



# governance toolkit

## best practices

**Principle:** Cultural Alignment of Institutions  
**Government:** Apache First Nation

### OPPORTUNITY

*Traditional Apache culture is based on an intimate spiritual connection with and knowledge of the natural world. Apache elders believe that connection is necessary to respect one's self, other humans and all living things.*

The San Carlos Apache elders living in San Carlos in northern Arizona have seen the changes in their community that are particularly worrisome.

San Carlos youth no longer eat the traditional foods and obesity runs rampant. Traditional knowledge about plants and animals is being lost as the young spend much of their time indoors watching television or playing video games. Dependence on federal government goods and services has become an acceptable way to live. Furthermore, the elders at San Carlos are concerned about questions of governance. Throughout the 1990s, San Carlos suffered from debilitating political instability, which manifest in protests, takeovers and demonstrations.

In the midst of such cultural, political and economic difficulties lies a kernel of hope and inspiration – the

### NCFNG

is a national, independent, First Nations-controlled organization dedicated to supporting First Nations as they work to implement their inherent right to self-governance. The development of a set of shared principles that clearly articulate our approach to effective governance is one way in which we support that work. This NCFNG Effective Governance Case Study profiles a best practice in the principle “Cultural Alignment of Institutions”.

To learn more about this case study, contact:  
San Carlos Apache Nation  
[www.sancarlosapache.com](http://www.sancarlosapache.com)

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San Carlos Elders Cultural Advisory Council (ECAC). Formed in November 1993 by Tribal Council resolution, the all-volunteer ECAC was established to advise the Tribal Council on cultural matters, to carry out consultations with off-reservation entities on culturally related matters, and to execute various projects related to cultural preservation.

### PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

The ECAC regularly gives its traditional views to the Tribal Council on a wide variety of matters. The ECAC has provided guidance on tribal environmental policies, including reservation-based mining; on cultural policies such as the inappropriate use of depictions of the Gaan (Mountain Spirits); and on guidelines for non-tribal researchers. It carries out cultural consultations with off-reservation entities, especially federal and state agencies that administer lands in traditional Apache areas, and advises the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the location of graves and sacred sites that should not be disturbed by tree harvesting. The ECAC also helps administer and oversee cultural preservation activities. For example, it is involved in activities related to the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)* and the *Western Apache Place Names Project*. It also helps collect traditional information on the natural world to be used in reservation school curriculum.

In all of its activities, the ECAC consults its membership – who ranges in age from mid-40s to late-90s – and, as necessary, other elders wise in Apache language, culture and outdoor living skills. While the ECAC operates strictly by consensus, the administrative functions are conducted by a coordinator and a facilitator who jointly organize the meetings, visit home-bound elders or medicine people, and transcribe conversations into letters, memoranda and articles. To ensure its long-term sustainability, the ECAC retains younger elders within its membership, who are mentored by older members.

## SUCCESS FACTORS

The values of self-reliance, respect and deep connection to nature are central to traditional Apache life. These values are the underlying themes in all Elders Cultural Advisory Council activities, consultations and messages. The ECAC tries to bring these values and traditional cultural knowledge to their own leaders in order for them to more effectively care for the people and their land.

The ECAC stands out on a number of dimensions. As an all-volunteer group, the program operates with minimal funding. This means that the program is replicable any place a dedicated elder could be recruited as coordinator. The ECAC has made a significant contribution at a reservation that otherwise suffers from dire political problems.

The ECAC serves as a conscience for the San Carlos Apache Tribe by tapping, discussing and then articulating its members' understanding of Apache cultural values. The Elders Cultural Advisory Council is a keeper and carrier of traditional Apache wisdom whose actions and advice will benefit the tribe for generations to come.

**Elders consider activities that harm the natural world, such as large-scale mining and irresponsible ranching, inherently disrespectful and dangerous.**

**Apache elders acknowledge the necessity of exploiting natural resources to survive, but are critical of destructive exploitation. Harming the natural world not only destroys habitats for natural resources, thereby removing access to resources, but it breaks the foundation of one's home, exposing people and communities to the harmful side-effects of broken relationships. Because traditional people still have and maintain these relationships, the destruction of habitats hurts them deeply and profoundly, as if a family member has been harmed or killed**

— Jeanette C. Cassa

Elder's Cultural Advisory Council,  
San Carlos Apache Tribe

## CHALLENGES

Having their decisions ignored by council members who are pressured to accept economic incentives has been one of the greatest challenges faced by the San Carlos Apache. While the majority of elected San Carlos Tribal Council officials have supported and respected the beliefs of the many members on their reservation who adhere to their traditional cultural and spiritual life ways, exceptions have occurred.

## NCFNG GOVERNANCE LESSONS LEARNED

The Elders Cultural Advisory Council at San Carlos provides an instructive example of how nations can strengthen their capacity to govern by ensuring the *Cultural Alignment of Institutions*. This principle recognizes that it is only where the organizations are infused with practices and beliefs consistent with the values of the people being represented, that effective governance in First Nations communities will exist.

Elders can play a critical role in securing this alignment and advancing the social, economic, political and spiritual health of an Indian nation.

As keepers of traditional wisdom, elders can and should play an active role in tribal governmental affairs, including cultural matters, leadership responsibilities and language preservation.

One way to use the knowledge of elders is to formally recognize a council of elders that is empowered to make recommendations, provide guidance and advise tribal decision makers.

## LINKS AND MORE INFORMATION

NAGPRA: Resources for Tribes

[www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/TRIBES/INDEX.HTM](http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/TRIBES/INDEX.HTM)

Inter Tribal Council of Arizona

[www.itcaonline.com/tribes\\_sancar1.html](http://www.itcaonline.com/tribes_sancar1.html)

San Carlos Apache and Mt Graham

<http://medusa.as.arizona.edu/graham/cultur.html>