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Required as mandatory training for tribal employees, the Cherokee Nation History Course has given employees, both Cherokee and non-Cherokee alike, a stronger sense of pride and a better understanding of self-governance. Indeed, this successful and innovative history and leadership course has stimulated a shift in employees' and citizen's thinking. Tribal employees see themselves not only as service providers, but as leaders of their nation; tribal members no longer see themselves as mere recipients of services, but as active citizens of a sovereign nation.

The Cherokee Nation has a long and well-documented history. In the eighteenth century, Cherokee citizens suffered from smallpox, genocidal warfare, and encroachment brought on by early white settlers. Later, in 1838, the US Government forcibly removed the Cherokees from their homelands in the eastern US to Oklahoma along the infamous "Trail of Tears." Thousands of Cherokees died en route. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Dawes Allotment Act—designed to assimilate Indians into mainstream society by privatizing Indian lands—brought about the calamitous loss of Cherokee lands in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, Cherokees fared no better in the twentieth century. In 1906, the US Government "dissolved" the Nation's elected government by federal legislation. In the Depression of the 1930s, a "second" or "economic" Trail of Tears occurred, as tens of thousands of Cherokees migrated away from the Cherokee country, seeking work in distant places, especially California and Texas. World War II and the relocation projects of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) created additional expatriates in the 1950s and 1960s, presenting further challenges to the Cherokee Nation's political and social cohesion.

Less known of the Cherokees is their history of innovation and adaptation in response to these destructive events. Especially notable is the Nation's unwavering commitment to educating its citizens and to preserving and exercising its governmental powers. In the nineteenth century, the Nation adopted a first-of-its kind syllabary of the Cherokee language, founded the first institution of higher learning for women west of the Mississippi, constructed a men's seminary, and opened 150 day schools, which represented the first system of co-educational public instruction in the world. The Cherokees attained a literacy rate of 90 percent—a rate three times higher than that of surrounding communities. In 1827, even before the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee Nation adopted a written constitution. After the removal—but 150 years prior to formal congressional recognition of the importance of tribal courts—the Cherokee Nation constructed a courthouse that stands to this day. In the 1970s, the Cherokee Nation rebounded from the disastrous federal policies of termination and relocation by formally reconstituting its government. Within several years, it reinstated the elections of a principal chief and rejuvenated the tripartite government that had been constitutionally established in the 1800s.

Regrettably, the Nation's enormous resilience and flexibility in the face of adversity has too often been overshadowed by the more commonly told stories of economic and political deprivation. Many Cherokee citizens, unaware of their long tradition of innovation and excellence, have been left feeling

disempowered. Despite the reorganization of the Cherokee Nation in the 1970s, many Cherokees today have struggled to regain an understanding of their citizenry and sovereignty as a nation. Several years ago, a Cherokee tribal attorney overheard another tribal employee cut off a problem-solving conversation with the comment, “We can’t do that. The Bureau of Indian Affairs won’t let us.” The employee’s deference to the BIA revealed a failure to appreciate a history of innovation and adaptation by the Cherokee people.

In 1992, the tribal attorney organized a course to teach the legal history of the Cherokee Nation. Eventually it evolved into the Cherokee Nation History Course—a forty hour college-level course that is a mandatory training component for every Cherokee Nation employee. Employees have the option of taking the course in one week, over two alternate weeks, or over five alternating Fridays. Teachers rely on lectures, guest speakers, group discussions, role-playing, and case study methods to immerse their students in the study of Cherokee history. The Course offers a 1,200-page reading packet consisting of treaty texts, legislative acts, and court decisions, as well as pertinent essays written by Cherokees and other scholars. Since its creation, approximately 1,300 tribal government employees have completed the Cherokee Nation History Course. An additional 600 students from the community at large—locals and expatriates, Cherokees and non-Cherokees—also have completed the Course, which is free and open to the public. Taught by one paid and several volunteer Cherokee staff, the Course is nearing its goal of teaching every government employee Cherokee history during the initial three-year project. Afterwards, the Course will be instituted as one of eleven “core” courses of employee development that will continue to be required of every new tribal employee. Furthermore, the curriculum is being adapted for school age children and Cherokee language speakers.

