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# SEIZING THE FUTURE: WHY SOME NATIVE NATIONS DO AND OTHERS DON'T

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# SEIZING THE FUTURE: WHY SOME NATIVE NATIONS DO AND OTHERS DON'T


## ABSTRACT

Both research and the experience among Native nations daily drive home the conclusion that the so-called "nation building" approach holds the keys to self-determined social, political, and economic development for indigenous communities. This approach emphasizes the critical role of asserting rights of self-rule and backing up those assertions with governing institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of the people and efficient in their operation. This study examines the question of why is it that some Native nations seize upon the nation building strategy and take effective control of their futures while others do not. We find that foundational change in a community arises when the external and internal conditions a people face interact with their interpretations of their situation, producing a new, shared "story" of what is possible, and how it can be achieved. The keys to changing a community's "story" are found in proactive decisions to alter internal and external situations, acquire concrete knowledge of the feasible, build on the community's cultural assets, and exercise leadership—especially in educating the people in a new vision.

# SEIZING THE FUTURE: WHY SOME NATIVE NATIONS DO AND OTHERS DON'T

## I. BREAKING AWAY

**Mississippi Choctaw.** Chief Phillip Martin of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians would not take no for an answer. Over a period of three years, from 1975 to 1978, he sent out about 500 proposals to major businesses trying to get them to locate on Choctaw lands. But he not only sent out proposals. He also tackled educational problems, social problems, trained a more skilled workforce, and upgraded the reservation's inadequate infrastructure. Perhaps most importantly, he set out to create a sophisticated and professional tribal administration and a government that could demonstrate both fairness and competence. He was determined to make the reservation a place where both outsiders and tribal members would want to invest. Eventually, his efforts paid off. In 1978, his proposals began to succeed, and the tribe entered an era of unprecedented economic growth. Today, the Mississippi Choctaws have virtually eliminated unemployment on their lands and must turn to non-Indians by the thousands to work in Choctaw-owned factories, enterprises, schools, and government agencies. Chief Martin's determination played a major role. Says he, "No one told me I wasn't supposed to succeed" (Ferrara 1998, p. 64).

**Membertou First Nation:** In the mid-1990s, the band council of the Membertou First Nation in Nova Scotia decided the stop signs in their village should issue their command in the Mi'kMaq language of the people of Membertou. So, they went out and repainted the stop signs on their roads. In fact, they decided, the Membertou First Nation ought to run Membertou affairs from top to bottom. Beginning with symbolic changes like street signs, Membertou now proudly boasts its own fish processing business, its own food service business, and a rapidly improving

economy that can hold its own with non-Native communities throughout Canada. In 2002, the Mi'kMaq community of Membertou received official certification by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), making it the first indigenous government in Canada, and likely the world, to meet these internationally recognized business standards. With ISO designation in hand, Membertou has entered into a formal partnership with Lockheed Martin Canada for the purpose of pursuing the federal government's $2.8 billion maritime helicopter project.

**White Mountain Apache:** After decades of living under the thumb of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), in the mid-1960s the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Arizona told federal officials they were no longer needed at meetings of the tribal council; they could attend only upon invitation. The tribe would let the BIA know when it needed their advice. The tribe also barricaded a road and guarded it with armed men to stop the BIA from renewing non-Indian homesite leases on the shores of a tribal lake at a fraction of market value. The Bureau backed down. These and other tribal actions launched a renewal of tribal sovereignty that led to two decades of economic growth.

**Flathead:** During the 1980s, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in Montana made key reforms to their tribal government, stabilizing the rule of law and professionalizing their management. Armed with both the necessary institutions and the desire to run their own affairs, they gradually took over many of the tasks of reservation governance previously carried out by—or under the close supervision of—the United States government. In the process they began building one of the most effective tribal governments in the U.S., reclaiming control of their lands and community and moving the tribe toward sustainable, successful economic development (Cornell and Kalt 1997b). The kind of thick private sector economy, with retail and service industries owned by tribal citizens, that is so notably lacking on many First Nation reserves and U.S. reservations thrives at Flathead. The tribes' S&K Electronics operates under multi-million dollar defense and

civilian contracts at the frontiers of electronic technology and is one of the fastest growing electronics firms in the United States.

**Akiachak:** In the 1980s and 1990s, the Native community of Akiachak, Alaska, set out to regain control of land and related resources and of education and other services long provided by the federal government. They established the Akiachak Tribal Court to resolve disputes, reorganized village government to improve performance, took over administration of many of the social services on which the community depends, and began to build new relationships with other Yup'ik communities in that region of Alaska. In the process they became a model of what Alaska Native villages could do to improve community welfare and expand political power.

## II. WHY DO SOME NATIONS SEIZE THEIR FUTURES WHILE OTHERS DO NOT?

These are not the only stories of nations breaking away from established patterns of poverty and powerlessness. A number of other Native nations in the United States and Canada also have taken action in recent years to regain control of their own affairs and build societies that work, launching new initiatives in areas ranging from constitutional reform to enterprise development, from reorganizing their relationship with federal governments to developing creative new strategies for addressing burdensome social problems. Many of these efforts succeeded, leading to a growing group of Native nations that not only are in the driver's seat in their own affairs but are shaping the future according to their own designs.

On the other hand, for each of these stories of successful assertions of self-governing power, there are other stories that tell a different tale. During these same years many other Native nations either took no comparable action at all to restore effective indigenous control of their societies, or initiated actions that went nowhere.

Why? Why do some nations act aggressively and effectively to seize control of their situations and reshape the world they live in while others spin their wheels, flail about, or do nothing at all?

These questions are prompted by the results of more than a decade and a half of research on economic development and governance among American Indian nations and other indigenous peoples. Starting in the mid-1980s, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and, in time, its sister organization, the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy at the University of Arizona, set out to discover the necessary conditions for successful, self-determined economic development among indigenous nations in the United States. The research effort was prompted by the simple fact that some American Indian nations appeared to be much better at economic development than others. The research asked why.

The results are intriguing. Sustainable economic development, it turns out, is dependent not so much on economic factors such as education or natural resources or location as it is on a set of distinctly political factors. Three are of particular importance:

- **Self-rule.** Native nations have to have genuine decision-making power over their own affairs, from the organization of their governments to the management of their resources, from mechanisms of dispute resolution such as courts to the administration of community programs. This doesn't mean they have to control everything themselves. Some decisions may be made jointly with outsiders, from other Native nations to non-indigenous governments. But where Native nations are excluded from decision-making, they cannot be held accountable for the outcomes of those decisions. Where they are included, the responsibility for outcomes becomes theirs, and performance typically improves accordingly.

- **Capable institutions of self-governance.** But decision-making power is not enough. They have to back up this

power with capable governing institutions that keep politics in its place, deliver on promises, administer programs and manage resources efficiently, and send a message to investors—from community citizens considering taking a job with a tribal or First Nation government to those thinking of starting a small business on indigenous lands—that they will be treated fairly and that their investments of time, energy, ideas, or money will not be hostage to politics.

