

Bridging the Cultural Divide



Introduction

This written submission is Assessment Task #9 for the ARU Level 3 Performance Coach program.

The choice of topic has stemmed from the author's personal interest how in a group of peoples numbering around 2 million, there seems to be an endless ability to produce male talent that have become arguably sport's most prized global product. The question is though, how well is this global commodity understood and more specifically in relation to the sport of rugby, what could a rugby coach in Australia do to improve their relationships and coaching of Pacific Island rugby players.

In the 2015 World Cup there was close to 40% players across the starting lineups of both Australia and New Zealand, who identified as someone of Pacific peoples ethnic background.¹

In Super Rugby this year, across the 5 Super franchises in Australia, over a third of players identified as being of Pacific Islander background. These numbers are significant given that Pacific Peoples make up only 13% of the entire Australian population as reported in 2011 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. 'Pacific Peoples for the purposes of the report included 23 people groups who have heritage from the South Pacific throughout the regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia' (Ravulo 2014).

Cam Avery reported in a column for The Roar – Sports Opinion, that the influx of Pacific Island players into Australian rugby 'seems akin to what was witnessed within New Zealand rugby in the early to mid 1990s, where the proportion of Pacific Island players in top sides started to become far more skewed from the true representation of the Pacific Island population in New Zealand'. There are some who argue that Australian rugby has been slow to adjust to the changing face of it and still has much ground to make up in learning to understand and work with the diverse makeup of its player base.

¹ 'Pacific peoples' for the purposes of this submission also incorporates those players who identify as having Maori bloodlines and are able to whakapapa (trace their genealogy) to a Maori iwi or tribe.
Setu Naseri

Pacific people have a high representation in team or group based sports with Rugby Union being no exception. Participating in a team sport like rugby, not only appeals due to its highly physical nature but also because it holds value that are important to Pacific Peoples i.e. family (including extended family) and community. These values are important across all cultures but the difference in level of importance placed by different cultures and how well this is understood can ultimately be of great benefit or have the opposite effect. This is a dilemma for coaches' in Australian rugby that is relatively new as the diversity across its playing group at all levels continues to grow and become more commonplace.

This paper does not serve to be provide a one stop shop but more so to share the experiences of not only the author but a number of players of Pacific peoples ethnic background and also coaches who have had experience dealing with playing groups with high Pacific people representation. The experiences are shared in the spirit of assisting those who wish to understand better how they may be able provide more effective support to their players or coaches from a Pacific background. It is also hoped that information shared will encourage readers who work with our Pacific peoples in the game of rugby to continually strive to become more culturally aware and competent so that they have better 'working' relationships with their Pacific players and colleagues.

The following is a revised version taken from an ARU document produced by Manu Sutherland - National Pacific Islander Program Manager and Talent Development

Background to Australian Pacific Islanders

Immigration patterns

There is an ever-increasing number of Pacific Peoples immigrating to Australia.

The steady migration of Pacific islanders over recent years is becoming more and more evident in pocket suburbs of major Australian cities. Samoans, Fijians, Tongans, Cook Islanders being the main Island migrants, though other Islands such as Tuvalu and Nauru are found to be migrating here in ever increasing numbers.

In most cases the migration pattern is generally the same with young families entering this country via New Zealand and its immigration policy, thus benefiting from the relaxed trans-Tasman entry visa allowing for temporary residence in Australia.

Local Island communities that are already established support new Pacific migrants enter the Australian workforce within a short period of time.

The majority will take jobs as factory labourers or other low skill type work. Many males take on security style work either as their primary job or to supplement their income.

There are more people in recent years arriving with higher education certificates or professionals in various fields. In time this family unit will become self-sufficient.

The favoured destination for the immigrating islanders is the suburban areas of all major Australian cities. Most settle in the cities outer suburbs and generally end up forming a loose knit community.

It is important to note the island traditions and village hierarchy is transferred into the new country.