The Cherokee Nation History Course seeks to promote critical thinking skills, self-reliance, and a strengthened sense of cultural and national identity. Organized chronologically, the Course encourages students to develop their own responses to various crises in Cherokee history—preventing encroachment in 1753, responding to the Removal Act in 1830, rebuilding the Nation in 1846, challenging Allotment in 1885, and coping with dissolution of the Cherokee Nation in 1906—and then compare their responses to decisions of Cherokee leaders of the past. These comparisons have generated respect and appreciation for the long tradition of Cherokee nation-building initiatives and the wisdom and ingenuity of former Cherokee leaders. For example, in role-plays, students act as the Council of Headmen that met to determine a response to the Cherokees’ problematic relationship with the British in 1753. In another assignment, students devise strategies for reconstructing the Nation in the aftermath of the Trail of Tears and the Cherokee Civil War. The actual rebuilding that took place in the mid-nineteenth century demonstrates to students the success with which Cherokee leaders of the past overcame the loss of land to assert their sovereignty. The Cherokee Nation History Course inspires students to see themselves as citizens of a sovereign nation and not as clients of a government bureaucracy. Furthermore, it has transformed tribal government employees from being service providers to leaders. As one former student said, “I plan to take more pride in my work and go that extra mile to do my job. I know that I am working for the people, not just a paycheck.”

The Course has succeeded in allowing its participants to see themselves differently, to see the Cherokees as a people of excellence. The appreciation of the Cherokee Nation History Course is most clearly reflected in the outstanding evaluations it receives from students. According to systematic surveys, the Course has a 96 percent general approval rating while individual students have described the Course as “life-changing” and “empowering.” Many say that the Course has succeeded in replacing discouragement and anger over Cherokee history with a sense of pride and accomplishment. One student wrote, “On the first day, I cried, but by the last day, I was really proud to be a Cherokee.” Another student remarked, “Growing up, I was always told by others, ‘You Cherokees all gave up. You died walking; you didn’t die fighting.’ Now I understand that we didn’t give up. We fought in our own way for four hundred years, not fifty. We adapted. We responded. And we’re still here.”

The Course’s exploration of past Cherokee leaders’ unprecedented and strategic thinking serves as a model for students who work on behalf of the Cherokee Nation today. Employees’ awareness of tribal history allows them to lobby on behalf of tribal interests from a more informed standpoint. One student

remarked that when she and her colleagues went to Washington, DC to discuss the applicability of the US Government's marriage initiative to the Cherokee Nation, their arguments were strengthened by knowledge of Cherokee marital relations over time, a subject examined in the Course. Another example comes from tribal police officers who, prior to participating in the Course, would defer to non-Indian police in calls involving Indians. After taking the Course, they came to understand the importance of having a tribal officer present at such incidents, and now, Cherokee police officers try to be the first responders. In addition, Indian Child Welfare workers have stated that knowledge of historical Cherokee family structures, residence patterns, and social systems has empowered them to argue more effectively against the routine removal of Cherokee children from homes that state courts define as "dysfunctional" on the basis of Euro-American cultural norms.

The Cherokee Nation History Course instills a sense of pride and accomplishment among students. As one student noted, "The history of the Cherokee people has had many events that could have broken our spirit and connection. It is with a joyful heart that I realize this never happened. Thank you for sweeping away the fog of mistruths, half-truths, and lies and replacing them for me with truth and understanding." Students who grapple with the voluminous course material acknowledge that while the lay view of Cherokee history focuses on "how we lost, and we lost, and we lost," their in-depth study of that history reveals how "smart and shrewd" the Cherokee leaders were over time. "We reconstituted," a student wrote. "We reorganized. We rebuilt. And not just once or twice."

The Cherokee Nation History Course stands out as a foundational contribution to good tribal governance. Its success in teaching Cherokee history fully and accurately from a Cherokee perspective, providing its Indian and non-Indian students with critical and highly transferable thinking skills, and instilling pride and confidence in being Cherokee is nothing short of remarkable. It is easy to imagine the benefits to tribes that follow the Cherokee Nation's example and develop and teach their own tribal history courses. Knowing, owning, and sharing one's history is empowering. As one former student noted, "They say that history is written by the victors. But the story's not complete. We're looking to be victors by telling our history and by using it."

Lessons:

- Tribal history can be tapped for lessons of adaptation, innovation, and resilience, and can serve as a vehicle for instilling civic pride and hope. Community understanding of a tribe's historic nation-building efforts bolsters citizen support of current and future nation-building efforts.
- Indian nations can use historical case studies and role-playing to teach citizens and employees better judgment, management strategy, and inter-personal skills. When applied with tribal history cases, these teaching methods have the added benefits of cultural resonance and strategic relevance.
- It may be desirable for Indian nations that have developed their own history course (or are interested in doing so) to make the course a mandatory component of tribal employment. Learning tribal history reinforces employees' connection to their work, improves their understanding of self-governance, builds greater cultural understanding, and dispels misperceptions among Indians and non-Indians alike.

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