

MANAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ORGANIZATIONS

Ian Chapman

Administrative Studies Program
Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario
Canada, K9J 7B8

Don McCaskill

Department of Native
Studies
Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario
Canada, K9J 7B8

David Newhouse

Department of Native Studies
Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario
Canada, K9J 7B8

Abstract/Resume

Aboriginal organizations which are based upon traditional Aboriginal values are managed differently from organizations in the mainstream of Canadian society. Their management scheme is based upon a collectivist orientation to life which gives rise to a group oriented, non-hierarchical organization which operates by consensus and encourages holistic employee development. The organization is also likely to involve Elders as advisors and teachers. It is important for educators, both institutionally and non-institutionally based, to ensure that these differences are reflected in management training and education curricula.

Les organisations autochtones qui sont fondées sur les valeurs traditionnelles aborigènes sont dirigées d'une manière différente de celle de la société principale canadienne. Leur procédé d'administration est basé sur une conscience collectiviste de la vie donnant lieu à une organisation sans hiérarchie, ayant pour but le groupe, et fonctionnant par accord général en même temps qu'elle encourage le développement holistique de l'employé. Il est aussi probable que l'organisation entraîne le Anciens qui jouent le rôle de conseillers et de guides. Il est important que les éducateurs, soit dans une institution ou non, fassent tout pour que ces différences soient exprimées dans la formation des cadres et dans les programmes d'éducation.

The thesis advanced in this paper is that Aboriginal organizations can be, and are, managed quite differently from their mainstream counterparts. The point can be illustrated quite simply by an incident which arose in a recent Native management class taught by one of the authors. Some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal management students were given the task of devising an evaluation scheme for a manager of an organization. The non-Aboriginal students had little difficulty with the assignment, but even after two attempts, the Aboriginal students remained acutely unhappy with the assignment's requirements which seemed to transgress their deeply felt values about judging others. This anecdote is not intended to suggest that evaluating someone is impossible in an Aboriginal organization, but rather to make the point that Aboriginal managers are likely to have perspectives on the appropriate way to run organizations which differ from those in equivalent organizations in the larger Canadian society and which arise from the distinct cultural values held by each. Most of the paper, therefore, will be devoted to exploring the cultural foundations of the concept of Aboriginal management based upon our research in Aboriginal organizations in Southern Ontario.

There are over six thousand Aboriginal organizations in Canada, divided equally between the private and public sectors (Arrowfax, 1990). Most are indistinguishable from their mainstream counterparts in terms of their structures and how they function. But two recent trends within the Aboriginal community have begun to alter that state of affairs, the movement to gain control over the processes and institutions of Aboriginal government, and the emergence of strongly held and newly revitalised Aboriginal cultural identities. Control implies more than just being able to make one's own decisions; it also means that one can make decisions using one's own values and implement the decisions in ways that are consistent with the community's way of doing things. As one elder said, in speaking of the establishment of Aboriginal justice systems, "in our culture, the rights of the group must come ahead of the individual" (Shoalts, 1991).

Methodology

The research was undertaken through a series of structured interviews with managers and staff of two Aboriginal organizations in Ontario in 1990-91. These interviews were undertaken to develop case studies for use in the Native Management and Economic Development Program at Trent University.

Management and Culture: Two Paradigms

Our understanding of organizations has been enhanced by thinking of them in a number of different ways: as machines, as organisms, as cultures, for example. Some twenty years of research has shown that the cultural perspective on organizations has proved to be a particularly powerful metaphor in helping us gain useful insights into organizations (Adler, 1983; Smircich, 1983; Frost *et al.*, 1985; Morgan, 1986). Based upon differing approaches to the meaning of "culture" in the field of cultural anthropology, two broad perspectives on culture have developed in the organizational literature: culture as a critical variable and culture as a root metaphor (Smircich, 1983).