Social patterns

The sporting pastime of most of these Island nations is rugby union and so it is natural that these new immigrants will seek out local clubs and schools that play the game. The physical nature of the game attracts them to play. Families often have several children of varying ages that are only too keen to get involved with rugby. Island families are strong and often vocal supporters/spectators of their children in youth rugby.

As rugby can be a very social sport in the islands with males of all ages wanting to impress the spectators with actions of bravado and individual brilliance the transition to the team game can be difficult for some. These games, in the islands are often played with relaxed interpretations on the laws. The island communities tend to pride

Setu Naseri

themselves on the physical way their races play the game, often praising the heroics of the individual. It is an expectation of the spectators to see a free flowing and physical game. The bigger the tackle the more the applause is often the case. This perception of how the game should be played, can be very difficult for coaches in Australia to tame if the style is well entrenched into prospective players. This in turn also has a negative effect on impressionable island youth who often want to emulate these feats of individualism.

Culture

Pacific islanders in Australia are often mistaken for New Zealand Maori. There are major cultural differences between the ethnic groups even though both are Polynesian. The Maori culture has had nearly 2 centuries of integration with European culture. Their origins and cultural heritage is still prevalent and is blended into everyday life within New Zealand. The Maori culture, art and history are a major tourism and export item for the nation. The spoken language is English and education system is on par with Australia. It is interesting to note that many of New Zealand's current super 15 teams are devoid of high numbers of pure Maori players and there is an ever increasing presence of Pacific islanders.

Pacific Islanders on the other hand have had substantially less integration with European culture in comparison. Their native culture is more predominant in the homeland partly due to isolation in the Pacific. It should be noted that Samoa was virtually governed by the New Zealand (NZ government administration) for nearly 50 years in the middle part of the last century. This helps explain the strong rugby culture and immigration policy. Tourism is the major industry in the islands. This detachment to the rest of the world has led to an independent culture with its own interpretations on common law and religion.

The Island way is a little less focused on wealth creation and lasting personal prosperity and more focused on family life and living for today. Individual status is important and dealing with humiliation is often very difficult for these people. Village life in the Islands places

the family unit in the highest priority with parents or grandparents (elders) as the figure heads, bearing in mind that most Polynesian cultures are formed by a myriad of chieftainships within their individual nations. The Island lifestyle is in total contrast to the general way of life in Australia. Islanders that live in this country generally try to blend with the rest of society but nearly always retain most of their customs. This is evident in their homes decoration, furniture, floor coverings, clothing and regular staple diet. Religion is in most cases of highest importance within the culture. Strict rules on a youth's religious education often prevent island youth from participating in elite rugby programs particularly between the ages of 14 – 18. In terms of elite individuals, this is a most important period for player development and it is hard to regain the lost ground.

Education levels

Nearly all Australian or New Zealand born Islanders are reasonably well educated whereas most early teen youth directly from the Islands have markedly different education levels to Australian standards. Most islanders speak their native tongue fluently and spoken English is usually a second language within the home. It is always an advantage to possess bilingual ability and this of course is an advantage for Polynesians on a rugby field. In some instances the family will not support their children in continuation with higher education. Island youth have a reasonably high dropout rate after year 11, often for reasons that will reduce their burden on the family unit. An increasing number of today's Island students are going on to complete a tertiary education and are holding down professional jobs and this reflect the adjustment to western ideals. This trend is increasing as they assume the western culture and lifestyle and discard the old ways.

Skill level, physical attributes and diet

It is the drive to achieve individual heroism that makes the Polynesian youth player such an exciting prospect from a coaching point of view. The Island youth from a very young age is often trying to impress his peers. It is not uncommon to see a child of 3 years or less holding a rugby ball, trying to kick and chase. They even

Setu Naseri

display signs of a strong competitive nature at this age. The early development of motor skills is a definite advantage as these kids grow up. As they reach the ages of 8 to 11 they are often fearless and show good potential, often performing at levels well above their age. It is also at this age group that there is some concern about legitimate age identification. We have all witnessed from time to time some very large lads for their specific age group.

