ADVANCEMENT Matters

Framing the Discussion

For many tribal nations, the challenge of moving their people from the unemployed side of the ledger to the employed side feels like a Herculean task—significant barriers to employment faced by their people, limited employment opportunities for those who overcome those barriers, and limited resources for the nation to work with. For workers and would-be workers in those nations, the idea of building a successful career over the course of decades may feel “out of reach.”

Yet more and more tribal nations are making employment the first goal—not the end goal—of their workforce development approaches. Consciously moving from a “poverty mindset” to a “prosperity mindset,” they are working to seed a culture of advancement among their people and throughout tribal government and tribal businesses. They are doing so by not simply preaching its importance, but putting into place concrete mechanisms to incentivize it, nurture it, and create opportunities for it. For example, one nation in Alaska 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.” Another pays most of the cost of employees pursuing master’s degrees in fields “deemed critical to community success.”

Creating such a culture of advancement is easier said than done. It requires 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 and prospective employees to visualize the professional futures they desire and the clear steps that they must take to achieve that future;
• Setting high expectations and standards of accountability for professional development/continuing education and advancement as a merit in tribal government and business employment;
• Establishing/funding opportunities for committed employees to take advantage; and
• Defusing the “crabs in the bucket” dynamic that exists in some tribal communities.

Creating this culture benefits tribal citizens who follow these roadmaps as well as the nation as a whole, expanding its human capacity to do its work, create more jobs, and achieve the nation’s long-term goals. It strengthens tribal government and businesses because everyone knows what they need to do in the organizations to advance. They will be more likely to stay because they know their commitment to working hard, performing well, and learning on the job will pay off. This, in turn, enhances the nation’s ability to grow the proficiency of its workforce over time.

Questions to Consider

• How is your nation incentivizing and nurturing career advancement among its employees?
• What types of professional development/continuing education opportunities does your nation currently provide its employees? Does the nation cover all or part of the cost?
• Do your leadership and staff members provide that person release time or paid time off? Is it organizational policy, or case by case?
• What criteria does the nation currently use to determine who should get promoted, receive salary increases, be assigned greater responsibilities, etc.? Is it length of service and perhaps job performance? Does/how does professional development factor in?
• How pervasive is the “crabs in the bucket” dynamic in your nation’s workplaces? What are its effects? What strategies can you implement to neutralize it so that advancement is encouraged and honored by all?

Innovation Snapshots

Chickasaw Nation

Recognizing many of its non-traditional students were reaching a point where career advancement was limited, the Chickasaw Nation established its School-to-Work Program (STWP) to offer them access to higher education as well as valuable on-the-job experience.3 Seeking to create “a nation of educated and highly trained professionals who can meet the demands of today’s workforce,” STWP provides opportunities for participants to earn the degrees and certifications they need to advance by enabling them to spend one-half of each work day attending classes and the other half receiving on-the-job training within Chickasaw government departments and businesses. To ensure they have the financial resources to support their families, students are paid for a full 40-hour work week and provided with the same benefits as other employees, including sick leave, vacation time, holiday pay, and health insurance. 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.” Of the 212 people who have completed STWP, 188 of them (88%) have secured full-time employment, and 144 of them (68%) now work for the Nation.4

Learning Link: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-chickasaw

CONNECT: Danny Wall, Director, Chickasaw Nation School-to-Work Program, Danny.Wall@chickasaw.net

Pascua Yaqui Tribe (PYT)

Located adjacent to Tucson, Arizona, PYT operates two successful gaming operations that provide the Tribe critical revenue and tribal members hundreds of jobs. For years, PYT wanted to increase the percentage of casino management positions that are held by tribal members. The Tribe set out to make that happen through its Future Leader Program (FLP). Employees selected to participate in FLP make a one-year commitment, during which time they are assigned two-month rotations across six key casino departments. Upon finishing each rotation, they must complete a project where they apply what they have learned. FLP participants also engage in job shadowing and ongoing professional development during their tenure, all for the purpose of PYT growing “our own future executives rather than recruiting outside of the organization.” PYT recently took it up a notch with its highly competitive, three-phase Executive Succession program, which features university-level coursework, rotational exposure to the executive-level responsibilities of the six key casino departments, and participation in a student exchange program with other tribal casinos across the U.S. to learn “best practices and different management styles.” Through this program, one or more tribal members are slated to move into the casino’s top executive positions in the next few years.5

Learning Link: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-yaqui

CONNECT: Miguel Roman, Director of Tribal Development, Casino Del Sol, PYT, Miguel.Roman@casinodelsol.com

Policy Recommendations

Assess your nation’s existing workforce development activities and initiate new strategies to prioritize professional development for the purposes of fostering a culture of career advancement.

Presuming limited resources, prioritize creating career ladders in key departments and businesses to develop the nation’s capacity in accordance with its strategic goals.

Create a merit-based system of advancement that rewards exceptional performance and engaging in professional development/continuing education (as opposed to job tenure or seniority alone).

Dedicate stand-alone funding for professional development and continuing education so it doesn’t become a periodic luxury of departmental budgets, provided only when times are good.

Create formal apprenticeship opportunities that enable tribal citizens to gain critical skills necessary for moving beyond entry-level positions.

Review position descriptions to set nation’s expectations for professional development and advancement, and how employees’ specific roles directly advance nation’s long-term priorities.