

Promoting Strategic Thinking in American Indian Leaders

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Abstract

Native leaders are challenged with rebuilding, reuniting, and revitalizing their disseminated nations. The Native chief executive faces the tasks of asserting political sovereignty, protecting cultural rights, and improving the dire socio-economic conditions on American Indian reservations. Strategic thinking is essential to addressing these challenges. The Constraints Model proposed by Irving Janis has been expanded to include American Indian perspectives regarding errors leaders make in policymaking and crisis management. Characteristics and educational needs of Native leaders crucial for strategic thinking are discussed. Recommendations include encouraging Native leaders to participate in executive education programs and to incorporate tools such as the Strategic Analysis protocol in their nation building efforts.

The Case for Nation Building

The nation building approach underscores the fact that economic development is first and foremost a political challenge.¹ Leadership is a significant factor in successful economic growth. The development of stable institutions and policies, the creation of mechanisms for dispute resolution, the ability to disentangle tribal politics from the management of enterprise, the establishment

of an effective bureaucracy, and the ensuring of a cultural match, all require that human foibles be subjugated to the strategic pursuit of long-term goals.

The “jobs and income” approach has been shown to be detrimental to economic development.² Conditions of severe poverty that exist on Indian reservations create pressures to “get something going quickly” in order to provide jobs and make available the basic essentials of life. Most short-term job creation efforts come in the form of government grants or investors with special interests that have doubtful benefits for the tribe in the long term. Tribal thinking is often reactive in nature and short-term in scope.

American Indian nations and their leaders have assumed greater responsibility for self-governance since the early 1960s, mainly in response to the poor socio-economic conditions that continue to plague Indian Country.³ Self-determination resounds as the overarching policy directive in the twenty-first century. However, the return of governmental and political control to American Indian nations from the U.S. federal government has brought enormous nation-building responsibilities to Native chief executives.

Even though tribes are more autonomous, the power of Native nations is neither absolute nor secure. Self-determination is under constant attack on several fronts as Indian tribes remain subject to the will of the United States Congress, the federal courts and the states as evidenced in disputes over gaming.⁴

Native nations exhibit disparate rates of growth. Some nations are still dependent on federal transfer payments for their economy; others have developed their own economies. Some still await the federal government to recognize their sovereign rights, while others have asserted their rights aggressively. A number of Native nations continue to be unstable with violence the order of the day, while others have established political balance and harmony. A number continue their struggle to retain their language and culture; tragically, many have lost both. Regardless of the state of these nations, most see the Native chief executive as the person who can bring about positive change.⁵

Nation building is political and organizational in nature. The Nation building approach seeks to create an environment which attracts investors and in which businesses and individuals can safely pursue economic prosperity. For Nation building to be successful, Native leaders must enact practical sovereignty, build sound institutions, assume a proactive stance and engage in strategic thinking, practice effective leadership, and ensure cultural match.⁶

Accountability occurs when a nation controls its strategic decisions. However, with accountability comes stress: the stress of decision making in the face of disparate perspectives, the stress of living with the consequences of erroneous decisions, and the stress of building on the results of good decisions. Any stress accompanying strategic decisions increases the likelihood of errors.

Severe stress can lead to sacrificing freedom and granting extraordinary powers to those in control of the nation.⁷

The Need for Effective Strategic Thinking in Native Leadership

A strong case has been made for strategic thinking as essential to nation building.⁸ The definition includes the systematic analysis of assets and opportunities within the context of priorities and concerns.⁹ Strategic thinking encourages the transition from reactive thinking to proactive thinking. Reactive thinking has characterized tribal decision making in the absence of sovereignty. Acquiring a strategic perspective is critical to staying alive as a leader.¹⁰ Errors, blunders, delusions, personal flaws, fallacies, and misconceptions undermine strategic thinking.

Leadership is an elusive concept, with little having been written about it with regard to American Indian leaders. Leaders must assume the authority inherent in the role of leader. According to Ronald Heifetz, physician and lecturer at the JFK School of Government, social living rests upon authority for its viability.¹¹ Cultural match ensures that authority will be recognized and used in a politically consonant manner.

