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LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

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INTRODUCTION

The following outlines the key findings from interviews with 15 tribal leaders and tribal communications officers across the country. The conversations focused on exploring how communications helps them in their daily work, how the communications playing field has changed over the years and how they have adapted, how they overcome barriers and what the tools and activities are that make them more effective leaders and communicators.

“How effectively we communicate depends on how well we adapt our long history of storytelling into persuasive messages that move the people we need to move. We must deliver strong and compelling messages consistently if we expect to have an impact on the issues we care about.”

Joe Garcia,
Ohkay Owingeh, N.M.

HOW BEST TO LEAD IN AN EVER-CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Be humble.

Job and title do not define you. Your desire to help your people does. We consistently heard that tribal leaders felt it was an honor and a privilege to lead and represent their citizens. They also noted that given the extraordinary pressures of leadership and the amount of time it takes, there is very little room for ego.

Listen and learn.

You don't, and can't, know it all. Let people help you become educated on the issues, history and potential direction you might take as a tribe. Never promise what you can't deliver.

Build strong relationships with elected officials and their staff.

Nothing can take the place of a personal relationship. It is important that the relationship becomes yours and not that of your lawyer/lobbyist. Whether it is your member of Congress or staff member at the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Department of the Interior, people should know who you are when you walk in the door. As one leader said, “You need to be able to navigate from the courthouse to the White House.” It is also important to build these relationships in advance of needing something.

“We must be honest and transparent if we want to engage other communities. Always acknowledge the work being done by the person contacting you; strong relationships come from trying to understand another person's point of view.”

Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy,
The Confederated Tribes of
Grand Ronde, Ore.



Understand how the political system works.

Given the complexity of policy issues and the lack of time leadership has to spend understanding these issues, it is often hard to find the time to fully understand how the political system works. Leadership in government requires understanding how an elected official is thinking, what the role of the staff is to move an issue, and the role and power of committee chairs; all are essential for understanding how to effectively use your power as a sovereign nation. This will also help you develop your messages to these leaders.

Balance local versus national priorities.

Leaders expressed the importance of juggling the double-shift of tending to the home-front and being in Washington, D.C. to take on important issues at the federal level. Communicating how successful efforts in Washington D.C. impact local on-the-ground issues can help answer many questions from interested citizens.

Engage the media by building trust relationships.

Based on a long history of being burned, there is a reluctance to trust the media. Several leaders attested that their comfort in dealing with the media comes from the relationships they have built with individual reporters over the years. Talk with other leaders about the relationships they have with reporters who do a good job of reporting fair and balanced stories that represent tribal issues fairly.

WHAT WORKS

Understand how to deliver a message.

Keeping your message short and clear and repeating it at every opportunity is critical to reaching your target audiences. Understanding that saying less can produce better results is an important lesson that was brought up in a number of conversations.

Have the right staff and reporting structure to streamline decision-making.

The most confident leaders have clearly defined leadership teams and reporting structures. The roles of the vice-chair, chief of staff and lawyer/lobbyist are clear. How best to communicate activities to tribal council, staff and tribal citizens was seen as equally important by leadership. Given the general mistrust in government by citizens, many leaders noted the most dangerous thing to do is to take internal audiences for granted.

“Our future success as tribal nations is directly linked to how effectively we communicate, and advocate for, the issues important to all of our people. Tribal nations and tribal organizations will always be stronger when we can speak with one voice – one that is strong, unified and clear.”

Jefferson Keel,
Executive Board President,
National Congress of American Indians
Chickasaw Nation, Okla.

“Lengthy oratory no longer works as a message deliverer. We must reach and influence our audiences in their environment, through their outlets. Messages must be short and succinct if they are to be effective. Less can be more.”

Chairman Ron Allen,
Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, Wash.



Be prepared.

Both leadership and communications officers expressed the need to be prepared. Whether it's background information on people with whom you are meeting, talking points, agendas, schedules or fact sheets that identify and answer difficult questions, tools that help create an increased level of comfort for leadership are increasingly important.

Have an agreed upon plan that can serve as a roadmap.

We heard from a number of people that using an agreed-upon strategic plan or a strategic communications plan as a guide for making decisions allowed their tribes to have a greater focus. Transparency to all audiences on accomplishments and outcomes stands as an important factor that cannot be overlooked.

You become a better leader when you share your power and your leadership.

As one leader said, "Be a stream, not a reservoir." Understand that effective leadership means distributing power and responsibility whenever possible. As another leader said, "It is important to play the role of referee on tough decisions but let your leadership team lead whenever possible." Leadership training was also seen as invaluable.

Educate your leadership.

There is a need to educate leadership through in-depth trainings on ethics, leadership, financial literacy, federal policy and other issues. There is a consensus that the new wave of emerging leadership will be more effective if there is a clear understanding of their tribes' history, the history of relationships with the state and a clear understanding of federal policy.

Electronic communications are an important tool.

Both leaders and communications officers felt the effective use of electronic tools (web, smart phones, YouTube, live-streaming, Facebook, etc.) allowed for more timely communications and decision-making. However, apprehension exists as to how and when to implement social media tools, due to the fear of losing control and legal ramifications.

"The first step in engaging your community is to be a good neighbor. Open your doors. Show up at local events. And through it all, add a personal touch."

Nancy Conrad,
Press Secretary,
Agua Caliente Band of
Cahuilla Indians, Calif.

"In my experience, the best presentations by leadership are those that are clear, concise and to the point. When leadership is comfortable with a presentation, they also are more confident in delivering their messages."

Todd Antioquia,
Director of Corporate Communication,
Sealaska Corporation, Alaska

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