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Professional Empowerment Program SWO Human Services Agency Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate

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After realizing that plentiful jobs did not always translate into employed citizens, representatives from a group of tribal services and businesses came together to address the underlying causes of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation's high employee turnover rate. The Professional Empowerment Program is helping create healthy citizens and better employees while improving its community through collaborative efforts, self-esteem building curriculum, and services designed to address the well-being of the whole person.

Like many rural tribal nations, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate struggled for years to combat high levels of unemployment and widespread poverty. Even as recently as 20 years ago, employment opportunities for tribal citizens were limited and the fight against poverty remained a top priority for the tribal government. However, with the establishment of the Dakota Western Bagging factory and several gaming facilities, the Nation experienced rapid economic growth over the past ten to fifteen years. In fact, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate is now the largest employer in the north east corner of the state of South Dakota, employing approximately 800-900 people within the tribal government, the tribal college, tribal gaming facilities, and the Dakota Western Bagging factory. While jobs have become plentiful, many people have been unable to maintain employment and by the year 2000, the Nation was experiencing a seventy percent employee turnover rate.

Concerned that many citizens were still unemployed and living in poverty in spite of having successful gaming operations and business opportunities on the reservation, a coalition of tribal entities began evaluating the employee retention problem. The evaluation identified several primary issues, including limited work experience and lack of reliable transportation, as possible underlying factors. However, in addition to these primary factors, it became apparent that many tribal citizens were also coping with personal issues such as drug and alcohol addiction and a lack of inter- and intra-personal skills. Because the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation is committed to helping their citizens be healthy, and desires them to reach their potential best selves for their families, the work force and the Oyate (the people), the Nation developed the Professional Empowerment Program to address the variety of external and internal employee issues.

Job skills and employment options are a concern across Indian Country. While not all tribal nations have problems regarding employee retention, most have high rates of unemployment compounded by a workforce with limited education and a lack of job experience. The effects of long-term poverty, cultural suppression, and substance abuse issues increase the challenges of developing a skilled and capable workforce and take tolls on the well-being of tribal citizens. By creating programs that seek to address both the external and the internal factors affecting job success, tribal governments everywhere are better able to help their citizens be healthy people and productive employees.

In June 2001, a group of representatives from professional and service programs in the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation including the Dakota Nation Gaming Enterprise (DNGE), Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, Tribal Employment Rights Organization (TERO), and the Sisseton-Wahpeton College came together to discuss the employee retention problem. These programs and businesses were witnessing a rotating stream of employees who were hired, then fired or quit who would then return to new places of employment and start the cycle again. Seeking to break the cycle, the group began identifying a common set of factors for these at-risk employees.

Among primary factors contributing to employee turnover rates, the group found that the adult population of the Nation often had little to no work experience before reaching their late 20s and 30s and even fewer had experience working with non-Natives. Many tribal citizens did not have practice working under specific time schedules and were unprepared to manage their time effectively. In addition, a number of citizens lacked formal education, often holding less than a high school degree. The lack of reliable public and private transportation, as well as difficulty finding adequate and affordable day care options, especially for single parent families, added challenges to maintaining employment. Multiplying the effects of the primary factors, a number of secondary concerns exist. People were struggling with a variety of issues, including drug and alcohol addictions, depression, effects of abuse, and the lasting consequences of intergenerational poverty. Limited inter- and intra-personal skills appeared to be a common thread underlying most of these factors and truly affecting a person's ability to meet the internal and external challenges of keeping a job.

The representatives from the professional and service programs realized it would be necessary to move beyond the usual job skills training of resume writing and interviewing and create a program focused on developing inter- and intra-personal skills. Addressing these skills would not only help "at-risk" employees become better workers, but would also empower citizens to become healthier people, positively impacting both families and the community. The Professional Empowerment Program (PEP) was established to accomplish this and it offered its first two-week course in 2002.

PEP uses a curriculum based on emotional intelligence theory and centers around a person's ability to monitor their own and/or other people's emotions. The program utilizes ideas about human development and psychological intervention to build a number of skills within each individual. By receiving both emotional and educational support, participants develop increased self-confidence, better communication skills, and the ability to manage time, finances, and emotions more effectively. They also learn how to deal with change, create long-term plans, and make healthier decisions.

PEP is impacting the Oyate in a variety of positive ways. PEP is improving the tribal economy by improving employee retention. By 2005, the employee turnover rate decreased. Because of this, graduates of the PEP are more financially secure and better able to care for their families. In fact, the return rate of families needing TANF services has decreased from thirty-four percent to seven percent. Discussions with the Nation's main employers indicated that PEP graduates show higher levels of commitment at work and demonstrate improved workplace skills, such as coming to work on time, communicating more effectively with managers and co-workers, and higher levels of productivity. Most importantly, PEP is helping participants make significant changes in their lives. Program graduates testify to the impact of PEP in their lives, saying "PEP will change your life; PEP makes you a more positive person. Instead of always being negative, you know how to turn it around and not dwell on negative people; and PEP helped me to not only be more positive but be a better role model for my family and my community."

The continuing success and positive impact of PEP is supported by several key qualities of the program's implementation. One is a dedication to the belief that the health and well-being of every tribal citizen is important to the overall well-being of the tribal community. Also important is a commitment to structuring the program to treat the whole person in order to help them improve their lives. Additionally, the level of connection and integration the program has in the fabric of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation is vital to the benefits of PEP.

