

# So What if They Are Family...

BY GLENN C. ZARING

When a tribal business is just starting out or already charging out of the gate, what is one of the main messages that has gone into the formation of that business? “We will provide jobs for our tribal members.” Often, that means providing jobs for family members of tribal officials or staff. This can turn into failure.

Why? Consider this: Is it right to hire family members for some new tribal enterprise just because they are family members? Of course not! But we do it anyway. Think about the messages that are communicated to our people when we keep doing this just because we can? At some point, they are going to lose any trust in themselves, their own “family” and their tribe. I shudder to think where that leads...

One of the biggest challenges for business, especially tribal businesses, is that we often seem to hire family members for jobs in which they do not have the background or training to succeed. We even stress the importance of providing jobs for our people before others, and if we cannot find tribal members who have the necessary qualifications to do the job, we simply dumb down the requirements until “someone” can qualify. Doing this ensures that the job will not get done, and the tribal member that we are trying to help will fail.

It is a hard pill to swallow, but it is the truth.

The psychology beyond this well-intentioned action is easy to understand and, on the surface, laudable. We are just trying to help our people. But we are actually setting them up for failure, loss of face and loss of self-esteem. We do not help our business and actually hurt our whole tribe. Failure or poor performance has impact well beyond just a specific job. It affects our tribal future and the chances for success and longevity.

In the outside business world, there are countless stories of how when a private business owner walks on, “Junior” takes over. Of course, Junior has a college degree from Daddy’s alma mater and has an excellent resume on either the tennis court or the golf course. But Junior doesn’t have any experience at the company, other than flirting with the receptionist.

Guess what? When Junior sits in the big chair in the corner office, he hasn’t any idea what to do. He vaguely remembers hearing some of what Daddy used to talk about, but he didn’t pay attention. Before long, the company either folds, is sold, or the board of directors gets tired of Junior and makes him the chief executive director in charge of picnics.

Now look at the contrast where Junior grows up, getting a good basic education and then starts far down the totem pole at the company, getting experience at all levels. When Daddy walks on and Junior takes over, the people know him. The customers and suppliers know him, and he knows what makes the corporation tick. This Junior is a credit to his

people, his parents and his company.

In Indian Country, like elsewhere, we have fallen for the promise of our college systems’ hype, which says that if you just stick it out and get a degree from us, you will be entitled to a great job, lots of money and prestige. (Sounds like Junior and his golf degree...ha!) Wonderful promise, isn’t it? It is a shame how it doesn’t really add up that way for Junior or for us.

Just because we pay through tribal funds or grants for a college education for our young people does not mean that once the degree is completed, they know what they are doing. They hopefully have the basic education from which to move on in life, but it’s experience and mentorship that will give them the tools for the task and help them to become proud and productive tribal citizens.

When our tribal nations are contemplating a new business venture, they should look at it as an opportunity to learn how to do the business. We should communicate to our people that the business will provide jobs, but that they will still have to learn how to do them and then actually perform the job. Doing so in truth (debtwin) will provide opportunities, self-esteem and self-worth, which will help our people and our nations create a better future. It also means being honest with our family. ♦

GLENN C. ZARING (CHEROKEE) IS THE FORMER PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR OF THE LITTLE RIVER BAND OF OTTAWA INDIANS, BASED IN MANISTEE, MICHIGAN, AND OWNER OF TRIBAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS ADVISOR (TPA2). HE MAY BE REACHED AT PUBLICAFFAIRSADVISOR@GMAIL.COM.