TRIBAL GOVERNANCE Matters

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

As the Introduction (page 3) mentions, the growing body of research on Native nation rebuilding identifies “practical sovereignty” – the assertion of tribal decision-making power – as among the five main keys to successful, sustained economic and community development. When it comes to workforce development (a key part of economic and community development), sustained success depends, above all, on tribal control: the willingness and ability of a tribal nation to seize and exercise control over the programs and activities that work to develop its human capacity. More and more tribal nations, Native organizations, and TCUs are recognizing this fact – and acting on it. Taking control is an essential first step, but taking control of what exactly? For many, achieving practical sovereignty in workforce development means taking control of federal, state, and other programs designed by outsiders for other places and purposes that typically ignore reservation conditions and fail to account for tribal priorities.

As one might expect, these uniform, “outside in” approaches have a poor track record for a variety of reasons. Typically, for example, they were not designed with Native people and their specific needs in mind. As one tribal workforce development practitioner explains, “Many of the grants and contracts that we have to administer are framed in what it would look like in a major urban city in America. That’s not our reality.” These programs also define and measure success based on performance criteria (reporting requirements, metrics, etc.) that often aren’t relevant to the particular challenges, values, and goals of tribal nations. In addition, they are, by their very nature, risk-averse, which stifles their ability to adapt in order to find and sustain success over time.

Simply taking over administration of these programs won’t change how, and toward what ends, they function. And it can improve their effectiveness only so much. The challenge for tribal leaders and key decision-makers is how to build a truly self-governed workforce development approach, either from whole cloth or more likely by moving beyond self-administering programs in the same way that others did before them by fundamentally redesigning them. As one tribal leader frames it, “What are we doing differently in this time of self-determination, when supposedly we are in control, different from the times that we weren’t, that we were critical of?”

For those who have done it, forging such an approach is empowering. As one workforce development practitioner whose nation has embraced this challenge concluded, “We are no longer victims of our history. We are now impacting and directing where we are going as a tribe.”

“...more United to truly own, support, and drive it...”

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Quinault Indian Nation

“No right is more sacred to a nation, to a people, than the right to freely determine its social, economic, political, and cultural future without external interferences. The fuller expression of this right occurs when a nation freely governs itself.”

– Joseph DelaCruz (1937-2000), Former President, Quinault Indian Nation

INNOVATION SNAPSHOTs

Citizen Potawatomi Nation (CPN)

In 1996, CPN took full ownership of the workforce development programs serving its citizens and other local Native people. It established a 477 Plan that gradually merged nine federal grant programs into a single, tribal approach that advances CPN’s overarching goal of empowering their clients’ ability to become self-sufficient. Whereas before CPN had to turn some clients away because of the eligibility and funding restrictions of the federal programs it had been administering, today its self-determined approach flexibly leverages dollars to provide customized services to all of its clients based on their particular challenges. It’s also led to reduced administrative costs and more money spent on direct services. CPN recently expanded its approach, adding a workforce reintegration program for former felons that boasts a recidivism rate of less than 1%. It also features a fruitful partnership with CPN’s CDFI to help tribal citizens become small business owners. As CPN explains, moving its people towards self-sufficiency starts with “understanding your own tribe’s distinct needs, the needs of your people, which is something that a federal, uniform approach to workforce development can’t possibly account for.”

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-cpn

CONNECT: Margaret Zientek, Assistant Director, CPN Workforce & Social Services, mzientek@potawatomi.org

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT)

In the late 1990s, CSKT was wrestling with an unemployment rate that hovered at around 50 percent. Its disjointed assortment of federal grant and other social service programs – run by more than 20 separate agencies, each with its own priorities and particular workforce development functions – was failing to make a significant dent in that rate. In response, CSKT’s Tribal Council consolidated these programs into a single, new entity: the Department of Human Resource Development (DHRD). Its goal: design CSKT’s own, holistic approach to preparing CSKT members to work and then helping them to secure employment. Integral to this effort was DHRD’s takeover of state-administered programs that “weren’t working and make them work” for the CSKT people. Chief among these was TANF, which CSKT formally took over from the State of Montana through an MOU signed in December 1998. DHRD restructured the TANF program in accordance with CSKT’s distinct cultural, social, and economic priorities, and then worked to build the systems and know-how it needed to administer it effectively. In the two decades since, DHRD’s transformative work has helped to cut CSKT’s unemployment rate in half.

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-cskt

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Where do your nation’s workforce development programs come from? Who designed them?
- Do they currently reflect tribal values and needs and advance tribal priorities?
- Is your nation’s workforce development approach truly self-governed? Is it individual workforce development programs? Who has the final say on who they serve and how they operate?
- What will it take to make them self-governed? To make them truly tribal? To make them successful?
- Does your tribal nation have its own plan for workforce development? Why/why not? What would it take to develop and implement one, and for tribal leaders, workforce development practitioners, and citizens to truly own, support, and drive it?
- Do you have the human capacity (experience and technical know-how) to claim control of, redesign, implement, and sustain a self-governed approach to workforce development? If not, what steps do you need to take to build it?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of your current workforce development programs – both individually and as a whole – to determine whether and to what degree they reflect tribal needs and values and meet tribal priorities and criteria for success.
- Develop a self-governed, tribal plan for workforce development that includes existing programs and creates new ones where identified gaps exist.
- Methodically redesign existing programs to the fullest extent possible in order to tailor it to the nation’s current realities and its aspirations for the future.
- Not only allow but demand that programs take calculated risks to innovate to develop strategies, initiatives, and networks capable of addressing the nation’s distinct workforce development landscape, challenges, and priorities.
- Provide these efforts with the ongoing political, programmatic, and financial support they will need to forge and sustain success.

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PRACTICAL SOVEREIGNTY

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