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governance toolkit
best practices

Principle: Cultural Alignment of Institutions
Government: Teslin Tlingit Council

OPPORTUNITY

Situated in southern Yukon, the Teslin Tlingit people have a clan system of government. That clan system of government operated for years prior to the imposition of the Indian Act. Through the Indian Act, traditional governance was separated from formal decision making power and authority. Then in the early 1990s, following 20 years of negotiation, federal and territorial settlement legislation provided the basis for the creation and ratification of the Teslin Tlingit Council Final and Self-Government Agreements. Through these agreements the Teslin Tlingit people once again were able to recognize the power and authority of their clan based government.

The structure of the Teslin Tlingit Council incorporates traditional Tlingit clan culture into contemporary organizational and management principles. The results are institutions of governmence that are aligned with the traditions and belief systems of the citizens they govern and represent.

The centrality of the clans in the design and operation of the Teslin Tlingit Council is considered a best practice in cultural alignment of institutions.

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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:
Teslin Tlingit Council
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PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

In Teslin there are five clans which are:

- Yanyedi: Wolf
- Dakhl'awedi: Eagle
- Kukhhittan: Raven Children
- Deshitan: Beaver
- Ishkitan: Frog

Every citizen of the nation belongs to one of the five clans. Each clan has its own individual customs inherited from past generations.

Each clan has a leader and elders recognized as such by the clan membership, and the Teslin Tlingit clans have emblems which are part of their tradition. These customs are observed by the clan and respected by the other clans. Individuals have clan responsibilities and also collective community responsibilities. These clan and collective responsibilities are enshrined in the structure of the Teslin Tlingit government as set out in the Teslin Tlingit constitution.

The council recognizes independent but complementary governing bodies, the constitutionally entrenched integrity of government branches, and the separation of legislative from executive, or administrative, roles, tasks and responsibilities.

Examples of Teslin Tinglit governance institutions which best reflect the influence of the clan system of government include the following:

- **The Teslin Tlingit legislative branch** is the 25-member General Council composed of five representatives appointed by each of the five clans for four-year terms. The General Council is the forum where the members bring forward government business for discussion, debate and deliberation.
- **The Elders Council:** The Elders Council is composed of all elders 58 years and older, presided over by the clan leaders. The Elders Council gives advice and direction to all other Teslin Tlingit

government branches and is responsible for safe-guarding, encouraging and instilling the heritage, culture, language and other traditions of the Teslin Tlingit First Nation.

- **The Executive Branch:** The six-member Executive Council is composed of one representative from each of the five clans, appointed for four-year terms by the General Council, and one elder appointed by and for a term at the pleasure of the Elders Council. The Executive Council is the top management team that heads up the Teslin Tlingit Council government.

- **The Justice Council:** The authorities and responsibilities of the Justice Council, composed of the five clan leaders, are established by General Council in accordance with the traditional principles of Tlingit customary law and upon the advice of the Elders Council.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Central to the success of the Teslin Tlingit's government is the embedding of traditional practices – clans and elders – within contemporary government and organizational practices. It works because:

- It draws on cultural knowledge, and tradition
- It is a formal structure of government codified by the constitution
- It is a modern expression of the clan system integrated into formal decision making institutions
- It allows for interaction with other governments and the certainty of decision making required for effective intergovernmental relations

Finally, in the few years that have passed since the

Teslin Tlingit Council is actively involved in the implementation process, attempting to build new ways of becoming self-sufficient in a contemporary world and continuing to prosper in the old traditional ways, retaining the language, culture and laws for future generations.
— Chief Eric Morris

system of government was established they now have leaders in the government that only know the clan system of government and do not know the *Indian Act*. This truly is "creating a new memory in the minds of our children."

CHALLENGES

Replacing the *Indian Act* with a different system of government isn't without its challenges. First, it may be difficult to see how traditional practice can be incorporated into contemporary governance institutions. First Nations whose political structures have been greatly affected by colonization may have a more difficult time trying to create a government structure that is culturally appropriate.

Second, change, even positive change, can create uncertainty and tension. It is important to have patience, flexibility and understanding as people learn to trust the effective implementation of the governance institutions.

Finally, effective inter-governmental relationships require that other governments also need to understand and accept the new institutions of self-governance.

NCFNG GOVERNANCE LESSONS LEARNED

The effective governance principle, *Cultural Alignment of Institutions*, exists when First Nation structures of government are infused with practices and beliefs consistent with the values of the people being represented. When this happens, people understand how government works and support the expression of cultural identity through collective decision making and action. It inspires trust and legitimacy in governance – two fundamental elements of effectiveness.

LINKS AND MORE INFORMATION

Teslin Tlingit Constitution
   www.ttc-teslin.com/constitution.html

Council of Yukon First Nations
   www.cyfn.ca/ournationsttc

BC Treaty Commission: Teslin Tlingit Council
   www.bctreaty.net/nations/teslin.php