



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

As with Native nation rebuilding generally, culture (i.e. “cultural match”) plays a vital role in self-determined, effective workforce development solutions.¹ Tribal nations that integrate their distinct cultures, core values, lifeways, and languages *in concrete ways* into their workforce development approaches enhance their ability to move the human capacity building needle in a positive, sustained direction. As discussed on pages 6-7, this is particularly critical when taking over programs administered by the federal and state government, for those programs don’t speak to tribal cultures or tap into their transformative power as mechanisms for overcoming challenges, strengthening families and communities, and guiding clients down paths to prosperous futures.

It’s no coincidence, then, that as tribal nations have exerted full control over their governance, more and more have recast their workforce development approaches to place tribal cultures at their functional cores. This can take many forms, from core values-based customer service (“caring for our own”) to providing program participants with tangible options to participate in cultural activities or education along with workforce education/training. For example, one nation’s TVR program asks applicants if they would like “the assistance of a person involved with Native healing or Spirituality to be involved with your rehabilitation planning?”² Most embrace the opportunity.

Such approaches recognize that those who seek workforce education/training often struggle with psychological trauma and cultural alienation that can only be remedied through a real connection to – and reliance on – their culture as the wellspring for personal and professional empowerment. As one workforce development practitioner explains, “When tribal members were taken away and their families split up and their children sent to boarding schools, they lost their culture. We’re finding that the culture can play a huge role in helping people heal and become self-sufficient.”³

The culture question not only entails determining where and how to infuse culture *into* your workforce development approach, but just as importantly, the *culture you seek to foster through that approach and what it says to your people about what your nation values and will value moving forward*. For many nations, this involves specific measures designed to uproot the entrenched dependency some citizens have on government and seed personal and familial self-sufficiency in its place. Growing this culture can be achieved in many ways, such as by: giving clients a “hand-up versus a hand-out” by requiring them to give something (community service, etc.) in return for the services they receive; forging work environments rooted in humility, mutual respect, and merit-based advancement; and attaching culture and service requirements to scholarship awards.



Coeur d’Alene Tribe (CDA) member Angelita Soto fillets a fish for distribution during the CDA Fisheries Program’s culturally rooted summer youth internship program, 2015. (Photo: Gina Vaughn)

“We hear it over and over again the importance of our culture and understanding that in our spirituality and what our roles are...We need to recognize that within the training that we provide.”

– Leander “Russ” McDonald, President, United Tribes Technical College

INNOVATION SNAPSHOTS



Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT)

Located in rural northern California, RVIT’s Tribal TANF program works to stabilize participants’ living conditions and remove their barriers to employment through hard skills training, health and wellness training and support, and job interview preparation so that they can get hired, enabling them to move from welfare dependence to independence. A few years ago, many TANF participants were struggling to comply with the program’s work requirements because of the time they spent engaged in seasonal subsistence hunting and fishing in order to provide for their families. In response, the TANF program’s leadership negotiated with ACF a revised definition of eligible work activities to “accept cultural participation” as countable work hours, a change that has enabled those participants to stay in program compliance while also fulfilling their cultural obligations.¹ This has led to higher rates of program completion among TANF participants and, in turn, the reduced dependency of needy parents on RVIT government for services. Round Valley also raised the poverty percentage threshold to enable its TANF program to help more of its people in need, particularly its working poor and their families.²

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-rvit>

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Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI)

Alaska Native corporation Sealaska and its non-profit arm SHI have developed a comprehensive educational program to promote academic achievement and improve the quality of life among the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian (THT) tribal members they serve. Undergirding this program are two core tribal values: (1) *Haa Shuká* (“Our Past, Present and Future. We honor our ancestors, and we recognize that we have responsibilities to our future generations”), and (2) *Haa Latseen* (“Strength of Body, Mind, and Spirit. An element of *Haa Latseen* requires that we educate and train our youth to prepare them to care for their families and communities”).¹ To enact these values, SHI awards undergraduate scholarships based on merit (instead of need), and successful applicants must demonstrate a knowledge of and commitment to THT culture. As part of the application process, they answer 25 multiple choice questions about Native history, with applicants’ scores determining how much scholarship funding each receives. Many SHI scholarship recipients go on to serve as Sealaska interns, and a number of them have become full-fledged “Language Learners” who take jobs in local school districts as educators who teach their Native language.²

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-sealaska>

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What cultural teachings and values does your nation convey/message through its workforce development approach writ large? Through its administration of particular programs? Are these readily accessible and understandable to your people?
- Where do the curricula your programs use to educate/train your people come from? Does it reflect/teach your nation’s culture/values? If not, what steps can you take to ensure that it does?
- Are your educators/trainers steeped in your nation’s culture? How can you build their knowledge?
- Do/how do your programs hold clients accountable to the commitment the nation is making in them through the workforce development services it provides? Could they be doing more?
- Are the ways that your clients are using – and benefitting from – the services that you provide appropriate given your nation’s culture and values?
- What core cultural competencies do your programs instill in your clients? When they complete education/training, do they understand how to apply them personally and professionally?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify the core cultural teachings and values you want to have serve as the basis for how you provide services. Assess and restructure your programs to integrate and advance them.
- Work with clients on long-range personal and professional goal setting (with achievable milestones) as a way of focusing beyond their immediate needs and challenges.
- Make social/emotional development a standard program component to support client resiliency.
- Infuse your nation’s history, culture, and values into your workforce education/training curricula. Consult tribal elders and other culture keepers to enrich the curricula’s design.
- Hold focus groups to learn if your programming is hitting the cultural mark and refine accordingly.
- Seed a culture of civic obligation by incentivizing program participants to contribute to the nation through assigned community service projects, community-based work experience placements, etc.
- Require that your scholarship recipients gain a prescribed set of cultural competencies; if feasible, give preference to scholarship applicants who can demonstrate fluency in your Native language.