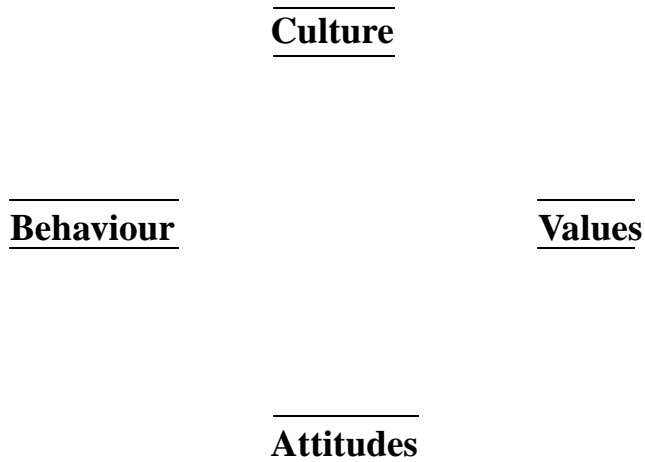
The former can be identified with the functionalist approach to organizations which sees culture as an organizational variable, something an organization has, the latter with the interpretivist approach in which culture is a pattern of symbolic discourse, something an organization is (Riley, 1983).

Corporate culture studies have tended to adopt the first perspective, and the thrust of much of this literature sees culture as a property of the organization which, if understood, can be manipulated or changed to improve organizational effectiveness. Culture, in this view, is an internal variable; organizations create their own culture, expressed in myths, legends and rituals which are the manifestations of the values and beliefs which the organization's members share. Excellence in companies is largely the result of the dominance and cohesion imposed by a "strong" culture (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Employees know what to do without being told because they share a common view of the organization and its values.

For researchers in comparative management, culture is an independent variable which is imported into the organization by its members and revealed by the attitudes and actions of individuals. From studies of many organizations in many cultures they have proposed sets of value orientations which characterize all cultures. For example, all cultures vary in their orientation to "individualism" or "relationships among people" (Hofstede, 1982; Lane and DiStefano, 1988). Adler (1986) illustrates how an orientation to group or individual values will influence hiring practices. A group-oriented personnel director will look for qualified people but will place great importance on trustworthiness, loyalty and compatibility with co-workers. The individually-oriented director on the other hand will hire those who are best qualified on the basis of personal skills and expertise.

What is important is that in both approaches, culture includes a system of values or world views. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind

which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” and includes “systems of values which are...among the building blocks of culture” (Hofstede, 1982); “a fairly stable set of taken for granted assumptions, meanings and values that form a backdrop for action” (Smircich, 1985). This definition reminds us that we observe actions or behaviours, not values. They are connected because values are generally held beliefs that define what is preferable in influencing behaviour. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among these concepts.



At the heart of all these views on culture is the notion that value systems have consequences for the structuring and functioning of institutions and organizations and the behaviour of individuals within them. Since we know that Aboriginal culture is different from that in the wider Canadian community in that it has a different world view and value systems, then we might expect to see Aboriginal organizations run differently from those in the mainstream society.

Aboriginal Culture and Organizations

There is an ample body of literature that identifies the values of Aboriginal peoples and shows that they do indeed differ from those in the Western cultural tradition (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; Bryde, 1971; Hallowell, 1955; Kehoe, 1984). However, references which discuss management in Aboriginal organizations from a cultural perspective are sparse and usually marginal to the purposes of the paper. Indeed, the practice of management in Aboriginal organizations has hardly been documented at all.

Anders and Anders (1986) studied Alaska Native Corporations and showed that there were fundamental differences in values, goals and operating styles of conventional corporations and the values of Alaska Natives. A review of the implementation of the James Bay Agreement refers to the development of an Aboriginal administrative culture based upon the values of the James Bay Cree (Larusic *et al.*, 1983). Cassidy and Blishen (1989) describe the differences in approaches to government and government administration taken by nineteen Aboriginal communities in Canada. These differences which relate to the nature, structure and functioning of Aboriginal institutions being established to deliver services within the Aboriginal community, are also beginning to show up in proposals made to governments for funding. Examples of these differences are a decided preference for organizational decision making by consensus, the incorporation of Elders into organizations and the use of traditional methods to choose leaders. This small body of research indicates that the differences which we would expect to see in the practise of management and administration within Aboriginal organizations are present and currently lightly explored.

