Guardianship By Design

Kaitiakitanga and sustainable Indigenous cultural elements within high performance and high stakes environments

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The claim this piece tests

A belief runs through sport and business that guardianship and winning pull in opposite directions, with hard organisations that think short term winning on one side while warm organisations built around relationships are admired and lose on the other. That belief shapes real decisions about who gets hired, who gets cut or how long anyone is given to build something, so it deserves a proper test that draws on evidence from several continents as well as roughly two decades of my own time inside elite rugby union and professional baseball.

> THE CONCLUSION THIS PIECE REACHES
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> **Guardianship and success are compatible and the supposed opposition comes from comparing a short window of results with a long window of condition.**

I grew up in New Zealand where two ways of holding the world share the same classrooms, rugby fields and family trees. Later I spent three seasons with the Māori All Blacks in an environment where tikanga and cultural identity framed how we worked and travelled, with kaumātua part of the tour. My understanding of te ao Māori came through that environment and did not come through whakapapa of my own, so I hold it as someone who was taught with generosity and I speak with that limit in view.

Kaitiakitanga is most often translated as guardianship or stewardship and both words help even though neither carries all of it. A kaitiaki is a guardian whose duty rests on whakapapa, the layered relationships that connect people to land, water and each other as well as to the generations before and after them. A river or a forest or a team is therefore treated as having its own mana and mauri, with the guardian taking from it under an obligation to hand it on in better condition. One English term cannot hold what the word holds in te reo Māori so I offer my translation as an approximation and speak mainly to how the idea behaves when it is put to work inside teams and organisations.

The sections that follow move from the history and evidence to the places where the principles are made visible, then through the practices that sit outside the model to a way of designing the idea into teams and organisations, so a reader after the practical material can go straight to the last three sections.

Every statement in this piece is either a documented fact that can be checked against the sources at the end or an observation from my own experience that I mark as mine and anywhere I could not tell which of the two I was dealing with I left the claim out.

A real history and a false polarity

The history that produced the polarity is real. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 and the New Zealand Settlements Act of 1863 later enabled the confiscation of Māori land, which is part of why the Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to hear Treaty claims. The United States passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and Aboriginal peoples in Australia, who had cared for their country for tens of thousands of years, lost much of it after British settlement began in 1788. Those facts describe two systems that met under conditions of enormously unequal power and they do not require me to call either system evil or to pretend that industrial society produced nothing of value.

The evidence that guardianship and commercial success coexist is stronger than the polarity assumes. The Menominee Nation has harvested its forest in Wisconsin for almost 170 years since the reservation was created in 1854 and by the account published in Yale Environment 360 it cuts about a third of annual growth while carrying roughly forty per cent more standing wood than when harvesting began. That is a working timber business that has outlasted most companies and it is managed with a horizon measured in generations.

The two traditions have already been joined in New Zealand law in ways that matter for this argument. The Te Urewera Act of 2014 and the Te Awa Tupua Act of 2017 each recognise a forest and a river respectively as a legal person with its own standing, which means a country with a colonial industrial legal system chose to write a Māori understanding of guardianship into its statutes while continuing to run a modern economy.

In Australia the Indigenous Protected Areas that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities choose to declare now make up more than half of the National Reserve System by area and fire management led by Aboriginal rangers in northern Australia has been recognised under the national carbon crediting scheme. In New Zealand the Māori asset base grew from sixty eight billion New Zealand dollars in 2018 to one hundred and eighteen billion in 2023 according to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. A good share of it sits in iwi, trusts and incorporations that operate inside the market economy with a mandate to serve people not yet born. Ngāi Tahu describes its purpose through the whakataukī *mō tātou ā mō kā uri ā muri ake nei*, which speaks of working for us and for our children after us.

Western institutions have their own tradition of guardianship and it deserves equal respect. The United States wrote into the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 a duty to leave its parks unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations and the same country holds the history of removal described above, which shows that one society can contain both impulses at once. The seventh generation principle is often linked to the Haudenosaunee and quoted widely in American business, although the phrase itself does not appear in the written transcriptions of the Great Law, so I treat it as a tradition to respect and I do not offer it as a citation.