- **Cultural match.** But not just any institutions will do the job. The formal institutions of governance have to have the support of the people. The community has to have a sense of ownership about the institutions themselves. This means those institutions cannot simply be imposed from outside according to someone else's model. They have to fit indigenous conceptions of how authority should be organized and exercised.

Another factor, while less systematically addressed in the research, also appears to be important.

- **Strategic orientation.** Native nations appear to do better when they are able to move away from a firefighting, band-aids, and factional conflict approach to governance, focusing their energies less on crisis management and more on developing sustainable solutions to problems. For such nations, the key questions become: what kind of society are we trying to build for the long term, and what decisions should we be making now in support of that objective?

These four factors, taken together, form the heart of an approach to development that we call "nation building": laying the political foundations for sustainable economic and community development. The more successful indigenous nations we have

seen have placed nation building at the top of their own agendas for change.[1]

These results emerged from a research effort designed to identify and understand what the more successful nations had done that enabled them to break away from the prevailing pattern of poverty in Indian Country. Nation building was a big part of the answer. In the spring of 2003, however, Daniel Brant, a Mohawk and then CEO of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, raised with us a further question, one that precedes the issues addressed in this research. Why, he asked, was it those particular nations—and not others—that made the move, launching major, focused efforts to regain control of their own futures? What got those nations going? And what has stopped others from taking similar action? In short, why does a strategy of nation building take hold in one Native nation but not another?

These are intriguing questions, and they are the types of questions that motivate this paper. We know of no systematic research on this topic in Indian Country,[2] but we have set out here to glean from our own experience and research and from relevant research outside the context of Native nations, such insights as we can find. Our thoughts are more suggestive than conclusive, an attempt to describe what we *think* happens as we develop a larger research inquiry along these lines.

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[1] This research is summarized in a number of studies. See, for example, Cornell and Kalt (1992, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2000, 2003), Jorgensen (1997, 2000), Jorgensen, *et al.* (forthcoming), Jorgensen and Taylor (2000).

[2] However, the issue of mobilization—moving into action—has long been a concern of the sociological literature on social movements and collective action; see, among many others, McAdam (1982), Snow et al. (1986), Snow and Benford (1992), Snow and Oliver (1995). Similarly, the literature on organizational change has paid some attention to why some organizations respond to changed conditions with innovative action while others do not; see, for example, Fligstein (1991). This paper draws in part on these perspectives.

## III. FOUNDATIONAL CHANGE

People and societies act in lots of different ways. What kind of action do we have in mind here? Our concern is with the efforts Native nations make to reclaim power over their own affairs, reorganize relationships with other governments, rebuild the institutional capacity for effective self-governance, and move vigorously toward improved and self-determined economic and community welfare. One might say that our concern is with *purposive movement toward foundational change* in Native societies.

Some examples: While it may be advantageous to provide the council members of an American Indian tribe or a First Nation with training on new federal policy developments to enhance their ability to do their jobs, this is not foundational change. Foundational change would have to do not with training people but with changing the institutions—the formal governmental organizations—that those people work in and try to use. It would include such things as constitutional reform that lays the institutional foundations of effective governance, or establishing a politically independent court, or placing controls on political interference in enterprise management, or reorganizing the tribal legislature.

It might be advantageous to persuade the federal government to reprogram some dollars to meet a tribal or First Nation priority, but this is not foundational change. More important would be establishing a realistic plan for escaping federal dependency altogether. Similarly, it might be advantageous for a tribe to take over administration of an important federal program, but this is not foundational change. Foundational change would be more likely to include the reorganization of the delivery of all social services so as to improve efficiency, better fit indigenous culture, better target community needs, and improve long-term community well-being. Foundational change is not starting a

new enterprise; it's rethinking the whole economic development strategy of the nation and then launching it.

What moves some nations to pursue foundational change, and prevents others from doing the same thing?

## IV. WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE TAKE ACTION?

Years ago, a British scholar named T. H. Wintringham carried out a study of mutiny. His interest was in what led to mutinies, but in the course of his research he decided that something else was more in need of explaining. "The puzzle becomes," he wrote, "not why did the mutiny occur, but why did men, for years or generations, endure the torments against which in the end they revolted" (Wintringham 1936, p.10). Why, for so long, *didn't* they take action? The point has been echoed by others. More recently a leading student of social protest noted that "the absence of rebellion is in need of explanation as much as its presence" (Gamson 1975, p.139).

While the subject in these studies was rebellion or insurgency, the point has a broader relevance, and it suggests a particular way of thinking about the topic of this paper. We could ask, "why do these breakaway nations take action on their own behalf?" Alternatively, we could ask why other groups or nations do *not* take action. Why *don't* they do something?

The first way of framing the question can be useful, but it tends to produce more narrow or glib answers. "I guess they got fed up, so they did something," or "they finally found a good leader and things started to happen," or "they got some dollars they could use to litigate or negotiate a new deal for themselves." These answers might be true, but they assume that people were ready to go—eager to make a move, primed for action—but just needed a little more of a push: a new leader, or a few more bucks, or one more bad experience. It focuses attention on what put people over the top.

Of course any of these things—and many others—might be keys. Certainly leadership and dollars are among the things that can make the difference between inaction and action. But we might understand the pattern of action better if we had a more comprehensive sense of what action requires, of what's necessary for it to occur.

The second way of framing the question—why *don't* they act?—is more likely to lead us in that direction. It is more likely to tell us what a group or nation is up against and to think more about what's required for action. What does it take for a nation to set out to change its situation, to take hold and seize the future? It encourages us to see action as depending on certain things, as being more likely where certain elements or pieces are in place and less likely where those pieces or elements are missing.

But what are the pieces? What might prevent a nation from doing what appears to be in its interest to do? What explains *inaction?*

## V. THE LOGIC OF ACTION AND INACTION

We begin with a simple model of action and inaction.[3] It has four primary components (see Figure 1). The first is ***the external situation in which a group or nation finds itself***—the political, legal, economic, and other relationships that make some kinds of action possible and others impossible. For example, launching litigation requires a certain standing in the courts. Without that standing, that particular form of action is unavailable. Another example: the passage of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in the United States gave Congressional sanction to

[3] This is essentially a version of McAdam's (1982) political process model of collective action, using a different terminology.

certain kinds of action by Indian nations. In its aftermath, a great many nations initiated gaming enterprises.[4]

The second component is ***the internal situation of the nation:*** its assets and handicaps, everything from skills to money to organizational networks to internal relationships.[5] For example, a nation with lots of people experienced in running enterprises, or a nation with lots of discretionary dollars that it can spend on scholarships, legal services, or travel to lobby politicians enjoys opportunities for action that other nations, lacking such resources, may not have. Similarly, a nation that is bogged down internally in factional fights over money or jobs or who gets to call the shots may lack the internal cohesion necessary to get action off the ground, and probably won't go anywhere.