E.H. Schein, professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management, distinguished among leaders who are builders, maintainers and changers.¹² Builders need vision, conviction, and energy to give birth to a nation. Many tribal leaders are at the building stage.¹³ Maintainers use judgment, wisdom and skill in getting disparate groups to work together once the groundwork is laid. Tribes with working governance structure and engaged in economic development, need maintainers. Learning ability and personal flexibility are necessary for changers to update an organization that is no longer viable. Few tribes are at this point, given that the practice of practical sovereignty has only recently come into its own.

The Constraints Model

Irving Janis, a social psychologist and authority on decision-making, posed two questions relating to faulty strategic thinking. "When and why do leaders of large organizations make avoidable errors that result in faulty policy decisions? How can such errors be prevented or at least kept to a minimum?"¹⁴

Janis identified three categories of factors leading to errors by grouping George's lists of constraints into cognitive constraints, affiliative constraints, and egocentric constraints.¹⁵ Constraints spawn trade-off dilemmas in strategic thinking and policy decisions. For example, deadlines often result in obtaining inadequate information for decision-making thereby leading to errors in strategic thinking.

Cognitive constraints include: deadlines and time limits, issues that grow in complexity the more they are explored, multiple tasks that overwhelm the decision makers. Others are inadequate resources for data gathering, lack of dependable wisdom and advice, and ideological perspectives that disallow certain conclusions.

Affiliative constraints play upon the social needs of leaders and decision-makers to maintain the good will of internal and external stakeholders. The desire to wield power effectively in implementing changes and to be accorded proper status and support by the community can lead to socially acceptable yet improper decisions.

Egocentric constraints, also known as self-serving and emotive constraints, address the darker side of human nature. Greed, the need for control, the desire for fame, anger, revenge, and irrational exuberance all serve as deterrents to effective decision making. The need to cope with multiple stresses brought upon by the leadership role is also subsumed under emotive constraints.

The simplistic decision rules used by leaders to address the constraints may be as deleterious to decision making as the actual constraints. Adverse cognitive decision rules include using available information instead of searching for appropriate data, accepting the first solution that meets minimal requirements without examining alternatives, and relying on "nutshell briefings" from "experts" in order to save time and effort.

Affiliative decision rules include avoiding punishment or loss of face at all costs, rigging the outcomes of committee decisions, and engaging in "groupthink" in order to preserve group harmony regardless of the direction decision making is taking. Egocentric decision rules allow emotions and personal needs to color strategic thinking. Self-aggrandizement, retaliatory actions, unjustified bravado, unsupported optimism, defensive avoidance, and untimely abandonment are some of the manifestations of egocentric decisions.

Janis has proposed vigilant problem solving as an approach to avoiding errors by negating the effects of constraints on strategic thinking.¹⁶ The vigilant problem solving strategy requires a number of steps painstakingly detailed elsewhere.¹⁷ The approach can be summarized as follows: identify the real problem in a comprehensive way that takes into account values and goals; use reliable and appropriate information sources; analyze, reformulate, evaluate and select, all the while being aware of constraints; reach closure by obtaining internal validation and external commitment regarding the decision. Though obvious when stated, these steps are often ignored by the leadership or overshadowed by unacknowledged constraints.

In many cases, the real problem to be addressed is not the simple or most obvious one, nor should it represent the choice of special interests to the detriment of the community. Problem identification and selection requires thoughtfulness and vigilance on the part of leadership. The use of information in arriving at a decision demands vigilance against biases, carelessness and

indolence. Selling the decision requires full self-knowledge and profound knowledge of the community.

Vigilant problem solving assumes leaders will accept and work within the limits imposed by their own abilities, abilities of their colleagues, and inadequate organizational resources. Identification and acknowledgment of constraints before they negatively impact strategic thinking can come about within limiting environments and is essential, if the leaders are to engage in successful nation building.

American Indian Perspectives

For the Western Apache, wisdom is viewed as a survival tool. Wisdom is said to be grounded in a mental aptness that allows for the identification of inauspicious, yet unapparent, conditions that otherwise would lead to danger. The notion behind the concept of wisdom is that an ongoing contemplation of the symbolic dimensions of the physical environment leads to the development of three essential mental sets.¹⁸ The three sets comprise smoothness of mind, resilience of mind, and steadiness of mind.

