CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT Matters

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Creating a truly self-governed, tribal workforce development approach and fostering its success over time is no small feat. Often, it requires a sea change in how tribal government works, how it serves its citizens, and the expectations citizens have regarding the role of government plays in enriching their lives. To take root and grow, it must have sustained investments of various types from all of the nation’s key players—its political leaders, programmatic leaders, employees, and most importantly, its citizens. Simply put, the people must be on board before the nation-building train leaves the station, and they must remain on board. As one synopsis of Native nation building surmises, “citizens’ faith in the integrity of their own government is the foundation of their support for that government. Without it, the government is on its own, separated from the people.”

Effective citizen engagement and education is critical to aligning—and maintaining alignment—between the nation’s workforce development approach and the will of the people whose job it is to serve. For that reason, more tribal governments are deploying innovative, culturally appropriate strategies to engage and educate their citizens, ensuring that they are learning what they need to learn from and about their people, and teaching their people what they need to know:

Learning: A tribal nation must go to great lengths to learn about its people (their needs, talents, and aspirations) if it is to provide compassionate, culturally relevant, person-centered workforce development services. Front-line workforce development practitioners committed to going above and beyond can play a key role in this regard, but the nation must design structural mechanisms to ensure that its workforce development efforts are informed by the people so those efforts can meet them where they’re at. Such mechanisms also need to provide citizens the ability to share their thoughts about how those efforts are progressing and ideas for how they could do better.

Teaching: Structured citizen engagement/education also enables the nation to keep its citizens informed about available workforce development services, job openings in tribal government and businesses, and the education and skills it most wants to cultivate among them. It also provides the ability to share back with the people how the nation has incorporated what it learned from and about them into the design/refinement of its workforce development efforts. Looking long-term, effective citizen engagement mechanisms and strategies also enables a nation to gradually reframe citizens’ expectations away from a “poverty” mindset to a “prosperity” mindset by teaching them that they all have inherent potential that the nation is committed to developing, they all have a lot to contribute to the nation (knowledge, skills, experience, and ideas) and an obligation to do so.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What is your nation doing to build citizens’ ownership in—and support of—its nation-rebuilding efforts generally and its workforce development efforts specifically? Is it working? Is it enough?
- Do your nation’s citizens currently engage tribal government in a constructive way? Do they share ideas for solutions as well as criticisms regarding how the government does it work? How could the nation improve those interactions?
- How is your nation working to obtain regular input from citizens about their workforce challenges and goals, and feedback from them about the nation’s workforce development efforts? What mechanisms does it rely on and are they effective at capturing the will of the people?
- What are your nation’s political and programmatic leaders doing to inform tribal citizens on an ongoing basis about its workforce development approach, how it works, changes to it, etc.? Does/how does your nation share regular reports on the progress its workforce development initiatives are making? Are they written in plain language so that all can understand them?

Innovation Snapshots

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST)

CRST struggles with severe unemployment and poverty, in part due to scarce job opportunities and barriers faced by CRST members seeking work. To tackle this dynamic, CRST launched a community inclusive planning process that gave rise to Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Ventures (TV), a long-term poverty reduction plan and tribal project. Based on a vision of prosperity, TV operates on the premise that you can’t help the people achieve it unless you truly understand them. To that end, TV has made structured, ongoing citizen engagement (learning from the people and then sharing what it learns with them) standard practice. Central to its effort “to create the story of our own community” is its “Voices” Research Project, which used household surveys to generate critical baseline data about CRST’s members, families, and economy. TV also partnered with the CDFI Four Bands Community Fund to conduct a reservation-wide workforce development survey. Its findings are being used to “develop a Reservation-wide strategy to increase the skills of individuals seeking permanent employment, while ensuring employers build their capacity to…hire and retain qualified employees.” So far, it has led to a partnership to provide targeted GED tutoring to CRST members and the creation of a day labor program for those seeking one-day, no-obligation employment.

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-crst
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Coeur d’Alene Tribe (CDA)

Key to CDA’s successful development and growth of its “Education Pipeline” approach to education and workforce development is its concerted effort to raise the Tribe’s expectations of its members—and prepare them to meet those expectations. This effort seeks to get CDA members who go to college to return home upon obtaining their degrees, and ensure they have a firm grounding in tribal culture and an abiding commitment “to serve as tribal advocates in their home communities” when they do. To this end, CDA partnered with Washington State University to create the “Visionary Leaders” Tribal Nation Building Leadership Program, which teaches four core values that the Tribe is working to instill in all tribal members. Among these values is “Membership,” which holds that “we be responsible, informed members…prepared to both lead and serve.” CDA also has partnered with the University of Idaho to offer a Federal Indian Law course at CDA’s Department of Education headquarters. Open to CDA members and other locals whether they’re seeking degrees or not, the course teaches about tribal sovereignty, how CDA exercises its sovereignty, and how CDA members and employees strengthen that sovereignty.

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Policy Recommendations

- Implement multi-pronged marketing campaigns to inform tribal citizens about new and revamped workforce development initiatives, how they work, and how they will benefit them and the nation.
- Hold regular open public hearings, citizen focus groups, and program participant advisory groups to learn how effective your workforce development efforts are, and how they could be improved.
- Use “captive audience” opportunities to obtain key input and information from citizens (mandatory questionnaires when they update their tribal enrollment, booths at community events, etc.).
- Conduct routine “program enhancement” surveys of program participants and community members and incentivize them to participate by providing modest rewards (gas vouchers, gift cards, etc.).
- Develop a formal social media policy (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) that enables tribal departments and programs to share key program messages/updates and job openings with tribal citizens in real time.
- Deploy concrete strategies to document and share the stories of successful workforce development program participants as professional role models that other tribal citizens can and should emulate.