



Creating Opportunities for Tribal Members

by Bruce Baird

Not too long ago, I was asked by one of our band members if it would ever be possible for a band member to train for the gaming director's position. I said, "Why not?" As I tried to process that thought, I thought about the number of casinos that have non-Indians as their managers. Why couldn't band members be mentored to take over those positions?

If we step back a little we will remember that one of the responsibilities of the old management teams that ran our casinos during the eighties and nineties was to train managers to take their places. There may have been some that were trained, but I don't recall hearing of any.

What would it take to develop such a program on any given reservation? I clearly understand the reasoning behind the need to maximize revenue for tribal programs and, that in order to accomplish that, you need individuals who understand the gaming business and have the necessary management background to run such an operation. I also understand that it is mostly non-Indians who have the necessary knowledge and experience.

So how do we set up such a program? First the tribe must have the desire to undertake such a program. Do tribal councils want to advance their band members? I believe, for the most part, they do. I also know there are councils that prefer not to train band members. Most of that is old thinking, i.e. if you train them they will leave. I have stated our motto in previous articles: "Don't worry about training them and having them leave, worry instead about not training them and have them stay."

Second, what would be the number of band members who would be "qualified" or have the potential to be "qualified"? I believe that every reservation has band members who do have management experience and many have individuals who have college degrees. Many members who have the potential do not live on the reservation. Would they be willing to come back to the reservation? When we started our succession plan and mentorship program we sent out 480 letters to band members in gaming. We received 83 positive responses and 53 actually showed up at the first meeting.

We also received some fairly interesting negative responses: "I don't want to be one of them;" "I don't want the responsibility;" "I don't want to be held accountable;" "This is just another idea that you will not carry through." The first three we kind of expected. However, the last one blindsided us. "Just another idea we will not carry through." We forgot just how many programs have been started on

reservations and fizzled out. We forgot how many times tribal members have had their hopes built up and how many times their hopes have been dashed.

We were bound and determined to make this program work. Out of our first class of six who started in January 2004, one is now a custodial/maintenance manager, another is a vault manager, another has gone back to school to finish her degree because of the program and still another transferred to the mentorship program and is now the Northern Lights hotel manager. The fifth one is a shift supervisor in games and the sixth one dropped out of the program. There are three classes of band members in various stages of training. The success of the program has resulted in the rapid development of a second pool of candidates.

I believe that dedication to the idea is the key for any reservation establishing a succession or mentorship program. The second key is making sure that there are jobs at the end of the training. Even if your program is a successful training experience, if you do not have the jobs available at the end, you run the danger of having your staff lose faith in the program.

Luring qualified individuals back to the reservation is not an easy thing to do. Many have established themselves in business and the community off the reservation and unless there is something real positive to come back to, it can be very difficult. Housing can be a problem, depending upon the remoteness of the reservation. There will also be fewer amenities. Tribes could offer a package deal such as a home and the job.

If a tribal member already lives on the reservation, provide the best opportunity possible. Make sure that non-Indian staff members who are hired into management positions understand that there is every possibility that a tribal member could be assigned to them to train for that position. Set reasonable times for completion of the training and keep in constant contact with the mentor and mentee to make sure that everything is on track. Assign someone to direct the program who understands gaming and management.

Training programs such as succession and mentorship programs are long overdue in Indian Country if we are truly going to own and operate our casinos. ♣

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