The Cultural Context of Aboriginal Organizations

All cultures possess a "world view," a broad understanding of the nature of the universe and man's place in it. The traditional Aboriginal world view is particularly influential in regulating values and behaviour in Aboriginal communities. Therefore, to understand how some Aboriginal organizations and their managers have made operational Aboriginal values, we must first discuss the Aboriginal world view.

Various ecological conditions in which Aboriginal people lived resulted in the creation of widely divergent ways of life. But, despite these variations, a common thread runs through each of the cultures. The thread is a common spiritual world view, an attitude toward the world and their place within it.

Traditional Aboriginal societies were based upon the knowledge that all things in life are related in a sacred manner and are governed by natural or cosmic laws. The land (mother earth) is therefore held to be sacred, a gift from the Creator, and all things are given a set of duties and responsibilities to be carried out according to their nature at the time of creation. In their relationship to the land, people accommodate themselves to it in an attitude of respect and stewardship. To do otherwise would be to violate a fundamental law of the universe.

Proper conduct was determined by natural laws which obliterated the distinction between “sacred” and “secular” or “the laws of nature” and “the rules of society”. For each had as their source the activities which resulted as humans and nature reacted upon each other, and it is through the understanding of this reciprocal relationship between ourselves and nature that we are provided with the sustenance, both physical and spiritual, that we require to live.

For the Elders, who are the keepers, interpreters and sources of wisdom about culture in traditional Aboriginal societies, human law and the values and behaviour which flow from it should be a reflection of natural law, and all the structures should be based upon this central understanding.

The Medicine Wheel and the Circle

A concept of Aboriginal self is based upon the teachings of the Circle or Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is a representation of traditional theology, philosophy and psychology. It represents the teachings of the Creator for all aspects of life for Aboriginal people. There are different but related versions of the Medicine Wheel for different Aboriginal groups. The one described in this paper is based upon the teachings of Plains Cree Elders from Alberta. There are in fact many Medicines Wheels, often depicted as concentric circles, each one representing different teachings, often dimensions of human psychology or key values. One common aspect of Medicine Wheels is that they are based upon the Four Directions. Central to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel is the goal “to live a good way in life,” or *minaatsiwin*, which entails balancing oneself among the various aspects of the four dimensions on the Wheel. In one Medicine Wheel, the four directions (East, South, West and North) represent the four aspects of self: spiritual, mental, emotional and physical. In addition, there are four fundamental values in traditional Aboriginal culture which are used to guide an individual's behaviour: kindness, honesty, sharing and strength. There are also four levels that are found in traditional culture which should be represented in the organizational functioning. These are: the individual, the

family, the clan and the nation.

Figure 2 illustrates one interpretation of the Medicine Wheel. The wheel, as a circle, expresses a unifying force in life. The seasons, starting from the east (the first of the four directions) move in a circle, and in life one starts in the East and journeys around the four directions. The power of the world always works in circles. It is the symbol of completeness and perfection.

