

---

# What Is Cultural Match and Why Is it So Important?

Manley A. Begay, Jr. and Stephen Cornell

---

Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy  
(University of Arizona) and  
Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development

---

# Summary of Harvard Project/NNI Research Results

Keys to successful community and economic development:

- Genuine self-government
- Capable governing institutions
- Cultural match

as well as...

- Strategic orientation
  - Leadership
-

---

**What do we mean by  
cultural match?**

---

---

## Example 1:

We studied two American Indian nations that have nearly identical governing institutions today. One is successful. The other is not.

The White Mountain Apache Tribe of Arizona has taken control of its own affairs and done well.

The Oglala Sioux Tribe of South Dakota has taken control of its own affairs but has been unable to translate that control into improved social and economic conditions.

---

# White Mountain Apache Tribe

## c. 1850

- Centralized power
- Powerful chief (*Nat'aan*)
- Weak council (chosen by chief)
- Dispute resolution controlled by chief
- Political control of business decisions (where to plant, hunt, etc.)

## 2000

- Centralized power
- Powerful chief (tribal chairman)
- Weak council (chairman holds most power)
- Tribal court controlled by council and chair
- Political control of business decisions (enterprises)

This is cultural match. It works.

---

# Oglala Sioux Tribe

## c. 1850

- Decentralized power (multiple bands/leaders)
- Powerful council (it appoints executive)
- Independent judiciary (*akicita*)
- Separation of strategic decisions (council) from day-to-day business management (managers)

## 2000

- Centralized power
- Executive directly elected by the people
- Judicial decisions controlled by elected officials
- Enterprises controlled by elected officials who use them to favor relatives and supporters

This is cultural mis-match. It doesn't work.

---

---

## Example 2:

There are two other Indian nations that have been successful at taking control of their own affairs and at translating control into social and economic success.

Yet they have radically different governing institutions.

---

---

# Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (Montana)

- Three tribes compelled by the U.S. government to share a single land base
  - Their traditional practices are not the same
  - Instead of appealing to tradition, they have chosen mainstream governing institutions: a parliamentary democracy with a strong and independent judicial system
  - But because this system was freely chosen by them, it has great legitimacy with people from all three groups, who believe it is an appropriate way to govern
  - This is cultural match
  - It works
-

---

# Cochiti Pueblo (New Mexico)

- No constitution, no elections, no legal codes
  - Every December 29, the senior spiritual leader appoints the six individuals who will run the Pueblo for the next twelve months. It is a very old system.
  - Public opinion and the still-vibrant traditional culture compel leadership to act in the public interest
  - The system has enormous legitimacy with the people, who believe it is an appropriate way to govern.
  - This is cultural match
  - It works
-

---

# So Does Cultural Match Just Mean Doing Things in Traditional Ways? No.

- It is not an appeal *to tradition*; it is an appeal *for legitimacy*. Governing institutions have to have the support of those they govern
  - Institutions imposed from outside typically lack that support. People say, “It is not our government. It is someone else’s.” The result is abuse and distrust
  - Indigenously generated institutions are more likely to have that support, assuming they have been generated freely and inclusively
-

---

## Cultural match means institutions that...

- Embody values that Indigenous peoples feel are important
  - Reflect their contemporary conceptions of how authority should be organized and exercised
  - Are generated through Indigenous efforts
  - Therefore have the support of those they govern
-

---

**But there is a second test as well.**

**Governing institutions not only have to have legitimacy with the people.**

**They also have to work. They have to be able to get the job done.**

---

---

**In some cases, this may mean Indigenous communities have to rethink their ideas of how to govern and invent new ways that better meet their needs.**

**This requires leadership.**

---

---

## Example 3:

In both the United States and Australia, peoples with different languages or cultures sometimes chose or were forced to move together and share a single community. Now they need their own strong governance.

What does cultural match mean in such cases?

---

---

## United States:

On the Flathead Reservation in Montana, three American Indian nations, forced to work together, chose institutions by which they could govern themselves.

Those institutions are not “traditional” to any one of the three peoples. But the people chose them. They were indigenously generated and therefore have legitimacy. People have decided, “This is the right way.”

That’s cultural match.

---

---

## Australia:

At Thamarrurr, twenty groups speaking diverse languages, faced with the need to find new ways of self-governance, together developed a new council that could include them all. Already, a new way of doing things has brought about good changes.

This solution to a governance crisis was generated by the people themselves. It therefore has legitimacy. They have decided, “This is the right way.”

That’s cultural match.

---

---

What matters is not that things be done in the old ways. It is that things be done in ways – old or new – that win the support, participation, and trust of the people, *and that can get things done.*

Some will be old. Some will be new.

“This is our way.”

---