

# Leadership through an Indigenous Lens



Kathryn M. Buder Center  
for American Indian Studies

Brown School

Kelley McCall, MSW/MPH Candidate

Indigenous leaders are found throughout history, across the globe<sup>1</sup>. Indigenous leaders have been present long before European settlers colonized lands. These leaders possessed qualities, worked within frameworks, and created strategies to successfully lead their people and nations. For the purposes of this brief, examples used will be of American Indians/First Nations leaders.

What makes leadership, “Indigenous” leadership? One difference lies in the lens in which one views the term “leadership”. To describe Indigenous leadership styles, consider the metaphor “The Currents of Culture” presented by Scott Gorringer (Mithaka)<sup>2</sup>. Picture a river and its myriad contents. The Rocks are the elders; Indigenous leaders with extensive wisdom of cultural knowledge, language, and practices. They may not have the desire to participate in Western leadership and government systems<sup>2</sup>. Within the river are White-Water Kayaker’s<sup>2</sup>. These Indigenous leaders hold a strong collectivist mentality that use Indigenous knowledge to keep themselves, and their communities, grounded<sup>2</sup>. These individuals are often characterized as argumentative or disruptive, however, they often succeed when pursuing mainstream goals<sup>2</sup>. Then we find the Down-Stream Kayaker; Indigenous leaders who difficulty understanding the Rock’s (elder’s) style of not adapting to the changing times<sup>2</sup>. They have strong beliefs in the power of Indigenous people to become successful in dominant society<sup>2</sup>. Then there is the Mainstream Current. These Indigenous leaders hold capitalist, individualistic, and monetary ideologies<sup>2</sup>. They tend to believe that people need to change their cultural ways to adapt to the mainstream ideologies<sup>2</sup>. Finally, there are the Whirlpool leaders, these Indigenous leaders use creativity and openness to provide safe spaces for new ideas and dialogue<sup>2</sup>. As described, there is no one style that all Indigenous leaders fall into. They may have traits from several of the examples above. All leadership styles are needed to function within a society, organization or community. Much like rivers, Indigenous leaders play unique parts in the navigation of the water. It takes many

Indigenous leadership styles to maintain the balance of American Indian values and traditions within the Western leadership government systems. Unlike many Western models that prioritize position or status of an individual in the community, American Indian leaders focus in on the techniques it takes to serve the community<sup>14</sup>.

Many modern Indigenous leaders are advocates within their tribe or community, seeking to better the future of their people through legislation and activism<sup>3</sup>. Indigenous leaders may use socialist, or collective, values such as humility and altruism that are utilized for the good of the tribe/community, rather than capitalistic or individual values<sup>3</sup>. Indigenous leaders balance power amongst their people, for example, having specific chiefs for specific purposes<sup>4</sup>. For example, one leader may be asked to assume the responsibility of political matters and may bring Indigenous perspectives to national committees/government systems<sup>4</sup>. Ritual leaders perform sacred traditions, including hunting and fishing, leading ceremonies, and incorporating Mother Earth and cultural arts that unite the community<sup>4</sup>. Another type of leader are the Elders. They are not considered “Chiefs,” but rather bring wisdom and experiences into focus while passing important traditional stories to younger generations<sup>4</sup>. Storytelling is another means of instilling strength and knowledge within people<sup>5</sup>. To that end, all community members are involved in the advancement of a tribe<sup>4</sup>. No one gender is better or more valuable than the other<sup>4</sup>. Indigenous women have traditionally been considered valuable leaders full of insight and healing skills<sup>4</sup>. Native leadership values prioritize cultural traditions, spiritual values, and diplomacy. Indigenous leaders carry on wisdom from 7 generations before to care for 7 generations to come<sup>4</sup>. Collectivism is a crucial framework for Indigenous leadership regardless of which tribe or country one represents.

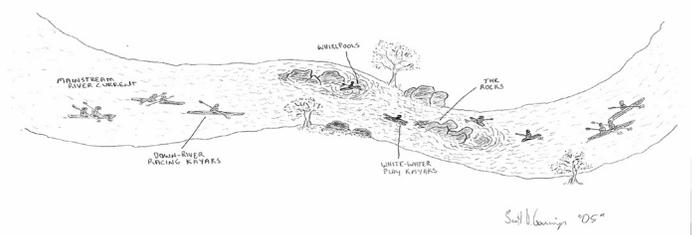
Our leaders today have learned from our ancestors. Traditional American Indian leadership strategies are important to



