

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Years ago, a Tribal Nation in Oklahoma developed a set of educational videos that teach about the history of its 477 Program, how it has transformed lives (through the words of 477 participants themselves), and how the Nation will continue to grow this tool to move its people “toward self-sufficiency.”¹ The Nation uses the videos as part of its ongoing trainings for existing staff and orientation for new hires.² Meanwhile, another Tribal Nation in Arizona established a permanent advisory council to support its development of long-term workforce development strategies.³ Composed of key members of its education and workforce development staffs, as well as representatives from its primary industry sectors, the council meets regularly to evaluate and refine the Nation’s sector-based training programs to enhance their accessibility, effectiveness, and cultural synergy.⁴

As these examples illustrate, it’s one thing to develop a practical workforce development approach that addresses tribal citizens’ needs and advances their Nation’s strategic priorities as they currently exist. It’s quite another to sustain that approach over the long haul. As Tribal Nations build track records of workforce development success, more and more are now tackling the challenge of how to systematically grow that success so that it benefits them not just today, but well into the future. As they engage this task, some common ingredients of “sustainability” are emerging that can shorten the learning curve for other Nations (and other Native workforce development entities) that are following in their footsteps:

- **Accountability:** Success – and the ability to sustain it – hinges on the accountability mechanisms (regular program assessments, employee performance agreements, outcomes-based budgeting, regular “refresher” trainings for staff, comprehensive orientation programs for new hires, ongoing education of the community about the purpose of workforce development programs and how they work, etc.) that a Tribal Nation puts in place to ensure everyone (leaders, employees, program participants, other tribal citizens) that contributes to or relies on its workforce development approach lives up to their end of the bargain. This matters not just for meeting the requirements of new grants, but more importantly for achieving the Nation’s long-term workforce development goals.

- **Adaptability:** According to one intertribal organization, workforce development “is a complex, multi-layered issue that is best treated...as an iterative process that will be modified and adjusted over time.”⁵ A Nation’s workforce development programs must adapt in real time to meet the distinct needs and goals of each participant it serves to be effective. To be sustainable, a Nation’s overall workforce development approach

“You’re battling all the time, but you have to keep looking at ways that you can set the infrastructure and the ways your workforce development [approach] will continue to grow.”

– MARGARET ZIENTEK, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR,
WORKFORCE & SOCIAL SERVICES, CITIZEN
POTAWATOMI NATION⁶

must be institutionally adaptable over time to: (1) maintain alignment with the Nation’s evolving strategic vision and long-term priorities; (2) refine programs based on new info and data and expand what is working; (3) proactively assess and address emerging obstacles (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in federal funding levels); (4) capitalize on staff’s deepening experience and know-how; (5) account for a growing population; and (6) forecast and adjust to changing labor market conditions and needs to ensure its workforce itself is adaptable.

- **Institutionalizing communication:** Building effective mechanisms for regular communication and coordination between political leaders, programmatic leaders and staff, and community members fosters a common understanding of – and support for – the Nation’s approach, how and why it works, how it’s changing to better serve the people, and how it advances the Nation’s long-term goals. For example, “cross-training” of programmatic staff so they understand how other components of the Nation’s workforce development approach function is a proven strategy for building this understanding.⁷

- **Formalizing partnerships:** Workforce development-focused partnerships often emerge organically out of necessity, but they must be formalized through MOU/MOAs, long-term funding agreements or contracts, or other strategies if they are to support the Nation’s approach over the long run.

- **Institutionalizing innovation (and success):** No Tribal Nation gets it exactly right out of the gate with its new approach. A bedrock institutional commitment to innovation enables a Nation to determine what’s not working and design better ways forward. Cultivating and retaining top-notch programmatic leaders and staff equipped with the technical expertise, institutional memory, and confidence from learned experience to innovate is vital.

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ Does our Nation have a long-range strategic plan for growing and sustaining our workforce development approach and its component programs? What would it take to create one?
- ▶ What metrics do we track to evaluate the operational effectiveness of those programs and determine how to strengthen them? Did we come up with these metrics, or did someone else? What else should we be using?
- ▶ What accountability mechanisms do we use to drive exceptional staff performance in our workforce development programs?
- ▶ How do we educate new tribal leaders/employees with key roles in our workforce development approach about how and why that approach works? Do we provide them an initial orientation? Do we offer a refresher training for existing leaders/employees?
- ▶ Is our technological infrastructure (hardware, software, etc.) adequate for supporting the growth of our workforce development approach and how we are working to make that approach more holistic and more capable of measuring our success over the long run? What technological capabilities do we most need that we don’t currently possess?
- ▶ Does our Nation have a firm grasp on how fast our population is growing? If so, what does it mean for how we need to grow our workforce development approach? If not, what steps should we take to track that growth to inform our strategic decision-making?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC)

