



Presented at the Hope for  
Kids Financial Sustainability  
Workshop—January 9, 2014

## The Art of Creating Gracious Space

Hau'oli Mau Loa Foundation acknowledges and offers great thanks to:

**Kukui Maunakea – Forth, Executive Director of MA'O Organic Farms (MA'O)**

and

**Maenette Benham, Chair of the Board of MA'O**

for their generosity in sharing their wisdom and experiences with the Hope for Kids Partners at a Financial Sustainability Workshop held on January 9, 2014, at the Arts at Mark's Garage.

We asked Kukui and Maenette to participate in this workshop which was focused on the topic of how to engage your board to support your organization. Beyond speaking with the group, they graciously agreed to have their comments summarized and shared in this document. The following are their notes and excerpts from their comments to the Hope for Kids Partners.

### Kukui opened by chanting oli ho'oulu – a chant for growth

#### Oli Ho'oulu

A ua mai la ua  
 A kupu mai la kupu  
 A mu'o mai la mu'o  
 A liko mai la liko  
 A lau mai la lau  
 A lālā mai la lālā  
 A kumu mai la kumu  
 A he kumu- pa'a hina 'ole e!

#### Chant for Growth

As the rain falls, raining  
 That causes sprouting, sprouting  
 That forms buds, budding  
 That send leaves unfurling, leafing  
 That forms mature leaves, leaves  
 That sends branches, branching  
 That establishes a trunk, a trunk  
 A firm trunk, that will not fall!

As shared by Kukui and Maenette, a successful board president and executive director collaboration is based on **common values** and a set of **partnership strategies**.

The **Common Values** Kukui and Maenette share are:

- ❖ Strong sense and affiliation to our cultural and communal identities
- ❖ Essential understanding in the vision and mission of the organization
- ❖ Firm understanding of kinship/relationship as a vehicle for sharing leadership
- ❖ Pono, integrity, and transparency in our organizational roles
- ❖ Aloha valued beyond just love: trust, respect, empathy, reciprocity, & compassion

The **Partnership Strategies** Kukui and Maenette employ are:

#### ● **Trusting, Respectful and Generative Relationship**

Our own leadership practice is strong within the communities we serve. Being confident in our own leadership roles and abilities, we have a sense of accomplishment and achievement about our work that we use as a building block to our partnership. Our ability to confidently engage one another in our mutual work around our organization's mission comes naturally because we have developed a mutual trust, respect and aloha between us. During the course of our work, we have been able to have successful outcomes. We have been able to strengthen our trust, respect and aloha for one another not only as colleagues, but as community members as well.

There is a great quote by Olana A'i in which she says that *"aloha is the intelligence with which we meet life."* Our intelligence is amplified because we understand that aloha IS the intelligence that nourishes what we do together for the organization. Our ability to execute and deliver on our mission is assured.

- **Accountability, Follow-through and Measured Impact**

Kuleana is more than just the accountability and responsibility over the organization and its operations; it is the ownership and pride we have for what our organization produces. Kūlia I Ka Nu'u (strive for the highest). Greater kuleana, accountability and responsibility are cultivated as the work we do together progresses and thrives. We measure our success, our excellence, against the high standards that our community demands. That learning then contributes back to the kahua or foundation of the organization from which our sustainability and resilience will continue to spring from in the future. Building off of that firm kahua, we can be assured of a progressive, productive and profound mission and movement not just for today, or to meet a grant commitment, but for tomorrow and for the excellence that has already been established by our ancestors.

- **Passion, Commitment & Integrity**

Our commitment, passion and excitement for our work have allowed an open source learning community to emerge. As a part of our leadership mantra, we have found that whether we are working on governance or operations issues, to have an effective partnership, we need to have a balanced or pono understanding and distribution of power/authority. Ulu a'e ke welina a ke aloha (Love is the practice of an awakened mind). Our commitment is to provide safe and gracious space to explore our challenges and solutions in a more generative way, making way for productive outcomes to result. As leaders, we provide space for generative and empathetic conversation on a consistent basis. The nonprofit sector has lots of pressure to perform at a high level of excellence, maintaining open and transparent communication between two of the most important figures in the organization is necessary to achieve the mission, goals and objectives.

Kukui and Maenette told several stories which illustrated the ideas they were sharing. A central story they told was the evolution of MA`O; and as MA`O evolved, so did the board. Kukui began by sharing some important aspects of her own background....

### **The story of the evolution of MA`O.....**

“Knowledge was planted in me as seeds. As I learned, I developed ideas which produced new seeds and which continue to grow & manifest through MA`O. Ho`oulu framed my practice. My practice is that of community based economic development and iteratively grew into my understanding of asset-based capacity building through social enterprise. Much of what I learned I learned being at the knee of my kūpuna. I have had the privilege of working alongside many kumu, practitioners and mentors.

At MA`O, we have responsibility for stewarding a mission told to us by our kūpuna. When our kūpuna first settled on homestead lands in Nānākuli and didn't have water, they figured out what to do. We have learned from them. We have learned that change can be activated through individual leadership, but systemic change is catalyzed by aggregating the individual leadership and empowering the communal leadership around collective impact. Over our first eight years it was just us. We rediscovered our own strengths, capacities and competencies. We regenerated our practice of aloha `āina. We would show up every day and then pule.”

