



**Native American Budget & Policy Institute Governance Council
Indigenous Governance Leadership Roundtable
June 30, 2021**



MEMO

TO: Native American Budget & Policy Institute
FROM: Michael L. Foster, EdD, MPH
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RE: NABPI Governance Council Roundtable on Indigenous Governance Leadership

Executive Summary

Purpose

On June 30, 2021, NABPI convened a Governance Council Roundtable to explore Indigenous Governance Leadership, to “define the way we’re wanting to move forward through this Indigenous model that we’re wanting to develop. As a former president of my tribe, having walked into that position and knowing the responsibility of providing leadership to my governing body, I was trying to do that as an Indian person utilizing a governance structure that I didn’t put together—somebody in the non-Indian world put together for me. I’m excited about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. In the end, that’s what my people want. They want a governing body that governs the way we’re supposed to as Indian people” (Arthur “Butch” Blazer, former President, Mescalero Apache Tribe). During this convening, the Governance Council explored several questions, such as: “What does it mean to be an organized Indigenous entity? What are the principles that guide us? How do we want to conduct ourselves?” (Dr. Michael Lipsky).

Attendees

The Roundtable was facilitated by Walter Dasheno (former Governor, Santa Clara Pueblo), a founding member of NABPI, and Tara Gatewood (Isleta Pueblo/Diné), a Governance Council member. In attendance were NAPBI’s interim co-Executive Directors Cheryl Fairbanks (Tlingit/Tsimshian) and Christy Chapman (Zuni Pueblo) and members of the Governance Council, including:

- Patricia Ives
- Dr. Joseph Suina (former Governor, Cochiti Pueblo)
- Robert Yazzie (Chief Justice Emeritus, Diné)
- Tara Gatewood (Isleta Pueblo/Diné)
- Dr. Michael Lipsky
- Arthur “Butch” Blazer (former President, Mescalero Apache Tribe)
- Ingeborg “Inky” Vicenti (Jicarilla Apache Tribe)
- Walter Dasheno (former Governor, Santa Clara Pueblo)
- Robert Apodaca

Also in attendance were invited guests and allies, Regis Pecos (former Governor, Cochiti Pueblo), Alvin Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo), and Dr. Michael Foster.

Agenda

What does Indigenous Governance Leadership mean to me?

Devoid of Western values, traditional Indigenous Governance Leadership is grounded on the cultural wisdom of pueblo and tribal communities. As an entity, NABPI strives to reclaim and center the cultural wisdom that was woven into Indigenous Governance Leadership, as the strengths of these ties were loosened in the wake of first contact with European settlers. Alvin Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo) warns the Governance Council as follows: “A Native American Budget & Policy Institute, if it is not infused with the values (of Indigenous people), runs the risk of doing what has already been done in the past to us that created that situation that we are trying to remedy.”

Instead, NABPI intends to develop a framework that is primarily based on the best of traditional Indigenous beliefs and practices, but also updated to be relevant now. This will be done by using Indigenous governance practices that pre-date first contact with European settlers as the foundation, with the best of Western practices being supplemental. Grounded on Indigenous ethics, Indigenous Governance Leadership is based on sacred core values, drawing on the guidance from the ancestors. Inky Vicenti (Jicarilla Apache Tribe) discussed it on these terms, “I really believe that we have it (the core values embedded in Indigenous Governance Leadership) in us, in our DNA.”

Further, Indigenous Governance Leadership is based on integrity and embodies a spirituality-based, heart-centered approach to leadership and planning. It is purposeful. Focusing on the heart-centeredness of Indigenous Governance Leadership, Inky Vicenti (Jicarilla Apache Tribe) uses her personal experience to contrast these leadership practices: “Once we commune with those parts of ourselves (our hearts and spirits), we get those messages brought to us of what we need to do and direct and guide us....I’m tuning more into that part of the spirit that I feel is important in order to do things the right way. Because without that, if I follow just the linear perspective, it’s gonna confuse me. I believe in the mind and the heart being connected but being led by the heart first, not the mind; it’s the opposite (of Western culture)...Western culture taught us to go by the mind and that’s just totally off-base.”

Moreover, along the lines of cultural wisdom, Indigenous Governance Leadership is about problem-solving that incorporates respect, accountability and humor. Here, Robert Yazzie (Chief Justice Emeritus, Diné) speaks to the connection between laughter and Indigenous Governance Leadership, suggesting to “put laughter into your leadership, put laughter into your decisions, and keep taking into account (that) all the people who are there are important.” And finally, Indigenous Governance Leadership is the inherent power that is central to being independent, sovereign nations, meaning “that members of the tribe can look within themselves and give meaning to what is truly a sovereign entity.” Robert Yazzie (Chief Justice Emeritus, Diné) posed a series of compelling questions: “Are we a sovereign entity? Or, are we sovereign subject to what the United States tells us what being sovereign is?” and wraps up by pointing out that “Sovereign does not need to be connected with anything. It is within our mind, within our body, within our spirit. That’s how we can stand together for the future.”

Who is an Indigenous leader who inspired me and why?

This question enabled us to identify characteristics embodied by inspirational Indigenous leaders. Governance Council members shared that these inspirational Indigenous leaders embodied cultural wisdom. They resisted external pressures from the U.S. Government to adopt policies and practices that were misaligned with their traditional ways. They were unwavering in this regard, only willing to compromise when the benefits outweighed the costs. Instead, these inspirational Indigenous leaders fought for their sovereignty and uplifted, respected and lived according to their core values. They recognized and respected tribal authority, which enabled them to focus on their goals and purposes, despite having to balance and respond to the competing priorities of those with whom they interacted. These men and women were resilient in the face of ridicule and criticism. Adaptive and looking inward, they prayed to the ancestors for guidance. They brought forth paradigm shifts that incorporated mind-body-spirit. They were strategic in that they aligned economic development with the development of governmental infrastructure to uplift the core values and priorities of their communities. They walked the talk. They were unwavering proponents of excellence who refused to cut corners to advance sovereignty, which they defined on their own terms. Throughout it all, they remained true to their goal of restoring or maintaining a sacred trust.

And finally, Governance Council members shared that inspirational Indigenous leaders uplifted the importance of relationship building, of connections. For context, these connections were between and among individuals within a tribe, across tribes and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks. As highly effective Indigenous leaders, they engaged with different personality types. They operated according to an ethic of helping and building up, rather than hurting and reducing. This type of leadership also fostered collegiality. They relied on the inherent powers of Indigenous leadership as they guided their people. These Indigenous leaders were characterized as being forgiving and compassionate. Such leaders willingly offered up personal sacrifices for the common good and created a balance between being purposeful and intentional with being lighthearted and laughing, often using the latter to cut the tension or stress of high expectations and high demands.

Prepared by:

