



The Cross-Cultural Challenge of Gaming Management in Indian Country

By Waltona Manion

In all the latest articles on international business management, it is the rage to discuss the challenges of cross-cultural or multi-cultural workplace management. Major accounting firms like Price Waterhouse publish whole libraries that assist clients in dealing with broad landscapes like the Pacific Rim or the specifics of negotiating a business deal in Peru or how to deal effectively with Chinese product managers. While much has been published on the management of tribal gaming facilities, most articles focus on the operational side of things. Not a great deal has been written on the cross-cultural hurdles of managing a growing Indian casino.

There are many crucial reasons to take a closer look at this issue. Unlike Las Vegas which has a traditional hierarchical management structure, Indian gaming is like a double helix with the twin strands of tribal government and casino management intertwined in an intricate, complex pattern. And, to be successful, casino management and tribal consultants must understand and be able to work effectively in both mediums.

(more)

The growing role of tribal governments in gaming management

First, let's take a look at the changing tribal casino management environment. With the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988 and the early days of new Indian casinos, there was a flurry of non-Indian management companies that were engaged by tribes to run their operations. As we approach the end of the decade, many of those early management contracts have been phased out or replaced by tribes who have chosen to manage their operations directly.

This transition was envisioned by the tribal leaders and members of Congress when they framed IGRA. Management companies were conceived as a bridge to the eventual goal of tribes to supervise their own facilities. One only has to take a look at IGRA's language and NIGC regulations which limit the scope and tenure of outside management contracts to understand they were always viewed as transitional.

Firms that once offered management now have transitioned into hybrid companies that offer a wide range of consulting services. In these arrangements the tribes exercise ownership and direct the decision-making. Of the 200-plus tribal government gaming operations that exist today, the majority are tribally-operated.

But tribal leaders have had to shepherd their tribes through the transition from management company-run to a tribal operated and owned facility. This means many non-Indian professionals will inevitably report not to another non-Indian manager but to a tribal member or tribal government body. Taken one step further, if you are going to stay in the Indian gaming business in any capacity of management, count on the reality that you will either report to or have interface with tribal government officials.

Understanding the role of staff

In Class II gaming states like Oklahoma, the bingo hall manager is usually the general manager and therefore reports directly to the tribal council. In Class III gaming states or where there is a full scale menu of video machines and card gaming, the bingo manager reports to a casino general manager and the GM to the tribal council. But regardless of the chain of command, all gaming managers at some point in time are called upon to communicate with and explain their business to elected tribal gaming commissions or tribal councils.

Tribal councils and gaming commissions are comprised of a rich mixture of people. Some are professional, some own and run their own businesses. Some are highly educated, some may not have completed high school. Some have had little exposure to the gaming

(more)

PAGE THREE: Cross Cultural Management

business and some have not had extended contact with professional managers. In some cases the gap can be widened if there are cultural, class, educational or experiential differences between non-Indian managers and tribal government representatives. With a divergent background, how does the gaming manager communicate effectively with this group?

These dynamics are no different in dealing with any governmental body, i.e., Congress, state assemblies or county boards of supervisors. All of these elected officials are not experts in many areas they are called upon to render an opinion or vote. They rely on professional staff to advise them and provide information upon which they can make good decisions. The role of a good manager in dealing with tribal governments is to facilitate good decision-making by 1) providing clear and accurate information; 2) helping tribal officials to develop multiple options and 3) serving as a sounding board for evaluating choices.

Like all managements, tribal councils want to know: What are my options? What are my prospective outcomes? What data is available? How do we assess the situation?

Part of management's and consultants' responsibility is providing information that will help shape the success of the tribal business. What does the professional staff person offer the elected tribal official? 1) A solid understanding of the business, 2) technical expertise and 3) the ability to address market and workplace realities and 4) offer options for decision-making.

Non-Indian managers need to understand that they are not in control but rather act as agents for good decision-making. Furthermore it is essential to grasp that, as a manager of an Indian gaming operation, you can't truly accomplish anything unless you are able to facilitate good decisions. Should we expand or contract gaming machines? How much money can we spend on advertising? How do we determine our overall product mix? These are tough questions that tribal governments have to struggle with and they need to be armed with plenty of information. They can't be experts, that's not their job. Tribal council members and gaming commissioners are there to evaluate information and make policy decisions. The staff's function is do research, prepare reports, and offer options.

Tribal councils represent a mandate from the real people who own the casino. The authority you have as a manager is delegated to you by the tribal council on behalf of the tribal membership at large. It is this authority that they vest with you that enables you to hire and fire and make operations, marketing, personnel and buying decisions.