At ages 12 through 16 their physical development is often well advanced on their Caucasian counterpart. Polynesian Islanders are often physically large for age group with solid bone structure and reasonable muscular development. The biggest advantage Islanders have in youth rugby is a psychological advantage that is evident in their no fear approach to the contact side of the game. The psychological advantage is built around a notion of self-awareness, that they are 'better than their opponent'. There is often little or no need for a pre-game 'fire up' for an Islander as this is already built in and can be switched on and off almost at will. On the down side, the fact that they play with so much passion is also what can affect their emotions when things are going wrong. This of course can lead to acts of ill discipline at times.

This combination of size, psychology, strength and physical presence can be a tremendous advantage during these early years. This advanced development combined with their aggressive approach to the game can bring an element of fear to the opposition, especially Caucasian youth who are not yet mentally equipped to counter these tactics.

With all this talk of aggression a question must be raised. How much damage is caused to youth rugby by this dominance, particularly in the minor Australian rugby states? There is a high percentage of Polynesian youth players spread throughout sub-standard club competitions. Their numbers often make up more than half of a team. This is where the mismatch can have the worst consequences. It is possible that Caucasian youth with potential, are possibly being put off the game because they are not as competitive or that they simply have not yet acquired the skills to counter the bigger player size.

A large problem that plagues Islanders in elite rugby potential is weight control. Their traditional staple foods are high in fat and carbohydrates. Their society is partly based around community feasting and there is not so much emphasis on a healthy food intake. Their children are often supplemented with the convenient fast foods. Pacific island players that are recognised with potential need to be educated in appropriate sports nutrition from a young age.

It is commonly recognised that there is an equalisation of the physical strength and psychological levels between Pacific island and caucasian youth when they reach the late teen stage. The speed of the equalization is dramatic with Caucasians often out performing their island counterparts in areas they were previously in deficit. This will often occur within a 3year period and usually before the age of 20. Most visible change is in stamina. The Islanders inability to continually perform at high intensity for longer periods of time during a game becomes very evident even when they are relatively fit. A sharp drop in performance late in each half is the usual symptom. This could be partly due to their diet. This physical anomaly often prevents Polynesian elite youth from achieving their ultimate dreams at representative rugby.

The point is that at an earlier age there is a high proportion of Islanders that show elite potential but the dropout rate is dramatic by the end of the teen years. A presumption maybe that it is the loss of the psychological advantage that affects an Islander the most. A solution may be to refocus the athlete's psychological perceptions during the late teen years.

Of course there has been many examples of elite Polynesian players in Australian, New Zealand and numerous other rugby teams around the world over the years, but there could potentially have been many more.

Comparisons

Language barriers can segregate Caucasians from Islanders. Often Island youth within Australia adopt the American RAP or R&B cultures. This association with African American culture can determine dress sense and other related social habits including posture and body language. It is also reflected in the vocabulary. A uniquely Australian adaptation of the American speech mannerisms and even pronunciation is common.

A much lower percentage of the Australian Caucasian youth follow these patterns and if so, then to a lesser degree. This can create divisions and segregate teams into groups of the 'cool' and 'not so cool'. It is therefore necessary as a coach to identify and stamp out any team divisions early in the season / program.