Mental smoothness, exemplified by keen and unhurried reasoning, is the primary requisite for wisdom. Smoothness of mind can take place only when external and internal distractions are eliminated. Mental resilience negates the effects of fear and anxiety in individuals when they face adverse external events. Mental steadiness allows for clear thinking by individuals by abolishing self-serving emotions such as pride and hostility.

Manley Begay, an educator (and co-author) has produced the most comprehensive work available on profiling the current cadre of Native chief executives.¹⁹ Based on responses from 86 tribal chiefs, today's Native leaders are, on the average, married males with a median age of 49, embracing either Native worship or Christianity. All have a high school diploma and close to 40 percent have a bachelor's or advanced degree. Forty percent have served in the military and consider the experience a valuable one in coping with the demands of leadership. Their median salary is \$28,000, with their workweek averaging more than 41 hours. Approximately 25 percent collect no pay for their services as tribal leader. Generally, they have served as chief executives for a minimum of four years and have lived on the reservation for at least 25 years.²⁰

Their work backgrounds indicate little preparation for assuming leadership positions. Overall, when tribal chief executives stepped into their complex leadership roles, they often lacked the skills necessary for effective nation building.

Begay has proposed a framework on which to base an adult education curriculum for Native leaders. The three domains comprising educational needs include executive skills, personal abilities, and leadership knowledge.²¹ Five

sets of responsibilities have been defined as matters pertaining to government, communication, affinity, administration, and external and internal relations. The three functions are nation building, executive administration, and cultural leadership.²²

Leadership as Adaptive Work

Ronald Heifetz has made a case for the fact that leadership engages our values.²³ He reviewed the four approaches to understanding leaders and leadership: the “great man” or trait approach; the situationalist view or “times make the man;” contingency theory which links decision making style to situational contingency; and transactional approaches which focus on the relational dynamics of influence. Although proponents of these approaches may eschew values, Heifetz believes they are value-laden.

Heifetz has conceptualized leadership as adaptive work.²⁴ Adaptive work serves as a guide to goal attainment. Goals represent values. The idea is to focus on goals and mobilize people to face tough realities and conflicts. The most difficult and valuable task of leadership along with supporters and co-decision makers is the advancement of goals through strategic thinking in order to promote adaptive work.

Adaptive work requires having the ability to close the gap between values held by the community and the realities with which they must live. The principles of leadership proposed by Heifetz include identification of the adaptive challenge, i.e., the gap, regulating distress, disciplined attention to issues, and giving work back to the people.²⁵

Regulating distress involves factors such as understanding the causes, awareness of internal contradictions and the histories of those contradictions, and sensitivity to the community’s breaking point and insight into past solutions for restoring equilibrium. Attention to issues addresses the phenomenon of work avoidance, both by the people and by the leadership. Giving work back to the people requires them to address the changes they have to make in order to close the gap.

Heifetz has enumerated coping strategies for leaders experiencing personal stress.²⁶ One suggestion is that the leader “get on the balcony” as a reflective observer rather than always assuming the role of an active participant. Other strategies include distinguishing self from role, externalizing the conflict by focusing on issues, having confidants and allies, listening while being aware of one’s shortcomings and biases, finding a sanctuary, and preserving a sense of purpose.

Avoidable errors in policymaking and crisis management plague every formal unit, whether it is a small family business, a major corporation, or a government.²⁷ Executives responsible for such entities should find it useful to be aware of the conditions under which errors occur, the reasons underlying errors, and the

ways in which such errors take place. Leaders should also be concerned with eliminating common errors to which they and their advisors are prone, regardless of whether the advice comes from family, friends, tribal council members, elders, or outside experts and consultants.

Extending the Constraints Model

Vigilant problem solving is not alien to American Indian thought. The theoretical assumptions and practical conclusions of the two Western scholars, Janis and Heifetz, have much in common with the two Native perspectives articulated by Manley Begay and Keith Basso.²⁸

Begay has depicted current Native leaders, described the personal (internal) and environmental (external) constraints with which they have to cope while fulfilling responsibilities and advancing nation building, and listed the skills, abilities and knowledge necessary for effective leadership.²⁹ His goal is to develop a curriculum based upon his findings for the education and training of current and future leaders. He views the task primarily as one of adult education.

