

TITLE:

Fostering Intertribal Cooperation – Begins at Home

Challenge

Indian reservations are sovereign nations within the borders of the United States of America. American indigenous peoples are very mindful of their history, which impacts their culture, values and tribal norms. For this reason they remain very wary of interactions with non-Natives; tribes may display a resistance to developing relationships with “outsiders”.

Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos (FSIP) provides an array of social, health and employment services to five Pueblo Nations in central Sandoval County New Mexico. Where programs originate or are funded by non-Native sources, requirements and timelines usually are built without consideration of tribal politics, culture, Indian law, tribal government rules and structures, and the values that shape the worldview of tribal nations.

Solution

The CPHMC Project provides an example of need and significance of breaking through unconscious biases and assumptions on both sides of the negotiation. The solution – time, observation, open mind, humility and respect.

At FSIP, the majority of employees are members of the five affiliated pueblos, or neighboring tribes. For the most part tribal values, attitudes and behaviors are similar (differing in some details) and Natives are comfortable talking in their language and have an underlying shared ethos. At the same time there are a few non-Natives on the staff, who bring their own “American” values, attitudes and behaviors to the workplace. This can create tension when not properly identified and managed. This is particularly so since “American values” are not the dominant culture.

As an example, native values view time as relative, rooted in the past when sun, moon and seasons were milestones to events. This is in sharp contrast to the Anglo concept of time as a commodity not to be wasted. Although the concept of “Indian Time” is sometimes seen as humorous, it can create tension when project deadlines and meeting times are not held to. Likewise, modesty and group harmony are stressed. It is not considered appropriate to boast and draw attention to oneself or one’s group; again, a sharp contrast to the Anglo drive for attention and uniqueness. For the CPHMC project, this modesty has been in direct conflict to the CDC requirement for publicity and media attention.

One major tension in this situation is the Native custom of speaking amongst themselves in their shared language in the workplace. It took a while to recognize that the speakers are not being rude, or

secretive, or specifically excluding the non-speaker – this is normal behavior and, as I came to learn, is sometimes the only way to specifically express thoughts, feelings and ideas since “English” language may not have words adequate in meaning. This after all, is their place, not mine.

The preferred method of communication, as we found out, is face-to-face, word of mouth, in their location, not formal meetings in a sterile office, or written communications. For native speakers, body language, inflection and pace of speaking are all as important as the actual words in conveying and perceiving intent. Going to their location, participating in their activities on their “turf” as it were, observing, asking respectful questions, and recognizing how activities are structured and meetings conducted is critical to gaining respect and open communication. From a strictly time-management viewpoint this might be seen as outside the parameters of the project plan, however it was rewarded by respect and improved working relationships.

Summary

Working with the tribes is a study in balancing the politics, culture, law, rules and structures, and values of tribal nations, native communities and of mainstream American business practice. Attention to detail, adjusting to the pace and rhythm of the community, and recognition that the behaviors and attitudes of the dominant culture are paramount, are key to earning respect and trust.

Sustaining Success

This narrative does not follow the structure of the American Business-based “Success Story” format. This information is important to share, and again highlights the complexity of understanding and experiencing cultural diversity. Continuing to observe, interact, share and learn the nuances of other cultures, and share the complexity and thought process of our own values and behaviors is critical to building and sustaining respect and relationships. Just as tribe members are diligent teaching their values, beliefs and behaviors to younger generations, American Business must be equally dedicated to helping maintain and continue the values of balance and humility in interactions, and passing this value on to new members of the project team.

Story Contact

Gail Buckley Crane MSHA

Project Coordinator Community Partnerships for Healthy Mothers & Children

Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos, Inc.

office: 505-867-3351 x 164

gcrane@fsipinc.org