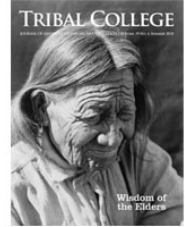


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## Keeping the Circle Strong: Learning about Native American leadership

*Volume 13, No. 4 - Summer 2002*

Martha McLeod ♦ May 15, 2002

Because I have had the privilege of serving the Bay Mills Indian Community for the last 18 years, I have been learning about leadership from those I serve. Leaders at Bay Mills are seen as servants of the people. When I asked about defining leadership during a talking circle, a Bay Mills elder said, "All of us stand around the fishing net as equals. Sometimes one person pulls harder than another. Sometimes a person pulls for another. Leadership is like that. Leadership moves around the circle." Everyone in the circle should be treated



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### Body Beauty

June 18, 2018 | By Scarlett Cortez

As we don our shorts and tank tops this summer, allow people to embrace the skin

with equal respect because everyone in the circle is a leader, past, present, or future.

they're in-their stretchmarks, scars, body rolls, and all-not just the parts we deem acceptable.

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As I worked on my doctoral dissertation, I searched for writers from other cultures and peoples who reflected the Bay Mills ideal. The purpose of my dissertation was to design a leadership development program for Bay Mills Community College (BMCC). That design had to be founded on the beliefs of the Bay Mills Indian Community. This article shares what I found.

## Paradigm Shifts

In a discussion of the American Indian organization and Indian leadership in the quarterly publication *Winds of Change*, Barbra Wakshul says that Indian leadership is different in the following ways: (a) Indian leaders need to know both their own community (values and history) as well as the Euro-American community because they function in both societies; (b) Indian leaders need to be holistic because Indian communities are small, Indians value interconnectedness, and Indians work on a wide variety of issues; (c) Indian leaders belong to communal societies that must accommodate both tribal values and Euro-American systems in which Indians and non-Indians coexist.

In his book *Wisdom of the People*, Don Coyhis states that Native Americans envision life as one great, interconnected web. The connections between various parts make top down structure seem inappropriate. Tribal leaders must be aware of how their cultural belief in the interconnectedness of the world affects their leadership.

The Native American concept of interconnectedness in leadership is expressed by both Native and non-Native theorists. Margaret Wheatley, in *Leadership and the New Science* stressed the necessity of a global paradigm shift from centralized to decentralized leadership. Writing in

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*Leadership is an Art*, Max Depree used the Native American water carrier as a metaphor for decentralized leadership. Water carriers do what needs to be done when it needs to be done, regardless of their position or authority role. The tribal water carrier symbolizes the essential nature of all jobs and their interdependence.

Peter Senge presents tools to destroy the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. When we give up this illusion of separateness, we can build organizations that learn to create results they truly desire, that nurture new and expansive patterns of thinking, and that set free collective aspiration. This is another reflection of the Native concept of interconnectedness.



Larry Spears argues there is a revolution under way. That revolution is servant leadership, which is congruent with Native American leadership philosophy. Some have likened this to turning the hierarchical pyramid upside down. In the mind of the servant leader, the needs of his or her employees, customers, constituents, and community become the most important reason for a company's existence. Leaders nurture both the institution and those affected by the institution. Coyhis agrees: If you try to implement top-down management in an Indian organization, it doesn't work. Top down management directly conflicts with traditional Indian values. The Indian views the leader as a servant of the people, and in tribal organizations, all people are expected to act as leaders when their specialized knowledge or abilities are needed at a particular time. When we look at Native leadership, we see this as the core of their leadership concept time and again.

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Beverlee McLure and Tony Stanco also espouse the Native American view of leadership's movement around the circle in their article, "The Peloton: Riding the winds of change." They describe the Peloton management model as servant leadership that echoes Native American interconnectedness philosophy. Leadership is rotated, allowing team members to avoid the burnout associated with constant responsibility or redundant work. This rotation also empowers future leaders as each person confronts the challenge of simultaneously leading and following.

The rotation provides point persons with a body of experience within the group, who not only aid the project at hand but also can be drawn upon for guidance or support. At the heart of the Peloton is a multifaceted trust and responsibility relationship with leaders and followers interchanging roles as necessary. Judith McLaughlin, in *The Perilous Presidency*, also promotes the concept of rotational responsibility when she says the burden of leadership should be shared. He insists we must find new ways to make institutional leadership more of a shared responsibility, rather than an assignment given solely to the president.

A key component of successful leadership is development, according to Ann Morrison. Identifying managers who are likely to become effective executives and rotating them into new jobs every year or two has proven useful. Evidence from her study and other research indicates that the pressure and visibility associated with the rotation process adds more challenge to the work. As John Neihardt points out, Native American's see this rotation as the natural order of leadership.

## Qualities of Native Leadership

In his book *Leadership secrets of Attila the Hun*, Wess Roberts speaks of leadership in tribal language. He says that chiefs must possess, among others, the following essential

qualities: loyalty, courage, desire, emotional stamina, physical stamina, empathy, decisiveness, anticipation, timing, competitiveness, self-confidence, accountability, responsibility, credibility, tenacity, dependability, and stewardship. The leaders of Indian nations must recover rapidly from disappointment to carry out the responsibilities of their offices without becoming bitter, without losing clear perspective. The leader must persist in the face of difficult circumstances.

The chief must recognize internal difficulties as well as enemies. Seldom is the real enemy an outsider, according to Roberts. Only infrequently will an enemy from outside have the rank and skill enabling him to win on the battlefield or in diplomacy. Too often, the leader is totally unaware when enemies are made. The good chief must set aside personal feelings and anger in order to make decisions based on what is good for the community. When a good chief possesses these qualities, there will be more peace in camp, and the tribe's energies will be in harmony when a real external enemy must be faced. A chief must also remember that it is never wise to gain by battle what may be gained through negotiations.