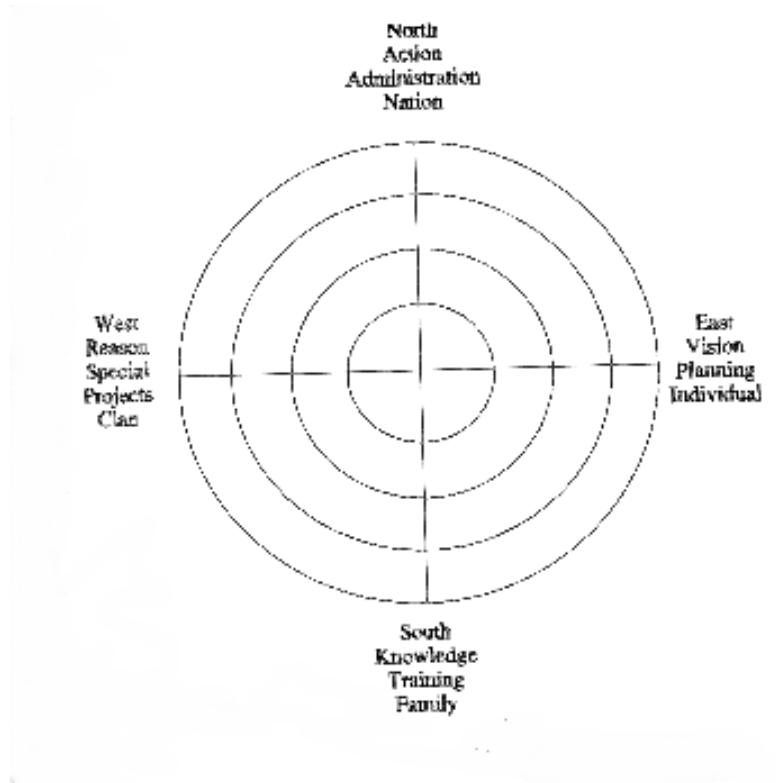


Figure 2: Medicine Wheel Traditional Interpretation

Figure 3 illustrates the use of the wheel as a way of organizing the various management tasks facing it and as a guide to behaviour of organizational members, both board and staff. Members of the organization using this wheel employ the core values as a guide to action in carrying out their work tasks and in relating to each other and to outsiders. Staff roles are likewise related to the medicine wheel.

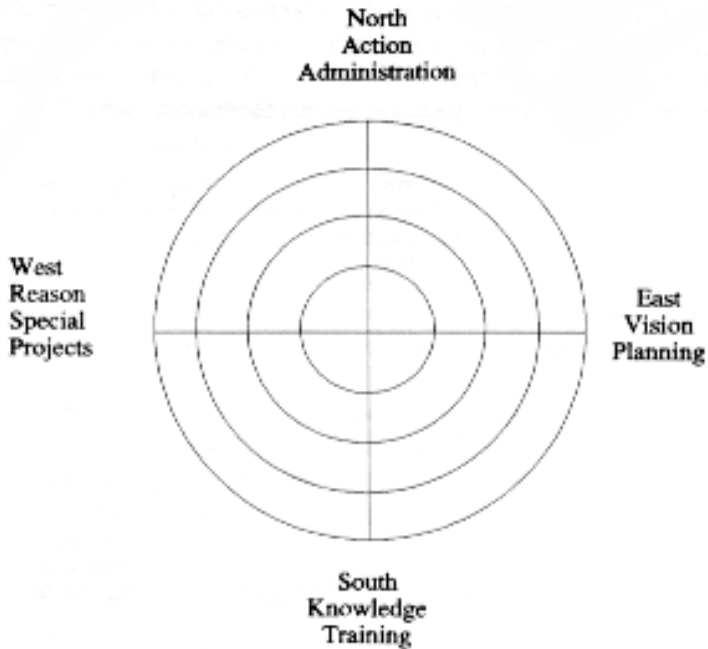


Figure 3: Medicine Wheel: Management Interpretation

The staff are divided into four working teams, each with specific responsibilities based on the teachings of the wheel as follows:

Program planning(East/vision)
 Training(South/knowledge)
 Special projects (West/reason)
 Administration (North/action)

One organization studied by the authors uses the directions to set what to do at various times—it starts planning in the Spring (the East) which is related to vision, prepares for the Annual General Meeting in the Summer (the South and knowledge) leading up to its annual meeting in the Fall (the West) also associated with reason, and finally to carrying out decisions in the winter (the North) a traditional time for action.