Built to last and made visible

Ownership structures can carry the same intent as culture does. The Green Bay Packers have been community owned since 1923 with shares that pay no dividends and cannot be traded for profit and the franchise has stayed in the smallest market in American major league sport while remaining competitive over decades. Patagonia moved its ownership in 2022 into a purpose trust and a nonprofit so that profit not reinvested in the business goes toward protecting the planet and Japan is home to tens of thousands of companies that have operated for more than a century. None of these examples proves that every guardianship company wins and what they show together is that guardianship and durable commercial performance are not mutually exclusive, which is the narrower claim I am making.

New Zealand Rugby is one of the clearer examples I know of an organisation turning these principles outward so that they can be seen and judged. The New Zealand Māori Rugby Board published a strategy in 2026 built on five pou, one of which is kaitiakitanga, defined there as a successful, profitable and growing business that funds Māori rugby. The same document pursues a Mana Ōrite agreement with NZ Rugby while calling for tikanga and hauora to be built into the teams in black and the high performance system with the aim of the Māori All Blacks becoming the leading Indigenous men's team in the world. What I find notable is that guardianship and commerce appear in the same sentence of a public document, since that pairing is exactly what the polarity claim says cannot exist. A published strategy is a statement of intent whose real measure is behaviour across years, which I cannot fully judge from the outside, yet publishing it gives players and staff as well as supporters and rivals something to hold the organisation to.

The Milwaukee Brewers offer the out of context test I find most useful, because baseball in the United States differs from rugby in New Zealand in its sport, its business and its national culture while the Brewers operate from one of the smallest markets in the game. Going in to my time in baseball I heard them described often as one of the best run and most people focused organisations in the sport, alongside a view that it was admirable and also unproductive on the reasoning that if the approach worked then it would have produced a championship by now.

In October 2026 the Brewers won the World Series over the Tampa Bay Rays for the first title in franchise history. Milwaukee Magazine described a team that plays for one another and in its account a rookie shortstop made an early error in Game 1 and later drove in the winning run, after which a teammate spoke publicly about how he had handled the mistake. The record now shows a people focused organisation winning in a game and a culture very different from the one where I learned these principles.

> **WHAT ONE TITLE DOES AND DOES NOT SHOW**
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> One championship does not prove a model and it does remove the logic from the sentence that said the approach could not win.

Where it can be felt and where it cannot

In my experience you can feel the governing principle of an environment within days of entering it, usually before anyone explains it. In the Māori All Blacks the tikanga and cultural identity of the group framed the environment, kaumātua were part of the tour and I learned there that standards carry more weight when they come from the environment itself than when they are posted on a wall. At the Crusaders across four consecutive Super Rugby titles I had a major role in developing the season theme, narrative and storytelling alongside the head coach's philosophy. What I took from that work is that a theme only holds when it is carried through standards, language, behaviours and actions, because anything less becomes decoration. Both examples are mine to report because I was inside them and I do not generalise from them to any other organisation.

The same lens shows what sits outside the model and these are my views on practices that cannot coexist with guardianship. Cutting from the base of an organisation to protect the top, or removing operational staff to lift shareholder returns, or keeping political climbers in place while drawing on the goodwill of the people in the middle who actually run the operation, all take from a store of trust without returning anything to it. Goodwill is a quiet account that does not appear on a quarterly report and it can be drawn down for a long time before the balance shows. Decisions about scheduling and recruiting reveal the same thing. When recruiting is designed to extract and replace, people become a supply to be used up then swapped, whereas recruiting designed to attract, develop and retain treats each person as someone whose growth is part of the organisation's own future. The first approach can look efficient for a season or two and it carries a hidden cost, which is that nobody inside the system has a reason to invest in anyone else.

