

Leadership Considerations for Educational Leaders on the Navajo Nation

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Indian Community School Leadership

Author Note:

Chris McNabb is the Assistant Principal/CTE Director at Ganado High School. The author wishes to thank all the educators and community members that shared their thoughts on educational leadership on the Navajo Nation by completing the survey. He also wishes to thank the Ganado area community members for allowing him to be part of their community for over two decades.

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Context

My name is Chris McNabb and I am the Assistant Principal/CTE Director at Ganado High School in Ganado, AZ. I have been involved in public education on the Navajo Nation for nineteen years, with almost all of those years spent in Ganado. I also worked at another school district, Sanders Unified School District, on the Navajo Nation for one and a half years.

I arrived in Ganado, AZ in 1997. While I had previous teaching experience, this was my first job working with high school students full-time. It was in Ganado where I really learned how to be a teacher and coach. I took advantage of every opportunity to work with students in and out of the classroom. At the invitation of veteran teachers, I was able to help in sponsoring clubs that took students on fishing and ski trips; participated in a student assistance program that worked with at-risk students, coached multiple sports, and chaperoned many dances and other school events.

I believe my professional experiences as an educator have provided me with a unique background as a public educator. While working on the Navajo Nation I have held a variety of positions. I have been a teacher in the fields of English, Spanish, and science), a department head, an instructional coach, an acting principal at an intermediate school and an assistant principal. During this time, I have also been involved in athletics as both an assistant coach and head coach in multiple sports. I have been fortunate to work with high quality individuals and many of these educators have acted as informal mentors and have shared their experiences and knowledge with me. Motivated by a desire to be the best educator I can be, I have taken advantage of every opportunity to hone my craft in order to be an effective educator for all my students. As part of my teaching journey, I returned to my hometown in Kansas for seven years where I was privileged to teach and coach in one of the largest and best districts in the state. This was a tremendous learning experience. For personal reasons, I returned to Ganado in 2014. I provide this background solely as context to help understand my experience in the education field in general, and more specifically in education and school leadership on the Navajo Nation.

Ganado is located in northeastern Arizona, approximately thirty miles from New Mexico. The community of Ganado is very close to the center of the Navajo Nation, which is the largest reservation in the United States. The reservation covers a little over Twenty-seven hundred square miles and parts of the reservation are in three states (Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah). Ganado Unified School District serves the Ganado community as well as several nearby communities. Like most districts on the Navajo Nation, it covers a large area and many students have to spend up to an hour on buses traveling to and from school. The district has four schools: Ganado Primary School, Ganado Intermediate School, Ganado Middle School, and Ganado High School. Based on school year 2021-22 enrollment numbers from the Arizona Department of Education, the district has one-thousand sixty-three (1063) students attending Ganado Public Schools. The high school where I work has a current enrollment of four-hundred thirty-seven

(437) students. Ganado High School is a member of the 3A North Region and has the smallest enrollment of any school in the conference. Recently, the district schools received their state letter grades. Ganado High School remained a “C” school which means it is a “performing school.”

Traditional Diné culture is important to the communities that make up Ganado. Many students still participate in traditional Diné ceremonies and maintain a traditional Diné lifestyle by living in rural and remote settings and have livestock such as horses, cattle, and sheep. The Ganado Unified School District values the Diné culture and strives to incorporate aspects of the culture into the education experience. In fact, the importance of the Diné culture to the district is reflected in the mission statement, *“Our mission is to ensure all students a quality education and strengthen Diné cultural values for life-long learning.”* The district also developed and adopted the Foundations of Learning which incorporates traditional Diné values and thinking into instruction and learning for district students.

This Leadership Practice Guide focuses on culturally responsive leadership in schools serving Diné communities and is based on more than 20 years personally witnessing the value and importance of the Diné traditions to these communities.

Rationale

There is an abundance of definitions on what it is to be a leader. Despite the diversity of explanations on what leadership consists of, key elements of most definitions include motivating and organizing a group of people to accomplish a task. These elements fit extremely well with the responsibilities of an educational leader. The task of motivating groups of people also relates to culturally responsive leadership. One must understand the history and culture of a community in order to work with and motivate a community to accomplish goals. In order to work with all the stakeholders of a school on the Navajo Nation, a leader must be culturally responsive. In the article, “Developing and piloting a tool to assess culturally responsive principles in schools serving Indigenous students”, the authors express that, “Culturally responsive schooling is a best practice, and the Diné integrates Navajo traditional knowledge throughout all aspects of our teaching, learning, and leading.” (Castagno et al., 2021). Therefore, in order to be an educational leader for a school in a Navajo community, it is imperative to have a thorough understanding and overall respect for the traditional values of the students and the community of which they are a part.