Equality is emphasized in the exercise of leadership in the organization. The leaders regard themselves as the servants of the people, as do

Table 1: Features of Aboriginal Management and North American Management Schemes

Aboriginal	
Group orientation:	The interests and functioning of the group are more important than those of the individual.
Consensual	The organization respects employees and expects decision-making:them to contribute to making decisions in an equitable collective process.
Group duties:	Roles are not as specialized, and the organization relies on peer support, teamwork, task delegation.
Holistic employee development:	The organization is concerned with all aspects of the employee's life, both inside and outside the organization.
Elder Involvement:	Elders are included formally and informally in the organization as advisors and teachers.
North American Mainstream	
Individual	The interests of the individual are paramount over orientation:the group.
Majority rules:	Decisions are generally made by voting in which the majority wins the right to choose the course of action.
Specialized duties:	Each person is expected to have a well defined job with a set of well defined duties.
Organization employee development:	The organization is concerned only with those aspects of the employee which directly have a bearing upon the ability to do the assigned task.
No elder involvement:	Employees retire at the age of 65 and expertise and knowledae is lost to the organization.

Aboriginal leaders in communities in the traditional culture. This might lead to staff meetings being chaired, in turn, by each person, with consensus the preferred manner of arriving at decisions. Finally, in this system, employee development will be viewed in a holistic way according to the four directions. That is, all aspects of an individual—physical (East), mental (South), emotional (West), and spiritual (North)—are considered for development.

Thus, the Medicine Wheel, which is a powerful teaching tool in traditional Aboriginal societies, can be adapted to contemporary organizational life. The Elders are also a vital part of the process of adaptation. They are the community's experts on the interpretation of the Wheel and the relationships it illuminates.

From this understanding and based upon our research on Aboriginal organizations which have attempted to manage themselves using traditional values and customs, we can summarize the principle features of an Aboriginal management scheme (Table 1).

Group Orientation

Anthropologists interested in comparing cultures have identified a number of cultural dimensions towards which all cultures have an orientation. One of these describes how people relate to each other. In North American culture, we tend to cherish individualism: we are largely responsible for ourselves and our family. This view is in accord with our predominantly Judeo-Christian cultural heritage which places great emphasis upon the individual's rights and responsibilities. The opposite view—collectivism—is held in societies which emphasize the individual's obligations to the group over individual interests in return for the group's support.

In traditional Aboriginal society, the latter view prevails as expressed earlier in the quotation by the Elder. The Medicine Wheel helps explain the interconnectedness of all things. The value of sharing also underlines the obligations of the individual to the clan or nation. Carried over into the organizational world (which, of course, in traditional Aboriginal thinking is not seen as something separate from other aspects of an individual's life) this collectivist orientation makes Aboriginal organizations who integrate traditional customs and traditions into their functioning very different from the vast majority of institutions in Canada because of its profound effect upon the relations between people.

Consensual Decision-Making

The value of respect for all life emphasizes equality in Aboriginal organizations. Respect for the individualism of each person meant that everyone in the community, young and old, was listened to respectfully. In organizational terms, a decision-making meeting will allow, indeed require, everyone to participate so that the group can hear all points of view before reaching a decision. Consensus comes about when a group's collective wisdom about what is best for the organization as a whole prevails over what might be best for a majority of individuals. Giving up what seems best for an individual, or the part of the organization which he or she represents, so as to support the actions of the group, is true consensus provided the individual has been listened to respectfully. It is also the most difficult thing for an Aboriginal organization to do given the overwhelming preference in North American society to "fight for our side's rights," and minority rule. However, given that so many Aboriginal organizations are run by Bands, collectives or boards representing the community (itself an indication of a group orientation), consensus decision-making is a natural path for these organizations to follow. A recent study on Aboriginal economic enterprises reports that 82% of Aboriginal development corporations make decisions by consensus (Atikan, 1991). Even in organizations which are individually owned or run, the next feature of an Aboriginal management scheme to be discussed—group duties—also encourages groups within the workplace to agree on how or what tasks are to be done.