The third component is ***the interpretations people make of the situations in which they find themselves.*** If people think nothing can be changed in those situations, they probably won't act to change things. Or if they think the cause of the problem is just bad luck or their own failings, they will either give up or focus on their own faults while perhaps ignoring strategies of action that are directed at other sources of the problem or at other things that could be changed.[6]

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[4] Technically, Indian nations had the right to run gaming operations prior to IGRA, which did not establish those rights but instead limited them. However, the Congressional sanction and other impacts of the legislation encouraged a significant number of Indian nations to move quickly into the gaming industry.

[5] In the sociological literature on collective action, this component is described simply as resources. For a useful typology of resources, see Edwards and McCarthy (2004, pp. 125-28) and cf. Cornell (1988, ch. 10).

[6] This is more or less what Erving Goffman (1974) called "frames"—the ideas people develop or accept that interpret and explain the world around them and the things that happen to them. Frames have become central topics in the current study of collective action. For some summary discussions of collective action frames, see Benford and Snow (2000) and Snow (2004).

The fourth component is ***action (or inaction)***: the product of the other three components. Together, the other three facilitate and encourage action—or hinder and discourage it.

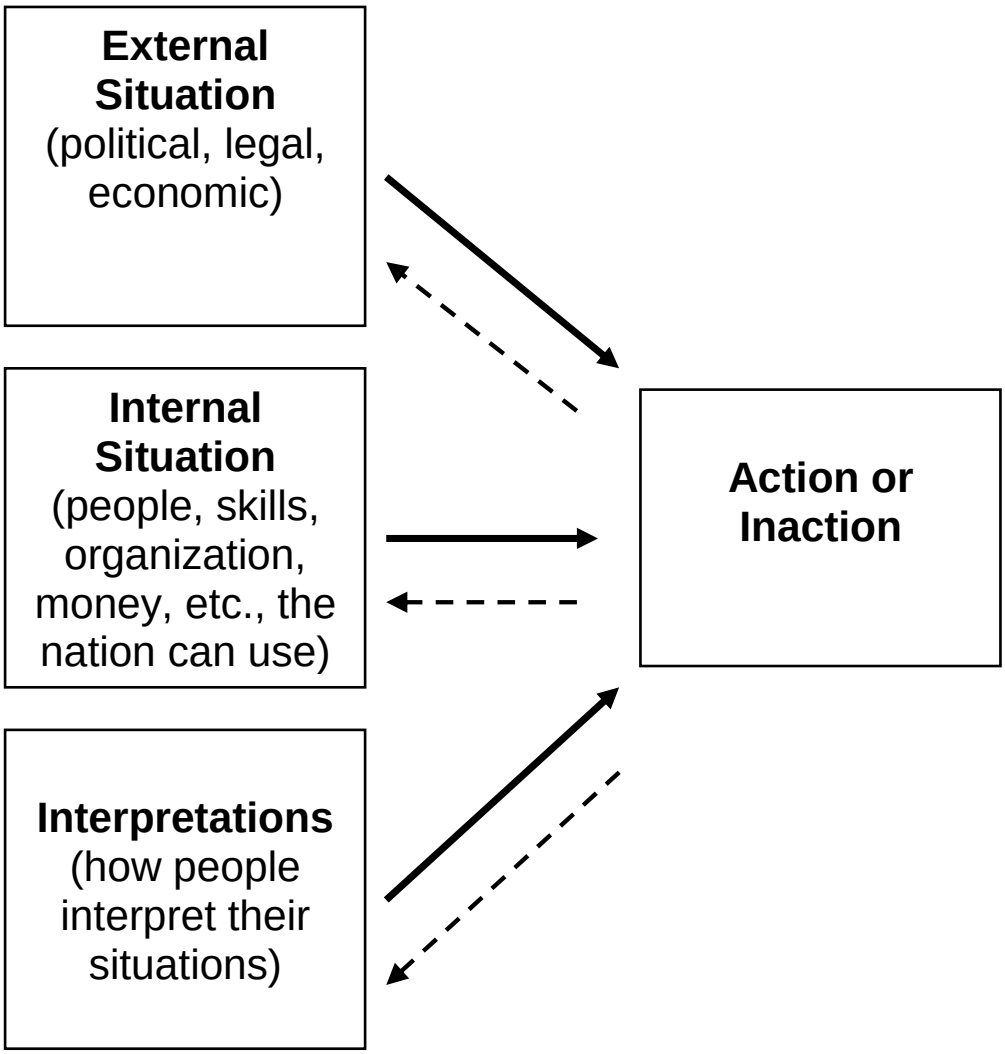


**Figure 1. A Simple Model of Action**

Figure 1 also includes dotted lines leading from action or inaction back to the other components. This reflects the fact that both action and inaction can have consequences. Either one of them can change the external situation for better or worse, expand or diminish available assets or resources (the internal situation), or alter people's interpretations of their situations. The

process, in other words, is a loop in which the first three components promote action or inaction, which in turn has impacts on the first three.[7]

It should be clear from this that inaction may result from any number of things. It could result, for example, from a hostile, intimidating, or paternalistic political or legal environment that threatens to respond to action with crippling force, endless litigation, or utter indifference. It could result from a lack or absence of the people or the organization or the other resources that could make things happen. It could result from people's perceptions that nothing can change or that someone else should do the work to change things. And so on.

We are going to focus in the remainder of this paper on the last of these: people's interpretations of the situations they are in. We do so for two reasons. First, interpretations are crucial to the whole process. For example, what matters is not what the external situation really is but how people perceive it. If they *believe* change is impossible, they are unlikely to act, even if the situation is encouraging. If they *believe* someone else should take responsibility for changing things, it won't matter what assets they have at their disposal. People act according to their understandings of the internal and external situations they're in. The interpretations they make are the linchpin in the process.[8]

The second reason for focusing on interpretations is that it is the component of the process over which a nation has the greatest and most immediate control. It is possible to change the external situation, but it is seldom the work of a moment. It is possible to

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[7] Of course situations also affect people's interpretations, a subject to which we turn in Section VII below.

[8] As McAdam (1982, p. 34) points out, there is "enormous variability in the subjective meanings people attach to their objective situations." As those meanings—which are part of what we're calling interpretations—change, so does the likelihood and nature of action. See also Gamson and Meyer (1996).

alter the internal situation as well—for example, expanding skills and other resources—but it often takes time. And in either case, a major change often depends significantly on what people outside the nation do.

Interpretations, on the other hand, may be tough to change, but they are substantially under the nation's control. You can do things to change how people see themselves and their circumstances. Exploring what you can do is one of the purposes of this paper.

But first, we want to look more closely at how the interpretations people make can lead to action—or to inaction.

