

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

As explained in “Institutions” (pages 20-21), establishing strong rules and governance structures to administer them is vital to a Tribal Nation’s ability to design, implement, and sustain an effective workforce development approach. But equally important is establishing clearly understood and respected roles for those leading the design and administration of that approach, namely the Nation’s political leaders and programmatic leaders (chief administrative officers, department heads, program coordinators, etc.). What responsibilities do each have, and how do they work in concert to shape and advance the Nation’s strategic objectives for human capacity building? Who should exercise what leadership roles, and how should they complement one another?

While defining and playing these roles would seem a simple proposition, many Tribal Nations have long suffered from “role confusion” due primarily to federal policies that defined these roles for them and the organic, often rapid growth that many tribal governments have experienced since the 1960s.¹ This dynamic is often evident among political leaders, whose roles are “unclear, ill-defined, or simply unlimited.”² In such situations, they decide and do *everything* because there is nothing preventing them from doing so; they have done it that way for so long; and the Nation’s programmatic leaders, staff, and citizens have come to expect it of them. Consequently, political leaders’ time and energy is spent putting out the day’s fires, solving everyone’s problems, juggling too many issues, micromanaging tribal programs and businesses, and fixating on every little detail. Meanwhile, programmatic leaders and staff wait around for political leaders to act, knowing any efforts to design and implement better solutions to the Nation’s challenges likely will be overridden by the political leaders. Overall, no one is forging a “strategic vision” for the Nation, leaving it “uncertain of where it wants to go or how to get there.”³

More than three decades of research demonstrate this formula is unworkable overall for Native nation rebuilding. It is also ill-equipped to support the sustained exercise of the visionary, transformative leadership by political leaders and programmatic leaders, which is crucial for crafting innovative workforce development approaches that can stand the test of time. Fortunately, through constitutional reform, organizational restructuring, and new policies and procedures supported by capable systems to administer them, Tribal Nations are evaluating, revamping, clarifying, and upholding the fundamentally distinct yet complementary roles of political and programmatic leaders (see pages 8-9), enhancing their ability to design, launch, and sustain self-determined, holistic, and progressive workforce development approaches in the process.⁴

“The breadth of tribal government is so huge: environmental, public safety, education – there is no magic wand that makes you know all of this stuff once you are elected... Well, your magic wand is the people you bring in to help you and the ones that are there already...Let them do their job...”

– KAREN DIVER, FORMER CHAIRWOMAN, FOND DU LAC BAND OF LAKE SUPERIOR CHIPPEWA⁵

The “Developing Native Workforces: Who Should Do What?” infographic on pages 8-9 delineates the key roles that tribal leaders and program administrators and staff need to perform day in and day out to define and achieve the strategic workforce development priorities of the Tribal Nations they serve. For example, it is the job of tribal leaders to set those priorities with input from tribal citizens, while it is the job of program administrators and staff to forge and administer programs designed to advance those priorities. As one former tribal chairman explains it, “An effective leader has to be humble...Don’t micromanage. Surround yourself with people smarter than you. You hire these people to do a job – let them do their job.”⁶

As the work of a growing number of Tribal Nations reveals, setting a strong, sustainable leadership foundation requires starting young with those who will one day take over the reins of their workforce development efforts. One Tribal Nation in Oklahoma, for example, concerned its college students were not “armed with the cultural and political knowledge they need to become the leaders they were born to be,” established a six-week, summer “crash course” that develops their leadership skills by immersing them in all aspects of the Nation’s government – including key tribal departments, tribal legislative sessions and board meetings, and the Nation’s enterprises – so they can learn and prepare to play key roles in service to the Nation in the near future.⁷ Meanwhile, another Tribal Nation in Arizona established a tribal youth council nearly 40 years ago that advises the Nation’s government on a range of issues including education and workforce development and enhances council members’ “understanding of and participation in tribal public service.”⁸

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ What is the extent of the involvement of our Nation’s political leaders in the day-to-day provision of our workforce development and related services? Do they micromanage/interfere?
- ▶ How is it impacting the efficiency and effectiveness of those services? How is it impacting our ability to design and implement more effective workforce development strategies and grow those strategies over time?
- ▶ Are our Nation’s political leaders dedicating adequate time – and do they have adequate information and data – to make informed, strategic decisions about how best to develop our workforce and in what specific fields?
- ▶ How is our Nation holding its programmatic leaders accountable for: (1) providing quality workforce development services equitably to our people, and (2) making quantifiable progress on our long-range workforce development priorities? Is it working?
- ▶ How are our programmatic leaders role modeling the behavior/performance our Nation needs to advance those priorities?
- ▶ How do our political and programmatic leaders work in concert to set and advance those priorities? What principles and mechanisms can we put in place to strengthen that relationship?
- ▶ How is our Nation preparing our next generation of political leaders and programmatic leaders to take over the reins?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Potawatomi Bands of Southwest Michigan

