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Exploring Tribal Leadership: Understanding and Working with Tribal People

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Exploring Tribal Leadership: Understanding and Working with Tribal People

Abstract

The article provides important educational information for Extension professionals who work with Native American audiences. It is based on findings from observations, conversations, and interviews with tribal people. Educational information about tribal leadership and culture, developed from the research, is provided for Extension professionals. Tribal leadership is a shared leadership, organized by the clan system, guided and sustained through the teaching of language and telling of stories. The article provides interpretations, implications, and recommendations for Extension administration and educators when considering partnerships and program development with tribal populations.

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Introduction

Understanding and working with tribal people can be important for Extension professionals who deliver educational programming in Native American communities. It is important for Extension to provide educational information that is research based. This article provides research-based implications and recommendations for working with Native American tribal people.

The article begins with a Methodology section that provides background information about a research study completed by the author that explored indigenous tribal leadership; the tribe's history, culture, and traditions; and how it has been affected by acculturation from the dominant society. The Findings and Discoveries section gives the reader a better sense of tribal culture and leadership. The research specifically explored leadership with the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. However, the Interpretations, Implications, and Recommendations section may be applicable to several Native American or other indigenous cultural populations who are potential audiences for Extension partnerships and educational programs.

The majority of the dominant white/Caucasian culture know little about indigenous tribal leadership in North America. This lack of knowledge and experience in working with tribes and tribal leaders have often produced the following results: negative opinions and attitudes, impatience with timing and deadlines, and the development of programming by the dominant culture's government, institutions, and organizations that are not accepted by tribal people.

This more in-depth exploration of indigenous tribal leadership discovered cultural characteristics and practices that can contribute to a better understanding and a more harmonious relationship between tribes and non-tribal organizations. Having a better understanding of tribal leadership practices can improve communication and the ability of Extension and land-grant institutions to work more cooperatively and progressively with tribal nations. Knowledge of these leadership practices could specifically help to strengthen partnerships between leaders of 1862 land-grant institutions, tribal governments and 1994 land-grant institutions.

Methodology

Research Design

The research followed an ethnographic design. Ethnographic studies or "ethnographic designs are qualitative research procedures for describing, analyzing, and interpreting a cultural group's shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time" (Creswell, 2002, p. 481). Specifically, this was a microethnography study, which is a type of ethnographic design focused on a specific aspect of a cultural group or setting (Creswell, 2002). The study followed a realist ethnography (Creswell, 2002) form of ethnographic design where the researcher reports on what is observed or heard from participants and produces participant views through edited quotations (p. 484).

Population

The population for this research was tribal members of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. The population is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Winnebago Tribal Population

Population Group	Defined As	Number
Tribal Council Members	Current and past members	25
Tribal College Presidents	Current and past members	5
Tribal Historians	Identified by Tribal Council	1
Tribal Elders	Usually Age 65 and older	60
Tribal Spiritual Leaders	Identified by Tribal Historian	6
Total Tribal Reservation Population	According to 2001 Tribal Census	1600

Extension in Thurston County, Nebraska

All of Thurston County is located on Indian Reservation land consisting of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska Reservation and the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska Reservation. Three of the seven communities in the county have a population of at least 95% Native Americans. The Extension county office is located in one of those three communities. The total county population was 7,142 according to the 2002 census. The tribal member population on the reservations in the county is about 4,600. Therefore, about 64% of the county's population to be potentially served by Extension is Native American.

Participants

Twenty-one tribal members from Winnebago completed formal recorded interviews. Table 2 indicates how these participants were represented in the various aspects of gender, age, and tribal leadership.

Table 2.
Summary of Interview Participant Demographics

Participant Demographic Descriptors	Number of Participants Represented
Male	16
Female	5

Age 30-39	3
Age 40-49	3
Age 50-59	2
Age 60-69	9
Age 70 and above	2
Current or previous Tribal Council member	10
Member of tribal organization	21
Spiritual leader	2
Elder	4
Winnebago Tribal member	18
Member of other tribes	3

Data Collection and Analysis

Formal data collection was focused on: 1) document reviews, 2) observations, 3) conversations, and 4) in-depth interviewing. Models and techniques used for analyzing and interpreting data included the following.

