

Supporting opportunity vs. entitlement



**BRIDGETT SORENSON,
DIRECTOR, UNIT III**

I hope everyone got to spend quality time with their families and friends. Life is so crazy busy without having to prepare for a major holiday that it is hard to have any time to just sit back and enjoy it. There is a lot of work for one day.

During December, there were some staffing changes at all casinos except Hessel. These are never easy decisions for anyone involved. December is not a good time of year to get notice of a change in your employment status but I personally do not believe any time of the year is a good time. The communication process could have been better since some people tend to find out prior to information being released. Some people do not have tact when communicating with team members and may need training.

On Dec. 17 during a Gaming Authority Meeting (which is a meeting of the board of directors that focuses on casino business), the COO and CFO presented us their 2014 budget and some staffing changes. Some team members had title changes, some team members' positions were eliminated and some positions that are vacant will not be filled. It was my understanding that the changes were due to unneeded positions more than a financial need. The staffing changes did however save us over \$500,000.

There was much discussion on these changes. One of my concerns was the elimination of the Shores Keno Department. The department had thrived under their manager until the position was eliminated in 2008. I realize that local bar and restaurants now provide keno for entertainment but I am not confident that we did all we could to rebuild

the keno revenues. The staffing numbers were continuously being cut, along with tournaments. Dealers covering the department that did not want to be there and the shift managers were running the department along with the Gaming Department and overseeing the building. In my opinion, keno was providing a service to our customers who enjoyed playing it and as long as we were close to breaking even, we were also providing jobs. I understand the need for change, but before elimination I would have preferred trying to rebuild.

On Dec. 18, I was in Detroit at my aunt's funeral and received a message that a team member had filed a letter claiming myself and another board member were harassing her and targeting her employment. The letter had been written on Dec. 17. The letter stated that we should not be able to vote on any actions regarding her employment. There was obviously a breach in confidentiality since we had discussed these changes on the 17th in a closed meeting and the letter was dated for this day. The person was not officially notified of her position being eliminated until Dec. 19. What is absolutely insane to me is that people believe that I can terminate someone. I have one vote on the employment of a key employee. This position was not a key employee and was not voted on. As members of the board, we voted on the 2014 casino budget and not on individual employment changes. In my last unit report I mentioned a Facebook post I had made regarding this person. I worked with this individual for four or more years and never had a problem with her. The chairman would love for people to hate me. He is all over social media claiming I said to fire this person and he will testify in court on her behalf. Are you kidding me? The chairman of the tribe is discussing people's employment on social media and making people believe something that is not true. As a team member I would not want people saying someone wants to fire me. This was a setup and all I can say is I am sorry that someone thinks and feels that way. The lesson to be learned from this is to be careful what you post on social media or any print because even if it doesn't come out as you wanted it to, the damage is already done.

As team members were notified of employment changes, some board members were sending out emails to say they did not know what they had voted on or that they didn't know changes would be happening right away. I thought the COO specifically said it would take affect immediately. There was a prior attempt to call a meeting to reverse the decision on the budget. There were board members on team member's Facebook pages telling the chairman to put them back to work. The majority of the board did not support it. The pressure must have gotten intense because a special meeting was called for Jan. 2 to rescind, replace or reaffirm the budget and also to reduce over-the-max positions that were making over \$40,000. In the meantime there was a Gaming Authority meeting called for earlier on Jan. 2 because that is the body that deals with gaming. When the board arrived and the meeting was opened there was discussion on whether the meeting should be in closed session or not. We always go into closed session because of proprietary information and employment concerns. The team member that had been given the idea that we would reverse our decision was present. We voted to go into closed session to discuss what we were even doing. Like I said, the majority of the board had no intention of making changes. We would have set a terrible precedent to have meetings each time someone lost their job. We would never be able to terminate anyone in the future if we made those changes. The board voted in the Gaming Authority meeting to not rescind the 2014 casino budget. The vote was eight directors voting 'no' and four directors voting 'yes.' There were also eight votes originally for passing the budget with one director abstaining, one director voting 'no,' and two others out of the room. In my opinion this was a waste of everyone's time and false hope for those team members. The COO took full responsibility for his changes he presented to us and said he had no changes at this time. This is pure micro-management.

I hope we will learn from all these decisions and continue on a positive road to driving revenue and creating more jobs.

One of the biggest concerns I have with cuts is that we do not

do them with what is best for business in mind. When we need to make changes it should be that the least productive team members are eliminated. Currently, the layoff policy for team members is non-Native first, household second and Sault Tribe members last. That does not leave room for what is best for the department, business or tribe. This brings me to the fact that the tribe provides an opportunity to its members by giving them a preference in being hired first. I absolutely agree with a preference. If a person applies for a position and they are the most qualified and tribal, they should be hired. What I do not agree with is that, currently, we almost force management to hire tribal members even though they may have quit or been fired numerous times. Is this good business? Would you run your business this way? Morale suffers, customer service suffers and we spend through the roof on turnover costs.

We need to separate the casinos and run them like a business and not a government. We cannot and will not be successful if we do not make decisions that are best for the businesses. Letting a team member go just because they are non-Native is ridiculous. Like I said, we have a preference for hiring and a layoff policy but we do not have an elimination policy. It is time to let all of our team members know that we value them, we are going to properly train them, and we are going to hold them accountable because we are here to generate revenue to provide services. If team members do not buy into this, then it is time to move on. Staff needs to know what is expected of them and that policy will be followed.

The misconception that I wanted to address is that some tribal members have a sense of entitlement. The tribe does not owe anyone of us anything. Our ancestors are the ones who truly suffered from the actions of the U.S. government. We have an opportunity to obtain a job in our tribe and share in the satisfaction of helping to run a successful business. Once we begin employment with the tribe, we are not better than our other team members; we have a preference in hiring and in order of layoff. We still need to follow the policy and provide good customer service.

The casino surveys proved

the need to look at our hiring policies. I have asked several times to have this discussed in a workshop and it ends up off the agenda. It is also being implied that I do not support tribal preference. This is absolutely not true. I support PREFERENCE not ENTITLEMENT.

I would have preferred a complete audit of all five casinos to decide any restructuring that needed to take place once instead of gradual changes. Our team members should not have to constantly worry what tomorrow will bring. There needs to be continuous, honest communication from the top down on where the businesses are and where they are going.

The over-the-max issue is not a board driven threat. This continues to be placed on the agenda to cause strife with our team members. There is no support so move on!

There has been concern with the tribe moving forward with the Lansing casino. There have been comments on why we would start another casino when we have needs in our current casinos. I agree we have to make changes to improve business in our U.P. casinos, but the opening of the Lansing casino has the potential to bring in more revenue than all five of our current casinos combined. I hope that we apply for trust status soon and continue our journey to allow gaming.

Our focus for 2014 needs to include discussions on strategic planning, economic development and rebuilding the casino revenues.

Even with as much turmoil that has taken place in 2013, we have actually made great strides. The audit was done on casino marketing and food and beverage. Casino team member surveys were completed. Changes in the casinos are reflective of both and change is not always easy but necessary. I believe this board has had to deal with a lot of baggage from years past and we are cutting through the politics and getting it done.

Thank you to all of our team members for your 2013 contributions! We could not do it without each and every one of you!

Please contact me with your concerns at bsorenson@saulttribe.net, bridgett91@yahoo.com, (906) 430-0536 or my office, 643-2123.