Looking outside the building for the technology or the expert who will bring the system or the answer, in preference to internal growth and development and retention, belongs in the same group. Outside knowledge is welcome and I have used it myself. In my embedded strength and conditioning model with clubs in Japan the embedded coach runs the daily work under my mentorship while agreed short visits lift the quality of delivery, so the outside input builds the people already inside. Relationships built over time are what hold under pressure and an answer bought in carries no shared history with the group on the day that pressure arrives.

Models built on zero sum thinking sit outside the model as well, because they rest on a belief that your success takes something away from me and that I therefore need to limit your success to secure my own. That belief produces high turnover, hoarded opportunity and a steady loss of the people who might have built something durable, whereas environments governed by guardianship first make sure that everybody eats and nobody starves, which settles survival so that people can compete on contribution.

Accountability and the structures that carry it

Protecting organisational information and intellectual property ahead of retaining and protecting the people who make it work also sits outside the model in my view. Information has value only while someone can use it well, which makes the people who carry that skill the more durable asset, so an organisation that puts its effort into guarding documents and systems while the people who understand them leave has protected the container and lost the contents.

Cultures that focus on supporting accountability and commitment belong inside the model while cultures that settle for the bare minimum needed to limit liability and meet compliance sit outside it. Compliance asks what must be done to avoid blame whereas accountability asks what the people involved owe to each other and to the work, which is the same question a kaitiaki asks of a place. A clear sign of the difference is what happens after a mistake, since a compliance culture looks for the person to blame while an accountable culture looks for what the group can learn.

Guardianship needs structure to survive because goodwill alone does not scale. In my view responsibility that is well structured and deliberately delegated gives each person a clear area of authority with the support to carry it. Progression that raises remuneration, authority and responsibility in sustainable steps at each level then leaves people able to grow into what they are given. Jumps that double or triple or quadruple the responsibility or the pay in a single move tend to strain the person promoted and to breed resentment in the group around them and they are more often a symptom of a system with no middle steps than a reward for performance. The practical test of an environment is whether everybody eats and nobody starves, because a group that has settled that question can then be designed for high challenge and high support at the same time. Those two are often treated as competitors and I treat them as partners, since challenge without support produces turnover and support without challenge produces comfort, so each makes the other safe to deliver.

> **THE DESIGN PRINCIPLE**
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> **Everybody eats and nobody starves comes first, with high challenge and high support then built to operate together so that neither has to compete with the other.**

None of this requires me to treat the people making such decisions as villains, because many respond to incentives that reward extraction. Innosight forecast in 2018 that average tenure on the S&P 500 would fall from about thirty three years in 1964 to about twenty four in 2016 and further toward twelve by 2027 and short tenure in senior roles pushes toward short horizons whatever anyone intends. The structures matter as much as the intentions.

In practice this suggests decisions that can be explained to the generation that will inherit them, development pathways that make promotion from within the normal route, hiring that asks what a person will become here and ownership structures that protect long horizons from quarterly pressure. It also suggests leaders who are held to the condition they leave behind as well as the results they post and in my view none of these moves is expensive in the short term while each one is slow to build.

The model in two conditions

The guardianship chain runs from place to people to team to organisation to the next generation. Above it sits a principle for each link with what it looks like, feels like and sounds like when guardianship and sustainable success are embedded, while below it sits the same description for environments where extraction governs and boom and bust follow.

WHERE GUARDIANSHIP IS EMBEDDED | WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, FEELS LIKE AND SOUNDS LIKE

Place	People	Team	Organisation	Next generation
Take less than the place regrows.	**Everybody eats and nobody starves.**	**High challenge and high support operate together.**	**Ownership and strategy are built for permanence.**	**Decisions can be explained to those who inherit them.**
LOOKS LIKE Use is paced to what the place can renew and upkeep is planned ahead. FEELS LIKE Settled and cared for with nothing being run down. SOUNDS LIKE "What will this look like after ten more years of use?"	LOOKS LIKE Pay and responsibility rise in steps that people can grow into. FEELS LIKE Secure enough to take risks and ask for help. SOUNDS LIKE "What do you need to do this well?"	LOOKS LIKE Hard standards with coaching and recovery built in. FEELS LIKE Safe to be stretched and safe to get it wrong. SOUNDS LIKE "That was not good enough so what will we change and how can I help?"	LOOKS LIKE Decisions weighed over years with promotion from within. FEELS LIKE Steady with a future that people can see for themselves. SOUNDS LIKE "Who carries this on and what are we building for them?"	LOOKS LIKE Successors developed early and handovers planned well ahead. FEELS LIKE Part of something that will outlast you. SOUNDS LIKE "Could we explain this to the people who come after us?"

