



# governance toolkit

## best practices

**Principle:** Participation in Decision Making  
**Government:** Gila River Indian Community

### OPPORTUNITY

*Gila River Indian Community, which borders the Arizona cities of Tempe, Phoenix, Mesa, and Chandler, has nearly 17,000 tribal citizens. Half of the population is younger than 18. Like youth elsewhere, Gila River youth are challenged by a host of problems. Gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy are particularly acute on the 372,000-acre reservation. Until the late 1980s however, Gila River youth had little or no avenue to participate in decision making related to these and other matters affecting them. This was the result, in part, of their government's own attitude about youth and their role in the community. As one Gila River leader acknowledged, "the tribal government has always focused on the elders, but youth and their issues were historically overlooked".*

Formed in 1987 and chartered under the laws of the Gila River Indian Community, the Akimel O'odham / Pee-Posh Youth Council (the Youth Council) gives youth a formal voice in tribal governance and prepares the next generation of leadership. Comprised of 20 young leaders between the ages of fourteen and 21, who are elected by their peers, the Youth Council

### 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 "Participation in Decision Making".

To learn more about this case study, contact:  
Gila River Indian Community  
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advises the tribal government on a diverse range of issues including substance abuse and youth delinquency. The Youth Council also engages youth in initiatives designed to enhance their understanding of and encourage participation in public service.

### PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

As elected representatives who serve the interest of their peers, Youth Council members hold significant public service responsibilities. They communicate regularly with other youth to identify relevant issues, concerns, and challenges. They formulate policy and they present their policy solutions to the community's elected leadership and other tribal government officials. Youth Council members also organize community activities and participate in and present at local, state, regional, and national conferences on issues pertaining to youth and youth/adult relationships.

The objective of the Youth Council is to create a single, comprehensive Gila River Indian Community Youth Policy to ensure that all children, teens and young adults have access to:

- Ongoing relationships with caring adults
- Safe places with structured activities during the non-school hours
- Healthy starts
- Marketable skills and competencies through education and youth development
- Opportunities to give back through community service

Since the Youth Council's creation, more than 300 youth have served on the Council itself, and over 8000 youth and community members have been involved in its program activities. The Council has coordinated more than 15 leadership conferences and a series of youth leadership development seminars, represented youth in dozens of conferences, and provided substantive input on a wide range of issues to tribal decision makers.

## SUCCESS FACTORS

The accomplishments of the Akimel O’odham / Pee-Posh Youth Council have earned them widespread admiration and respect on and off-reservation. Three factors appear to be powerful contributors to the Council’s success. The first is the community’s recognition that youth can and should play a critical role in governance and decision making. By enabling youth participation in tribal government, the Council has made use of a valuable and previously untapped resource. The future of aboriginal nations to be self-governing depends upon knowledgeable, motivated, and skilled youth to assume leadership positions.

A second factor is the seriousness with which its members and the tribal government take the Council’s responsibilities. The tribal government treats the Council like any other tribal government program or department. Similarly, members of the Council take their roles and responsibilities as community leaders seriously. Members commit to a code of ethics that forbids substance use, gang participation, and inappropriate behaviour (including inappropriate dress). The Council’s code of ethics is being replicated within the Gila River Indian Community tribal government.

A third factor of success is the Youth Council’s commitment to investing in itself. For example, the Youth Council’s robust, well-documented, and periodically updated bylaws show that it pays attention to its own governance. The Youth Council’s structure itself is significant: the Council’s representation by district reflects the fact that district allegiances are noticeably strong in the community. These innovations are hallmarks of good governance.

**Our mission is to provide youth the opportunity to contribute individual perspectives and insight into the ongoing activities of the Gila River Indian Community. Our vision is to build upon and recognize the power and importance of youth leadership by uniting young people, through communication and action, to enable youth to have a positive, formidable impact in the Gila River Indian Community.**

— Akimel O’odham / Pee-Posh Youth Council

## NCFNG GOVERNANCE LESSONS LEARNED

The effective governance principle of Participation in Decision Making recognizes that First Nations will engage their people in decision making in many different ways. The form of that decision making is not important. What is important is that nations determine the best way(s) for their communities to contribute to important decisions.

Leaders of Gila River Indian Community working with the leadership of the Youth Council found that building an effective framework to engage youth in decision making requires the following principles and actions.

Statements about the importance of tribal youth should be backed by concrete investments in their development. For example, tribal leaders can facilitate the establishment of youth councils; fund, host, and participate in youth activities and events; and encourage youth to participate in national organizations. These actions inspire youth to make a positive difference in the community while building up the pool of future leaders.

With appropriate training and organizational support, youth can make meaningful contributions to tribal governance. They can offer input into the issues affecting their peers, provide guidance and feedback in policy formation, and serve as effective spokespeople for the tribe. Like tribal governments, tribal youth councils require good organization. Bylaws, staggered terms, a code of ethics, election rules, and clear processes for decision making are institutional ingredients for success.

The youth population in First Nation communities is growing faster than any other segment of aboriginal society. Investments in youth development are essential. The actions employed by Gila River can be applied in other communities as an effective strategy to engage youth in decision making and support effective governance.

## LINKS AND MORE INFORMATION

Akimel O’odham / Pee-Posh Youth Council  
[www.gricyouthcouncil.org/gryc](http://www.gricyouthcouncil.org/gryc)

Innovations Network Profile  
[www.innovations.harvard.edu/awards.html?id=6393](http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/awards.html?id=6393)

2004 NCFNG Youth Think Tank Summary Report  
[www.fngovernance.org/pdf/FINALREPORTFNGCYouth.pdf](http://www.fngovernance.org/pdf/FINALREPORTFNGCYouth.pdf)