Basso pointed to smoothness of mind, i.e., keen and unhurried thinking, as a survival tool.³⁰ Basso also cited resilience of mind toward external stresses and steadiness of mind in coping with internal stresses as necessary to achieve smoothness.

Heifetz posited goals that reflect values and adaptive work as the guide to reaching the goals.³¹ He has articulated the personal stresses faced by those in leadership positions and has underscored the need for an ongoing learning strategy.

Janis has documented the constraints (cognitive, affiliative, self-serving and emotive) and the adverse decision making strategies that lead to errors in strategic thinking.³² He has proposed vigilant problem solving, which is depicted as a rational approach, as key to effective strategic decision making.

Effective strategic thinking is possible only when one has smoothness of mind (keen and unhurried reasoning) or, put another way, engages in vigilant problem solving. However, vigilant problem solving as defined by Janis reflects the Western mind set and not necessarily the rationality of the American Indian leader.³³ In fact, Shafir and LeBoeuf, both psychologists, have noted that people do not behave rationally when engaged in decision making and are often swayed by supposedly irrelevant factors such as mood and context.³⁴ Historian Donald Fixico has concluded that the Western emphasis on linear logic does not validly portray the prowess of the human mind and in fact stymies the identification of American Indian geniuses and intellectuals.³⁵

Expansion of the model by adopting the more global survival concept of Smoothness of Mind, rather than adhering to the narrow Western construct, vigilant problem solving, advances understanding of strategic thinking within both perspectives.³⁶ In order to achieve Smoothness of Mind, the leader must

be aware of and cope with constraints. Constraints come in two basic forms, external and internal. The interplay between the internal and external constraints makes the task of error identification and resolution even more difficult as it encourages the use of simplistic decision rules that undermine strategic thinking.

Figure 1 outlines the components for engaging in successful nation building. A feedback loop is implied by the model, with each of the three modules being enhanced by information gleaned from the other two through an iterative process. Each of the four scholars has addressed the three components to varying degrees. Selected aspects of their conceptualizations are highlighted for the expanded model.

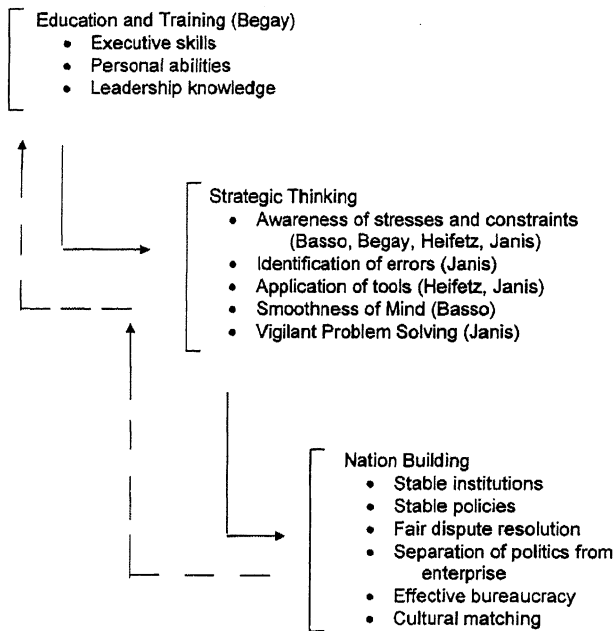


Figure 1: The Expanded Constraints Model for American Indian Leadership Engaged in Nation Building

The expanded model assumes an education and training curriculum in which the specific skills, abilities and knowledge necessary for attaining smoothness of mind have been articulated. Begay has set this process in motion by presenting a research and design model for an educational program for Native leaders.³⁷ See Figure 2. The early identification of stresses and constraints, the swift detection of errors, and the targeted application of available tools to resolve problems, are important components of training for survival. Only with smoothness of mind, can American Indian leaders undertake the strategic thinking required for nation building.