For the Assiniboine, there was an established route of leadership development that all future leaders had to follow, according to Dr. James Shanley and Kenneth Ryan in their article in the *Tribal College Journal*. In the early days, tribal leadership was a male function. The chief was selected by the *Hungabi*, which was a council composed of proven war leaders, able hunters, brave, courageous men, religious leaders and elders. A person could be chief only if he had proven ability to lead and take care of the people. As an example, the hunter could not eat what he killed. A hunter killed game for someone else, then someone else would provide game to the hunter. This is just one example of how recognition of the tribe's interdependence was built-in to the cultural tradition.

In traditional Assiniboine society women were leaders but usually not in the same fields as men. They were involved in their own religious societies and had other traditional responsibilities in the camps. Assiniboine leadership cannot be represented as a vertical hierarchy. All tribal members, men and women, stood in the circle of life and accepted leadership roles when the tribe needed their particular skill and called on them to accept their responsibility for tribal survival. Today, the Assiniboine concept of preparing for tribal leadership applies to both men and women.

## **Native American Women as Leaders**

In writing about Native American women's leadership, Dorothy L. Miller says that leadership as an authoritarian role is still a foreign or unacceptable concept to many Native Americans. Rather, she said, the role comes as a result of consistent care-giving behavior over a long period of time. Caregivers earn respect from others and are seen as holders of wisdom by the community. The Native American leader's image is that of a selfless person. Many Native American women do not identify themselves as leaders because they are uncomfortable when their achievements are made public and they are singled out to stand above others.

Napier described the educational profiles of nine gifted Indian women and their own stories about wanting to lead in the *Roepers Review* in 1995. One woman said that when she was growing up, her mother talked to her about how certain Native American women are given special roles in life. She referred to these individuals as "the chosen ones." A chosen one attempts to see what others cannot see and assists those who need help on their journeys. A chosen one, a leader, must evaluate her reasons for wanting to lead. If the heart is free from selfishness and conceit, only then can the chosen one attempt to lead.

The primary function of the Lakota woman leader is to be a good mother and to raise good children who are also good tribal members, says Geraldine Acoren, Lakota president of the White Buffalo Calf Women Society, in a *Tribal College Journal* article by Eric Haase and Lydia Whirlwind Soldier. All other duties are secondary to motherhood. That is a duty a woman cannot shirk. Politics are less important than some modern women seem to think. Acoren believes that the true job of a Lakota woman is motherhood.

In August of 1996, Bernita L. Krumm described the leadership roles of four American Indian women as tribal college presidents: Dr. Janine Pease Pretty-On-Top, president of Little Big Horn College; Dr. Verna Fowler, president of the College of the Menominee Nation; Tanya Ward, president of Cheyenne River Community College; and Margaret Campbell Perez, president of Fort Belknap College. In her *Tribal College Journal* article, Krumm points out that the leadership attributes of these tribal women are as diverse and numerous as the tribes they represent. While existing leadership theories may not provide the necessary framework to contextualize tribal college leadership, they do provide a foundation for identifying leadership characteristics of those specific tribal college presidents. According to Krumm, models of leadership generally have common elements: They define a leader as one who possesses vision and focuses on mission, serves as a role model for others, and enables others to take action or perform their roles. They emphasize vision and mission as well as work with tribal culture members and governments. The style of successful women leaders tends to be participatory and consultative.

The women also stressed the importance of common values with the tribe as defined by its culture. The leader is a facilitator and promoter of group values and interests. The article quotes Thomas J. Sergiovanni, who explains that leadership acts are expressions of culture. Leadership as

cultural expression seeks to build unity and order among the people.

Krumm also interviewed Twila Martin, a former Turtle Mountain tribal chairperson, about her role. In accordance with the concepts of leadership discussed earlier in this article, Martin explained, “Tribal leaders must look beyond self and ask what can be done to ensure the survival of the people.” She said tribal people have certain shared values, a belief in stability, and the work ethic. Leaders of the Turtle Mountain Tribe of Chippewa are expected to exemplify these values.

People want leaders to work for the people, for the tribe as a whole. Martin says it’s very difficult to build a common purpose, a bond with the people of the tribe. She succeeded in her first term as tribal chair when the tribe bonded with her against the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which was seen as the enemy. In her second term, when the BIA was no longer an issue, she struggled to bring the bond back, but ultimately it didn’t work. Martin admits that a leader has to recognize how going to battle every day wears people out. A leader has to know when to back off from the fight and allow the people to recoup and refocus.

Frequently, members of the community try to be leaders but don’t have the sense of direction to make change, says Martin. Thus, sometimes tribal people act more like antagonists than families. It is up to these grass roots community leaders to focus the people’s good intentions; capitalize on their strength of focusing on specific issues; and request their help in a broader tribal focus. In this way, goals will be accomplished.

In conclusion, these experiences exemplify the complexity of tribal leadership roles. Their insights illustrate that tribal leadership is not simply an act or a series of acts; it is not merely directing a process; it is not playing a role. Tribal leadership is the embodiment of a lifestyle, an expression of



learned patterns of thought and behaviors, values, and beliefs. Culture is the basis; it formulates the purpose, process, and ultimately, the product.

*Martha McLeod, Ed.D, is the founding president of Bay Mills Community College in Brimley, MI. She completed her doctorate in 1999 at Nova Southeastern University. Her dissertation was "Developing a model for leadership training for Native American students at a tribal college."*

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