



Working Effectively with American Indian Populations: Gaining Perspectives

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This fact sheet explores the roles of communication and relationship-building in improving the success of reservation programs. It examines the potential for improving the success of agriculture and natural resource programs through improved communication and relationships with tribal officials and Indian producers.

A Matter of Perspective

Although culture is symbolized by dress, food, language and customs, it extends beyond these symbols to include strong characteristics that represent group identity. Culture includes underlying currents that shape individuals and influence who they are and what they believe is important. Culture influences **perspective** or one's personal world view (LeBaron, 2003). Working effectively in reservation environments requires an understanding and appreciation of the Indian people on that reservation, including their culture and individual perspectives (Payne, 1996).

Communication

Similar to perspective, personal communication style stems from our cultural background and experience. When two individuals communicate, a relationship begins to take shape, whether positive or negative. When two individuals communicate, they define themselves as well as the subject they discuss. Obstacles to effective communication include spoken words, nonverbal behavior, attitudes, beliefs and perspectives (Chaitin, 2003).

Cross-cultural communication recognizes that different cultures may communicate differently. Skills in cross-cultural communication focus on understanding one's own perspectives while learning to appreciate another's perspectives. The goal is to understand and appreciate one another's differences and to look for similarities in perspectives (Kimmel, 2000). Effective and **open communication** seeks a safe place where no one feels coerced and no one person asserts power over another. Information sharing begins with **empathic listening**. Empathic listening allows a person to listen and respond accurately based on mutual understanding, respect and trust. Empathic listening is perhaps the most important and also most challenging, skill to practice in today's hectic work world.



Winter Cattle Drive on the Duck Valley Reservation.

Empathic listening may take time to develop, but has the capacity to help build relationships. For example, among many Indian cultures,

silence and a lack of eye contact are deemed acceptable communication styles. These communication styles may also reflect that a person is unable to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings with another person they do not know (Chaitin, 2003). Awareness, patience and respect for different communication styles demonstrated by different Indian cultures create the foundation for successful working relationships.

A Hypothetical Example

Dorothy, a 50-year-old Shoshone Indian, walks into the local Extension office. Dorothy has lived on the reservation her entire life and has worked for the tribal government. She has seen the difficulties that the tribe faces concerning land tenure issues. Dorothy feels that she must constantly battle with the BIA over land use decisions on her 80-acre trust allotment. Dorothy has little faith in government. She has surprised herself by visiting the local Extension office, but her son told her they may be able to help. She tells the Extension educator that she needs information about the grasshoppers that have recently devastated her alfalfa field. She says she needs financial assistance to deal with the problem because she has no money to invest in the field.

The Extension educator tells Dorothy to come into his office and have a seat. "What can I help you with?" he asks. Dorothy tells him that she lives on the reservation and has ugly grasshoppers everywhere eating everything. She tells the Extension educator that her first crop of alfalfa hay was down two tons per acre. The Extension educator tells Dorothy that he would like to look at the property and collect samples of the grasshoppers to identify them. "Let's find out what we are dealing with," he tells Dorothy.

Focus on the Problem

He visits the property, looks at the grasshoppers and determines that grasshoppers are migratory and will eat

everything green if left uncontrolled. He tells Dorothy that he can provide educational information about the grasshoppers, but he cannot offer any financial support to get rid of the grasshoppers. The Extension educator explains the details of a chemical used to control the grasshoppers and gives her written information about the techniques to treat the infestation.



The Warm Springs FRTEP Agent discusses management of the 4-H Cattle Club with the 4-H adult leader on the Warm Springs reservation.

Focus on the Person

He visits the property and asks Dorothy questions about the reservation. The reservation has always intrigued him but every time he has tried to offer educational programming he feels ignored. He looks at the grasshoppers, telling Dorothy that they are migratory and will eat everything. This is a problem for everyone on the reservation. The Extension educator tells Dorothy about his first efforts to make contacts on the reservation. Dorothy tells him that he was talking with the wrong people. She tells him about the tribe and the way governance works on the reservation. She tells him that the people on the reservation do not know him and do not trust anyone they do not know.

Dorothy tells the Extension educator that she will help him make contact with other tribal members. The Extension educator explains to Dorothy that his job is education and he will

provide support under this umbrella anyway he can. He also informs Dorothy that the State Department of Agriculture should be contacted and may be able to offset some of the costs of controlling the grasshoppers. The Extension educator dials the phone number for the State Department of Agriculture and puts the phone on speaker for Dorothy while he explains the situation. The State Department of Agriculture informs Dorothy that they can offset the costs of spraying using a 60 percent state to 40 percent producer ratio.

Dorothy offers to give the Extension educator a tour of the reservation at any time. She tells him that he has not seen the last of her because she will be back if these grasshoppers do not go away. The Extension educator laughs and tells Dorothy he hopes to see her again even if the grasshoppers are gone. He gives Dorothy his card to pass along to other residents on the reservation that may have a similar problem.

Reaching for Potential

The two different responses featured in the hypothetical example produce very different results even though the Extension educator is doing his job in both scenarios. Dorothy had a problem and it took courage for her to walk into the office in the first place. In the first example, the Extension educator focuses on the problem. Identifying the problem is his job and he does it well. In the second example, the Extension educator focuses on the person. He identifies the grasshoppers, but asks questions about the reservation culture. He indicates to Dorothy that he wants to work with producers on the reservation.

The difference between the examples is the quality of communication that occurs that helps to build a relationship between the two individuals. When the Extension educator took the time to listen to Dorothy, ask questions about the reservation culture and to diagnose the problem, he was successful in establishing trust and building a relationship.

Greek philosophy viewed relationship-building from the perspective of ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos is competency and integrity, pathos is empathy and logos is logic (Covey, 2004). The first scenario focused on the logistics of the grasshopper problem and on the competency of the Extension educator to identify the problem. While there is nothing wrong with what was done, the interaction did not build a relationship.

In the second scenario, the educator also focused on the logistics and identification of the problem, but also empathized with Dorothy. He wanted to know more about her culture. The educator took advantage of the opportunity to get to know Dorothy, to build a relationship and to create an opportunity to return later.



Range plan brainstorming session on the Pyramid Lake Reservation with NRCS and the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

Missed opportunities occur on reservations when professionals fail to appreciate the culture and consider the perspective of the client. Ideally, professionals should apply the ethos, pathos and logos philosophy to facilitate the greatest potential for building relationships and solving problems. Tribal politics and land tenure complexities can influence the success of agricultural and natural resource programs on reservations. It is very important to build trust and relationships through effective communication and appreciation of culture and perspectives.

Summary

Multiple perspectives must be taken into consideration in order to redefine problems as opportunities. In looking for opportunities, agricultural professionals must consider different perspectives shaped by reservation culture. The challenge remains how to tailor outreach programs to fit a specific reservation's culture, governance, environment and needs.

Both Indian producers and professionals must seek ongoing education regarding federal assistance programs available to reservation lands. Procedures required to implement federal assistance programs established for agricultural producers nationwide must be customized for restricted Indian lands because of land tenure complexities as well as limited access to working capital available to many Indian agricultural producers.

It takes courage and commitment on the part of both tribal members and agricultural professionals to build positive working relationships. Knowledge and practice of effective communication skills is key to this process. Also critical, is an awareness and appreciation of the role that individual perspective plays in tackling tough problems.

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