(more)

PAGE FOUR: Cross Cultural Management

Take a page from private enterprise if the government paradigm is difficult. Consider that a tribal gaming facility is a publicly-held business. Tribal members are stock holders. The tribal government is the board of directors. The board hires the executives who run the company. If the ownership of Chrysler doesn't feel the board is doing a job good job, they get rid of the board and the board finds new management. Same holds true in Indian country.

Preparing for the adventure of working in a foreign country

It is amazing how many non-Indian managers I meet who have never been on a portion of the reservation other than the casino they work in or been to the home of a tribal member or even visited the tribal office. The underlying truth is they may they feel estranged or uncomfortable in that environment.

One reason that non-Indian management fails in Indian gaming today is their inability to communicate well with tribal members. Those who succeed do so because they learn how to engage in genuine dialogue with Native Americans.

It is an axiom of international trade that when executives go abroad to work for another nationality, they take the time to learn about the country because they know that all business dealings must be understood within the context of the culture. If they don't comprehend what motivates, influences and colors the thinking and feelings of their foreign counterparts, they can't possibly make good business decisions and act in the best interests of their employer.

If you were hired tomorrow to work in China, you begin immediately to study the history of the area to which you were being assigned. Out of respect and practicality, you would try to learn something about the culture, practices, traditions of the people you would be working with. You would take time to learn the basics of the language and something about the culture's values. This is absolutely true for non-Indians who are going to work in Indian gaming.

British rock musician Sting has a song about being a "legal alien" as an "Englishman in New York." While he speaks a common language, he knows the values and approach are very different and he can't help feel out of place. The same is true for all of us who work in Indian gaming. We all speak a common language but non-Indians and Indians both must make the effort to understand the nuances and values that lie behind the words and illuminate their meaning.

Resources Non-Indian Managers Can Tap

What can the non-Indian manager do to improve his or her ability to manage in a tribal gaming business? The answer is very straightforward. Do your homework. Invest the time.

- Recognize Native American tribes are regionalized and that there are important

(more)

PAGE FIVE: Cross Cultural Management

differences between respective Indian cultures.

- Visit the local museums that feature something about the history and roots of the tribe's culture.

- Familiarize yourself with the structure and organization of the tribe's government. (i.e. commission or council; making appointments and visiting tribal leaders

- Form an informal network with other Indian and non-Indian managers that gives you an opportunity to meet and talk with people in similar lines of work.

- Join the industry's national and state level professional associations like the National Indian Gaming Association(NIGA) or the Minnesota Indian Gaming Association(MIGA).

Consider a membership in the American Indian Chamber of Commerce. Use these groups as opportunities to become acquainted with other Indian leaders and associate members and to understand industry issues.

- When appropriate, attend events that are important to the tribe. Make a point to learn about the tribe's annual calendar of events.

- Find out something about the tribe's recent history in the community. What are its strengths and vulnerabilities? What are perceived problems from the community's standpoint?

- Subscribe to publications like Indian Country Today and Indian Gaming Magazine to read about the industry's issues, roadblocks, progress and players.

- Attend the trade shows and conference on Indian gaming. These are great venues for learning how other Indian facilities are meeting their challenges and gathering ideas you can apply at your property.

Communication, communication, communication.

Nothing is a substitute for talking with the chairperson and council members. This doesn't have to be formal. But don't expect them to come to your office. Make an effort for outreach. Tribal elected officials are a valuable repository of information and can tell you a great deal about tribal values, perceptions, past management history and current expectations.

Managing by walking around is something Peter Drucker advocates and it has great applicability to Indian country. Running things from your desk won't work. Successful tribal gaming managers must be available and approachable.

A common mistake is not initiating conversations with every level of employee. Another is not thanking people for the information they give you. Initiating conversation opens a door where they may feel freer to bring something to your attention in the future. The same is true when you acknowledge individuals for their input.

(more)

PAGE SIX: Cross Cultural Management

Conversely when tribal councils do not take the time to acknowledge management for the things they do right, they can set in motion a damaging dynamic. A manager who doesn't feel their value or contributions are recognized are less likely in turn to acknowledge and thank employees. Subconsciously they may even be less friendly or acknowledge tribal employees in particular.

Keeping channels of communication open is more difficult in practice than in principle because you may feel at times weighed down in minor matters. But even the complaints are an opportunity to learn what motivates and discourages your employees and also offers you some insight as to how to assess employee supervisors.

Good managers in Indian country know how to learn from their employees. To do this, you must first be accessible. You may think you are projecting a professional attitude but you may be conveying aloofness or unapproachability. If this is true, you will be isolated. Isolation translates to less information flow which translates to uninformed decision-making. The key always lies with getting as much information as possible. Information is the most important commodity in business. Cash comes in second.

Where does information that you can use every day reside? In the heads of your employees. You never know when an employee will tell you something important. You can gather bits and pieces that are invaluable --useful information that will help the tribal government run their business better and become more profitable.

