

## FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

For many Tribal Nations, the challenge of moving their citizens from the unemployed side of the ledger to the employed side feels like a Herculean task – significant obstacles to employment faced by their citizens, an inadequate number of meaningful employment opportunities for those who overcome those obstacles, and limited financial and other resources for the Nations to work with to develop their workforces. For workers and would-be workers in those Nations, the idea of building a rewarding, good-paying career over the course of decades may feel “out of reach.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, more and more Tribal Nations are crafting thoughtful, long-range strategies that make employment only the first goal – not the ultimate goal – of their workforce development approaches. Consciously moving from a “poverty mindset” to a “prosperity mindset,”<sup>2</sup> they are working deliberately to seed a culture and expectation of professional advancement among their people and throughout the tribal government and tribal enterprises that employ many of them. They are doing so by not simply preaching its importance, but putting in place concrete mechanisms to incentivize it, nurture it, and create opportunities for it. For example, one Tribal Nation in the Southwest, eager to grow “our own future [gaming] executives rather than recruiting outside of the organization,”<sup>3</sup> created a program through which selected employees spend a whole year as full-time apprentices rotating through several gaming departments to learn the management ropes so they can eventually take the place of the non-Native executives that currently oversee the Nation’s gaming operations. Meanwhile, in Alaska, one Tribal Nation awards up to \$1,000 per year to employees for specialized training related to their work, which represents not just an investment in them, but an investment “in the infrastructure and capacity of the tribe itself.”<sup>4</sup> Another Tribal Nation in the state pays most of the cost of tribal employees pursuing master’s degrees in fields “deemed critical to community success.”<sup>5</sup>

Creating a culture of and formal pathways for career advancement by Native people within tribal entities – as well as with non-tribal employers – is easier said than done. It begins with methodically fostering the mindset shift mentioned above in both subtle and direct ways, as well as:

- developing roadmaps for advancement (i.e., “career ladders”) for existing, prospective, and future employees (i.e., youth) that enable them to identify and visualize the career futures they desire and the formal professional development steps they must take over time to achieve those futures;
- educating current, prospective, and future employees about

**“We really have to think about how we incentivize and support our people to grow within our own Nation.”**

– TANYA FIDDLER, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIVE CDFI NETWORK<sup>6</sup>

the relevant, locally available professional development opportunities the Tribal Nation provides, those it otherwise will financially support, and those offered by the Nation’s partners and other entities;

- setting high expectations and standards of accountability for ongoing professional development through continuing education and training to support employees’ advancement through the tribal government and enterprise staff ranks;
- establishing and funding formal and specialized programs through which committed employees can take advantage;
- institutionalizing in workforce education, training, and related programs a paradigm shift in their operational philosophy to prioritize ongoing career advancement for those they serve (with their securing of employment as only the *first* step in that long-term process); and
- neutralizing the **crabs-in-the-bucket** dynamic that exists in some Native communities that socially discourages ambitious working professionals from pursuing advancement opportunities or undermines them when they take advantage of those opportunities.

Creating this culture benefits tribal citizens who follow these roadmaps as well as the Nation as a whole, enabling it to: (1) expand its human capacity and institutional expertise to do its work more efficiently and effectively; (2) create more jobs; and (3) achieve its long-term economic, social, cultural, and political goals. It also strengthens the resiliency of tribal government and enterprises because everyone knows what they need to do in the organizations to advance – and they will be more likely to stick around because they know their commitment to working hard, performing well, and learning on the job is sure to pay off down the road. This, in turn, enhances the Nation’s ability to grow the resiliency and proficiency of its workforce over the long run.

## ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ How is our Nation incentivizing and nurturing career advancement among its governmental and enterprise employees? Have we created well-defined and clearly understood career advancement ladders that we are supporting our employees in climbing?
- ▶ What types of professional development/continuing education options does our Nation provide its employees? Do we cover any of the costs? How can we grow partnerships with TCUs, online training providers, and others to affordably expand these options?
- ▶ If an employee chooses to do professional development or continuing education, does our Nation provide that person release time or paid time off? Is it organizational policy, or case by case? If the latter, how can we develop a comprehensive policy that enhances the ability of employees to learn and train while on the job?
- ▶ What criteria does our Nation use to decide who gets promoted, receives raises, is assigned greater responsibilities, etc.? Is it length of service and job performance? Does professional development factor in, and how can we elevate its importance?
- ▶ Do we have an informed understanding of the competitive salary/benefit packages we need to offer to retain those advancing employees we are elevating through our ranks by supporting their on-the-job education and training?
- ▶ How pervasive is the crabs-in-the-bucket dynamic in our Nation’s workplaces and what are its effects? How can we neutralize it?

## INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



### Chickasaw Nation

In the early 2000s, non-traditional Chickasaw students looking to build rewarding careers faced a conundrum. Many worked jobs “where advancement was no longer possible,” and “their job limited the time and flexibility to go back to school, while family and financial obligations made it exceedingly difficult to pursue higher education after work.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, they typically didn’t meet the minimum qualifications for jobs in the Chickasaw Nation’s government and enterprises.<sup>2</sup> In response, in 2006 the Chickasaw Nation created the School-to-Work Program (STW), which works to create “a nation of educated and highly trained professionals who can meet the demands of today’s workforce.”<sup>3</sup>

STW enables participants to earn the degrees and certifications they need to advance by enabling them to spend part of the workday attending classes while also receiving on-the-job training within the Chickasaw Nation’s government departments and enterprises. To ensure they can support their families, students are paid for a full 40-hour work week. According to one participant, “The hours I put in at school are part of my 40-hour week. I have more hours to give to my family now.”<sup>4</sup> Of the 365 people who have completed STW since its inception, 341 of them have secured full-time employment, and 217 work for the Chickasaw Nation.<sup>5</sup> Established as a stand-alone program, STW is now a key component of the Chickasaw Nation Employment Access Division, created in 2018 to “provide stepping stones to long-term employment for Chickasaw citizens.”<sup>6</sup> The Division’s other “advancement-focused”<sup>7</sup> training programs include Toksali SMART (which helps youth ages 14-21 “develop healthy and productive work behaviors necessary for success in today’s labor markets”) and the Chickasaw Institute of Technology (which provides targeted training in high-growth fields such as construction, electrical, HVAC/R, plumbing, and Certified Nursing Assisting).<sup>8</sup> Recently, the Chickasaw Nation partnered with the State of Oklahoma to launch its Driver Education Training Program, which equips participants with the necessary skills to obtain driver’s licenses, enhancing their employment prospects.<sup>9</sup>

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

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### White Earth Tribal and Community College (WETCC)

Seeking to address a “critical gap”<sup>1</sup> in locally accessible training programs in the rapidly growing field of solar energy, in 2020 WETCC partnered with the Rural Renewable Energy Alliance (RREAL) to create a solar energy certificate training program hosted by the college for White Earth Nation members and other area residents.<sup>2</sup> The 50-hour, hands-on program teaches participants the basics of the solar photovoltaic field so they can then pursue “family-sustaining careers” in this high-demand regional occupation.<sup>3</sup> Participants learn on the job working on projects under development by local energy companies both on and off-reservation.<sup>4</sup> To ensure its program graduates are highly marketable and well-positioned for career advancement, in 2022 WETCC completed a rigorous process to become a North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) testing site, enabling program graduates to then take a NABCEP certification exam for Solar Associates that will “allow them to earn higher wages” without having to leave home (when graduates become NABCEP certified – which is considered the “the gold standard for solar installers”<sup>5</sup> – they can more than double their wages from \$20 to \$43 per hour).<sup>6</sup> Recognizing “clean energy and energy sovereignty go hand-in-hand”<sup>7</sup> WETCC’s Customized Education Department works closely with the White Earth Nation government and its weatherization task force to coordinate development of a Nation-wide clean energy plan and grow the tribal labor to implement it. To further expand its multi-tiered professional development approach in the field, WETCC is partnering with a state-based clean energy non-profit to secure state funding to build a state-of-the-art Trades Building – complete with a renewable energy design lab – on its campus to train students in a variety of high-demand, skilled careers including solar, energy auditing, HVAC, plumbing, electrical work, and traditional Anishinaabe trades.<sup>8</sup> According to WETCC, the building will advance the college’s commitment “to keep Indigenous students, post-graduation, in surrounding communities that struggle with limited wages and a lack of resources.”<sup>9</sup>

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

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## POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Map the career pathway-based continuing education and professional development options you and others make available to your employees, what they cost, and how many employees need them. Budget accordingly and forge partnerships to reduce the costs.
- ▶ Prioritize creating career ladders in key governmental departments and enterprise divisions to develop the Nation’s capacity in the areas it needs most to achieve its long-range, strategic priorities.
- ▶ Establish a dedicated budget to provide a certain number of days of annual paid educational leave to employees pursuing college degrees or professional credentials<sup>7</sup>; tie those investments to employees’ commitment to remain in their jobs for a prescribed period.
- ▶ Dedicate permanent, stand-alone funding for professional development and continuing education programs so it doesn’t become a periodic luxury of departmental budgets, provided only when times are good.
- ▶ Create management-level apprenticeship opportunities that enable tribal citizens to gain critical skills necessary for moving beyond low-paying, entry-level positions. Deploy retiring government and enterprise staff as mentors to those taking their places.
- ▶ Revise position descriptions to explicitly convey to employees your Nation’s expectations for their ongoing professional development and career advancement, and how employees’ specific roles directly advance the Nation’s long-term priorities.