## VI. INTERPRETATION: SIX STEPS TO ACTION

Our starting point is the assumption that people act according to how they interpret and understand themselves and the situations they are in. Situations shape what people do, but not directly. People act—or not—based on their *interpretation* of their situations. Both action and inaction are results of a process that goes on, to a significant degree, in people's heads. That process of involves a number of steps (see Figure 2)[9]:

- First, people have to realize that ***something is wrong*** and identify the problem. Not everyone necessarily views their misfortunes as signs that the world is askew—or even as misfortunes. Seeing their situations simply as the way things are, they don't try to change them. Viewing dependency on federal dollars as normal or even preferred, for example, leads nowhere except to more dependency.

[9] Cf. the discussion of "core framing tasks" in Benford and Snow (2000, pp. 615-618).

Accepting external control of the nation's affairs as the way things should be done means nothing will change.[10]

- Second, people have to realize that it doesn't have to be this way: ***things can be different.*** Identifying a problem doesn't help very much if you also believe that it can't be helped. "There's nothing we can do about it" simply accepts the current situation.[11] On the other hand, the knowledge or belief that something is wrong but *it doesn't have to be this way* is an important step toward action.

- Third, people have to decide that ***it's up to us to change things***. Knowing something is wrong, believing it can be different, and believing also that it is up to the federal government or some other outsider to do something about it is not a recipe for foundational change. In Indian Country, for example, moving from an interpretation that says "they did this to us and they need to fix it" to an interpretation that says "it doesn't matter right now who did this to us; it's up to *us* to fix it" is to move closer to taking action.

- Fourth, people have to believe that ***we <u>can</u> change things.*** They are much more likely to act if they have a sense of efficacy or confidence in their own ability to make things happen. If the idea that "it's up to us to fix it" is accompanied by the idea that "we *can* fix it"—that is, by a

[10] For Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982), this recognition that something is wrong involves both challenging prevailing definitions of the current situation that regard it as normal or legitimate and at the same time reinterpreting that situation in a way that presents it as illegitimate or unjust. Of course prevailing definitions of the situation as normal may come from either inside or outside the nation or group.

[11] Writes Gamson (1992, p. 68): "Quiescence can be produced, even when injustice is taken for granted by a dominated group, through the belief that resistance is hopeless and fraught with peril."

sense of confidence in the nation's ability to act effectively in pursuit of its interests—action becomes more likely.

- Fifth, it is important to have a compelling idea of what the solution is—of ***what needs to be done.*** Deciding, for example, that the solution to the nation's problem is more federal money leads to a very different course of action from deciding that the solution to the problem is to build the nation's own institutional capacity to make things happen, or to govern well, or to respond more effectively to the needs of its people.

- And finally, people have to ***decide to act.*** Start. Do it. Make it happen. Even if all the other steps are in place, the nation still has to take the plunge. It has to *act.*

These six steps or stages describe a process of interpretive mobilization: moving mentally from inaction toward action, from sitting still to seizing the future. At the end of the process, something happens: you take control, you draw a line in the sand, you say no, you rewrite the constitution, you turn your back on the petty politics, you choose *your* way, you rise to the challenge, and so forth. It is a process by which the nation comes to an action-oriented understanding of the problems it faces and of ways to solve those problems, and then decides to act. The specific understanding that the nation comes to will shape the course of eventual action, leading some nations to lobby for more dollars and others to reform their constitutions, or leading some to spend their time blaming somebody else—perhaps rightly—for their problems while others confront those problems, regardless of who is to blame, and seize the future for themselves.

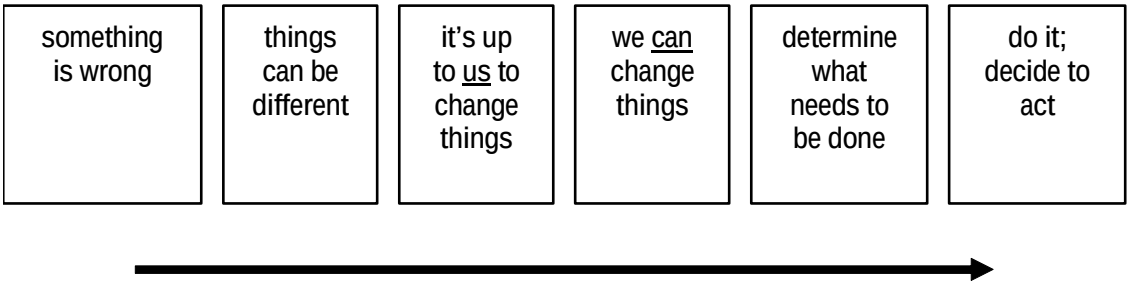


**Figure 2. Interpretation: Six Steps toward Action**

As these six pieces come together, what emerges is a story, an account of why things are the way they are and of what it will take to change them. Action—or inaction—is the end result of the particular story the nation tells itself. Both "taking off," and sustaining the effort it involves, happen when the nation adopts the story of capable self-determination—"we are the kind of people who can, do, and will build a successful society"—as its own.

## VII. SOURCES OF THE STORY

So where does the story of capable, self-determined nation building come from? What shapes these understandings, determining what goes on in people's heads? Why does one nation tell a story that encourages people to sit still or to keep on doing what they've always done, while another nation tells a story that brings the community together to promote change?

A number of things affect what people think about their situations and the possibilities of change. Four factors seem to us to be particularly important (see Figure 3). These include *situations, culture, knowledge,* and *leadership.* Each of these has impacts on one or more of the six steps we've just listed. Each shapes the story the nation tells itself, and thereby determines the likelihood of action, driving the process of breaking away—or staying put.

## Situations

Indigenous nations—like all human societies—live in networks of relationships and in concrete situations that make some courses of action more possible than others. They face, among other things, very real legal constraints, the tendency of encompassing societies to enforce their will on Native peoples, the realities of resource endowments and location, the material impacts of their own histories, and an assortment of other factors. In short, a set of concrete circumstances shape their opportunities for action. But these factors not only make some things more possible than others; they also have an influence on people's perceptions of what is possible – on what they *think* they can do.

As Figure 1 suggests, the elements in these situations are of various kinds. Some are internal, having to do with how the nation is organized, with relationships among persons and groups within the nation, with various assets or the historical legacies of colonialism and poverty. Others are external, having to do with legal, political, economic, or other relationships between the nation and other nations or governments.

For example, we have done some work with one American Indian nation that has been deeply divided for decades. The division has to do with a fundamental aspect of the organization of the society and with a conflictual event that occurred several generations ago. The resulting division has been very difficult to overcome. It seems to contaminate everything: decisions are difficult to make because the two sides cannot come to an agreement. This is especially the case when the decisions have potentially major impacts on the future of the nation. One result is to cripple efforts to initiate foundational change. It has made action of the sort we're talking about here nearly impossible. There are people in this society who see the need for change and even know what needs to be done, but the nation will be unable to move forward until it can bridge the gap between the two parties, agree on ***what needs to be done*** and ***decide to act.*** Its internal situation has immobilized it.

