

Statement: Time to change how we do things



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Aniin, Anishnaabek, last month, my unit report was not printed in our tribal newspaper. I wish to thank Editor Jennifer Dale Burton for her quick response and assistance in helping to correct the omission.

I sincerely appreciate the concern expressed by many of you and I want to assure you that, this month, you will find my unit report for April as well as May.

My fellow tribal members, I will once again be outspoken and forthright in my communication to you this month.

Our tribe needs to change. I believe we need a major shift in how our tribe “works,” and I believe *it needs to start with the board of directors*. I work with some very fine and dedicated men and women; individuals who stepped up and were selected by their communities (units) to serve as their representatives. I’ve witnessed board members who work hard and demonstrate generosity

and commitment to the people of our tribe.

My suggestions are not in reference to how board members **individually** do their jobs. However, I believe what we do when we are **together** in our workshops, budget meetings, committee meetings and board meetings needs to change, continuing to do things “the way we’ve always done it” isn’t good enough.

In the three years I have been seated at the board table, I have yet to see a plan that speaks to the future of our tribe. What are our priorities? Where are we weak? Where are we strong? What do our people need? How do we involve our people in the decisions we make? What do we do in the event of a crisis?

Our Constitution directs us to perpetuate our way of life and provide for the welfare and prosperity of our people. Instead, we spend huge amounts of time on budgets (many of which are grants and they are basically dictated by the granting agency!), and we allow ourselves to get involved too deeply in the day-to-day operations of every department and enterprise.

I mean no disrespect to my colleagues, but I believe it’s time to change from the “way we’ve always done it” to thinking about “how can we do this better?”

We could begin by *developing a cohesive plan for the future* of our people that keeps the foundation of our being Anishnaabe STRONG. In my opinion, we spend too much time focusing on things that are “less about where we are going,” and more about “where we have been.”

Please don’t misunderstand

me, the mistakes of the past are important to learn from so that we don’t repeat them. However, I am weary of listening to the current chairman’s rants about chairmen of the past, instead of meaningful discussion over what we are doing NOW. I am weary of meetings that are allowed to disintegrate into chaos and lose the focus and purpose of the meeting. With a shift in our thinking, we can put a stop to the nonsense and focus on what truly matters — moving our tribe forward in a good way and making life better for our people. I am not criticizing individual board members. I believe, individually, board members DO work to make life better for our people, but we can do so much more as a group if we look at how we’ve done things over the years and ask ourselves, “How’s this working for us?”

You have heard me say before in my reports that we need to prioritize. We need to have a plan. We don’t. Wait, let me rephrase those statements. There are LOTS of plans, but they address goals established by various departments. I am saying that the board of directors needs to prioritize, and have a plan, **a tribal strategic plan**. As a board, we need to change what our meetings are about, put a stop to the chaos and make time to plan. I don’t have all the answers, I do not believe any ONE of us does. But, I do know that working together we can make a difference. I know that change begins by asking the right questions such as:

- Has life become better or worse for our people? How? Why?
- What is our tribal unemployment rate and what are we doing about it?

- How can we improve access to medical care for ALL of our members?

- Why are we losing so many of our young people to drugs and suicide and how do we stop it?

- Are the children using our language?

- What are the needs of our elders?

These are just examples of a few questions we could focus on and really make a change in the lives of our people. Perhaps there are questions even more important that should be looked at first, I am merely providing some examples. But our board time is structured to do the same things we have always done. Meeting agendas get filled with minor budget modifications and resolutions based on politics, instead of tribal need (as is the case for the May 5 board meeting). Too much of the board’s time together as a group is spent focused on dollars instead of people. We can change that.

Let’s look at the constitutional goal of “perpetuation of our way of life.” I believe we need to be focused on how we are going to make certain our language and culture does not vanish. We have some excellent cultural and language events and activities, but is it enough? Is this board of directors providing enough resources to rejuvenate the use of our language so that seven generations from now, we will have MORE language speakers?

Let us look at the other constitutional goals: Are we doing enough to provide for the welfare and prosperity of our people? Are the basic needs of food, medicine and housing being met? I know the

answer is “no.” The need of our people is great in these areas and I want to give credit to those departments who work hard to address those needs. But as a tribe, can we do better? I know the answer is yes. But we have to change. We are a TRIBE, not a corporation. I believe the board of directors needs to focus *more on PEOPLE*, less on dollars. I heard someone say recently, “We had more, when we had less.” We had more caring, more connection and more hope. Sadly, I understood exactly what was meant.

Members of our board of directors do many good things and work hard, but it’s time to work better. I believe it is time to do what we demand of our staff. Plan where we are going, prioritize what is important and hold ourselves accountable for getting there. We need a **tribal strategic plan**. Moving in this direction would require a huge shift in thinking, procedures and accountability measures. But I believe we MUST do this. Continuing to do what we have always done will only bring us more of the same.

This is only a small part of changes I think need to happen for the betterment of our tribe. I am interested in what YOU think. Please feel free to contact me via phone, email, “snail-mail,” texts or come visit me at my office (I rent an office in the Big Bear Arena) and, as always, if I can be of any help, please don’t hesitate to contact me!

Anishnaabe gagige (Anishnaabe for always)

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