Group Duties

Formal hierarchical organizational charts do exist in Aboriginal organizations, but the formal ordering of the relationship among individual positions usually expressed by these charts does not capture the much less hierarchical relationships which exist in Aboriginal organizations where roles are much less clearly defined. Often tasks are accomplished by teams which can bring together people with qualities and skills drawn from different parts of the Medicine Wheel. The Aboriginal cultural values of equality (it is inappropriate to put oneself ahead of another) patience and respect (each individual has a unique "gift" or "skill" given by the Creator which should be respected), are naturally conducive to team building. The team will often have the responsibility delegated to them of finding its own way to accomplish the task, rather be given explicit objectives. Aboriginal societies are much more high context in their communication than is western society (Hall, 1976).

The de-emphasis of office hierarchy also requires a different role for

leaders in Aboriginal organizations. Traditionally, the leader was seen as a servant of the people which meant that the leader's role was to coordinate, to resolve differences, and to facilitate harmonious relationships, which, if translated into the organization, would mean someone who leads by example and by virtue of their personal characteristics rather than through the authority solely of their position. The role of the Aboriginal manager is closer to that of a facilitator than a decision-maker, which means he or she must delegate authority and not express his or her wishes explicitly.

Many studies of organizational change stress the importance of the senior executives living what they say; so, in Aboriginal organizations which are attempting to run themselves in accord with traditional values the leaders must exemplify those values in their actions. This extends to their whole lives, both in and out of the daily workplace. The holistic view of life illustrated in the Medicine Wheel cannot stop at the office door. This holistic view is a major factor governing human resource management in Aboriginal organizations.

Holistic Employee Development

The application of Aboriginal values in the workplace has its greatest effect upon the organization's social system. The employee is viewed in a holistic fashion, not as someone who turns up between nine and five, but someone who also has a life outside the organization. A mother might bring her child to the office if some reason at home warrants it. Staff may be given time off to attend important cultural ceremonies in their home community. Formal personnel policies are generous in their provision for maternity and paternity leave and in time off to acquire new skills. Hiring practices look at the whole person, partially because job descriptions are vaguely defined. Individual characteristics, particularly understanding and practising the culture at home or in the community, will play a greater part in the decision to hire than just academic or professional qualifications. Of course, these characteristics also make it easier to integrate the individual into the organization's culture because they share the values, attitudes and behaviour of members of the organization. Just as the individual has obligations to the group, so must the group recognize its obligations to the individual's life outside the office.

Elder Involvement

Elders in Aboriginal societies have always assumed prominent roles as healers, guides, advisors and as living symbols of Aboriginal values.

During the past few years, Elders have regained their traditional places within Aboriginal societies and are now assuming roles within Aboriginal organizations. In these contemporary organizations, they remind managers of the values and customs of traditional societies, provide advice to managers and staff on a variety of issues such as strategic planning, personnel selection and evaluation, and assist in the resolution of problems facing the organizations.

Two organizations which we studied incorporated Elders into the organization in two different ways: formally through the establishment of an Elders' council, and informally through ensuring the presence of Elders at board meetings and other decision making forums. In both cases, however, Elder involvement was not limited only to the roles which had been agreed upon. There is an informal agreement that Elders can become involved in whatever way they see fit, without interference.

Discussion

The foregoing account shows that Aboriginal organizations which have chosen to manage themselves in accord with Aboriginal cultural values have developed a distinct management system quite unlike that used in the rest of Canada. This conclusion can be reinforced by reference to one of the most extensive research efforts in the comparative management field.