This, in fact, is a common problem in many societies, including indigenous ones. Deep internal divisions can threaten the entire process of mobilization. Factions blame each other for what's wrong, preventing the group from coming to a common understanding of where the real problems lie. Some groups—particularly those in power—may think things are just fine, uncertain that ***something is wrong.*** Or solutions proposed by one group are automatically rejected by others, meaning there's seldom agreement on ***what needs to be done.*** If people aren't talking to each other, it becomes impossible to develop a single story that explains why things are the way they are, indicates how to go about producing change, and invites people to act together to improve things.

External situations can be as much of a brake on action as internal ones. Action has consequences, and if the expected consequence of the desired action is that you will be shot, or go to jail, or lose all your money through protracted litigation, or court the wrath of the powers that be, you may decide action isn't worth it—you can't really change things—and choose not to act. If, on the other hand, there are obvious doors of opportunity opening everywhere, the nation may be more easily persuaded that ***things can be different***.

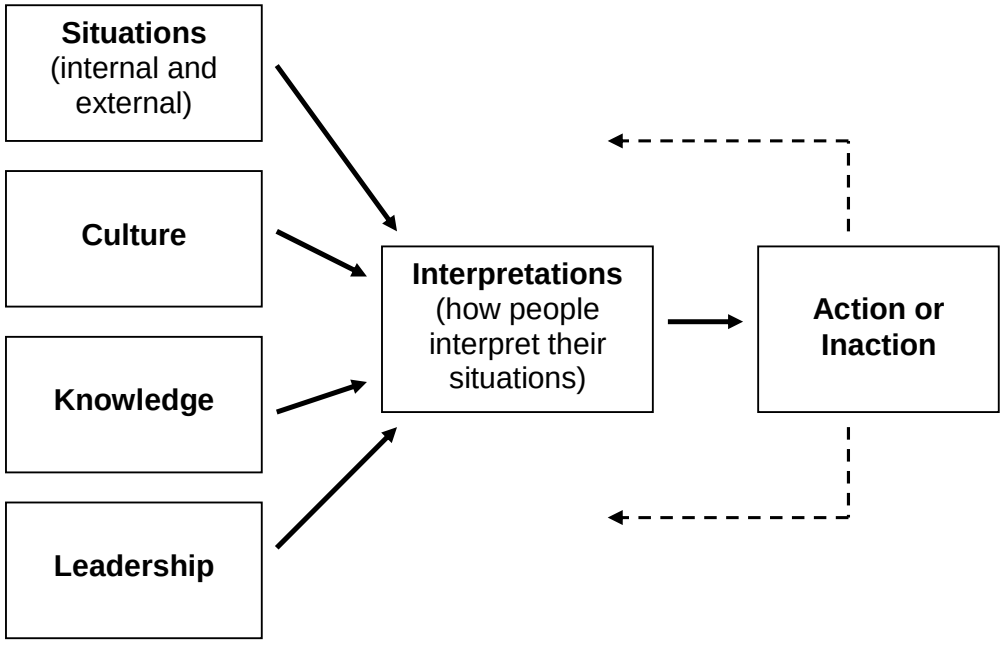


**Figure 3. Shaping interpretations and action**

A crucial moment in the history of Indian nations in the United States came when the U.S. Congress, responding to Indian demands for more power in their own affairs, passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. The provisions of the act were modest—the "self-determination" part of it allowed tribes to take over administration of some programs previously administered by federal bureaucrats—but it conveyed, perhaps inadvertently, a particular message. In this legislation and its accompanying rules, the federal government explicitly acknowledged that Indian nations should determine what's best for Indian nations. In effect, it invited Indian nations to take control of their own futures.

A number of tribes responded by taking the words "self-determination" in the title literally, and acted accordingly. They went far beyond what the legislation envisioned, reorganizing their governments, taking over land and natural-resource use decisions, imposing greater tribal control over both Indian and non-Indian activity on tribal lands, pushing federal bureaucrats out of decision-making roles and into resource roles, and so forth. Many of these tribes might have done this anyway, but the

change in the external political environment—the self-determination message—encouraged them. Some who might not have acted at all began to move. In essence, they were persuaded that ***things can be different*** and ***it's up to us to change things*** by seizing this opportunity for action.

Of course situations have to be evaluated and interpreted—this is one of the places where leadership comes in—but the point for the moment is that people tend to look carefully at the circumstances they face and act in terms of their perception of those circumstances. That perception may lead people to take action—or to sit still.

## Culture

We can think of culture as the set of shared understandings that shape how a people or a community deals with each other and the world around them. Cultures vary enormously. Some tend to see the world as a set of opportunities; others, as a set of threats. Some tend to be very proactive and opportunistic; others, more reactive or deliberate. Some adapt quickly to change; others resist change. Many fall somewhere in between.

This set of understandings has an influence on how people view their situations and the world around them. We look at the world through the lens of what we've learned, right or wrong, about how things should be done, about what is possible or impossible, about the proper way to deal with problems or with opportunities—in short, we tend to view the world through the received knowledge and wisdom of our society.

This, too, can influence our choices of action. For example: over several centuries, the Apache peoples of the American Southwest developed a highly opportunistic approach to the world around them. They aggressively seized opportunities cast up before them by history. When Europeans arrived in the Southwest, some Apache groups saw an opportunity. They raided Spanish outposts for cattle and horses, knowing that eventually the outposts would replace the stolen livestock with

new cattle and horses, making it worthwhile to raid them all over again. They altered their way of doing things to take advantage of this new opportunity.

Later, after being confined on reservation lands in Arizona and New Mexico, the Apaches saw another opportunity: ranching. They grabbed it, developing large herds of cattle in the early part of the twentieth century. Decades later, when they realized that wealthy non-Indians would pay thousands of dollars to shoot trophy-quality elk on Apache lands, they quickly moved into commercial wildlife, managing their elk to maximize trophy-quality heads and thereby developing a significant tribal revenue stream. Again and again through much of their history, the Apaches moved to take advantage of opportunities. One of the things this represented was an attitude of confidence. In the face of opportunity or adversity, many Apaches took the attitude that ***we can change things.***

Of course, cultures don't stand still; they change over time. New developments and events may reveal weaknesses in established practices and encourage innovation, or perhaps new ideas will offer better ways of solving problems or achieving goals. And sometimes, new experiences can undermine old ideas. On some American Indian reservations, generations of dependence on federal funds and federal controls have produced a culture of dependency in which Indian nations look to the federal government to solve their problems. Many such reservations are very poor; the problems they deal with on a daily basis are enormous. They understand fully that ***something is wrong;*** they may even believe that ***things can be different.*** But they don't see themselves as primary agents of change; they have yet to realize that ***it's up to us to change things*** or that ***we <u>can</u> change things.*** Instead, they want the federal government to step in and set things right. This is not to say that their interpretation of the problem is wrong. They may be correct that the federal government has betrayed its responsibilities and that federal actions are to blame for the fix they find themselves in today. But the culture of dependency undermines the inclination to take

things into their own hands—to seize the future and shape it in their own way.

