

# Exploring Tribal Leadership: Understanding and Working With Tribal People

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## Interpretations, Implications and Recommendations For Extension Professionals

### *Interpretations of Tribal Leadership Themes*

#### *Theme 1. Traditional Tribal Leadership*

Tribal leadership is a shared leadership, organized by the clan system, guided and sustained by elders through the teaching of language and telling of stories. Tribal leadership is about role and relationships, the clan system, elders, women, families, children, moms and dads, chokas (grandpas) and kakas (grandmas), aunts and uncles. All have a role in the leadership of the tribe.

#### *Theme 2. Tribal Leader/Leadership Characteristics*

A true leader has vision, knows traditional ways, shares and develops leadership, serves and protects the tribal community, develops trust and shows respect for all tribal people. They are chosen in time of need because they have vision toward the future. A true tribal leader assumes a leadership role, not because he or she has chosen that leadership position, but because that leadership role has chosen him or her.

#### *Theme 3. Tribal Acculturation and Interventions*

The dominant society leadership has done much to force acculturation on tribal people. Tribal people, because of their desperate need to survive, have accepted acculturation to some extent. Boarding schools provided education, but it was the white man's education. Churches provided a place for tribal people to gather, but it was the white man's religion. Commodity food was provided and alcohol was cheap, but it has created many negative health conditions. Money was given to tribal members based on blood quantum, but there were very few jobs and not much acceptable job training. Finally, the dominant society allowed the existence of a tribal government, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs mandates the structure of this new government with strict compliance requirements.

### *Implications for Cooperative Extension*

There are some overall implications that should be recognized by Extension administration and educators when considering partnerships and program development with indigenous tribal populations.

#### *1. Extension Needs To Understand Tribal Leadership*

Learning about tribal leadership takes time, patience and requires listening to tribal people. Understanding tribal leadership involves letting go of most dominant white society leadership theories and leadership management ideas. An elder indicated, "A person should forget what they have been told about the outside world and what they read about Indian people and leadership. A person needs to come and listen to what people have to say." This implies that Extension leaders and professionals must have an open mind and be willing to learn (as well as teach) when developing relationships with tribal people and other indigenous culture populations.

#### *2. Extension Needs To Learn About Tribal Leaders*

It is important to learn about who tribal leaders are and what they do. Learning about who a tribal leader is and what he or she does could involve spending a considerable amount of time in the setting. Tribal leaders describe a true leader as, "One who mentors, shares leadership, develops leadership for others, builds consensus, leads by example, allows other people to take the lead, gives other people the opportunity to be in their position, and is the last one to eat at a meal." Extension leaders should know these characteristics when developing relationships with tribal leaders.

### *3. Extension Can Learn from Tribal Leadership Styles and Practices*

The application of tribal leadership styles and leader characteristics might be beneficial for non-tribal leaders. Extension leaders who are open to change are patient may find tribal leadership styles beneficial for making tough decisions currently facing Extension. However, leaders or organizations that are very time-oriented may have some difficulty with tribal leadership styles.

#### *Implications from Key Descriptive Words*

*Vision:* Vision in tribal leadership is about looking ahead to the future. A good leader has vision or insight into the future, seeing the future needs of the people. Tribal leaders have always had the vision to look ahead and plan and pray, not for themselves, but for everyone who is to come. This is what is meant when someone talks about praying for seven generations to come. This implies the need for Extension leaders to be pro-active, looking ahead to the future needs of their constituents.

*Shared Leadership:* Shared leadership involves all the informal leaders of the tribe. Informal leaders can be volunteers at community events and tribal ceremonies. A tribal leader knows when to step back from that leadership role and let someone else carry the load when needed. Shared leadership implies the need for all Extension professionals to be a leader when needed in their program area of focus (e.g., Focused Educators).

*Council of Elders:* The Council of Elders has been explained as a group of various leaders representing the tribal clans. Clans represent the various groups of tribal people within a tribal nation, responsible for various roles within the tribe. Traditionally, a council of elders would sit and make decisions based on people coming to them to seek advice and sometimes even adjudication. This is an organizational implication that could be compared a state Extension organization. Extension Deans and District Extension Directors may represent a Council of Elders. State program areas (e.g., Extension Action Teams) could be compared to the clans, each having a role in the organization.

#### *Recommendations for Cooperative Extension and Non-tribal Organizations*

Tribal leadership on the reservation is different than leadership in the *outside* or white man's world. Representatives from Extension and non-tribal organizations can best learn about tribal leadership by simply going to the reservation and spending time with tribal people. The following recommendations can help non-tribal audiences prepare for what to do when visiting the tribal environment.

- Be patient and expect time changes or postponements for scheduled meetings.
- Allow some time for a meal at the local restaurant, coffee shop or senior center.
- When introducing yourself, simply say your name, where you are from, and maybe something about your family. Do not give a complete vitae of information about yourself. Telling about your family is more important than telling about your job and credentials.
- Do a lot more listening than talking. It is better to walk-the-talk than to talk-the-walk.
- If you are asked to come to the reservation and give a presentation, remember that shared learning is important. You should devote at least as much time to listening and learning as you do to talking and presenting.
- Do not say you are a leader. Tribal leadership is not about, "I am the leader."
- Expect to change your ideas about leadership. If you don't expect to do this, then it is best not to make the trip.
- Remember, it is always important to sit down, share a meal, share life, and talk about things.

The recommendations from this study may or may not be generalizable to other tribal populations. However, the author recommends reading this article in its entirety before you visit a tribal community.

NOTE: A complete copy of the dissertation research by Dr. Jeff G. Hart can be found at: <http://2020-www.libfind.unl.edu.library.unl.edu/journals/iris/nebdis.html>. A Research in Brief article can be found in the Journal of Extension, located on-line at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2006august/a3.php>. Contact: [jhart4@unl.edu](mailto:jhart4@unl.edu)