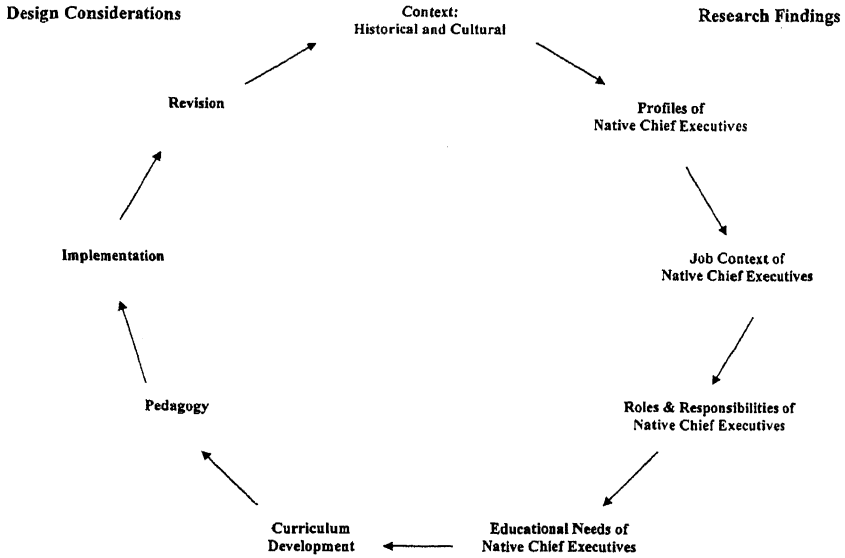


Figure 2: Research and Design Model of an Educational Program for Native Chief Executives

Inculcating Strategic Thinking in American Indian Leaders

The challenge that faces American Indian educators today is to apply Native wisdom in designing a curriculum which addresses directly the issues of identifying and disposing of errors plaguing strategic thinking during the process of nation building. Begay has identified skills, abilities and knowledge necessary for effective leadership, using data from interviews with tribal leaders.³⁸

Begay has also incorporated the knowledge gleaned from his work nationally and internationally with indigenous nations involved in nation building, to outline an adult-learning curriculum for the education and training of current and future American Indian leaders.³⁹ Some of the content has been incorporated into executive education seminars offered to leaders of Indigenous nations on leadership, governance, and economic policy in nation building. An analytical tool, “Strategic Analysis for Native Nations” is available for use by Native leaders seeking to develop solutions to difficult governance and development problems.⁴⁰

A number of questions have been posed by Begay. Who are the current Native American chief executives? More specifically, what are the educational, experiential, and individual backgrounds of these leaders? Which of them are successful as Native leaders?

What are the current job demands of Native chief executives? What political, educational, social, and cultural challenges do chief executives face?

What are the educational needs of current Native chief executives as perceived by them, and where do they currently go to receive education and training?

Finally, what are the implications for educating contemporary Native chief executives and other heads of state? What kinds of education initiatives are needed to assist them with the task of nation building?

The Native leaders interviewed by Begay mentioned appellations for leaders in six general categories: Head, Direction Giver, Boss/"One-In-Charge," Leader/Chief, Magical Person/Beloved, and "Think-With-Them"/Planner.⁴¹ These categories capture the historical meaning of native leadership from 11 tribal perspectives: Pueblo, Cheyenne, Anishnabe, Quinault, Comanche, Apache, Lakota, Blackfeet, Cherokee, Mojave, and Navajo.

The various definitions of leadership signify that tribes differ in their concepts of leadership, yet, fundamental connections do exist. First of all, Native meanings of leader do not imply the accumulation of wealth (property and goods). Rather, what is emphasized is the prominent community position. This role is based on a sense of respect, celebrated standing, and accomplishments.

Second, Native leadership terminology determines a proactive approach by using terms such as "to direct" and "leads the people." Third, a Native leader facilitates activity with the people, rather than commanding or wielding power over them. Leadership enhanced by both "male" and "female" components is a fourth link shared in Native definitions. And finally, the religious and spiritual aspects of leadership are central in Indigenous communities.