We work with one American Indian nation where this seems to be the case. Much of the dialogue about change within the society focuses on one of two things. It either is concerned primarily with what "they have done to us"—where "they" is variously the federal government or white people or some impersonal forces—and with how "they" need to fix it, or it looks for a miracle cure, for the beneficent outsider—perhaps a multinational corporation—that is going to bring in 500 jobs and lots of money and solve all the problems. Either one of these perceptions takes the burden of change off the nation itself, encouraging it to wait in frustration and bitterness for someone else to make things right. As a result, not much happens and the situation drags on.

## Knowledge

There are many communities who take hold of their own affairs—from Germany under the Third Reich to decolonized Uganda to liberated Bosnia—and promptly lead themselves down a path of social destruction. There are concrete lessons that must be learned to successfully build a nation. As we have found in our research on nation building in Native America, among these lessons are: economic isolationism blocks development; a rule of law *that is culturally legitimate to the community in question* is indispensable; infecting business and day-to-day bureaucratic organizations with politics is the kiss of death; and so on. Successful nation building requires that leaders and decision makers know what they are doing and that citizens have knowledge of constructive paths so that their leaders are held to the task of nation building and serve the community as a whole instead of just themselves. Knowledge about what is necessary and what works tells a nation ***what needs to be done,*** focusing the effort to change things on what's most likely to be effective and move the nation forward.

The primary source of that knowledge is experience—the nation's own or someone else's. Education can be helpful in this regard because it gives people access to experiences—and therefore knowledge—beyond their own. After all, part of what education does is to gather together knowledge from across the world in numerous areas of life and organize it into lessons we can learn from. It collects stories of change, offering insights into what's necessary and accounts of what has worked to change things elsewhere and might work here as well.

Such stories can offer very specific lessons. The story of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation offers an example. When Rocky Barrett, now tribal chairman, first was elected a council member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in Oklahoma more than twenty years ago, he set out to persuade non-Indian investors to invest in business development with his tribe. Some of the people he talked to were interested, but they asked some pointed questions. What would happen to their investment if there was a change in tribal administration? Would newly elected leaders respect arrangements made under old leaders? What rules would the new leaders be operating under? Did the nation have a commercial code that specified how business should be conducted and what the responsibilities of both entrepreneurs and the tribe were? Had the nation put in place good governing institutions, or would a new investor be entering a world of uncertainty and high risk?

Barrett found he couldn't adequately answer these questions, most of which the tribe had never addressed. He realized that a change in the economic fortunes of the nation was going to depend, first, on changing how the nation governed itself. This experience pointed the Citizen Potawatomi Nation toward constitutional reform, the development of a commercial code, and other changes in governing institutions, changes that eventually led to an economic boom. Barrett's experience with investors changed the Potawatomi view of ***what needs to be done***—and offers a critical insight for other nations as well.

This is one reason why success stories are so important, even when they are stories of some other nation's success. They

expand the available knowledge of what's required for change to occur. For example, case after case reinforces what the research conclusively shows: If you don't get politics out of the tribal court, even your own people won't want to invest in the nation's future.

But success stories also do something else of importance. They enlarge the imagination, encouraging people to imagine doing successful things themselves. At the Native Nations Institute and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, one of the key things we do in our research and in our executive education programs is learn the stories of how this American Indian nation or that First Nation solved a problem or charted a new path or broke away from dependency, and then tell it to others. The response we get from other indigenous nations is often along the lines of "tell us more about how they did that. Maybe we can do something like it." Such stories encourage people to imagine themselves seizing the future and shaping it to their own designs—a critical step toward action.

Of course the community's own experience also can be a critical source of knowledge and perception. If a community has built a track record of success at doing what needs to be done—if it has succeeded in changing even small things—then citizens are likely to have confidence in the nation's ability to respond effectively to the challenges it faces. They are more likely to believe that ***we can change things*** and to take action when the situation demands it. This is in part the Apache story.

On the other hand, the experience of repeated failure, of being beaten down over an extended period of time, can undermine a people's confidence and destroy their sense of efficacy. It can put a society into a survival mode instead of a change mode, making it difficult to believe that ***things can be different*** or to imagine that ***we can change things,*** even when they may know very well ***what needs to be done.*** If people have been slapped down every time they have tried to take control of their situation, they may give up and simply try to cope.

Individual knowledge and experience may matter as well, in much the same way. If significant numbers of citizens have experience in the private-sector job market, in the military, or in college or university, they may have both transferable knowledge about what's required for change to occur and more of a "can-do" attitude toward the tasks at hand. They have had to depend on their own resourcefulness and performance to move ahead and get things done. The more such people there are in the community, the more likely that the population as a whole will be inclined to be proactive in dealing with problems, to imagine that ***we can change things,*** that the nation itself can fix what needs to be fixed, and to know ***what needs to be done.***

## Leadership

Leadership is the secret weapon in seizing the future. Circumstances may be daunting, the culture of dependency may be deeply entrenched, knowledge may be lacking and experience discouraging, but powerful and persuasive leaders may still be able to turn things around. They often do so, in effect, by retelling the story of the nation in new ways, persuading people to act. A new story can lead to moments when people say or feel, "ah, right, *that's* what it's all about" or "*that's* what we need to do" or "you're right—*we're* the ones who need to change things. We can't wait around any more. It's *our* responsibility." They also can use their positions to propose new courses of action.[12]

This retelling of the story and offering of strategic proposals—this is why things are the way they are, we can change them, here's what we need to do—can be crucial, compensating for other obstacles in the path of mobilization. By telling the story in

[12] Erwin Hargrove (1989, p. 79) argues that one of the tasks of creative leadership is "to provide plausible strategies of action in an ambiguous environment." Studies of social movements also indicate that leaders with wide experience in collective action are a crucial strategic and tactical resource when it comes to initiating change. They can offer interpretations and open up possibilities that leaders with less diverse experience might not have seen. See Ganz (2001) and Voss and Sherman (2001).

new ways, by reinterpreting the past, by introducing new knowledge or other people's experiences, by challenging community assumptions, by proposing action, leaders can convince people that ***something is wrong*** but also that ***things can be different*** and that ***it's up to us to change things.*** They can help them overcome a lack of confidence, inspiring them to see themselves as capable, as believing that ***we <u>can</u> change things.*** They can initiate a change in beliefs, values, and preferences, articulating and promoting a new way of thinking about the world, moving people closer to action. They can identify ***what needs to be done,*** focusing discussion and energy on the critical tasks involved in change. Perhaps most important, leaders can encourage the community to ***decide to act.***

Writing about leadership in organizations, Hargrove describes this sort of leadership as "transformative": it creates new missions, alters norms, and reinterprets the ideas that lie at the heart of the organization (Hargrove 1989, pp. 66-67). As the story we told earlier about Rocky Barrett and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation suggests, much of this sort of leadership comes from elected officials. Barrett identified a course of action that was more likely to yield positive results and urged the nation to follow that course. Grand Chief Mike Mitchell of the Mohawk Council at Akwesasne made his council members contribute money to a pot whenever they used words that referred to the colonial system, such as "reserve" instead of "territory," or "band" instead of "First Nation." He wanted his whole government to learn to think in new, more independent ways, to view their tasks in terms of nation building. Longtime White Mountain Apache tribal chairman Ronnie Lupe once said that what his tribe needed was "extraordinary persons," capable of walking at the same time "in both the Wall Street way and the Apache way."[13] His statement not only articulated a specific need for diverse skills, but legitimated a combination that many

