through the individual. The wellbeing of the person is connected to the wellbeing of the whānau, hapū, iwi, whenua, and wider environment. Māori governance therefore often carries a responsibility to pursue outcomes that benefit the collective, rather than privileging narrow or short-term interests.

Collective benefit requires boards to consider who gains, who may be disadvantaged, and how decisions contribute to shared prosperity and wellbeing. It asks governors to balance economic, cultural, social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of value. This broader view of success reflects a Māori worldview where the strength of the collective is central to the wellbeing of future generations.

## The Role of a Governor

Governors are guardians of the organisation they serve.

Their role includes:

- ✓ *Setting strategic direction*
- ✓ *Protecting the organisation's purpose*
- ✓ *Monitoring organisational performance*
- ✓ *Ensuring financial sustainability*
- ✓ *Managing risk*
- ✓ *Ensuring legal compliance*
- ✓ *Supporting and overseeing the Chief Executive/General Manager*
- ✓ *Maintaining accountability to stakeholders*
- ✓ *Planning for future leadership and succession*

Governors should focus on governance matters rather than becoming involved in day-to-day operational decisions.

## Common Governance Challenges

Many organisations experience similar governance challenges regardless of their size, structure, or purpose. While these challenges are common, they can have a significant impact on governance effectiveness if they are not actively addressed.

## Common Governance Challenges (Cont.)

### **Governance vs Operations**

One of the most common governance challenges is the blurring of governance and management responsibilities. Governors can sometimes become involved in day-to-day operational matters, particularly in smaller organisations where relationships are close and resources are limited. While this often comes from a genuine desire to help, it can create confusion around roles, undermine management authority, and prevent the board from focusing on strategic leadership and oversight.

### **Succession Planning**

Many organisations struggle to identify and develop future governance leaders. Without deliberate succession planning, boards can become overly reliant on a small number of experienced governors, creating risks when those individuals step down. Effective governance requires a long-term approach to building capability, creating pathways for emerging leaders, and ensuring knowledge is transferred across generations.

### **Governance Capability**

Strong governance requires ongoing learning and development. Many governors are appointed because of their leadership, mātauranga, or professional expertise, but may not have received formal governance training. Without adequate induction and ongoing development opportunities, governors can find it difficult to confidently navigate their legal responsibilities, financial oversight obligations, and strategic decision-making roles.

### **Accountability**

Maintaining meaningful accountability to whānau, hapū, iwi, members, and stakeholders can be challenging. Organisations often have reporting obligations, but reporting alone does not always create genuine accountability. Boards must continually consider how they engage with their people, communicate decisions, gather feedback, and demonstrate that they are acting in the best interests of those they serve.

### **Governance Documentation**

Over time, governance documents can become outdated, duplicated, or inconsistent. Constitutions, trust deeds, governance manuals, policies, and terms of reference may no longer reflect current governance arrangements or organisational practice. Poorly aligned documentation can create confusion about roles, responsibilities, authority, and decision-making processes, increasing governance risk.

### **Strategic Focus**

Boards can sometimes become consumed by immediate issues and operational reporting, leaving insufficient time for strategic discussion and future planning. Effective governance requires governors to regularly lift their focus above day-to-day matters and consider long-term opportunities, emerging risks, organisational sustainability, and the aspirations of future generations. A board that spends most of its time looking inward may miss important changes occurring beyond the horizon.

## Questions Every Governor Should Ask

### Purpose

- Why does our organisation exist?
- Are our decisions aligned with our purpose?

### Strategy

- Are we achieving our strategic objectives?
- What challenges are emerging on the horizon?

### Financial Sustainability

- Are we financially sustainable?
- What happens if funding changes?

### Accountability

- How are we engaging with our people?
- What feedback are we receiving?

### Risk

- What are our biggest risks?
- Are we actively monitoring them?

### Future Focus

- What legacy are we leaving for future generations?

### Indicators of Strong Māori Governance

Strong Māori governance often demonstrates:

- ✓ *Clear purpose and strategic direction*
- ✓ *Strong relationships with whānau, hapū, and iwi*
- ✓ *Effective governance and management separation*
- ✓ *Sound financial oversight*
- ✓ *Robust governance documentation*
- ✓ *Regular reporting and accountability*
- ✓ *Governance capability development*
- ✓ *Succession planning*
- ✓ *Decision-making informed by tikanga and values*
- ✓ *Long-term intergenerational thinking*

## Final Reflections

Māori governance is ultimately about kaitiakitanga and making decisions today that honour those who came before us while creating opportunities for those who will follow.

Effective governors balance accountability and aspiration, tikanga and governance practice, immediate needs and future generations.

When governance is grounded in purpose, relationships, and collective wellbeing, organisations are better positioned to create lasting outcomes for the communities they serve.