Creating a strong community with healthy individuals is an important value of the Nation and reflects an overall belief in the importance of every single person. The Tribal Chairman and Tribal Council members repeatedly assert the belief that No one is expendable. The community is an island and if a

person is fired at one door, they will show up at another. Because the tribal government is committed to serving their citizens, even at the most basic emotional level, making an investment in a program like PEP is making an investment in their people. Indeed, program graduates report feeling as though the Nation was making an investment in them as not only employees, but as people. Many indicate that their new life skills gave them hope and helped them make significant changes in their lives. One program graduate, after being awarded custody of her children, credited her time in PEP for making this possible. The idea of intertwined well-being also imparts a sense of respect and camaraderie. No one is someone else's problem. Everyone works together to help each other and people at every tribal business, service program, and institution collaborate in ensuring people participate and benefit from PEP. Managers and supervisors see PEP as a necessary resource in helping "at-risk" employees rather than just terminating them. Valuing every citizen also produces tangible results. Acting on feedback from PEP participants about how improved community resources can support job retention, the tribal government created a new transportation route and a daycare. Willingness by the Nation to recognize and address the issues facing tribal citizens fosters a deeper connection between both.

The structure of PEP is based on recognizing that each participant is more than just an employee and that success is dependent on treating the whole person. PEP developers realize that designing a program focused on traditional job skills, such as filling out applications and writing resumes, is not useful in tackling the challenges facing their tribal citizens. Traditional job skills focus on getting a job rather than keeping one and fail to address the underlying internal issues preventing participants from their full potential as responsible, productive, and healthy people. However, by focusing on developing inter- and intra- personal skills, PEP is able to help participants maintain employment and become healthier people.

The program is also designed to meet the needs and learning levels of a wide variety of participants. The program curriculum breaks down complicated concepts into pieces that are easily understood and applied by participants. For example, when discussing positive and negative attributes in the work place, the instructors refer to a 'toolbox.' They have physical toolboxes in the classroom one red and one black. The red one symbolizes the 'red road' and holds attributes that contribute to a positive work environment. The black symbolizes the 'black road' and holds the negative attributes. Red and black puppets are used in the same way to demonstrate the angel and devil scenario where the red puppet tells you to go to bed so you are able to get to work on time and the black one tell you to stay up all night drinking and doing drugs.

PEP's structure ensures mindfulness of the circumstances of individual participants' lives. Because attendance is mandatory and participants often have children or other responsibilities, the program occurs over two weeks. This condensed period of time better allows for participant completion and shortens the time away from work for those supporting families. While short in duration, the program is not short in intensity. The program design is highly therapeutic - recognizing the need to deal with internal issues before participants can be productive employees or citizens.

During the first day of each course, program staff assesses participants for potential mental health concerns, substance abuse issues, or gaps in formal education. Beyond dealing with these issues directly in the program, staff also makes outside referrals for additional or longer-term assistance. Because the program involves opening up and sharing many emotions, strong bonds are created between the participants and the instructors. The program's two facilitators recognize and value these bonds, using them to help participants make progress. Their roles as caring teachers with high expectations help to create an environment where participants feel safe and motivated. As a team, the two facilitators are extremely effective in combining professional knowledge with practical skills. The instructors remain as resources for participants after graduation and help to reinforce the program's lessons every day. In addition, PEP is considering how to meet the needs of more tribal citizens. Plans for the future include finding ways to extend program time and expand intervention services for the fifteen to twenty percent of participants who remain unable to retain a job.

PEP is deeply rooted and integrated in the fabric of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation. Although PEP borrows techniques from other programs, it modifies them to be more applicable to their own

community and to traditional Dakota values. By integrating Dakota culture into the training curriculum, participants feel a direct connection between their everyday lives and the skills they are developing. Quotes from prominent Native thinkers line the program's walls and ideas about good choices and good lives are based on concepts of what a living a good life means in Dakota culture. Prominent tribal citizens are often held up as examples of people living good lives, and to stress Dakota values. The connection between the curriculum and the community is reinforced by the fact that one of the instructors is a respected, traditional member of the community, in addition to being a professional social worker. Her presence and teaching style is similar to the role played by respected tribal elders full of warmth and sincere concern for the participants while also demanding that they give their best to PEP and to their community.

The program is also deeply integrated into the more formal organization of the tribal government and business enterprises. PEP was created and supported through a unique collaboration among tribal programs, businesses, and services. Because of this collaborative partnership between tribal departments and agencies, including education, welfare, health care, and mental health services, PEP participants are better able to access services with PEP acting as a facilitator. In addition, each of these entities refers clients to PEP, including attorneys with clients that would benefit from the inter- and intra-personal skill building in remaining out of the court system. Agencies such as TANF require their participants to attend PEP and referral to the program by tribal businesses is the often the first step before termination of an at-risk employee. In fact, PEP is incorporated into the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation's personnel policies. Because PEP is so successful at teaching inter- and intra-personal skills, the Nation has instituted an on-going manager/supervisor training program for all tribal businesses and entities.

The presence of a program like PEP is making a positive difference in the economy and in the community of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation. Citizens are retaining their jobs, tribal employers are getting better, more productive employees, and individuals are able to become healthier and happier people. By starting with a solid belief that nobody is expendable and a dedication to improving the overall well-being of its citizens, the Nation is able to create a program addressing the holistic needs of each person through a focus on inter- and intra-personal skills rooted in the fabric of the tribal community.

Lessons:

- Recognizing that in healthy societies no one is expendable, nations are wise to create programs that foster healthy individuals, thereby contributing to a strong, professional workforce as well as the overall well-being of the community.
- By focusing on the development of inter- and intra-personal skills that incorporate cultural values, individuals can be empowered to be better family members, employees, and citizens.
- Collaboration across departments, services, and employers can better facilitate professional and personal development for citizens most in need of support.

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