Geert Hofstede has studied work-related attitudes in a US-based multinational company operating in more than forty countries. He found there were significant differences in the behaviour and attitudes of employees and managers from different countries, differences that were best explained by the national culture of the respondents (Hofstede, 1982). Hofstede developed four cultural dimensions to explain the variations he found based upon an earlier tradition in cultural anthropology (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). His four cultural dimensions are:

Power Distance	The degree to which a society accepts a hierarchical or unequal distribution of power in organizations.
Uncertainty	The degree to which a society perceives ambiguous and uncertain situations as threatening and to be avoided.
Individualism	The degree to which a society prefers a loosely knit social framework in which individuals take care of

	<p>themselves and their families, as opposed to collectivism where individuals expect their relatives, clans or other groups to look after them in exchange for loyalty.</p>
Masculinity	<p>The degree to which a society emphasizes stereotypical masculine traits such as assertiveness, independence and insensitivity to feelings as dominant values. By contrast, femininity refers to preferences for relationships, caring for the weak and quality of life.</p>

The Canadian indices of cultural dimensions revealed by Hofstede's survey are:

Rank (out of a total of 40)

Power distance	low	26
Uncertainty Avoidance	low	30
Individualism	high	4
Masculinity	medium	21

To our knowledge, no one has administered an equivalent questionnaire in Aboriginal organizations, but from our research, we can surmise that members of Aboriginal organizations would differ from those in other Canadian organizations, specifically scoring lower in all dimensions and much lower in the individualism value. The abundant evidence that traditional Aboriginal societies and their organizations prefer a collectivist orientation in their activities is the most obvious difference between Aboriginal and mainstream Canadian society, but the other dimensions will differ too. For example, the cultural values of respect and sharing would indicate a very low Power Dimension score. Hofstede lists some of the features of a low power distance in terms which capture those values: "inequality in society should be minimized," "all people should be interdependent." Caring and sharing would be perceived as feminine traits resulting in a low score on the masculine dimension. The feminine dimension, according to Hofstede, includes these characteristics: "people and the environment are important," and "interdependence is the ideal" which would be attributes of caring and sharing too.

Conclusions

What is the consequence of seeing Aboriginal organizations begin to operate with values which differ markedly from the vast majority of organizations that surround them? Very few Aboriginal organizations presently deal solely with Aboriginal clients, particularly if they are in the for-profit sector. This factor will require Aboriginal managers to be extremely versatile. Newhouse (1991) has pointed out that the skills these managers will require must include the ability to work within two different organizational cultures and be able to switch back and forth with ease, as well as being able to translate the two cultures to each other.

As an example, one organization we worked with was required to conduct an evaluation of the programs by the non-Aboriginal funding agency. The organization carried out both a tradition-based evaluation involving Elders, where cultural relevance was important, and western style evaluation with performance indicators. Both evaluations were successful, and, significantly, the organization was able to persuade the funding agency that cultural relevance was important to the programs.

The management practises and organizational cultures which we found in the organizations which we studied have a surprising similarity to those which mainstream managers are beginning to discuss: the idea of flexible work teams in which individuals are able to do several different jobs, the move towards less hierarchical organizations and more task teams, and recent developments in human resource development which focus upon the whole employee.

The development of management education and development curricula becomes critical for the training of managers for Aboriginal organizations. One of the main ways in which organizational values are transmitted is through the education process. Without significant attention paid to the specific influences of Aboriginal cultures upon management practises, the individuals who leave these programs will lack the necessary skills to develop organizations which are consistent with Aboriginal cultural values.

Versatile managers will require a correspondingly flexible education. For those Aboriginal students who decide to go on to post-secondary education, standard courses in management from a solely western perspective will not be adequate, except, perhaps, in the most technical of subjects. To return to the story which opened this paper, a course in Aboriginal management attended by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is filled with moments of insight; the discussion of the assignment led to a far greater understanding of what happens in performance reviews for both groups than any standard texts could have achieved, and emphasized once more the importance of cultural values on how we manage our organizations.

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