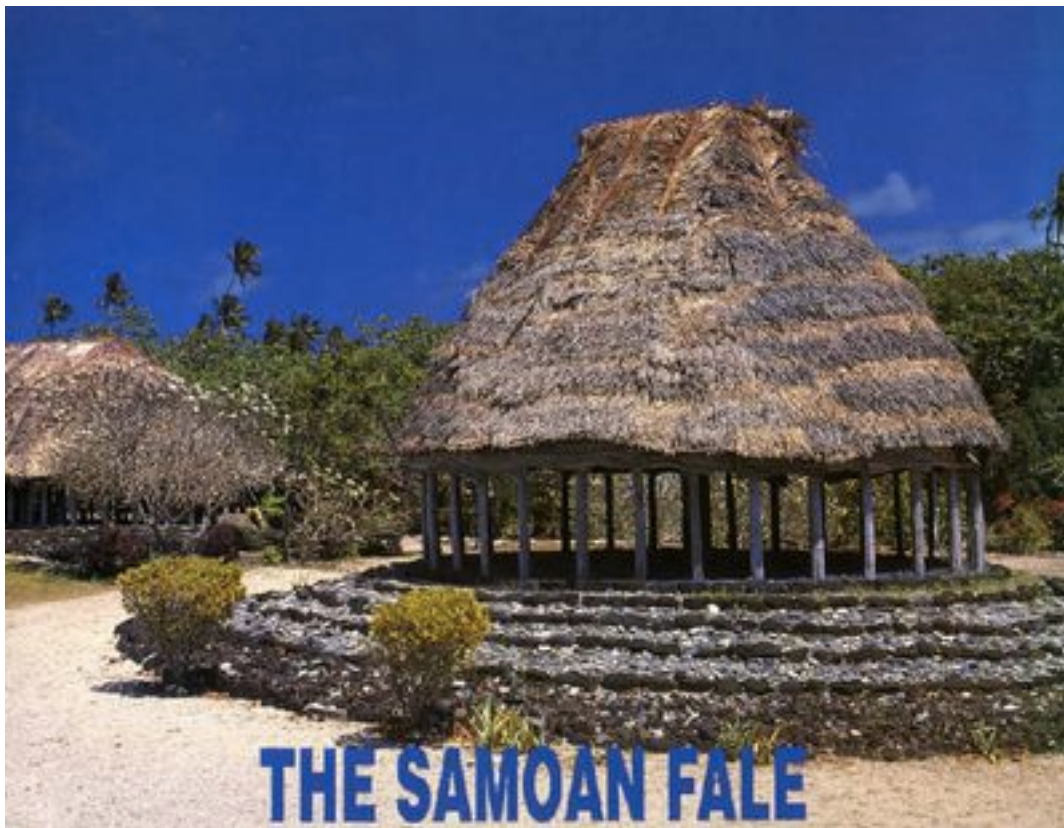
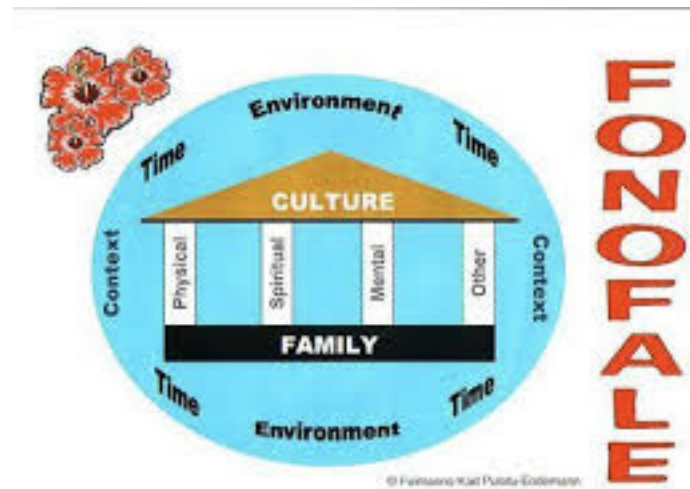
Elite Caucasian players will often develop evasion skills to counter the Polynesians robust defensive tactics. This skill which is honed during the younger years, can be a decisive advantage when the physical gap is bridged at the late teen age. This should be encouraged from an early age to assist with agility and guile.

Some Island youth tend to lack discipline if not kept in check. Issues like consistent high tackles, which are commonly a discipline matter are mostly the result of over intensive play.

