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Introduction

By Dr. Erich Longie



The subject of this month's newsletter is nepotism. According to Wikipedia, "**Nepotism** is [favoritism](#) granted to [relatives](#) or friends, without regard to their [merit](#). The word *nepotism* is from the Latin word [nepos](#) (meaning 'nephew' or 'grandchild')" (nepotism, 2005; nepotism, 2010).

Nepotism is favoritism granted to relatives or friends, without regard to their merit.

Traditionally, there was no nepotism among the Dakotas. You did not automatically become a leader or receive preferential treatment because your parents held an important position in the tribe. You had to earn whatever position you aspired to. Sadly, it is the opposite today. The old familiar saying on reservations, "it is not what you know, but whom you know," is so true. This unethical practice often puts unqualified individuals into jobs of great

importance to tribal members and prevents other tribal members from working in jobs they are qualified for. Some reservations lose their best and brightest tribal member due to nepotism. They choose to work off the reservation because they will not get hired on the reservation because they don't have a relative in a top level position.


An important thing to remember is nepotism on Indian reservations is not always the same as nepotism off reservations for a number of reasons. Many individuals off reservations own their own business, and they see it as their right (not as nepotism) to hire family members. Similarly, as a small business owner, the few times I had to have help, I did not hesitate to hire my relatives. On the other hand, very seldom will you see two family members working in the same department, or in the same project in public businesses off the reservation. They strictly enforce their nepotism policies.

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In the past, all tribes had an extended family system and loyalty to family members within that extended family exceeded everything else. Here is how the Lakota viewed kinship:

 *"Kinship is central to the Lakota way of life. Courage, fortitude, wisdom and generosity are among the most celebrated virtues. The Lakota learn these traits from their elders and prove them in their daily lives. Every act and judgment is considered in terms of its duty and benefit to the extended family, which often includes hundreds of people. The worst insult a Lakota can give is to say, "you live as if you had no relatives." (The Lakota Ways, n. d.)*

When you take the Lakota philosophy, which is similar to other tribes' philosophies, and apply it to the modern world, you can begin to see why many tribal members practice nepotism openly and unashamedly. They are doing what any good Indian would do; taking care of their family (The Tribal Leaders Institute understands this tradition of loyalty to family members and addresses it in its trainings).

Another reason nepotism may be so prevalent on reservations is the lack of jobs and poor work habits of tribal members. Often, good dependable workers may come from the same family, and if you are a manager looking for good workers, you very well might overlook the fact that your two best workers are closely related.



In 1996, I was hired as president for our tribal college. My sister, April, was the business manager for the college at that time. The Board of Regents did not express any concerns about the potential nepotism that was created between April and me when they hired me as president; however, April, who is known as a highly ethical worker, took it upon herself to look for a job elsewhere. In a very short time, she was hired as business manager for the tribe.

This month, we have Willie Davis; a Turtle Mountain Chippewa member, back as the guest author for this month's newsletter. Willie's article is about nepotism on reservations, something those of us who live on reservations are all too familiar with. ♥



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Nepotism

By Willie Davis

Member - Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa's



The Chippewa/Ojibwe words, “miigiwe-niigaan-nindawaaj” (grant-advance in-preferably), is the closest word or phrase I could reference that would explain that a “person is getting special or preferential treatment.”

The term, nepotism, can be traced back as far as the Middle Ages when popes and monks who usually had no children gave their nephews positions of preference.



Nepotism is defined as: “a common accusation in politics when the relative of a powerful figure ascends to similar power seemingly without appropriate qualifications” (nepotism – definition, 2009, ¶ 3). Favoritism shown, preferred treatment, or patronage granted - it has played many roles and elevated many people in the areas of politics, entertainment, familial bloodlines, etc.

Having grown up living most of my life on an Indian reservation, I realize that there are many tribal members in their jobs simply because they had a family member in a position to hire them – this seems to be a common and re-occurring situation in many tribal organizations. Yes, I do understand that many of us are related, but to go out of your way to help select or overlook other qualified persons for a job is simply wrong. As the saying goes that Dr. Longie alluded to in his introduction, on Indian reservations “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

Because of rampant nepotism and other social ills I have observed among my people, I have often wondered how our tribe has continued to

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maintain a strong identity, and to outsiders, do we not appear to have a lot going for us? This, in spite of the political turmoil that constantly re-occurs, not only every two years with a new election, but with the constant bickering and power-struggles within tribal government and to some extent other tribal entities, including college and school boards.

