

A Native Leadership Perspective – Creating a Leadership System in Native Communities

By Al Nygard, President & CEO, Al Nygard Consulting

There are literally thousands of Anglo American pundits today who espouse a particular method of leadership that “works”. There are many leadership theories; trait theory, behavioral and style theories, situational and contingency theories, functional theory, and transactional and transformational theories, participative theory, great man theory to name a few. There are a seemingly infinite number of leadership styles as well; servant leadership, bureaucratic leadership, situational leadership, participative leadership, charismatic leadership, quiet leadership, sea gull leadership, mushroom leadership, etc. There are managerial grids, normative models, leadership inventories, social learning skills, and scales to be compared with to understand exactly what your particular style is based on your “personal makeup”. In short, leadership has become a business, not a skill or attribute.

Is it any wonder we hear so many Native people lament “where are all our leaders?” Many of those same pundits, as well as those who mean well, attempt to cram a particular style down our Native American throats in an attempt to help. There is a dramatic difference between Anglo leadership and Native leadership. Two central concepts set them apart. First, the Anglo world aspires to leadership, they seek it out. Second, the Anglo world seeks to hold leadership for as long as they can. In the Native world, leadership is not sought; rather it is given and then for a prescribed period of time or until a particular result is attained. This cultural construct is central to the debate of Anglo versus Native leadership.

As Native people we do share some similar leadership dynamics and elements that are needed for effective leadership. The need for shared values, the power of a vision, the ability to rally people to action all is common. It is the way in which we exercise leadership is where we diverge from the Anglo-American world.

In the context of community, particularly Native American communities, leadership is one of the most often cited voids. Today, when you ask people in Native communities who are the leaders in their community they typically list elected officials and members of various boards. That is then followed by how those leaders many times forget or ignore the people of the community. But when you drill down deeper into the inner workings of the community you find a tapestry of leadership – just with a different name.

The future of Native leadership and Native leadership development lies in our past. That tapestry of leadership in Native communities has a tendency to mirror the past. You find headmen, clan representatives, keepers of spiritual and cultural tradition, school organizations as well as fledgling movements of various types that address social issues in the community. As you examine how our villages were socially constructed you find a closed loop of leadership on multiple levels. Typically there were leaders of the village, advisors to the leaders, those who looked out for the welfare of the people, those who protected the common interest, those who informed the people, those who regulated the village, and those who enforced the will of the people. All these positions were appointed and none were long term appointments. No one in the village sought out those positions. Rather acceptable candidates were asked to assume those positions.

The prerequisites were personal attributes displayed by prospective candidates that mirrored shared values of the village for that particular position.

Our work with Native communities has identified seven attributes central to effective and healthy Native communities. They are trust, communication systems, leadership systems, governance, lateral oppression, the effects of racism and equality, and the degree of hurt and balance in the community. Central to effective Native community development and empowerment is community leadership coupled with community capacity and community cohesion. These three elements lead to sustained community systemic change and action. Community leadership is the glue and catalyst in the community.

Creating a Native community leadership system is critical to maintaining balance in the community. A leadership system has several facets; identifying new and emerging leaders, selecting leaders, developing leadership, filling the leadership pipeline, succession planning, leadership direction, and evaluation the impact of leadership. This system allows for a healthy and dynamic Native leadership paradigm to develop locally that meets the needs of the community in a culturally appropriate manner that is owned locally. In short, each place is different and each place needs to develop their own way – “our way of doing”.

Our past holds many keys to our future. It is not just happenstance that we have survived so many blatant attempts to eliminate us. It is our culture and spiritual constructs that have enabled us to remain. The same is held true for our future and our future leaders. Let’s take a look at the leadership system in the context of the past.

- Identifying new and emerging leaders – this element allows for the community to keep in touch and develop fresh ideas and maintain a keen reflection of the community. In the past the village had to have a certain way of keeping order. This order ensured the protection and survival of all in the village. Patience was a valued personal asset. The ability to keep your cool was admired. Carelessness was not an admirable trait.
- Selecting leaders – who should be our leaders? Who has the specific skills and personal attributes we need? In the past social, spiritual and political considerations were blended into one. There were very high ethical standards and an incredible amount of responsibility expected of those given leadership in the village. There were distinct values that were sought – bravery, fortitude, generosity and integrity. Leaders were those who exemplified the virtues and values of the people – and were expected to live them every day.
- Developing leadership – Communication skills, the ability to motivate, team building, problem solving, conflict resolution, the ability to manage change, and to be creative are all contemporary needs of today’s Native leaders. In the past leadership was to assume a hard way of life. A life that meant personal sacrifice and a reflective journey that placed all else in front of you. Leadership was to emulate those exemplary leaders of the time. That meant to seek them out and learn from them and their example. Leadership was to forget oneself. Spirituality was the road map.
- Filling the pipeline – means supporting, involving, mentoring and guiding, recognizing and creating opportunities for leadership in the community. In the past prospective candidates were observed by the entire village for admirable

- traits. Those candidates were then mentored and guided by the entire village. In essence, everyone in the village had the opportunity to be called upon. There was a prescribed order and ample opportunity to prove oneself.
- Succession planning – is not so much about the individual as it is about the need(s) of the community. Considerations such as who and what do we care about, why do we care about that, when do we care about that, where is the source of that care – social, political, economic, etc., how much do we care. In the past leadership succession was by lineage, but not always. Families at that time had prescribed roles within the village and lineage succession made use and access of families that were responsible for particular facets of village life. Consensus ruled to maintain harmony. Seeking “council” of those deemed as wise was common. The good of the people was THE main importance above all else. Peer selection was common.
 - Leadership direction – how and where do we want our leaders to lead us? In the past leaders were charged with the communal harmony and welfare of the band/tribe. Leaders were expected to be selfless benefactors of their people. Leadership direction was based on human and individual needs. The central aim was to bring ease and comfort in equal measure to all.
 - Evaluating the impact of leadership – how do we know if our leaders are making a positive impact for us? The best of intentions and meaning cannot be measured and measurement misleads us when we apply it indiscriminately. In the past the evaluative metrics were applied to values. Bravery was measured by an individual’s war deeds. Generosity was measured by how one took care of the people. Fortitude was measured by the temperament of the individual. Integrity was measured by individual behavior and honesty. Individuals were also measured by their ability to encourage people and their skills with dispute resolution. The full measure of leaders as they assumed the leadership position was many times encapsulated by asking and evaluating the sincerity of the individual when asked if they were willing to give their life for the people.

Creating a leadership system locally allows Native communities to empower themselves. It also allows the community to expand their notion of leadership beyond the elected folks and those appointed to various boards. In order for an effective community leadership system to emerge there cannot be a one size fits all approach. Each tribe, and in most cases each community, needs to establish the culturally specific and traditionally appropriate approach that reflects them as a people. We are as diverse as the stars as Native people. Each place and each people need to establish the appropriate leadership system as they see fit in their cultural context. Only the community can determine a particular method of leadership that “works”.

Al Nygard is the President & CEO of Al Nygard Consulting (ANC) a management consulting firm based in Bismarck, ND. ANC is a Native American owned firm specializing in culturally sensitive approaches to management, planning, and development. They have developed a process that empowers Native communities toward action and community empowerment with remarkable results. They are one of the Nation's experts in this work. Mr. Nygard is an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation of Fort Berthold. Mr. Nygard sits on the boards of Empowerment First and the Northern Plains Initiative. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Sitting Bull College.