Cultural Model

For this assignment I have chosen to use the Samoan fale (house) to deconstruct and unpack my interpretation of the information and feedback provided by various sources of research as well as participating players of Pacific peoples origin and coaches who have had experience coaching a high number of Pacific island players. This idea is a personal adaptation of the better known Fonofale model developed by Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann as a Pacific Island model of Health in the New Zealand context. The Fonofale model shares the values and beliefs of many Tongans, Cook Islanders (Rarotongans), Samoans, Fijians, Tokelauns and Niueans as told to Fuimaono in relation to health and wellbeing. The Samoan fale provided a mode for depicting a Pacific way of what was important to the various ethnic groups as well as what Endemann considered to be important in relation to Pacific peoples health

Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann's Model



The reason behind my using a Samoan fale is that there are some synergies between Endemann's model and my personal view that

Setu Naseri

health and wellbeing is the foundation and basis to be able to do anything. I believe that my view is one shared by many people of Pacific island ethnicity that health and wellbeing is holistic and takes into account how the different facets important to Pacific peoples work in conjunction with each other and if ever there are imbalances or short falls this then impacts on one's health or wellbeing and ability to perform everyday activities, including sport.

So what does this all mean and how can a coach working with players from Pacific island backgrounds use this information to inform their practice?

Information sourced via research was very much consistent with the feedback provided by participating players and coaches alike. The three major themes that came through were the importance of family, culture and spirituality.

I will use the Fale as a means to illustrate how coaches can get a better insight into how Pacific peoples think and feel and understand more what might make them tick.

Foundation - Floor

The culture of a Pacific peoples rugby player cannot transfer into their environment without first entering the consciousness of those working with them.

A Pacific person enters their environment taking with them their cultural values, beliefs, their language and identity wherever they go. Their world is constantly impacted as they enter environments that are not necessarily familiar to them. Clubs and rugby programs that have inclusive values that are consistent with those of Pacific cultures can have immediate success or progress in engaging with Pacific participants and communities.

The floor is seen as the base or one's cultural makeup that helps to shape one's journey through life from the moment they are born.

Supporting – Posts (Pou)

‘It takes a village to raise a child’

Family is the foundation of all Pacific Island cultures. Family is nuclear family, can also include extended family including those connected via kinship, marriage and titles. The genealogy (gafa in Samoa) is in the foundations or family history, which ties Pacific peoples to their titles, land, the sea as well as other cultures. David Lakisa, a former New South Wales Rugby League Pacific Islander Coaching and Development officer found in a survey of all Pacific island players with the New South Wales Rugby League Academy that 100% of participants identified family as the most influential factor in their success as a professional athlete.

To Pacific peoples, this is probably the most crucial part of the structure because herein lies the purpose of community, service, respect, inclusiveness and reciprocity. All these values are first and foremost learned in the home amongst family and helps the Pacific person connect from their internal (cultural identity) to the external (day to day way of life) environment

The challenge here though is that the traditional Pacific peoples family makeup or construct is a lot different these days compared to the construct of Pacific families say 30 years ago. In this day and age there are far more mixed ethnicities due to interracial relationships and marriages so Pacific people more specifically youth are trying to navigate their way through uncertain times as they establish their sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Influence – Environment (Learning)

‘Know me before you coach me!’

A great way forward to promote success on the field is to firstly cultivate a culture of learning. Understanding the Pacific learner is important if you wish to get the best out of them. Although there are some exceptions, Pacific peoples generally are tactile or kinesthetic learners. This is often why it is thought Pacific peoples enjoy the physicality part of rugby, is that the physical elements of rugby such

Setu Naseri

as tackling are best learned through ‘doing’. There are roles to play for both coach and player: what are coaches prepared to do to better understand their Pacific players? It may also involve breaking down stereotypes of belief that Pacific rugby players are not suited to decision making positions in rugby i.e. halfback, five eight.

Full Circle – Roof

‘E tumau le fa’avae, ae fesua’i le faiga’ – Samoan Proverb

‘The foundations remain the same, but the ways of doing it change’. This old Samoan proverb relates to not only how Pacific peoples have evolved through generations but can also be related to the game of rugby. The foundations of the game that was founded some 140 plus years ago still stand firm today though the game continues to evolve.