1. Text Analysis or Transcription (Creswell, 2002): This is the process of converting audio recordings and field notes into text data.
2. Coding (or Themes) Process (Creswell, 2002): The object of the coding process is to make sense out of text data and to develop themes.
3. Conveying Personal Reflections (Creswell, 2002): Personal interpretations of the researcher were used to interpret the data from the findings and to develop and interpret themes.
4. Making Comparisons with the Literature (Creswell, 2002): The literature was important in the early stages of data collection. The researcher's interpretations also contain references to the literature.

Findings and Discoveries

Context of the Study: The Findings Environment

It is important to understand the environment and conditions under which the researcher gathered the findings. The Winnebago Indian Reservation is located in Thurston County, a rural county in Northeast Nebraska. Businesses in Winnebago include two tribal-owned gas stations, a tribal-owned grocery store, and a new Dollar General store. Many tribal offices, departments, and institutions are located in the town. The majority of Winnebago tribal members live in the town of Winnebago and the immediate surrounding area.

Two general approaches were necessary for the collection of data: 1) scheduling appointments for interviews or 2) calling ahead, drop-in and visit with tribal people. Conducting formal interviews was often a challenge. The researcher learned to "go with the flow" when visiting the reservation.

Tribal Leadership Themes

Tribal leadership themes were developed from key descriptors found in transcribed conversations and interviews. Three categories or themes were identified.

Theme 1. Traditional Tribal Leadership

Theme 2. Tribal Leader/Leadership Characteristics

Theme 3. Tribal Acculturation and Interventions

The descriptive words and phrases used most frequently in transcribed conversations and interviews are summarized in Table 3. They are listed according to the theme areas developed.

Table 3.
Tribal Leadership Themes and Key Descriptive Words

Theme Area	Key Descriptive Words Used Most Frequently by Participants
Theme 1: Traditional Tribal Leadership	Clans, elders, family, chiefs, Winnebago people, women, tribal council/council of elders, Hochunk Nation, warriors, battles, culture, grandpas and grandmas, shared, language and stories
Theme 2: Tribal Leader/Leadership Characteristics	Education, role, vision, respect, teach, spiritual, protect, caring, serving, battle, follower, choose, true leadership, responsibility, traditional, trust, listen, earned, veteran
Theme 3: Tribal Acculturation and Interventions	Elected/elections, education, money, BIA, government, battle, moved/relocated, white man, boarding school, alcohol, vote/popular vote, health, political, church, reservation, allotment

Findings Compared to the Literature

The study involved an extensive review of literature. The following is a sample of literature that verified some of the findings.

1. Clanship and families were found to be high on the list as descriptors for traditional leadership in this study. Johnson (1963) confirms this: "Tribal Council leadership is often dominated by extended families or bands (clans)" (120-125).
2. Wise councils, spiritual leaders, and elders were essential to the organization of a tribe, as found in the study. "The elders know the old ways, they can help" (Haase & Whirlwind Soldier, 1993, p 22). "Always remember who you are and to respect and appreciate your elders" (Piper, 1995, p. 86).
3. Being a role model and having vision ranked high on the list of descriptive words for a tribal leader in the study. Having vision refers to looking ahead to the future and seeing the needs of the people. "A Leader possesses vision and focuses on mission, serves as a role model for others, and enables others to take action" (McLeod, 2002, p. 13).
4. The study found that a tribal member often became a tribal leader because of the needs of the tribe, such as the need for a war chief in times of war or a civil chief in times of peace. "Ancestral leaders emphasized the needs of the tribe, not individuals" (Martin, 1993, p. 24).
5. The findings of the study revealed the importance of the oral tradition in maintaining traditional tribal leadership, despite the dominant society's emphasis on written documentation. "During the course of the last several centuries, oral tradition has continued in an unbroken chain for many peoples and this sometimes conflicts with written records documented by settlers, missionaries and anthropologists, each of whom transcribed speeches and reminiscences through the prism of his or her own beliefs and codes" (Fleet, 2000, p. 4).

Quotes and Stories from Tribal People

The richness of the findings was found in the many quotes and stories told by the Winnebago people. This section presents sample quotes for each of the Tribal Leadership themes.

Theme 1: Traditional Tribal Leadership

"Leadership is based on the knowledge of knowing your community, knowing your people, knowing the visions, and knowing the culture." A tribal council member talked about the importance of knowledge as a base for leadership in order to see the large picture and look into the future for the needs of the people.

Theme 2: Tribal Leader/Leadership Characteristics

"A true leader not only mentors for the people who are following, but also shares the leadership and develops the leadership within the group or the membership." This tribal councilman was responding to what is meant by shared leadership. Sharing leadership means providing opportunities for all people to be in leadership roles relating to family, extended family, clans and community.