Operating one of the country’s longest-running and most dynamic 477 programs, CITC provides “whole family wraparound services”¹ – including education, training, career development, job placement, and a growing array of support services – to roughly 4,000 Native people annually so they can achieve “their personal and professional potential.”² Intent on sustaining its organizational capacity to ably serve its growing service population well into the future, in 2020 CITC launched its Generative Leadership (GL) approach, designed “to create transformative growth opportunities for Our People while ensuring that CITC remains a leading employer.”³ Advancing CITC’s strategic objectives of Recruitment, Development, and Retention, GL systematically enacts CITC’s commitment to succession planning by identifying and training the next wave of capable executives and senior administrators through a “peer-to-peer and multi-generational” learning approach.⁴ Under GL, CITC’s existing “high-level” leaders (executive leadership, senior directors, and directors) are required to identify employees “with high potential who have the ability, motivation, aspiration, and engagement” to develop and advance into the organization’s high-level positions.⁵ Each identified employee then completes – with guidance from the high-level leader who supervises them – a “Leadership Development Plan Form” where they list the particular competencies (such as strategic and systems thinking, problem-solving and decisiveness, and emotionally intelligent leadership) they will develop to qualify for and thrive in the specific high-level positions they seek to eventually inhabit, the steps they will take to develop them, the resources they will need, and how they will measure progress.⁶ Once the employees launch their GL plans, their supervising high-level leaders regularly engage them to evaluate their progress, help them work through challenges, and ensure their ultimate success.⁷ Demonstrating the GL model’s early returns, the current senior directors of CITC’s Legal and Human Resources Departments and directors of its Clare Swan Early Learning Center, President’s Office, and Education Assistance Department all advanced from their previous manager positions to their present roles through the GL process.⁸

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

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Tulalip Tribes

Created in 2001 by Tulalip’s TERO Vocational Training Center (TVTC), TVTC Construction is the first Native-run pre-apprenticeship program recognized by the State of Washington.¹ Offered twice a year to enrolled citizens of federally recognized Tribal Nations and their spouses, parents, and descendants, this free, “hands-on” program features a rigorous 16-week curriculum through which students obtain industry-critical skills and certifications for well-paying, high-demand jobs such as carpenters, electricians, mechanics, and plumbers.² Graduates are required to apply to at least three local apprenticeship programs, where they are accorded “preferred enrollment and advanced placement” through MOUs between TVTC and its union partners.³ Key to the program’s success is TVTC’s “two-generational approach,” which fosters success in the workplace and the family by connecting the student’s family members – first and foremost their children – to services and organizations “beneficial to family health, well-being and economic success.”⁴ This begins with TVTC’s comprehensive evaluation of the resource needs of each eligible applicant’s family through TVTC’s two-generational assessment, which asks a range of questions about their children’s academic progress, health, and economic security.⁵ Based on the new student’s answers, TVTC provides them customized referrals to the “culturally responsive,” two-generational services that Tulalip and TVTC’s partners provide, such as early learning enrollment, library services, healthcare, afterschool programs, parenting classes, and programs addressing childhood trauma – all with the goal to bolster children’s educational and, eventually, career success.⁶ To “reinforce the intergenerational focus of building skills and ‘going to work,’” TVTC provides students opportunities to directly role model for their children, with a hallmark of the program its “Family Day” event, where TVTC students work side by side with their children to create and design bookshelves, planters, desks and other products.⁸ Illustrating the long-term benefits of TVTC’s two-generational approach, many of these children have subsequently completed TVTC’s summer Youth Class and then enrolled in the TVTC Construction program as their parents once did.⁹

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

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Regularly assess your programs to determine how effectively they are advancing your workforce development priorities.
- ▶ Based on those assessments, target additional resources to replicate the success of well-performing programs across the organization, and design innovative solutions to refine and strengthen those programs that aren’t performing as well.
- ▶ Ensure incoming political leaders develop strategies to grow and sustain successful workforce development initiatives (instead of eliminating them simply because they were created and/or supported by their predecessors).
- ▶ Regularly “cross-train” staff to grow institutional knowledge and resiliency across your workforce development system.
- ▶ Institute a transition memo policy requiring key programmatic staff leaving the organization to transfer critical institutional knowledge about how your workforce development programs work to those taking their place.⁸
- ▶ Recognize programmatic leaders and staff “for their hard work...and create succession plans for employee transitions.”⁹
- ▶ Set long-term, incremental targets to increase the overall percentage of tribal citizens/other Native people comprising your Nation’s governmental and enterprise workforce; task your workforce development programs to assist with meeting those targets.¹⁰
- ▶ Develop a concrete sustainability plan to grow funding and staff and provide higher-quality services to more people.