Historically in Indian Country, nepotism has taken on a significant impact throughout the years, and in many cases, served the tribes to maintain unity, harmony and balance. However, in more recent years, this “family, friend, or other close friend getting help by someone in a high end position in the community or in a resource position” has become an act without credence - many not having to know any more than a person in authority to get a step up over another tribal member. This was not how it was long ago. According to stories and other oral teachings I have heard, some 75 years ago, a typical leader was chosen through consensus – the same as any group leader who earns a position informally, as demonstrated by early colonists 400 years ago (Balzer, 2000).



As I reflect upon how nepotism has affected our people, I think, “it is no wonder many alcohol and drug problems have had a direct influence on how tribal members deal with their daily lives.” A friend of mine, Erich Longie, shared some wise words, “we, as tribes of people who once regarded generosity, sharing, and

supporting your family as being a positive influence in traditional society, are in fact enabling for alcoholics” (personal communication, 2009). He went on to explain how many tribal members who are alcoholic take advantage of these values. An alcoholic may spend all his/her money on booze then live off the generosity of other tribal members. And because we are generous people, we let them, thereby enabling the alcoholic tribal member(s)

“We, as tribes of people who once regarded generosity, sharing, and supporting your family as being a positive influence in traditional society, are in fact enabling for alcoholics...” (Longie, 2009)

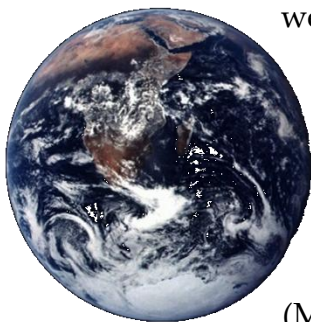
to keep spending their money on booze. There are also little consequences for how we treat each other. Those who are generous and caring are manipulated into helping unethical people. This, in turn, protects the unethical person, or the addicted person, and they do not have to deal with their problems. The generous person covers for the addicted person’s poor job skills, or poor spending habits, preventing them from taking on personal responsibility to be more accountable in establishing their own personal merits of achievement.

The foundation of the government of the United States was partially built on the model of the League of Iroquois Nations – made up of five

tribes at that time. Benjamin Franklin and other significant leaders observed how the Indians were able to establish such a league, in spite of their vast tribal differences and outlooks. The



League of Iroquois Nations influenced Franklin and his associates when they wrote the U. S. Constitution. Fairness, equal rights and due process were qualities that were universal in Indian Country. Although each tribe shared similar thinking as in the Great Spirit, Mother Earth and nature, there were differences that were respected. Personal



growth and responsibility within the tribes was earned. The tribe, as a whole, recognized any individual achievements (Murphy, 2007).

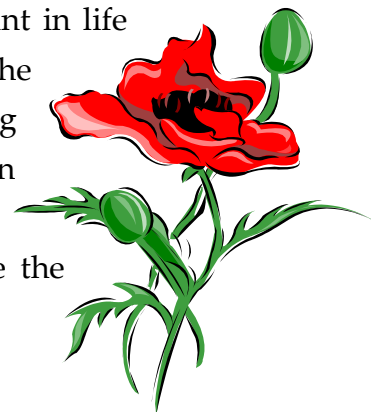
We Indians have always tried to maintain cooperation among ourselves. Even in times of war, there were signs of respect and civility among tribal members. Each tribe took time out from fighting to re-stock supplies, and it was just understood, neither side would attack or fight until restocking was complete. The bottom line is that there was an understanding and you knew what was expected – trust and respect was earned, not freely given.

A person who was in a leadership position once performed his duties with honor and reverence. Now people in leadership positions distort our

traditional values and use their influence to advance themselves or their family. This has become commonplace in Indian Country. We need to get back to the traditional ways of thinking! We need to get back to when one earned what they received! We need strong, honest leaders with personal merits and real accomplishments instead of unethical leaders who are promoting nepotism and favoritism.

We need strong, honest leaders with personal merits and real accomplishments instead of unethical leaders who are promoting nepotism and favoritism.

In closing, we as proud Indian people owe our children. We need to teach the next generations of tribal members that hard work, determination, and personal accomplishments are what make a true leader - and being a brother, sister, cousin, uncle or other relative to a person in authority does not automatically get you a free pass or step up on somebody. You have to earn what you want in life and with this will come the respect of others – including the ability to work within the framework of policies or regulations that enforce the abuse of “nepotism.” ♥



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