[13] Introductory remarks, National Executive Education Program for Native American Leadership seminar, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona, June 14, 1990.

people might have found incongruous. Yet Chairman Lupe's admonition reflected Apache history and culture: a deep history of national solidarity and cultural receptivity to economic change that had allowed the Apache to stand as a nation and block the northern advance of the Spanish centuries earlier (Cornell and Kalt 1995). Part of what he was saying to his people was that these two ways of thinking and acting have in the past worked together for the Apache and could work together again now. To combine them was not a loss, but a gain; not cultural capitulation, but deeply Apache. He, like Chief Mitchell, was asking his people to look at the world and at ***what needs to be done*** as a proactive challenge to action.

On another Apache reservation, long crippled by political factionalism and infighting, a newly elected tribal chairwoman recently has made clear her intention to ignore the divisions that have immobilized the tribe over the last two decades and build new bridges among her own people. Along with several other new council members, she has set out to create a different political environment in which what matters is not who proposed an idea or who voted for whom, but what will move the tribe forward. In her words and actions, she is demonstrating the behavior she feels is needed and articulating an idea of ***what needs to be done*** if things are going to change. She is trying to overcome the things that have prevented her nation from taking the actions it needs to take.

But while elected leaders often may do the things we're talking about here, they're not the only ones who can take leadership roles. Leadership that leads to change, that moves a nation from sitting still to seizing the future, can come from almost anywhere. It was not only elected leaders who initiated constitutional reform on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. It was a group of people—mostly women, some elected, some not—who decided they had had enough of poverty, of government crippled by factional politics, of failed initiatives. They took the challenge of change seriously. They became actively engaged in initiatives to reform the constitution, from generating ideas to arranging community meetings to

campaigning for the proposed changes that were about to be voted on. They paid particular attention to the importance of strengthening the nation's judicial system and providing for a separation of powers, seeing this as the keystone piece of the entire process. Person by person, they built a constituency for change. While the story at Northern Cheyenne is still being written, this mixture of community people and elected leadership who stood up for change has already had an effect on day-to-day life.

Sometimes leadership comes almost entirely from the grassroots. On the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, well-known as one of the poorest places in the United States, leadership for change is coming from the owners of small businesses: citizen entrepreneurs who have decided to rebuild the reservation economy, job by job, business by business, and are fighting for the changes in government necessary for self-determination and prosperity. They successfully challenged a tribal legislative measure that would have made it more difficult for tribal citizens to go into business; are promoting constitutional reforms designed to bring more stability to tribal government; and have become a leading force in the effort to set up a more capable and less politicized tribal court. In effect, they are rewriting the story of Pine Ridge, and a lot of people are paying attention, including the tribal council, which is looking more closely at constitutional reform. Articles in national Indian media have noticed and are beginning to repeat the story: Pine Ridge is a place where innovative things can happen, jobs are being created, and change is coming (Melmer 2002a, 2002b; Record 2003; among others).

When the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma undertook a major reform of the tribal constitution, the elected leadership organized participation by people throughout the community. But once the community became involved, the focus of the effort changed. Community people felt the effort did not go far enough: they had a more comprehensive idea of ***what needs to be done,*** and exercised leadership in making it happen.

The lesson is an important one: anyone can begin to tell the story in new ways, propose strategies for change, and alter the pattern of inaction. Ideally, the process will involve elected leadership; after all, they usually hold positions of influence and power and may be able to make things happen quickly. But seizing the future can begin anywhere in a community, and anyone can be a leader in that process.

## VIII. PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARD A NEW STORY

As the discussion of leadership suggests, these four factors—situations, culture, knowledge, leadership—are interrelated. What happens in one area may affect the others. We've already pointed out how leadership may overcome fatalism in the face of a discouraging situation, or reinterpret experience in ways that give people new confidence in themselves and their ability to change things. We've also pointed out how new knowledge—including knowledge of other peoples' experiences and of what other nations have done—can change a nation's perceptions of what is possible or of what is needed. Similarly, a new situation can change people's views of the world, encouraging them to take actions they did not previously think possible. In other words, it is not necessary to get all four of these "right" for effective action to occur. The path to action can start anywhere. The task is to get the story right, to move a people from believing things are fine or cannot be changed to understanding what needs to be done and seeing themselves as capable of doing it.

If a nation, or its people, or its leaders want to find a path toward action, are there practical steps the nation—or its citizens—can take? We end this study by examining some of the things that may be done in the areas of situations, culture, knowledge, and leadership to support seizing the future.

## Changing the Situation

Changing the external situation that a Native nation faces is a daunting prospect, since the much larger nations of Canada and the United States in which Native nations are embedded have tended for centuries to be the ones imposing their wills on Native peoples and communities. Yet we see many instances in which proactive efforts of Native nations are put to work effectively to influence economic conditions around them, relations with neighboring communities, and even federal law and policy.

Consider the prospect of changing federal, provincial, or state law and policy. There are impressive examples of Native nations using the alternative tools of litigation and negotiation to change the external laws and policies that impinge upon them. The use of courtroom litigation is a particularly high-stakes strategy that can firm up a Native nation's rights to self-rule but also risks the Native nation's money and rights, and even the rights of other Native nations when negative rulings establish precedent for all. Litigation is inherently a game of knowing "when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em."

We believe there is a trend toward the use of government-to-government negotiations as preferred means for attacking external legal and political situations that hold a Native nation back. Certainly, the recent spate of land and treaty negotiations in Canada have been used by affected First Nations to expand both the recognition and effective scope of their self-rule—as in the cases of the Yukon and Nisga'a treaties. As the treaty process has demonstrated for so many First Nations, however, *negotiating* and *successfully negotiating* are two different things. The latter hinges critically on the ability of a First Nation to hold its own "at the table."

This requires much more than resolve and courage. It entails building up the Native nation's expertise and management capabilities in the area of concern so that the nation can be as well-armed with information and experience as the non-Native government or other institution with which it negotiates.

Membertou's noted efforts at both self-rule and economic development, for example, must be credited, in part at least, to experience and expertise. In the U.S., numerous instances—from the Swinomish in Washington establishing joint land use planning and permitting with its neighboring government to the Columbia River Indian Tribal Fish Commission's powerful role in salmon recovery[14]—out-administering, out-computing, and out-documenting non-Native counterparts have put the winning cards in Native communities' hands.