Although the focus of this seminar has been on culturally responsive leadership, one of the consistent themes throughout this seminar has been quality educational leadership. Dr. Koerperich (ICSLI Seminar Leader) has shared his insights into being a successful educational

leader and has brought in guest speakers that have done the same. They have provided keys to being a culturally responsive leader but have also shared their thoughts on being a successful leader in general.

When I first took on leadership roles, coaching and as an administrator, I often would read books and find interviews with successful leaders hoping to pick up strategies that I could use to build successful teams and motivate others to work toward accomplishing a mutual goal. I was amazed at the number of resources out there for aspiring leaders and leaders wanting to improve their capacity to lead. Leadership in general is a topic that is ubiquitous in all fields and endeavors. Business, athletics, government, and military are just some of the many organizations and fields where individuals have developed their own leadership style and approach and have written books outlining their framework on how to be a successful leader. While many people might opine that there is a lack of quality leadership in the world today, there is no shortage of leadership theories and the importance of quality leadership to any organization.

An example of one of the many approaches to leadership that I have encountered twice recently is Strength Based Leadership. Within the last three months I have attended two conferences (in addition to this seminar) where there were sessions on using Clifton Strengths tool for Strength Based Leadership.

In researching books on leadership in order to have a better understanding of the leadership theories and approaches out there I found two lists of the top books on leadership and compared them to see if they had any titles in common. The results were interesting. I found that the shorter list, "15 of the World's Best Leadership Books" (Miller 2023) had 10 books that were included in the longer list, "The 25 Best Leadership Books of All-Time" (Summer.com 2022) . The titles common to both lists are: *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Good to Great*, *Start with Why*, *Wooden on Leadership*, *Extreme Ownership-How U.S. Navy Seals Lead and Win*, *The Effective Executive*, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The Art of War*, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. These books represent a small fraction of the books that have been written on successful leadership. They represent many of the fields (business, sports, war) that have produced some of the most successful and esteemed leaders.

After seeing the multitude of leadership approaches and styles it occurred to me, as an educational leader on the Navajo Nation trying to formulate my own leadership approach, a good place to begin is with what the Diné culture has to say about the topic of leadership. One of our first readings in the seminar discussed how the indigenous people of the continent had their own educational system. The resource noted that indigenous populations \ had their own traditional thoughts and beliefs on what it means to lead. As a school leader, on the Navajo Nation, a basic understanding of the traditional Diné views on leadership and the traits expected from a leader provides a foundation from which to develop one's own leadership approach.

Topic Summary

The purpose of this guide is to provide some basic information for new educational leaders on the Navajo Nation. It is not a “how to lead” or “what I have learned”. I think it would be presumptuous to write something like that. Many leaders and specifically indigenous leaders have more experience, have better insight into the Diné culture and the many communities they serve on the reservation, and already have the traits and ideas to make them quality leaders. The focus of this leadership practice guide is to simply provide a basic look into the cultural aspect of leadership, with a closer look at what traditional Diné culture says about leadership, and finally examine what current leaders and community members wish to share about their thoughts on educational leadership on the Navajo Nation.

The relationship between leadership and culture is a frequent focus of research. Project GLOBE is a research program examining this connection between culture and leadership. House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman (2002) explain “Its intent is to explore the cultural values and practices in a wide variety of countries, and to identify their impact on organizational practices and leadership attributes. The program studies specific aspects of leadership in over 60 nations looking for similarities and differences in effective leadership across cultures. The GLOBE project found that:

“the attributes and practices that distinguish cultures from each other, as well as strategic organizational contingencies, are predictive of the leader attributes and behaviors, and organizational practices that are most frequently perceived as acceptable are most frequently enacted, and are most effective” . (House et. al 2002)

On prima facie this could mean that the ideals that cultures value affect organizational leadership behavior by promoting and encouraging specific actions that are seen as more effective in a type of positive feedback loop in which cultures reward the desired traits in their leaders. Based on this, it seems that a best practice for an educational leader is to understand the culture of the community in which they aspire to lead.

One of the main components of this practice guide is to look at how the Diné people grounded in a more traditional Diné philosophy view leaders and leadership in general. However, it should be noted and not taken for granted that many current Navajos do not follow a traditional lifestyle. In this leadership practice guide it is not the intent to explain Diné teachings on leadership rather to provide a small amount of background on traditional Navajo leadership from experiences and input from Navajo leaders. Furthermore, culture and language are intertwined as a significant aspect of Diné’ and culturally responsive leadership and it must be noted, as a non-navajo speaker, the ability to understand complicated concepts for non-native speakers is an aspect of

culturally responsive leadership that should be taken into account when evaluating culturally responsive leadership practices in indigenous schools and communities.