Kukui explained that MA`O has undergone three major phases of growth. At about year eight the leadership realized they could not achieve their mission of social entrepreneurship without bringing everyone along: board, staff, partners, and community.

“We were a grass roots organization trying to transform the educational systems to meet the needs of our children. We were about accomplishing food sovereignty in its highest form which required self-

determination and a higher level of self-sufficiency. It was time to focus on the root causes of poverty, of cultural, social, economic and political injustice and inequity. We had to be open to growth and renewal. We had to see our mission much more broadly. We evolved from a five acre farm to a 25 acre farm.”

### **And as MA`O evolved, so did its board membership.....**

“Our board composition is reflective of our mission. As we saw ourselves working in social enterprise it allowed us to rearticulate who and what we are. Our board changed to help reflect what we are doing and where we are going. We navigated the transition of our board very carefully. We needed to be very explicit about where we were going.

Transforming from a grassroots board to a power board took time. While some of the kūpuna are no longer on the board they are still there giving us their mana’o.

‘Ohana is an important part of our value system. The kūpuna are part of our ‘ohana. While our board may be considered a ‘power’ board it is still very much grounded in our mission,” explained Maenette.

### **Maenette gave some background on how and why she became involved with MA`O.....**

“My involvement with Kauhale (a partnership between MA’O, Searider Productions, and Makaha Studios) goes back to when I returned home in August 2008. Val Johnson (from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) visited Searider (a Kellogg Grantee at the time) and we were invited to MA’O. As soon as we stepped on the ‘āina at MA’O and were greeted by the students – a group of young kids – self-empowered young people who showed pride and power, Val and I committed to support the work of MA’O and the Kauhale. Several years later, when Kauhale was evolving, Neil Hannahs and I were invited to serve on the board. I was selected to

serve as chair (after William Aila Jr. became chairperson of DLNR), perhaps at a meeting when I wasn't there, but I knew I would be asked. "

**As MA'O and its board membership have changed, so has the role of the board has evolved.**

She also explained,

"The Board composition has changed over the past 2 and a half years. Prior to the change that we went through – the transformation – our board was very grassroots. This change has been necessary because to strengthen the educational 'auwai, to strengthen the roots as well as grow to serve more young leaders and their families, to have sustained impact, there is need to diversify the skill sets of the board. We have macro-organizational thinkers, fiscal/economic modeling scholars, student leadership advocates, public relations/communications experts, business minded leaders, cultural practitioners, and many more. I represent post-secondary education and they needed somebody with those higher education connections. What we all have in common is the spirit to serve, the commitment to lāhui/beloved nation, to the health and well-being of our 'ohana and communities.

*All organizations need to ask, 'What's our mission? Who is going to help us hardwire it?' "*

Maenette shared,

"I sit on several boards. With each organization my role is different. It is important to constantly and collectively clarify that role. I am honored to serve on this board. It is a commitment that requires me to know the mo'olelo of the organization and the contributions the organization makes and can make. To be a contributing member of any board—100% all in--I need to see the alignment between the organization's values and work, with my own."

**Maenette and Kukui closed by talking about how they work together within the common values and partnership strategies framework they share ....**

“As chair of the board my role is to be a role model of excellence and commitment. I need to create a space where gracious and generative dialogue can occur; a place where people can feel safe and ask tough questions.

Resource development is a responsibility I take on with full commitment. When I do so I keep in mind the mo’olelo of the organization which helps to keep us aligned. I am always the one that asks, ‘Does it speak to our mission? Does it have an impact that can be sustained?’ I see another of my roles as bringing opportunities for learning to the organization.”

Kukui added,

“As board chair, Maenette gives us space where we can share expectations of each other. Processes by which we can engage one another in safe space and focus on the goals and objectives we have set.”

She went on to explain,

“We needed to make changes to accommodate the new members of the board – we needed to adjust meeting schedules. We use them for discussion on issues. When working with the board, it is important to take the time for reflective practice; having informal conversations with Maenette, Neil, Ed or other Directors has helped me to align the needs of the operations with the unique knowledge, skill sets and experiences that the Directors bring to the table. There is the job of translating mission into program. It takes a fine point to make that translation. The fine point is the relationship we have developed around our organization’s values, practice and kuleana.

Two words that I’ve been thinking about are ‘context’ and ‘text.’ We are constantly translating back and forth. What is the ‘text’ for this ‘context?’ We are trying to make meaning out of lived experience. There are times when we need to articulate

that so that we can communicate what we are doing, how we are doing, to broader audiences. What is the 'context' for this 'text?' Take the organizing principles (the text) and put them in context. The Board and Leadership constantly negotiate this so there is no loss of the integrity of who we are and what we serve. It keeps us from mission drift.

Change needs leadership from within. For example, our fund development strategy has evolved. We couldn't stay in 'grant land.' We needed to engage in enterprise. We needed to engage individuals in learning. We had an opportunity to fundraise from individuals to support an endowment. We used our board to help us find our fundraising philosophy, which we agreed is restoration of ancestral abundance. We had hard conversations getting there. You have to be able to have hard conversations. You have to create space for critique and that critique must come from your values."

Maenette added:

"To ensure that can happen, the board chair must have a strong relationship with the Executive Director and staff. And, if the board chair is in the way, she needs to know that, also."