In a related vein, at the frontier of the efforts of a growing number of Native nations to change the external conditions they face are their investments in media and public relations. Asserting one's nationhood reasonably means continuing to present the nation as a *nation*. The economic, political, and social linkages between Native nations and their neighbors are critical and are ignored at the Native nation's peril. Professional public relations will not cure problems of racism and disrespect for Native nationhood. The progress we find in those dimensions comes largely after the Native nation has seized its future and gone well down the path of nation building.[15] But planting the seeds of recognition of the economic importance, social presence, and nationhood status of the Native nation promotes the sense that the nation is for real.

The foregoing components of strategies for changing external circumstances follow from the observation that being treated like a nation requires acting like a nation in intergovernmental and inter-community affairs. A side benefit of such strategies is that acting like a nation vis-à-vis the external situation spills over into internal, within-community conditions, changing internal attitudes and self-perceptions. Perhaps such perceptions are the most important of all. Too many citizens *and leaders* of First Nations and tribes see their own government through a "grant mentality"; that is, as merely a pipeline whose job it is to land

[14] http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/hn_main.htm.

[15] See, for example the case of Grande Ronde at http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/hn_main.htm.

the next grant, find the next project for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, deliver the next federal dollars and programs, and so on. Such sources of support are important, but a central goal of nation building must be to build the sense internally that tribal and First Nations governments *govern*, as well as deliver needed services and support. This change begins in the conscious adoption of a self-determination mindset on both large and small scales. From the nation's street signs to its economic systems, this mindset is constantly focused on "how *we* can solve that problem," rather than on "how we can get that other government to solve that problem for us."

## Building on Culture

Harnessing shared history and values in the service of today's nation building battles is critical. Some of this we have emphasized above: Designing successful First Nation and tribal governance systems requires assiduous attention to questions of cultural match. It is clear that a "one size fits all" approach is neither necessary nor effective when it comes to governance forms and management systems (Cornell and Kalt 1992, 1995, 1997b, 2000, 2003). The range of forms of successful governance in Native America ranges from "textbook" parliamentary democracy (as at Membertou and Flathead), to "textbook" tri-cameral systems (as at Osoyoos and Oklahoma Cherokee) to traditional theocracy (as at Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico) to mixtures of traditional and new structures (as among a number of the Iroquoian tribes and First Nations and at Navajo). Similarly, we see sustained economic development under alternative forms, ranging from the strong private sector economy at Flathead to the development of nation-owned enterprises at Mississippi Choctaw and Membertou.

This room for diversity means that effective nation building does not necessarily mean having to change a community's culture. The secret is tapping into that culture and tying nation building efforts to it. In part, this requires knowledge of the culture, particularly as it relates to norms of power, authority, and consent. To some extent, that knowledge may come from study

and investigation, but much of culture is simply lifeways that are lived, not read about. Injecting into decision making the community's values, expectations, norms as to how things should be run, what kinds of things the community ought to take on, and how decisions are legitimately made requires self-confidence. While the self-confident nation can turn appropriately to outsiders for knowledge and advice (see below), it does not run to outsiders to make strategic decisions affecting the direction the nation takes. To do so raises the risk that the subtleties of culture—having to do with everything from respect for tradition to gender roles—will be lost. This in turn increases the chances of crafting institutions and making decisions that the community fails to respect or view as its own.

It would be naïve romanticism to pretend that heeding the edicts of one's own culture is easy. First, historic cultures have changed substantially over the last century or more. Second, contemporary Native communities are commonly places of extreme cultural diversity, ranging from elders with knowledge of history and language to teenagers bombarded by the messages of modern media. Amidst such diversity, however, there often reside elements of shared identity and history and, in many cases, common—if often changed—understandings of how things should be done. These can bring powerful resonance to the term "we" when asserting the nation's rights of self-governance, turning otherwise diverse cultures toward common ends.

## Acquiring Knowledge

Many nations that assert their independence, bootstrap themselves up the development ladder, and build sustained social, political, and cultural systems do so under decisive leadership. At the same time, decisive and motivating leadership can often lead a nation enthusiastically down a path toward stagnation and even calamity. What makes the difference?

Leaders who can garner the support of their communities and mobilize them to action have a responsibility to know what they are doing. If they are to move their nations toward prosperity and solidarity, they must know how to actually get the job done. Unfortunately, few Native leaders have had prior opportunities to learn answers to such questions as: "How do we set up an effective and culturally matched administration?" "How should businesses be run?" "What are effective approaches to intergovernmental relations with the federal government?" "What does the law say about this problem?" "What economic strategies will work for a community of this size?"

Several strategies are available for expanding the knowledge First Nations have to work with when they take on the challenges of nation building. Learning from others, for example, can be particularly effective. A nation can learn more about what is working and what is not from visiting other nations in similar situations. There are also formal programs of executive education—from aboriginal leadership institutes to executive business programs to Native nations governance and management programs—that provide learning opportunities for leaders, officials, and managers. Then, too, self-determined nations can bring in expertise from other cultures—employees, managers, consultants—and then manage them instead of being managed by them. It is a shared trait of those Native nations that are successfully charting their own courses that, while they prefer to rely on their own citizens, "we hire the best people available." Such nations are clear that they are hiring expertise but that decision making ultimately lies in their own hands.

Of course the need for knowledge goes beyond technical expertise. Effective Native nations also invest in building the community's knowledge of itself, its history, its culture, and its status as a nation. Thus, for example, we see Native nations investing in language revitalization, or requiring all national employees—Native and non-Native—to take courses in *that nation's* civics and history, or finding innovative ways to involve

elders and spiritual leaders with children and their families and with the national government and schools.[16]

## Exercising Leadership

There is probably no other problem so vexing for nations around the world as that of finding and empowering effective leadership. Yet leadership is critical to building self-determined, self-sustaining nations. The act of seizing the future and embarking on a strategy of nation building entails numerous roles for leaders. They are educators, decision makers, managers, strategists, consensus builders, and inspirers. Moreover, the mix and mode of these various roles is culturally dependent. In one culture, legitimate leadership may require forceful decision making, while in another, the leader must be focused on organizing community dialogue so that agreement emerges.

The tasks of Native leaders in nation building are innumerable—from negotiating with federal officials to the responsibility for educating themselves on the tools they need for today's battles, from living the exemplary life within the community's culture to understanding business and finance. But among the numerous roles of leaders of nations that effectively seize their futures, perhaps none needs more emphasis than that of *educator*. As we have stressed above, the turnaround for many nations starts with the teaching of a new story about itself: a story of capable self-rule. This story is told in words and deeds, and it can emerge from any quarter. It is the catchy, culturally congruent linking by the Apache leader of his heritage of successful economic adaptation when the Spanish invaded almost 500 years ago to doing things "the Wall Street way" today. It is the repainting of stop signs at Membertou. It is the leader of a nation who reminds her people that dependency is not among their traditional values.

This new story must be told not only by elected leadership but by all those wishing to take responsibility for the nation's future. It must be told by political leaders, spiritual leaders, education

[16] http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/hn_main.htm.

leaders, business leaders, youth leaders, program managers, and elders. It is a new way of looking at the world, at the nation's place within it, and at the people's role in nation building. Leadership is telling that story.

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