Many current Native leaders had administrative and management jobs immediately before they became chief executives. Another large portion of Native leaders came directly from tribal council positions. The rest held an assortment of positions prior to chief executive, including construction laborer, engineer, grant-writer, community worker, and counselor.

The paths contemporary Native leaders took to become Native chief executives indicate that most were not adequately prepared for the challenges of nation building. The jobs held immediately prior to taking up the position of Native chief executive only minimally prepared current leaders. Some were prepared managerially, administratively, and politically, but none were prepared to take on the formidable task of Native chief executive leadership. This is not to say that they did not gain the skills on the job; but coming into the position, they all lacked experience related to nation-building, strategic thinking, executive administration, and cultural leadership.

This information leads to the following conclusions regarding design of appropriate educational programs. First, the leaders have a relatively low level of educational preparation. Sixty-two percent of Native chief executives surveyed do not have a bachelor's degree.

Second, since the median age of Native chief executives is 49 years of age, current leaders are in fact, adult learners. Adult learning techniques, pedagogues, and curricula are needed for any educational program to be successful.

Additionally, there will be a new cadre of Native chief executives who will have different historical, cultural, social, and educational experiences from their predecessors. The new leaders will be operating in a profoundly different historical context and will contemplate its specific policy and development issues, from their perspectives. These changing demographics affect the ways in which tribal leadership training and education will be structured, currently and for the future.

Third, an examination of the career paths Native leaders took to reach the office of Native chief executive revealed that they are not well prepared for the challenges of nation-building which include strategic thinking, executive administration, and cultural leadership. Their preparation has been minimal and mostly in managerial, administrative, and political arenas.

The lives of Native chief executives are complex, driven by issues arising from history, culture, politics, policy development, economics, and law. Their fast paced days demand executive skills, personal abilities including patience and stamina, and knowledge required of leaders for nation building.

Success as a Native leader is dependent upon nine factors: 1) advocacy for Native sovereignty and rights, 2) excellent communication skills, 3) establishment of an effective and efficient system of tribal government, 4) promotion of integrity by self example, 5) maintenance of a reliable support network, 6) cultural knowledge and sensitivity, 7) possession of recognizable leadership qualities, 8) people skills and 9) evidence of progress in development.

The three primary categories of the educational needs of Native chief executives have been identified as leadership knowledge, executive skills, and personal abilities. The five areas of responsibilities are 1) matters of government, 2) communication, 3) affinity, 4) administration, and 5) external and internal relations. Combining educational needs with leadership responsibilities yields a body of data which can serve as the basis for curriculum development for Native chief executives. The proposed framework for curriculum development is presented in Figure 3.

Examples of topics to be included within the curriculum are grouped by primary function (nation building, executive administration, and cultural leadership). Topics pertaining to leadership knowledge that correspond to nation building include: 1) understanding and advocating political sovereignty, 2) reviewing and preparing constitutions, 3) analyzing and developing policy, 4) understanding politics, 5) negotiating, 6) promoting economies, 7) building alliances, 8) planning strategic development, 9) relating to the public, 10) making strategic decisions, 11) understanding diplomacy, 12) comprehending political and legal relations, and 13) communicating as heads of state.