In 2019, Western Michigan University (WMU) adopted a formal statement recognizing its location within the ancestral territory of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, and Pokagon Band of Potawatomi.¹ The statement led WMU to establish its Native American Affairs Council (NAAC), which the bands leveraged to tackle a longstanding challenge: the lack of locally available, tribally informed, and culturally relevant leadership development curricula for their emerging political and programmatic leaders.² Through NAAC, the bands partnered with WMU to co-design and “co-govern” its Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance, a graduate-level course series officially endorsed by the bands and tailored to their specific histories, governance systems, and governance and economic development capacity-building priorities.³ The program provides “a comprehensive understanding of the legal and cultural history” of the bands, their treaty rights and governance systems, their business entities, and how they relate to other governments.⁴ It also “develops hands-on skills to assess and address the economic, managerial, and societal challenges of tribal governance”⁵, with a specific emphasis on the skills tribal leaders and senior-level administrators and managers need to do their jobs effectively.⁶ The bands each fill five slots in each program cohort, with their governments and enterprises nominating (1) existing employees to participate as part of their ongoing professional development and (2) community members who display professional promise; their enrollment costs are covered by tribal higher education scholarships. Any remaining slots are made available to non-Native professionals employed by local governments and organizations that work with the bands.⁷ Participants are chosen based on the focus area of that year’s cohort (tribal government, gaming enterprises, or non-gaming enterprises) and they must collaboratively design “service-learning” capstone projects to implement on the bands’ behalf upon program completion.⁸ Many graduates have then run for tribal elected office or been promoted into program director or senior manager roles within the bands’ governments and enterprises.⁹

LEARNING LINK: <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/potbands.pdf>

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Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS)

In 1977, the All Pueblo Council of Governors assumed control of SFIS from the federal government.¹ Recognizing many young Pueblo people were pursuing higher education and taking jobs elsewhere when “their skills were very much needed at home”², key Pueblo leaders subsequently pushed SFIS to establish its Leadership Institute, whose mission includes “[transforming] the impacts of externally-developed policy on Tribal community institutions by cultivating emerging intergenerational Indigenous leaders”³ committed and prepared to make lifelong contributions to their Pueblo communities.⁴ Among the Institute’s programs is its Summer Policy Academy (SPA), a four-year leadership development and public policy training program established in 2007 and consisting of two-week sessions the first two summers. SPA Year One introduces rising high school juniors to tribal, state, national, and international policy issues, who then travel east the following summer to Princeton University and Capitol Hill where they form teams to formulate and present policy solutions “harmonized with our traditional values”⁵ that address issues directly impacting their communities.⁶ In SPA Year Three, students serve internships with Pueblo government departments and programs, state legislative offices, and other local placements where they apply their SPA learnings and advance the policy solutions developed the previous summer. In Year Four, SPA participants serve as junior faculty for the incoming Year One cohort and staff for the Community Institutes, the Leadership Institute’s hallmark convenings.⁷ Ninety percent of SPA participants eventually attend college, with many obtaining bachelor’s and graduate degrees before returning home to support their communities in the critical ways SPA envisioned.⁸ Invoking the Pueblos’ deeply rooted “planting and farming culture”⁹, SPA is well on its way to achieving its goal of cultivating 500 “Pueblo thought leaders” over the program’s first 25 years, leaders who are ready to embrace “the sacred and inherent responsibility of sustaining our Indigenous life ways, while drawing upon our western knowledge so that we are successful in generating a better quality of life for our people today and into the future.”¹⁰

LEARNING LINK: <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/sfis.pdf>

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ **Political leaders:** Frame and prioritize workforce development as a vital pathway to the Nation’s long-term prosperity through (1) ongoing messaging to tribal employees and citizens and (2) strategic decision-making.
- ▶ **Political leaders:** Make community-informed, strategic decisions about the Nation’s overarching workforce development priorities and delegate the day-to-day authority to programmatic leaders and staff to implement them.
- ▶ **Political leaders:** Mandate/encourage programmatic leaders to take calculated risks to develop innovative programmatic solutions and commit to grow solutions that work and learn from those that don’t.
- ▶ **Programmatic leaders:** Hire top-notch qualified staff with particular expertise. Give them the authority to do their jobs.
- ▶ **Together:** Depoliticize tribal workplaces and the provision of workforce development services.
- ▶ **Together:** Establish a formal process for regular communication and reporting that sets clear roles and fosters mutual accountability between political leaders and programmatic leaders.
- ▶ **Together:** Identify and fill service gaps based on ongoing community feedback; discard or overhaul ineffective services.
- ▶ **Both:** Establish formal policies for succession planning for programmatic leaders and leadership transition for political leaders.