"If you want to be a leader, you have to also be the guy who is cleaning up the place. A true leader is a great follower. If you can't follow, how in the heck can you lead?" A tribal councilman and tribal elder contributed this quote. The quote indicates that a leader, who was also a follower, was someone who would listen to others, ask them for their opinion and suggestions, and allow them to be involved in making decisions.

Theme 3: Tribal Acculturation and Interventions

"I asked my Grandma, 'Why didn't you teach me those words when I was little?' She said, 'Who you gonna talk to? All those old Indians are dead.'" A tribal spiritual leader told about his grandmother's response when he asked her why she did not teach him the language. It was another example of how the white man had beaten the Indian out of the Indian.

"Those church people who ran the children's home used to put this soap in our mouths for speaking the language. Our spirit and pride was destroyed as a result." This was part of a conversation with five elder women at the Winnebago Senior Center. They were recalling their past and the negative interventions of the boarding schools. Statements like these should need very little explanation about the result of the white dominant society interventions on the Winnebago people.

Interpretations, Implications, and Recommendations

Interpretations of Tribal Leadership Themes

If an Extension professional is going to have a working relationship with tribal people, he or she would do well to know and understand the leadership of that tribal nation, the characteristics of a true leader, and the effects of tribal acculturation and interventions imposed upon tribal people. Major themes discovered from the research are a starting point for gaining this knowledge and understanding. These themes are summarized as follows.

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. Winnebago tribal leadership is about role and relationships, the clan system, elders, women, families, children, moms and dads, *chokas* (grandpas), *kakas* (grandmas), aunts, and uncles. All have a role in the leadership of the tribe. All are part of the sacred circle. It is this shared role that binds the people as one and provides a role model for leadership.

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, but the old traditional ways are not forgotten and live strong in the spirit of Winnebago 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 there was not much acceptable job training. Finally, the dominant society allowed the existence of a tribal government with a tribal leadership organization, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs mandates the structure of this new government with strict compliance requirements. Knowing these things and understanding all the dominant society interventions that contributed to forced acculturation can help to develop trusted partnerships and relationships with tribal people.

Implications for 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. Those implications are summarized as follows.

1. Extension Needs to Understand Tribal Leadership

Learning about tribal leadership takes time and 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 and training to become a true tribal leader involves a lifetime of experiences. 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. Spending time with tribal elder leaders can give non-tribal leaders and organizations new knowledge about what it means to be a leader.

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 and leadership organizations. Extension leaders who are open to change and who are patient may find tribal leadership styles beneficial for making tough decisions currently facing Extension. However, leaders and organizations that are very time oriented may have some difficulty applying 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. Sometimes a vision comes during times of hardships. 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, seven generations to come. This implies the need for Extension leaders to be proactive, 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 who can do it better lead, then step in and 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 to a state Extension organization. Extension Deans and District Extension Directors may represent 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 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, senior center, or community event.
- 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 the study may or may not be generalizable to other tribal populations or indigenous cultures. However, the author recommends reading this article in its entirety before you visit a tribal community.

Final Thoughts

It seems appropriate to give some closing thoughts about Extension and support these thoughts with some quotes from tribal people, recorded in the tradition of oral conversation.

Extension Is About Knowledge and Education.

"Leadership Is Knowing"--Tribal Council Leader

A tribal council member spoke of knowledge, "Leadership is based on the knowledge of knowing your community, knowing your people, knowing the visions, and knowing the culture."

Extension Is Involved with Leadership at Many Levels.

"Leadership Is Shared"--Tribal Organization Leader

One tribal member views leadership like this, "Leadership. It's just a crazy quilt of shared responsibilities at various levels. And you don't know who's going to be telling you what to do next. The maintenance guy could be the one telling me what to do tonight."

Extension Is About Spending Time with Local People.

"Take Time to Share"--Grandma Leader

This elder woman talked about the grandmas in K-Mart tennis shoes who spent much of their time devoted to the family, "It was always important to sit down and share meal, share life, and talk about things."

Extension Has a Vision for the Future.

"Hope For The Future"--Young Warrior Leader

A young Winnebago warrior seeks vision for the future of his people, "I hope the future is as bright as what I live, for the generations to come, and even beyond. I hope the future is brighter than what I left. That's what I hope."

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