INHERITANCE RETURNS TO THE PLACE

WHERE EXTRACTION GOVERNS | WHAT BOOM AND BUST LOOK LIKE, FEEL LIKE AND SOUND LIKE

LOOKS LIKE Use runs ahead of renewal and upkeep is deferred. FEELS LIKE Tired and worn with the place being drawn down. SOUNDS LIKE "Take what we can while it lasts."	LOOKS LIKE Cuts from the base and big jumps for a few with constant turnover. FEELS LIKE Expendable and watchful about who is protecting whom. SOUNDS LIKE "Your win is my loss" or "we can always replace them."	LOOKS LIKE Challenge without support or comfort without standards with the minimum done to limit liability. FEELS LIKE Tense or flat with a fear of being blamed. SOUNDS LIKE "Who is responsible for this?" or "Are we covered?"	LOOKS LIKE Quarterly horizons and short tenure with answers bought in and information guarded. FEELS LIKE Restless and always one reorganisation away from change. SOUNDS LIKE "We need a fix from outside by next quarter."	LOOKS LIKE Success counted over a season or a quarter with handovers late or missing. FEELS LIKE Someone else will deal with it later. SOUNDS LIKE "That will be the next person's problem."

Boom as returns are drawn forward then bust once the condition behind them is spent then a restart on new ground with new people

Each link inherits the behaviour of the link above it and sets the conditions for the link below, so a team that treats athletes as supply sits inside an organisation built the same way and changing the middle of the chain alone rarely holds. Both rows are patterns that I describe from my own observation, meant to apply across sport, business and community settings.

Translating it into environments, teams and organisations

> **THREE TESTS FOR ANY ENVIRONMENT AT ANY LEVEL**
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> Reciprocity asks what the place gives back to the people and land it draws from. Horizon asks whether decisions are made for a span longer than the tenure of whoever is making them. Standards ask whether everyone is held to a level that the work deserves and whether the people closest to the work have real influence over how it is done.

Applied as an audit the tests can be asked at each link in turn, starting with what the place gives back to the people and land it draws from before moving to whether pay, authority and responsibility rise in steps that each person can grow into. At the team link the question becomes whether challenge and support arrive together. At the organisation link it becomes whether ownership and incentives protect a horizon longer than any one tenure, while at the final link it asks whether decisions made today can be explained to the people who will inherit them. An environment that answers well at every link is sitting in the upper row of the model and one that answers poorly at several is sitting in the lower row, whatever its stated values say. A useful first step in my view is to run the three tests at one link of the chain and compare the answer with what the people at that link would say, since the gap between the two shows where the lower row has taken hold.

These map directly onto the three values that ST Performance works from, which are written as People First Meaning Over Status Rigour is Respect and which I read as reciprocity, horizon and standards in that order. People First asks that obligation run in both directions. Meaning Over Status keeps the horizon on what is being built with little room for who is seen building it. Rigour is Respect holds guardianship to a standard so that care shows up as accountability and does not slide into comfort.

The Menominee forest, the Brewers clubhouse and a Māori All Blacks camp are different places with a common feature, which is that someone decided the place would outlast the person. The belief that guardianship opposes success rests on a short window of observation and the longer the window is held open the less support it keeps. I do not claim that every guardianship organisation wins or that every extractive one fails, since either claim would go beyond what I can state as fact. The claim I can defend is narrower, which is that the evidence from forests, rivers, franchises and companies shows guardianship and high performance can be built together on purpose.

SOURCES

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