

Indigenous Leadership

The responsibility of Indigenous leaders is to take care of the people and the community; it's a collective responsibility that overshadows individual needs. Indigenous leaders are highly respected in their communities for knowledge of Indigenous language, histories, ceremonies, rituals and stories. Effective Indigenous leaders utilize learned lessons from the past to tackle current issues, while envisioning how best to prepare their people and communities for the future. Effective leaders stand with their people, gather them to gain their insight, listen effectively and make decisions with the support of the people. The characteristics of effective Indigenous leaders are the same character traits that make effective managers.

Character traits of effective Indigenous leaders and managers:

- Effective listener and communicator
- Strong in cultural and spiritual identity
- Respectful in all relationships with people and the natural world
- Puts community first before individual needs
- Builds community by being inclusive, welcoming and valuing the perspectives of others
- Makes decisions for future generations of those yet unborn
- Is guided by ancestors, elders and advisors
- Makes decisions by consensus
- Charismatic – the people respect and want to follow
- Encouraging and supportive, helps others find their gifts
- Visionary
- Family oriented
- Continuously works to fulfill their responsibility to the people and community
- Knowledgeable on many fronts and willingly shares knowledge
- Accountable to the people

Qualities for Indigenous leadership can also be described as:

Knowledge and a self-assured identity are very important. This includes knowing the history of the land and community. Good leaders are also confident in their Indigenous identity. Understanding and following traditional practices are a part of this, as well as having respect for others, Indigenous culture, and self-respect. Good relationships within the community and outside of it support the leader's role as a bridge-builder. To facilitate strong communication and mentorship, good leaders are available. Gratitude, humility, and bravery are important traits, as well.ⁱ

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that can inspire positive changes in those who follow. Transformational leaders are generally energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate. Not only are these leaders concerned and involved in the process; they are also focused on helping every member of the group succeed as well.ⁱⁱ

Transformational leadership is a leadership style can increase group morale, lead to rapid innovation, improve conflict resolution, decrease turnover and foster a sense of ownership amongst a team.ⁱⁱⁱ

Munya Andrews (2018) describes seven ways to improve leadership skills:

1. Community

Indigenous leadership focuses on community interests rather than that of the individual. Leaving behind a legacy that benefits everyone is paramount. As such Indigenous leadership is future-oriented rather than motivated by immediate self-gratification...

Leadership Challenge: *Will this decision benefit the community as a whole, without creating significant 'winners' or 'losers'?*

2. Collaboration

Indigenous cultures are highly collaborative with an emphasis on group consensus in decision making. Roles are clearly defined ...group members develop and agree to support a decision in the best interests of the whole.

Leadership Challenge: *Has everyone been consulted and contributed to this decision?*

3. Safety

The safety of all members in this process is vital to achieving consensus. Cultural safety features strongly in Indigenous cultures. It creates an environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe for people where there is no assault or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need.

Leadership Challenge: *Have I created an environment where people feel safe to contribute and express themselves freely?*

4. Responsibility

Leaders are responsible at all levels – personally responsible for themselves and collectively responsible for the group. Responsibility demands accountability, self-reflection, and self-assessment. It requires courage and humility...Indigenous leaders are held accountable to the entire community who keep their leaders in check.

Leadership Challenge: *Do I actively seek feedback from everyone in my organisation, viewing each person as an equally important contributor?*

5. Listening

Listening is a much-overlooked leadership tool. It can be a powerful technique but only in an organisation that values listening. There are many Indigenous practices and techniques that teach invaluable listening skills...listening creates an environment of respect and safety.

Leadership Challenge: Ask a family member if they consider you a good listener. If not, then practice giving them your full attention for 5 minutes, listening with your whole self, without interruption.

6. Strengths focused

[Leaders are strength focused] ...draw upon existing cultural strengths that nurture and sustain leaders, especially that which emanate from Indigenous spirituality. We connect people with the power of their Dreamings that they can call upon in any situation to guide them on their leadership journey.

Leadership Challenge: Are you aware of the cultural and personal strengths of each team member? Have you given them the opportunity to share with you what they perceive as their strength and worked out ways to build upon this?

7. Courage

Underpinning all values is courage – the key to great leadership. Although cultures differ in what makes us courageous, most would agree courage is acting in the face of fear. Indigenous leaders have had to face many personal and political struggles in their lifetimes and they've done it courageously. There are many examples from history to draw upon to see how they have dealt with various issues in the face of much social and political onslaught.

Leadership Challenge: Can you tell a story about a courageous Aboriginal person (either living or in spirit world)? If not, do some research so you can share an individual's story of leadership and courage.^{iv}

ⁱ [What Is Indigenous Leadership? - Global Peace Careers](#), retrieved on March 14, 2022

ⁱⁱ [Transformational Leadership: Inspire and Motivate \(verywellmind.com\)](#), retrieved on March 14, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ [What Is Transformational Leadership? \(And How to Lead with Motivation\) | Indeed.com](#), retrieved on March 14, 2022

^{iv} [Aboriginal Leadership Wisdom: 7 Ways to Improve Your Leadership \(evolves.com.au\)](#), retrieved on March 14, 2022