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# Miniwakan News

## Special Issue on Ethics



**A publication of Spirit Lake Consulting, Inc.**

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**Editor's note:** As many of you are probably aware, Spirit Lake Consulting, Inc. recently received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to research and develop an on-line course on ethics, called Tribal Leaders with Character (TLC). In this newsletter, we offer a brief introduction of why and how TLC and strengthened ethics can be taught through on-line education. One of the drawbacks of most research is the amount of time it takes before the findings can become practice. Therefore, it may take several years before the benefits from the research are passed on to Indian Reservations. What is advantageous about the Spirit Lake Consulting on-line ethics course is that it is to be researched, disseminated, and put into practice within eight months.

## **Ethics in Indian Country: Problems and Progress**

**By: Dr. Erich Longie, SLC President**

There are many reports written by Indians and non-Indians alike who point out the progress made in Indian Country. It's true. There has been tremendous progress made in Indian Country in the last 30 – 50 years. Indian Country has become more self-sufficient; tribal governments have taken control of their destiny. Tribal members are filling more and more leadership positions on reservations, more tribal members are in the work force and more Indians are becoming educated. Nevertheless, most tribal members who reside on reservations will agree what has not improved on reservations over the last several decades is the ethical and moral behavior of Indian leaders, whether they are board members or program managers, not to mention other tribal members in the workforce. It is common knowledge In Indian Country that there is highly unethical behavior within the tribal government and within the tribal workplace. In fact, most people, especially those who are from the same generation as I, will argue that over the past two decades it has gotten worse

## Ethics in Indian Country [cont.]

I am 54 years old and as a young kid I do not recall as many of the moral and ethical abuses in the workforce that I hear about today. What I do remember is many older men and women with high moral and ethical standards.

Any place you go in Indian Country you will hear the same stories over and over again about how tribal members, whether they are council members, program directors, workers, or if they are related to someone in power, abuse their authority and/or use this influence to obtain benefits for themselves, their friends, and relatives. Stories of tribal managers abusing their authority, tribal workers not coming to work, yet putting 40 hours on their timesheet, programs directors using their funds to purchase clothes, gas, etc. for their families are common.

Spirit Lake Consulting believes that by having an on-line ethics course and having a forum where ethics can be discussed in a constructive manner that we could have an impact that will lead to change.

There are several reasons why we believe Indian Country is ready for change. One, there is a rising group of young potential leaders, as well as an older group of people who are tired of the corruption, favoritism, the fraud being committed, the outright stealing, and the nepotism. These people are willing to work for change. These people want change and are just waiting for something, or someone to take the lead in this direction. On some reservations, they are already creating change through recall of tribal council members, calling for separation of powers, and electing ethical people to office.

These individuals, who for the most part have kept quiet on unethical behavior, have two resources to let them express their opinion on unethical behavior - our on-line course and on-line forum. We hope tribal members use these two mediums to educate themselves and others on how to bring about ethical and moral change in Indian Country.

1. The on-line forum is available now at:

<http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/forum/viewforum.php?id=8> Or, you can just go to [www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/forum/](http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/forum/) and click on the link in the middle of the page that says "Ethical Questions".

2. The on-line course will be available in October.

I am sure skeptical people will say, "How can you teach people ethics?" or "How can you teach people who have misused and abused the system for years and years?" These are fair questions. Our ancestors of over a hundred years ago would have no problem answering these questions. Teach by example, they would say. Because that was how they were taught from the time they were toddlers right up to adulthood. They were taught the meaning of honesty, generosity, perseverance, and integrity right from the beginning. Ethical behavior was an integral part of their life.

I believe that in spite of what is happening on the reservation today that ethics can be taught. I believe most tribal members want ethical people in positions of authority and in the workplace. With the proper atmosphere, which is one without fear, they will eagerly come forward and learn how to stop unethical behavior on their reservations through honest and open discussions about ethics in the tribal workplace.

## **Ethics in Indian Country (continued)**

That is the purpose of our ethics course. To begin discussions about workforce behavior. People will discuss and find answers to these questions I hear quite frequently: “How can people do that?” “How can they steal over and over again?” “How can they give themselves raises?” These are very good questions. Questions we will attempt to answer in our on-line course, and/or through the discussions on our Forum.

Why have Native Americans who once were the most ethical and moral people in this country reached this stage? I believe we have come to this stage because of years of poverty and years of deprivation and alcoholism. Those conditions have caused us to struggle to survive. Therefore, we survived any way that we could and we often took what we could. As a result, over the years unethical behavior became the norm and continues to this day.

Unfortunately, individuals who rip off the tribes every chance they get, pass these traits down to their sons and daughters. I believe this behavior started in the early 60’s when the reservations started getting an influx of money. Faced with money when there was previously none, people found it very tempting (and easy) to take advantage of the lack of law and order on reservations and begin to fill their pockets. Why did they do it? I think it was because with all that sudden wealth and authority, these individuals did not have the moral and ethical foundation to resist the temptation. Unfortunately, these individuals have now taught a second and maybe even a third generation the same unethical behavior. So now, we have young men and women who grew up observing unethical workplace behavior in their fathers, mothers and relatives and now they’re doing the same thing.

As I said before, there has been progress on many fronts. We are not ignoring the positive things happening in Indian Country; we are just recognizing the total picture, what the statistics show. High unemployment, not enough housing, suicides, abuse of all kind, and other signs of poverty cannot be denied. The most effective way to start addressing these social ills is by having highly ethical leaders, workers and tribal members. That is the goal of our on-line course and forum.