The roof is the completion of the Fale and refers to the Pacific peoples and its hierarchical structures throughout its communities. It can be deemed hypocritical as though hierarchical structures exist in Pacific communities, Pacific peoples engage in what is termed the bottom up philosophy – serve to serve, serve to lead and lead to serve. Pathway to leadership is through service is certainly synonymous with Pacific peoples and their way of life. If rugby clubs, coaches and administrators can connect and begin to understand the Pacific peoples way of life, then the Pacific rugby player will feel a greater sense of belonging, that their cultural identity is recognised and acknowledged and they as an individual feel valued.

The following is more literature as a revised version taken from an ARU document produced by Manu Sutherland - National Pacific Islander Program Manager and Talent Development

General Observations

Coaches must recognise players with language difficulties. Comprehension suffers substantially when the level of spoken English is substandard. It is obvious that Pacific peoples can excel if taught correctly, therefore total comprehension of what is being taught is of utmost importance. Attention span can be limited, as they prefer to get involved in the activity. This area can be quantified by seeking constant feedback from players identified with language or comprehension difficulties.

At representative levels, where Islanders are concerned, coaches must be able to recognise a player's true character and decide if the situation is workable, well before selection into the team. An understanding of a Pacific person's social upbringing can help. Things to look for are families where the father is or was, a high level player or even where older siblings are elite players. There is a good chance that the sons or younger brothers will try to emulate and surpass the feats of the preceding playing family members. This cannot be used as a complete judge of character due to individuality. But, as a rule of thumb, when the immediate family value the institution of rugby, then the child will be encouraged to learn the correct techniques. At representative selection feedback from prior coaches is handy.

Absenteeism is often a sign that the family is not supporting the player and the reasons given for poor attendance can often be obscure, hiding the truth. It sometimes pays to look behind the excuses, to seek the truth.

Pacific players may be influenced by family members in areas that may be contrary to a coach's requirements. This can be problematic with players showing elite potential not to mention frustrating for a coach. Family bonds can be very strong and a player's actions can be influenced at any time, even during a game with instructions being shouted from the sidelines in their native tongue. Players must be taught to ignore all outside influences. Emphasise that we play what we train.

Setu Naseri

Coaches must be able to persist with minor behavioural problems. Some Pacific players have what can almost be perceived as an arrogant persona. This is often just a front and a much more pleasant character lies behind the rough exterior. Their integrity is nearly always genuine and honesty is comparative to any other race.

Winning is a high priority for the Pacific Island player and losing can almost be classed as a loss of face in this society. Therefore sometimes pressure situations can affect the emotional stability of the player. Their rugby upbringing is the major factor in determining their psychological reasoning during a game. Their upbringing means having played quality rugby with quality coaches from a young age regardless of where they were born and therefore a greater ability to control emotional outbursts. A Pacific player's psychological stability needs to be established at an early stage by the coach. Teaching all players to deal with emotional responses associated with winning, losing and high-pressure situations is the coach's responsibility. At elite levels identify those with a tendency for ill discipline and make a decision that is best for the team regardless of the individual's ability.

Keep their attention span by keeping their mind and body stimulated. Design sessions to involve as much activity as possible. Because of their physical nature, Pacific peoples love the physical contact involved in this game. As we aim to teach running at 'shoulders and not sternums' we must train them to avoid contact where possible or at least consider the option of driving past the man rather than into the man. This can be and must be encouraged from a young age for once the physical 'man to man' game is entrenched in the thought patterns of a Pacific person it is virtually impossible to change.

Always encourage Pacific peoples to mix with their caucasian team mates and ensure they are dispersed evenly in group situations. A player's immediate friends or associates outside the rugby team should be noted if possible, as they can influence behavioural patterns. Encourage group participation as Pacific peoples tend to stand back and let others lead the way in group discussions. Pacific peoples do tend to distance themselves from a group when in minority.

Watch for segregation of the team. Sometimes the clicks of players can operate as team within the team. It is most obvious when the majority of play is either created or carried out by the inner group. This is more evident at the U12 through U15 age groups where physical domination can prevail, but it can cause rifts within teams at all age groups. Stipulate a requirement of full team participation.