To illustrate this point, it helps to look at the Diné word for leader. A simple translation would tell one that when a Navajo says “naat’aani” they mean leader. I have heard the school secretary use the word when talking about the principal to a native Navajo speaker.

The Department of Diné education refers to all the educational leaders as “naat’aani” during their weekly educational school leadership meetings. Based on what I have been told the word refers to a communicator, someone with the ability to speak well, and plan. But for traditional Navajos the word encompasses more than just being in charge. Dr. Lee explains it in this way,

“Diné leadership, specifically the word naat’áanii, has a deep and honored significance for the people. The deep and honored understanding has become standardized when in fact it is not conventional. The word is supposed to be rarely used in everyday conversation and only in formal settings do the people acknowledge the distinct title. (Lee 2011)

As a personal reference, I am often reminded that I owe many individuals loads of wood as I am an “aadaani” (in-law as I understand it) to the Diné. Because of this, I have been fortunate to have first-hand experience with the stories, ceremonies, and practices of a traditional Diné family. One of the most basic teachings that I have observed is that if something is an important part of traditional Navajo philosophy then there will be songs, stories, and prayers associated with that ideal. This applies to the concept of leadership. There are Diné ceremonies where the hataali sings songs in order to bless the patient with leadership. Songs bless the individual with strong leadership qualities just as they bless them with a home, weaving skills, livestock, and other things important to Navajos traditionally. If a person aspires to be a leader or is one, there are prayers to help them lead by being humble and strong in the face of criticism, while at the same time protecting them.

Like many aspects of traditional Diné philosophy, the concept of leadership can be very complex. In the book *Guided by The Mountains* the foundation of leadership is explained in the following way:

This Diné Philosophy of governance was revered by all Diné at least up until the time of interaction with Europeans. The story of traditional Diné governance is founded in “exceptional” leadership qualities of particular individuals. An exceptional leader is one who can consistently guide his or her people toward a good and proper relationship with the Four Sacred Elements (Lerma et al., 2017)

The scope of the aforementioned book is quite extensive and explains in great detail the fundamentals of traditional Diné philosophy. Much of the book examines traditional ideas about leadership and its importance to the Diné and provides context and background that is highly instructive to a culturally responsive leader in a school on the Navajo Nation.

The goal of this information is to suggest things to be considered by leaders new to the Navajo reservation. However, there is a broader purpose as currently most school site administrators in public schools on the Navajo Nation are Navajo. Informally, looking at names and based on the knowledge of the public school districts, it is estimated that in the school year 2024-2025, eighty-one percent (81%) of school principals and assistant principals leading school systems on the Navajo Nation are Native American. In addition, fifty percent (50%) of school superintendents on the Navajo Nation are from the Navajo tribal affiliation.

Even with most schools being led by individuals from their unique cultures and communities it does not lessen the challenges faced by educational leaders trying to be culturally responsive. There is tremendous diversity in terms of culture on the Navajo Nation. Leaders both Navajo and non-Navajo have to balance western expectations (degrees, state certification, state mandates, etc.) and traditional expectations (k'ee, fundamental laws, language, etc.). How and to what degree depends on a variety of variables. While it may not appear so, the Navajo Nation is full of diversity. There are a variety of religious beliefs, life experiences, lifestyles, Navajo language ability, etc.

Considering the diversity of leadership, cultures and leadership styles within indigenous communities and school systems, it is important to note that leadership is not about ego or power but many times how people expect leaders to act. This was learned through personal experience as a novice, non-native leader in a cultural setting. My experience when I first became the assistant principal and later an acting principal was a bit of a culture shock from a leadership perspective. Within the first few days of occupying the position I had a steady line of people coming to me and telling me what I should do. What amazed me was not that individuals had their own agendas or that they would share them with me as that is simply human nature. Rather, what I found to be disturbing was the fact that those coming to me as a leader seemed to believe that I would use any authority I had to do what they wanted and that they seemed to imply that I would do so. That is not how leadership works but for many that is the expectation which is an important aspect of culturally responsive leadership that must be considered by all leaders!

As an educator with a diverse background in teaching and leading, it is often noted that strategies for Exceptional Service Students are simply best practices for all students. In the same vein, culturally responsive teaching and leading means that learning and leading is based on relationships, relevance, and rigor; as well as, high expectations for all. Some individuals are

able to do this naturally while others must make a focused effort to incorporate this into their leadership and teaching. Culturally responsive leaders should prioritize forming strong relationships with community members and all school stakeholders in order to identify what is important and relevant to the community as a whole.