One of the reasons it’s so hard to be ethical and maintain ethical practices in Indian Country is because of greed – pure and simple. Often people who do not want ethical practices in the workplace malign anyone who wants to do the right thing. These individuals gossip and tell lies about anyone who advocates for workplace ethics because it will prevent the individuals in question from ripping off the tribe.

Unfortunately, these individuals are so good at character assassination that other tribal members believe them. This situation is to the detriment of both the person whose character is being maligned and to the tribe because the tribe loses or does not hire the exact people with ethics who are so badly needed. Too many times have I heard about, or read about an ethical judge, program manager, board/committee members, council members getting fired, removed from a board/committee, or losing an election simply because they were doing their jobs

## Ethics in Indian Country (continued)

in an ethical manner. All of these sad events happen because there are tribal members who will say and do anything to destroy the reputation an ethical person.

If we are to make our reservations a better place for our children and grandchildren, we can start by behaving ethically, holding tribal workers to ethical behavior and electing ethical people to councils, boards and committees.

## The Sounds of Silence: Bystanders in Ethics

By: Dr. Erich Longie and Dr. AnnMaria De Mars, SLC Vice-President

*No one wakes up one day and decides, “You know what would be good? A gigantic fraud! I think I’ll perpetuate a myth through accounting fraud and make money that way.” Nor does anyone suddenly wake up and exclaim, “Forgery! Forging bank documents to show lots of assets. There’s the key to business success.”*

*These icons of ethical collapse did not descend into the depths of misdeeds overnight. Nor did they descend alone. To be able to forge bank documents, one needs a fairly large staff and a great many averted eyes. To drain the corporate treasury for personal use requires many pacts of silence among staff and even board members”* (From The Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse: How to Spot Moral Meltdowns in Companies... Before It’s Too Late By: Marianne M. Jennings, J.D.)

This quote makes a very, very important point. We have been reading the comments on our [Spirit Lake Forum on Ethical Questions](#) and everyone seems to think that there are some people who are ethical and others who aren’t. Yet, major ethical violations seldom happen in complete secrecy. Quite the opposite, from most of the people posting on the forum, it sounded like ‘everyone knew’ about the worker who comes in three hours late most days and doesn’t come in at all on other days but no one said anything because it was a relative of a tribal council member.

The first sign of ethical collapse Jennings mentions in her book is “Fear and Silence”. She points out that hiding hundreds of millions of dollars in income to avoid paying taxes, using a billion dollars of company money for personal expenses, those things can’t be done with no one knowing about it. Lots of people knew, but they were **afraid** to say anything. While her book focused on famous ethical violations at huge corporations, the same situations exist in small companies, colleges, tribal councils and social service programs.

### Ethical questions everywhere

All of us use ethics on a daily basis. These aren’t just some discussions by philosophers talking to each other at a university somewhere. When we posted the question on the Spirit Lake Forum about the person who comes to work 25 hours a week and gets paid for 40, it was based on a case study of a specific program. Guess what? People posted from several different reservations and emailed us privately saying, “You must be talking about my co-worker ...” or, “I know exactly the person you mentioned, she

## The Sounds of Silence (continued)

works on my reservation...”

Momaday, a Kiowa writer, says: “. . . more Indians going to school, more Indians becoming professional people, more Indians assuming full responsibility in our society. We have a long way to go, but we’re making great strides.” We agree with Momaday, Indians are indeed making great strides forward, but we have a long way to go, with the emphasis on “. . . a long way to go,” especially in the area of ethical behavior in the workplace. Here are two examples:

- Several months a friend forwarded an email that was sent out by a former tribal business manager who resigned because a newly elected tribal council member wanted the tribe to pay off what he owed on his old car, which he would then trade in for new car, and the tribe would pay the difference.
- While attending a national conference, a friend of mine from another reservation told me this about a tribal official. While on travel with several members of his tribe, they ate lunch at an expensive restaurant. They were going to use cash to pay for the meal when the tribal official said, “Give me your money, I will pay for the meal with my credit card. I need cash,” he said. As he was getting his credit card out of his billfold it dropped to the floor and everyone could see it was not his personal credit card, but the tribe’s credit card. Consider these two examples for a minute and what they say about us - can, or cannot Indian Country benefit from a course on ethics? You be the judge. If you believe so, then keep reading.

The most important reason to teach this class, in addition to learn about ethics, is to galvanize tribal members to action. There are tribal members out there who are highly ethical people. These people often stand-alone and could use some help. We know of a former tribal business manager who for many years fought hard against unethical financial practices but finally left the job after many years of fighting alone.

Now some people might criticize us and say, why are you airing our dirty laundry for the entire country to see? Good point. However, we have our head in the sand if we think non-Indian people are not aware of the ethical issues on our reservations. In our view, Indian people will benefit not from trying to cover up behavior, but rather, by bringing it out in the open so we can start to address it. Fear, silence, and observing ethical violations without taking action are not the path to building a better future for *any* people.

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## Last Words

You may notice two different tones represented in the articles in this newsletter and this is what you should expect in our upcoming ethics course as well. We have a wholly reservation perspective (our first article) and a blend of reservation experience and relevant research. This is our plan for the ethics course as well. If you have any suggestions, comments, or opinions on this newsletter or our planned course design, please feel free to email Dr. Erich Longie at [ericstev@spiritlakeconsulting.com](mailto:ericstev@spiritlakeconsulting.com).

## Want to get involved in the conversation?

Go to the Spirit Lake Forum section on Ethical Questions at the web address below. Anyone can go and read all the comments on ethical questions in Indian country and the world. You will need to register before you can post a comment. If you want to be anonymous, you can use a name such as Tribal99; however, you need an email address to register. We have had problems with porn and other spam sites posting, so we have had to start requiring registration. <http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/forum/viewforum.php?id=8>

