

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

As with Native nation rebuilding generally, culture (i.e. “cultural match”) plays a vital role in self-determined, effective workforce development solutions.¹ Tribal Nations that: (1) integrate their distinct cultures, core values, lifeways, and languages in concrete ways into their workforce development approaches, and (2) center the strengthening of those things as primary intended outcomes of their approaches enhance their ability to grow their human capacity in a positive, sustained direction. As discussed on pages 10-11, this is particularly critical when taking over programs administered by the federal and state governments, as those programs don’t speak to tribal cultures or tap into their transformative power as mechanisms for overcoming challenges, strengthening families and communities, and guiding program participants down self-defined paths to prosperous futures.

It’s no coincidence, then, that as Tribal Nations have reclaimed control over their governance systems, more and more have recast their workforce development approaches to place tribal cultures at their functional cores. This can take many forms, from core values-based customer service (“caring for our own”) to providing program participants with tangible options to participate in cultural activities or education along with workforce education/training. The following examples illuminate the endless possibilities:

- The Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation program of a Tribal Nation in Montana asks applicants if they would like “the assistance of a person involved with Native healing or Spirituality to be involved with your rehabilitation planning?”² Most have embraced the opportunity.
- A Native non-profit organization in Alaska enacts two core tribal values in administering its undergraduate scholarship program, awarding funding based not on need, but on merit through applicants’ demonstrated knowledge of and commitment to tribal culture.³
- A Tribal **TANF** program in California negotiated with **ACF** a revised definition of eligible work activities to “accept cultural participation” as countable work hours, a change enabling those participants to stay in program compliance and fulfill their cultural obligations, including taking Native language classes and participating in the Tribal Nation’s annual “Indian Days” event.⁴

Such approaches recognize that those who seek workforce education, training, and related services often struggle with psychological trauma and cultural alienation that can only be remedied through a real connection to – and reliance on – their culture

“It’s about creating those relationships that matter, that keep people coming back. We’re not just building a workforce; we’re building a family.”

– HANNAH SEYMOUR, HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR, COWICHAN TRIBES⁵

as the wellspring for personal and professional empowerment. As one Native workforce development practitioner explains, “When tribal members were taken away and their families split up and their children sent to boarding schools, they lost their culture. We’re finding that the culture can play a huge role in helping people heal and become self-sufficient.”⁶

The culture question demands that Tribal Nations determine: (1) where and how to infuse culture (teachings, values, lifeways, behaviors, your Native language, etc.) into your workforce development approach; (2) the culture you seek to foster through that approach and what it says to your people about what your Nation values and will value moving forward; and (3) the culture you wish to grow within your workforce and the community at-large through that approach. As the Native Governance Center sees this endeavor, “By utilizing a care-based approach centered in Indigenous values, human resources professionals and tribal leaders can meet the diverse needs of their employees and relatives to ultimately strengthen their nation. Embracing the interconnectedness of accountability, culture, history, community, and government fosters a working environment that holistically and systemically cares for its people and keeps politics in its place.”⁷

For many Tribal Nations, enacting their answers to the culture question involves specific measures designed to uproot the entrenched dependency some citizens have on government and seed personal and familial self-sufficiency in its place. Growing this culture can be achieved in many ways, including by: giving clients a “hand-up versus a hand-out” by, for example, requiring them to give something (community service, etc.) in return for the services they receive; forging work environments rooted in personal and cultural humility, mutual respect, and merit-based advancement; and attaching culture and service requirements to scholarship awards.

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ What cultural teachings and values does our Nation impart through its workforce development approach? Through its delivery of specific workforce development and related services? Are these readily understandable to our people?
- ▶ Where do the curricula our programs use to educate and train our people come from? Do they reflect and teach our Nation’s culture, values, and language? If not, how can we customize the curricula we use to integrate those things in thoughtful ways?
- ▶ How are we working to build a culture of collaboration among those working in our tribal government and enterprises? What concrete steps can we take to enhance that culture?
- ▶ Do we provide program participants with formal “Cultural Engagement & Healing” opportunities (see page 6) to help them emotionally and spiritually as well as professionally? What should we be doing that we currently aren’t?
- ▶ Are our educators and trainers steeped in our Nation’s culture? How can we build their cultural knowledge?
- ▶ How do we hold participants accountable to the commitment our Nation is making in them through the services it provides?
- ▶ What core cultural competencies do our programs instill in their participants? When they complete the education and training programs we provide, do they understand how to apply them personally and professionally?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Cowichan Tribes