Implementation Plan

While the Diné still maintain very strong traditional cultural values based in traditional Diné philosophy, there can be no argument that foreign social, political, and economic forces over the years have affected the traditional Diné lifestyle. The education of Diné children has not been immune from these overwhelming forces. The INE and our ICSLI always include an historical perspective on the many injustices that Native families and children have suffered through the dominant society's attempt to educate Native children. The tales of forced assimilation, removal from families, the many horrific experiences of children in boarding schools, the inequality in resources for schools on reservations, and the overall neglect of educational responsibilities in spite of treaty obligations are some of the examples that current education systems must overcome. While current school administrators responsible for the education of the next generation of Diné and Native children overall must be aware of this history, they are faced with additional challenges including supporting culturally responsive schooling.

To better understand educational leadership on the Navajo Nation I created a survey and shared it with 27 individuals familiar with schools and the overall educational system on the Navajo Nation. The survey was quite simple consisting of only a few questions. I asked each person to do five things: (1) identify as Navajo or on-Navajo, (2) describe your role as teacher, administrator, or other, (3) Identify 3 traits an effective educational leader on the Navajo Nation needs to have, (4) Identify an effective leader you worked with and why they were effective, and finally (5) Any other thoughts on educational leadership on the Navajo Nation? The survey was anonymous and out of 27 surveys shared, I received 21 responses from a variety of individuals. 15 of the respondents (71%) were Navajo. The roles of the respondents were 9 administrators, 7 teachers, and 5 "others". Everyone I shared the survey with worked in education in some manner except for one Navajo individual who while not in education does hold a leadership role in a state agency. While I am not sure, I believe that those who identified as "other" actually are retired administrators or hold leadership roles but do not consider them as such for example instructional coaches.

In order to analyze the information gathered from the survey I employed a simple methodology. I looked for general trends in the responses regarding the three traits needed for a school leader on the Navajo Nation. I classified each trait suggested into one of 5 categories:

1. Cultural knowledge
2. Communication

3. Professional knowledge/Experience
4. People skills/motivation
5. General personality traits.

Some respondents mentioned multiple traits from one category, but I only counted a category once. There are other ways to make meaning of the responses, but I did find this a useful approach.

The results showed that Professional knowledge/ Experience and People skills/motivation were both mentioned ten times. Communication was the next most mentioned trait with eight individuals including this. Cultural Knowledge was mentioned six times and Commitment was mentioned five times. All the other responses can be generally categorized as individual personality traits and varied widely depending on the respondents' opinions.

Assessment

This leadership practice guide is not intended to instruct someone on how to be a culturally responsive leader in a school on the Navajo Nation. Rather, its purpose is to encourage reflection on ways to approach being an educational leader in schools serving Diné communities. To lead successfully and in a culturally responsive manner requires one to assess their knowledge of the culture and learn how leaders are viewed by that culture.

In traditional Navajo culture the leaders that were followed communicated well, were able to plan successfully for the well-being of the group, and were often spiritual leaders. The survey discussed in this guide of current educational leaders on the Navajo supports the idea that these traits are still seen as valuable. While the skill set and knowledge of contemporary educational leaders is different from Diné leaders in the past, there is still the expectation that leaders have knowledge that can be used to improve the lives of the community.

Today's educational leaders must have something to offer to their students, parents, and other stakeholders. They must understand both state and federal mandates and regulations. They must be able to navigate educational laws. And they must be able to manage a school or district effectively and create systems in order to create a school environment that is positive and conducive to student learning.

Furthermore, as in the past, they must be able to communicate their knowledge and vision to those they lead. Effective communication is a basic tenet of leadership. Educational leaders will encounter many challenges: climbing out of school improvement, raising test scores, increasing state letter grades, providing service to the community, family engagement, retention and recruitment of staff, etc. while at the same time communicating their vision and plan for the

school or district. Culturally responsive leaders will show their stakeholders how they can lead to accomplish these goals while aligning their actions with the cultural expectations of the community.

Culturally responsive leaders will also make the effort to understand and respect the culture of their community. For non-Navajo leaders this can be an added challenge but its importance should not be understated. It can also be difficult for educational leaders that are Navajo as they have a different set of cultural expectations. However, for both Navajo and Navajo leaders the culture of the community, which is often diverse in terms of religion, beliefs, lifestyles, experiences, etc., must be navigated in a way that supports all perspectives yet moves the school or district forward.

Resources

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GANADO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING