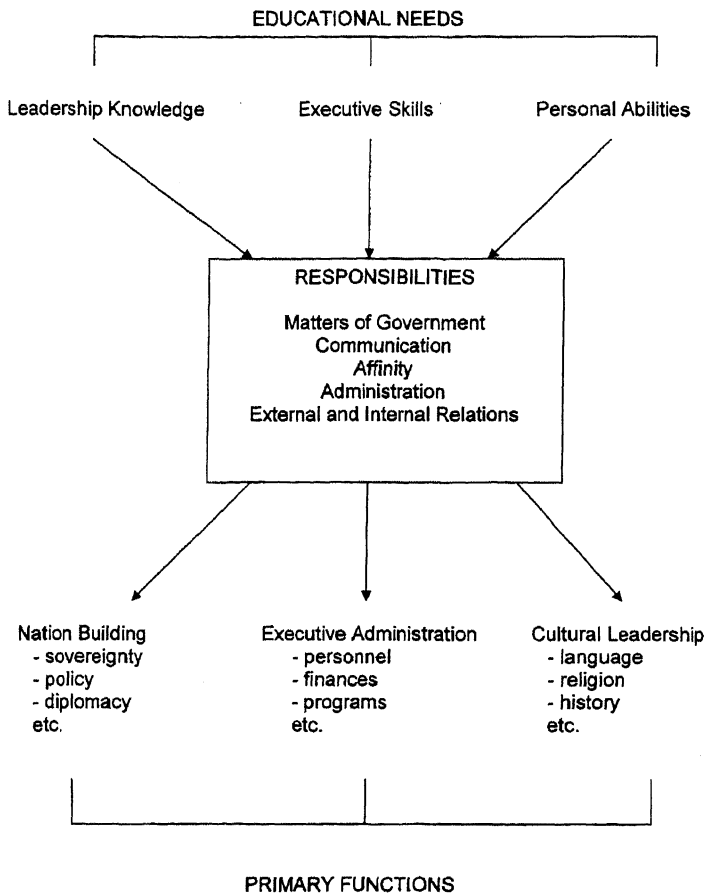


Figure 3: Proposed Framework for Curriculum Development for Native Leaders

Topics to be covered within executive administration that relate to the executive skills areas include: 1) implementing programs, 2) managing personnel, 3) organizing and overseeing office procedures and operations, 4) understanding strategic planning, 5) managing finances, 6) developing and overseeing tribal organizations, 7) communicating as an administrator, and 8) establishing and maintaining Board/Council relationships.

Topics addressing personal abilities that correspond to cultural leadership include: 1) possessing knowledge about tribal history, 2) understanding and speaking the Native language, 3) being familiar with the cultural and religious practices of the people, 4) knowing how to be available to the people, 5) communicating cross-culturally, and 6) relating to diverse groups of people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Nation building is first and foremost a political process muddied by human nature at play. Successful nation building mandates strategic thinking. Strategic thinking must integrate awareness of constraints and the simplistic decision rules used to cope with the constraints that lead to errors in policy making and crisis management. Avoidable errors occur at all levels of an organization and within all types of leadership. Native leaders must learn to think strategically and rise above the reactive short-term mentality that leads to quick and mostly ineffectual fixes in the face of poverty.

Constructs relevant to strategic thinking from both Western and American Indian sources have been incorporated into the expanded Constraints Model and linked to successful nation building. Vigilant problem solving was enhanced by the addition of the Western Apache concept of Smoothness of Mind in order to align the model with American Indian perspectives. The constraints identified have been validated by the four sources as applicable to both Western and American Indian leaders engaged in decision making. It is hoped that the model will serve as a resource for curriculum development within the area of strategic thinking.

Executive seminars, workshops, and forums should benefit from integrating the expanded Constraints Model within their curricula. Insightful case studies such as those incorporated into the executive education seminars offered by the Native Nations Institute are excellent vehicles for presenting the concepts put forth by the Model.

Success stories bring hope to Native nations attempting to overcome the effects of long-term poverty and creating a better life for its citizens. The Honoring Nations awards program identifies, celebrates and shares outstanding examples of tribal governance. The honors were first awarded in 1999 and are presented annually to 16 selected applicants. Efforts recognized by the awards cover a wide range of initiatives and include maintaining an elder's cultural advisory council, creating a suicide intervention team, establishing a pharmacy on-line billing initiative and leveraging gaming profits by promoting a private sector economy.⁴²

Spreading the word about successes within Native nations helps to identify valuable resources and serves as an inspiration for others wishing to pursue similar paths. Making known such success stories sends a strong message to Indian Country not to give up on nation building.

Notes

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18. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).
19. Begay, *Leading By Choice, Not Chance*.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Janis, *Crucial Decisions-Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management*.
28. *Ibid.*; Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*; Begay, *Leading By Choice, Not Chance*; and Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*.
29. Begay, *Leading By Choice, Not Chance*.
30. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*.
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32. Janis, *Crucial Decisions-Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management*.
33. *Ibid.*
34. E. Shafir and R.A. LeBoeuf, "Rationality," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002): 491-517.

35. Donald L. Fixico, "Call for Native Genius and Indigenous Intellectualism," *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, 1 (1) (2000): 43-59.

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