Recognizing “our behaviors in the workplace, how we collaborate, and how we serve the community all could be enhanced,” in 2018 the Cowichan Tribes in British Columbia overhauled its human resources (HR) policy.¹ “Embedding cultural heritage into the fabric”² of its organization, Cowichan’s revamped HR policy ensures its 500 staff members – 80 percent of whom are Cowichan or other First Nation citizens – “operate as *nuts’amaat shqwaluwun* (people working together with one mind respectfully) guided by the teachings of our ancestors (The Cowichan Teachings).”³ Among the teachings employees must uphold are *Tli’i to’ muk’ mustimuhw* (“Each person is important”), *Hwial’asmut ch tun’s-ye’lh* (“Take care of your health”), and *Yath ch o’ lhq’il* (“Be positive”).⁴ Central to the HR policy is its “Commitment to Culture and Language,” which encourages employees “to participate in and incorporate culture and Hul’q’umi’num’ language whenever appropriate,” which includes twice-weekly language and culture classes and wellness classes that a growing number attend, and standing access to Cowichan’s Cultural Coordinator to deepen their “knowledge of cultural protocols.”⁵ The policy also features the “Cowichan Syuwun Leave With Pay” provision, which provides employees up to 15 days of paid leave to support their spiritual initiation in the longhouse, and up to five days of paid leave to employees who sponsor them.⁶ Committed to “taking care of our community’s caretakers,” Cowichan also provides employees regular “psychological safety” trainings and safe spaces for hard conversations between them.⁸ In addition, it administers a lateral violence prevention policy that promotes “developing and maintaining respectful relationships with those around us,” which has helped to reduce Cowichan’s annual number of workplace conflict investigations from 25 previously to just four today.⁹ Further reflecting that Cowichan is building “a place where people want to work”¹⁰, the Tribes’ annual staff turnover rate has decreased by more than half since 2018 to 4.3 percent, which is considerably lower than the average turnover rate among employers across Canada.¹¹ As Cowichan explains it, “We’re not just building a workforce; we’re building a family.”¹²

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

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Tohono O'odham Nation (TON)

For decades, O’odham elders needing skilled nursing care, long-term assisted living support, or related services had to travel long distances to facilities outside of TON’s vast reservation, where they received care isolated from loved ones and the O’odham culture that sustained them physically and spiritually.¹ In response, TON established the Tohono O’odham Nursing Care Authority (TONCA), which in 2002 launched the award-winning Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, which has a central reservation location easily accessible to tribal residents.² In 2013, TONCA opened an assisted living residence next door. Both facilities enact TONCA’s mission to provide tribal elders with “dignified living in an environment that preserves our traditional Himdag”³ – defined as the culture, way of life, and values “uniquely held” by the O’odham people.⁴ Committed to developing a culturally competent workforce “from within the community”⁵ capable of providing culturally responsive care, TONCA gives hiring preference to TON members and prioritizes them in awarding financial assistance to “defray tuition costs and other related educational expenses” to employees seeking professional development and career advancement.⁶ It also requires new employees – O’odham and non-Native – to complete a two-hour “O’odham Culture Inservice” orientation introducing the O’odham language, traditional foods and medicines, and cultural perspectives on death and dying.⁷ To ensure the staff can converse with its O’odham-speaking patients and residents, TONCA provides a basic O’odham language training to the non-speakers it employs and it recently launched a compensation program to incentivize employees to take free Tohono O’odham Community College courses to deepen their O’odham language fluency.⁸ It also conducts a quarterly cleansing ceremony for staff, patients, and residents, and hosts an O’odham medicine person weekly who works with staff upon request to support their wellbeing.⁹ Growing its capacity to provide care “in accordance with our traditions”¹⁰, TONCA will soon begin training medical translators, who will be dispatched to area hospitals to interpret for TON members with limited English language fluency to ensure they receive proper care in those facilities as well.¹¹

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

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Identify the core cultural values you want to shape the structure and delivery of your workforce development and related services. Assess and restructure programs accordingly, and train your political leaders, programmatic leaders, and staff about them.
- ▶ Work with program participants on long-range personal and professional goal setting (with achievable milestones) to help them focus and plan beyond their immediate needs and challenges.
- ▶ Make social emotional development a standard feature of your programs to enhance clients’ personal resiliency.
- ▶ Infuse your Nation’s history, culture, and values into your workforce education and training curricula. Consult tribal elders and other culture keepers to enrich the curricula’s design.
- ▶ Offer employees the option to take regular Native language and culture classes as paid work time (or require it); integrate those classes into your workforce education and training programs.
- ▶ Hold focus groups with elders and other citizens to learn if your programs are hitting the cultural mark and refine accordingly.
- ▶ Seed a culture of civic obligation by incentivizing program participants to contribute to the Nation through assigned community service projects, community-based **work experience** placements, etc.