

Learning by looking at us and our ancestors



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Aaniin, Anishnaabek, nearly seven months ago, in the April edition of this newspaper, I announced that Sequestration had hit our tribe, and I shared with you my thoughts on how I felt our tribe should deal with the huge cuts. The message was simple: **Use common sense and prioritize; do no harm.**

That was seven months ago, since that time I have been strongly insisting that, as a board, we look at the services and functions we perform as a government, and identify what is VITAL to the survival of our people. To my way of thinking, that includes at the very least: food, housing and medicine. I then suggested there should be a second category for those things that are IMPORTANT, but not necessary for survival, such as recreation. Finally, a category for

DISCRETIONARY — things that are nice to have, but we could manage without (huge government spending).

Once all services are categorized, we could then look at those activities that are solely grant funded (by outside dollars), and which require tribal dollars (revenues/profits from our casinos and other enterprises). Those services supported only by outside dollars, will be told by the granting agency (for example, the federal government) what their grant amount will be. If it is a VITAL service, the tribe may want to use tribal dollars to make up the difference in the cut in order to keep the programs providing life sustaining support to our tribal members. Because our budgets are tight, this would mean taking tribal dollars from a less important service and applying them to the VITAL services.

This concept is no different than what each of us would do if there was a loss of personal income. We would prioritize! We would buy food, pay the mortgage/rent and make sure we had the medicine our family needed. We would keep our family safe and we would cut back on things that are nice to have, but not really necessary (like cable TV or Internet). This is all I have been asking the tribe to do, use common sense, and prioritize.

But something this simple, is apparently not so easily done. Why? Politics! For months the

board has been in turmoil from being subjected to intentional distortions, personal agendas, misrepresentations, threats, games and slick political maneuvering. I could not be more disappointed by what I have witnessed. However, I firmly believe that there are 12 members of the board of directors who have it within their hearts to be a highly functioning team. I have seen each of them exhibit the positive traits of teamwork, and that gives me hope.

Perhaps it is the “teacher” in me that sees a problem, evaluates it, researches a solution, implements a plan and evaluates for performance. It is my way, my professional training and I used it in regards to our board. I have learned that for our tribal board of directors to be highly successful, it needs to overcome at least FIVE major dysfunctions (P. Lencioni, 2002).

1. Fear of conflict.
2. Lack of commitment.
3. Avoidance of accountability.
4. Inattention to results.
5. Absence of trust.

Another way to look at this is our board needs to:

1. Engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.
2. Commit to decisions and plans of action.
3. Hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.
4. Focus on the achievement of

results.

5. Trust one another.

One of the biggest challenges is the establishment of trust. Trust in each other to accept questions about their areas of responsibility, to be able to take risks, and offer feedback and assistance to each other; and, perhaps most importantly, to give one another the benefit of the doubt before arriving at negative conclusions.

I have faith in 12 leaders. They have been chosen by their communities to work together for the betterment of the entire tribe, and our Oct. 31 board meeting was proof that it could be done! The board of directors trusted each other. As a team, we worked hard through give and take, compromise and vision, and passed the tribe's 2014 budget. I pray that this experience will empower us to continue forward in a good way, to trust each other and work together to ensure coming together for the good of our tribe.

With “for the good of our tribe” as a shared vision, we can unite in a way that hasn't been seen in a long time. I was taught that there was a time when tribal communities would select a leader to represent them. These leader(s) would travel to Bawaating (now known as Sault Ste. Marie), and within the sound of the rapids that used to flow here, they would sit in a great council, and discuss the needs and future of our people. There were great speeches, great listen-

ers and a shared vision. We still have parts of those old ways in existence today. We still have leaders selected from tribal communities who gather in a great council to discuss the needs and future of our people. One of the distinct differences, though, is that we have adopted manners and ways that are not ours. There was a time when our leaders would work through differences of opinions, until the group reached an answer that everyone could agree to. It didn't matter how long it took; our people counted on guidance from the Great Spirit to help find the way, and they always did. These days however, we suffer under majority rule, which creates a minority of unhappy people and a huge division. However, at our last meeting, our leaders talked, compromised and worked to a point where 11 of 12 leaders agreed. Granted, it wasn't everyone, but it was a great start!

I believe in our old ways, our old values. They held us together as a people for thousands of years, and I believe we should do our best to return to those ways, those old values. I, for one, do not want to see our tribe become a mini-federal government. Just take a look at D.C., how's that working for them?

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