Understand your role is to serve the tribal government not the personalities but the government and ultimately, the people of the tribe. You are staff to this function.

In Nevada or Atlantic City, the management culture is highly competitive and a tough hide is a requirement to survive. But a tough, autocratic style won't serve you well in Indian country because ultimately you are not in charge. In fact, the very tribal employees you supervise are, in effect, also your bosses because they elect the council who hired you. Power flows from the tribal members to elected officials and it is the elected leadership who give you the authority to manage. But that authority is not a mandate for totalitarian management. Rather it is a designation of trust that you will need to manage with a fair and equitable approach.

As DeToqueville noted when he wrote about the early days of the American government, democracy can be inefficient. However that is precisely the environment in which you are working -- a highly democratic process in which all levels of the organization have the ability to influence and direct the operation of the casino. Ultimately if you are not comfortable with

(more)

PAGE SEVEN: Cross Cultural Management

this structure, you probably should consider another work place.

Sometimes even the most well-intentioned non-Indians can still be “ugly Americans.” A non-Indian advertising agency making a presentation to a tribal group showed up in very crisp white shirts and clearly very expensive suits. Not a problem in itself but when they arrived, they found an informal setting and tribal representatives dressed casually. Not one of the executives removed their jackets in an effort to take a cue from their hosts. Even though the tribal hall was small, they arranged the tables and chairs to create a barrier between themselves and the audience. Instead of talking to the group, they lectured the participants. Amazing as it is to read, they actually addressed the group as “you people”. Not surprisingly, the tribal members and employees stopped listening and were very resistive to the concepts presented. They resented being talked down to. When this was discussed later, the ad executives could not believe these behaviors were factors in their presentation’s failure and decided the Indians were simply unwilling to listen to good ideas.

Useful practices and perspective for the non-Indian manager

As St. Francis of Assisi advised, be disciplined to accept that which you can change and those things you cannot and have the wisdom to know the difference.

- Know that Indian gaming is more than a business; it is a major economic development. Indian gaming is rooted in tribal sovereignty and the right of self-determination. Of course it is about profit. But is also about ensuring their children have a better quality of life, have access to healthcare, have good housing, the opportunity for higher education and about establishing a future of self-sufficiency.

- Be consistent. Make sure there are policies and procedures in place that have been signed off by tribal government representatives and management. Yes, it is true that tribal members get priority consideration in hiring but their tribal status should not mean they are exempt from gaming operation’s policies and procedures. Making exceptions destroys the order necessary to good management. Rules that apply to everybody means management that is fair.

- When there is a problem, document your handling to ensure your actions are consistent with non-Indian and Indian employees. Part of maintaining workplace morale is fostering the belief that management is impartial and fair in its conflict resolution.

- Make a point of communicating daily with all levels of casino employees. This goes back to our earlier discussion about accessibility and information.

What Elected Tribal Leaders Can Do

A frequent question is what can tribal governments do in the recruiting and training of non-Indian managers that will help ensure the selections prove to be a win-win for everyone.

PAGE EIGHT: Cross Cultural Management

- The first answer is to seek people with experience in dealing with tribal governments and gaming operations. There is no substitute for the experience in multi-cultural environments. Evaluate carefully whether a candidate's exposure to or experience with Indian culture was a positive experience. Someone may have had a good deal of interface with tribal governments but not had constructive experiences. I know of one tribe who hired a non-Indian manager who had great depth of work experience with tribes in another part of the country. No one picked up the phone to check with tribal contacts on this person's background.

- Clearly communicate what you want and expect. Non-Indians and Indian managers alike say tribal government can be unclear as to what they expect of manager's performances. Set aside regular times when objectives and work in progress can be discussed rather than only scheduling a manager to meet with the council when there's a problem.

- Give the manager immediate feedback on good work and bad efforts. Don't wait months to convey either negative or positive concerns. A predisposition in traditional American business settings as well as Indian culture is not to share feelings. This can become a serious problem if a non-Indian manager is trying to decipher how a council may feel about them and the job they are doing.

- Create mutually established objectives with your managers. The management of Indian casinos is truly a team effort. If a tribal council or gaming commission is not collaborative but dictatorial with a manager, expect that manager to echo that conduct with employees.

- Invest in a manager's continued training and professional development.

- Encourage them to learn about the tribe. Provide books, references and resources that can be helpful.

- Hold an annual or semi-annual managers workshop to develop yearly goals and objectives, discuss problems and solutions.

A former Lummi tribal chairman Larry Kinley used to carry a thought-provoking business card. At the top of the card is a quote from Chief Seattle that reads, "This we know. All things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected." How true and appropriate when reflecting how best to understand the secret of good management of tribal gaming operations.