Identity-based and Reputational Leadership:
An American Indian Approach to Leadership
By John Tippeconnic

Leadership, like diversity, is often used in education as an all-encompassing notion, applied to a wide variety of situations, or at times, used rather loosely. The danger with such an approach is the lack of specificity. Yet, specificity can set the boundaries so narrow that one is led to believe one approach is better than another or that *one size fits all situations*. I suggest what educators and educational leadership programs need is some balance between the *broad* and *narrow* views of leadership in order to foster congruence between individual values and beliefs and organizational missions, visions, and activities.

Administrators, teachers, counselors, and others in education are individuals first and therefore, view situations though life experiences. Those experiences are influenced by academic preparation, socialization process, and job experiences. Through administrative preparation programs, potential school and institutional leaders are exposed to diverse leadership approaches and decision-making processes, such as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), ethical leadership (Shaprio & Stefkovich, 2005), collaborative leadership (Glaser, 2005), culturally proficient leadership (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999), and moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992). Each provides valuable direction for effective leadership in education. The broader literature on leadership in the business world adds to the complex and, at times, confusing nature of leadership. But educators are in the people business and people make the difference in student success or failure. Buy-in or commitment to leadership approaches is initially based on values and beliefs, or who we are as individuals. We agree, disagree, or modify leadership approaches to fit our values, beliefs, and attitudes – in essence it starts with our own identity as a person. A particular leadership approach catches our interest, gets our attention, and we commit to using it because it reflects our identity.

Identity-Based Leadership

I am a member of the Comanche Nation, located in Oklahoma. I have a research interest in how being an American Indian / Alaska Native influences leadership, especially educational leadership. My father, a full-blooded Comanche, conducted a study in 1942 that identified attributes of elder Comanches; at that time most of them did not speak English and were well enmeshed in their traditional cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Among

the attributes found were: cooperation, consideration for others, self-denial, courtesy, reverence, self-reliance or dependability, perseverance, responsibility, reliability, honesty, trustworthiness, respect for others, kindness, and loyalty. My father concluded that these were Comanche attributes, part of the identity of Comanche people, which could not be attributed to "education by the white man" (Tippeconnic, 1942). [1] It is interesting to note that many of the attributes my father identified as specific to Comanche are reflected in the leadership literature today.

I suggest that when attributes, like those described above, are part of our identity, we filter our thinking and leadership actions through our identity, and practice "identity-based leadership". Differences exist depending on the historical, social, political, economic, or health contexts of culturally based people, but traditional cultural beliefs, values, and practices influence approaches to leadership. For example, most Native Americans feel that tribal languages and cultures are fundamental to their existence. Thus, leaders who value respect for others and are aware of the oppressive actions of the dominant society toward Native Americans are more likely to support a relevant education, which incorporates Native cultures in the school curriculum. How the Comanche Nation College's governing board makes decisions provides another example. I serve as Leader (President) of the College Council (equivalent to a board of regents). The foundation of the College is based on the Comanche cultural beliefs and philosophy or as we call it "Comanche Centered Education." Rather than voting or using Roberts Rules of Order to make decisions, the council makes decisions by consensus of the whole because we value the concepts of courtesy, consideration for others, honesty, kindness, loyalty, trust, and respect for others. This works for us and is a reflection of our Comanche identity.

Reputational Leadership

The final point I want to make in this essay is to address the relationship between cultural identify and professional reputation. Because cultural beliefs, values, and actions vary, one can be seen as an effective leader with the ability to achieve results or be known as less effective or even incompetent. Each of us needs to take a critical reflective view of our cultural identity and its inherent leadership values. If we practice identity-based leadership, and truly use values and attributes, such as those mentioned (e.g., cooperation, consideration for others, self-denial, courtesy, reverence, self-reliance or dependability,

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[1] Although the focus is on Tippeconnic's study, there are other works that present Native leadership from different perspectives, e.g., Johnson, Benham & VanAlstine, (2003); Jules, (1999).

perseverance, responsibility, reliability, honesty, trustworthiness, respect for others, kindness, and loyalty), along with an understanding of historical, social, political, and economic knowledge, then it is likely one's reputation will be positive, even in times of adversity.

In sum, our cultural identity makes a difference in how we view and practice leadership in education and the reputation we will have as an effective leader. Comanche values promote leadership that is cultural, ethical, inclusive, collaborative, shared or team based, diverse, and accepts and promotes the broader worldview of education. Leadership starts within each one of us and reflects who we are – our identity.

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