Chief Seattle



Chief Blue Jacket



“Currents of Culture” Gorringer, S., Indigenous Leadership? (2008)



consider as modern leadership styles are analyzed. Past leaders, while navigating relations with European settlers, varied from aggressive defender to inclusive diplomat<sup>6-11</sup>. Massasoit, a Wampanoag chief circa 1500's, taught settlers valuable survival skills such as planting, fishing, and hunting<sup>6</sup>. He adhered to a socialist perspective to co-exist and welcome the newcomers<sup>6</sup>. Using a similar leadership style, Tamanend "the affable" of the Lenape, was a peaceful political negotiator<sup>7</sup>. He possessed qualities of wisdom, virtue, prudence, hospitality, and was known to be a strong believer in "the great and good spirit"<sup>7</sup>. Nisqually Chief Leschi, circa 1800's, was a noble, courageous leader who utilized diplomatic behavior until he believed his people were being wronged, and then shifted tactics to that of defender and warrior<sup>8</sup>. Shawnee Chief Blue Jacket, Chief Seattle of the Duwamish people, and Sioux Chief Sitting Bull were known to be determined, persistent, and aggressive defenders of the lands and people<sup>9-11</sup>. These traditional leaders faced challenges of settler colonial tactics and threatening behaviors from European settlers. The effects of colonization remain today and aspects of modern Indigenous leaders are shaped by these histories. Many of the obstacles that Indigenous leaders face in contemporary times have been challenges their ancestors encountered in the past, a primary difference being the local village is now a worldwide community<sup>2,4</sup>.

Contemporary leaders carry on the traits of courage, wisdom, educator, defender, diplomat, and activist taught by their American Indian ancestors. Chief Wilma Mankiller of the Cherokee Nation carried these exemplary traits<sup>12</sup>. Raised by an activist family, she had the confidence and determination to organize communities and create the political balance that existed before European settlers arrived<sup>12</sup>. Ada Deer, Menominee Indian, is a contemporary leader and defender for Native rights and social justice<sup>13</sup>. Her endless campaigning and persistence restored the Menominees' tribal status and trust lands<sup>13</sup>. Beginning as a social worker, she went on to serve as the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs<sup>13</sup>. Using Indigenous leadership skills of peaceful politics, respect, and personal involvement, these two women became strong leaders that have successfully advanced in American Indian policy from a grassroots level to honorable positions within the



Wilma Mankiller

United States and tribal governments. Regardless of the time period, American Indian leaders are courageous, fierce advocates and providers for their people and lands. As previously described, "The Currents of Culture" metaphor, no matter which river Indigenous leaders will navigate, their vision and actions stem from their cultural knowledge, history, values and ancestors<sup>2</sup>.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Spiller, C., Maunganui Wolfgramm, R., Henry, E., & Pouwhare, R. (2019). Paradigm warriors: Advancing a radical ecosystems view of collective leadership from an Indigenous Maori perspective. *Human Relations*, 73(4), 516-543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719893753>
- 2 Gorringer, S. (2008). Indigenous Leadership? A Set of Lenses from which to view Indigenous Leadership. Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training. [https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Microsoft-Word-Currents-of-Culture-brief\\_doc.pdf](https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Microsoft-Word-Currents-of-Culture-brief_doc.pdf)
- 3 Haar, J., Roche, M., & Brougham, D. (2019). Indigenous Insights into Ethical Leadership: A Study of Māori Leaders. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3869-3>
- 4 Katene, S. (2010). Modeling Maori leadership: What makes for good leadership? L&R Hartley. <https://lrhartley.com/seminars/katene>
- 5 Voyageur, C., Brearley, L., & Calliou, B. (2015). Restorying Indigenous leadership: Wise practices in community development (2nd ed.).
- 6 Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Massasoit. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Massasoit>
- 7 Baker, M. (2016, May 20). Tribal leaders: Tamanend the affable of the Lenape. The History Files. [https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/FeaturesAmericas/NorthNative\\_TribalLeaders01\\_Tamanend.htm](https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/FeaturesAmericas/NorthNative_TribalLeaders01_Tamanend.htm)
- 8 HistoryLink. (2003, January 29). Nisqually chief Leschi is hanged on February 19, 1858. The Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History - HistoryLink.org. <https://www.historylink.org/File/5145>
- 9 The American History. (2016, May 25). The life of chief blue jacket of Shawnee Native American Indian leader. <https://theamericanhistory.org/blue-jacket.html>
- 10 Chief Seattle. (n.d.). HistoryNet. <https://www.historynet.com/chief-seattle>
- 11 Sitting bull. (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sitting-Bull>
- 12 Tyler, R. (2018). Wilma Mankiller. National Women's History Museum. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/wilma-mankiller>
- 13 Deer, A. (2019). Making a difference: My fight for native rights and social justice. University of Oklahoma Press.
- 14 Warner, L. S., & Grint, K. (2006). American Indian ways of leading and knowing. *Leadership*, 2(2), 225-244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715006062936>