Matters of finance can be a strain. It must be monitored constantly and dealt with firmly. Most Polynesian families are able to finance tour costs on a time payment basis, but consideration should be made to those with multiple children in representative sides. Avoid the constant handout. This only leads to more expectations and creates an onus on the management staff.

Tips to coaching Pacific Peoples – Feedback from players of Polynesian origin and Coaches who have coached high number of Pacific peoples

As mentioned earlier, this is not an exhaustive list but merely a starting point for consideration for those working with rugby participants of Pacific ethnicity.

The school environment can be very different to home where parental/family influence totally controls behaviour

Parental support will appear to be non-existent, don't believe it. It could be for you, (or against you.)

Do some homework on the players' background and family. Your imparted knowledge of the little things concerning the player creates a good impression and conveys your genuine interest in their development.

Make sessions meaningful and intensive but ensure they comprehend the session topic.

Utilise relevant grid games as this feeds their competitive needs.

A general rule is train them hard and they will respect you for it. They are often low intensity fitness trainers but high intensity players. Work on it.

Avoid extended session times to achieve the desired result. Far better to keep the sessions short and sharp regardless of result

Watch for drop off patterns during fitness sessions. Encourage PB's. Keep the oratory content simplified and seek constant feedback to check comprehension.

Seek feedback from individuals from the group in front of the group to add feeling of participation.

Never try to make an individual mechanical if he is not. Individual flair should encouraged.

Cover the basics and take notes as they may never have been taught them before. Unfortunately most skilled players have got where they are by size and sheer talent. Some coaches even back off coaching the extras that is needed to take Pacific players to the next level

Monitor all forms of injuries as it is common for nothing to be done about them. Family remedies often becomes first choice

Simplify L/O calls and set plays. Complicated and detailed plays can often worry the player and can detract from his performance. This has been proved to exist at all levels, including contracted players

Socially Pacific players will always gravitate to each other whether they know each other or not even those in opposition, as evident at the end of games. Do not discourage (or encourage this), it will only put a barrier between you and the player.

Leadership qualities often extend from the ranking of hierarchy within their respective communities.

Some boys are happy to let others speak for them, others will automatically adopt leadership. This can be a reflection of their respective parents' hierarchy within the community. Try not to force too much responsibility on those that are struggling, allow it to develop within the team environment.

Pacific peoples are big on respect and it is a value that is important to them. They like to see respect go both ways.

One on one feedback to players is preferred as opposed to feedback via the group

Hard line or authoritative approaches do not work for Pacific peoples, particularly this generation.

A leave it to themselves attitude from a coach creates uncertainty and often leaves Polynesian players disillusioned

Relationship building helps with Polynesian players taking on board information as opposed to 'a just do it cause I'm the coach' mentality.

Polynesian players respond to goal setting that is specific.

Polynesian players want to earn their spot but can also become complacent when they are doing well. Coaches need to be mindful to continue to encourage their players to chase new goals.

Clear, concise communication is important and always check for understanding.

Pacific peoples place a high importance on spirituality and there have been examples where players have tried to make their prayer routines part of preparation. Coaches spoken to have found the best way to deal with this is to allow the Pacific players to still have their prayer session but not have to subject the rest of the team to the process.

Clubs have found success with the holding of and promotion of cultural events and festivities.

Leveraging from Pacific peoples in networks or circles or from within the club.

Giving time to Polynesian players has helped some coaches build stronger relationships as it promotes closer working relationships and not just a relationship that may be hierarchical in nature.

Challenging Pacific peoples for any breaches in guidelines or club policies. Important to note that this is not done in a group setting.

Trust must be built before respect is earned and a relationship formed.

Pacific peoples are seen as happy go lucky and enjoy the opportunity to have a laugh and this should be encouraged as long as it does not impact on the team.

Check if there is a hierarchy amongst the Polynesian players. Generally the older ones will be the leaders and can assist with keeping younger ones in line or as third party support.