

Truth/Debwewin: Whose Truth?

BY GLENN C. ZARING

“You can’t trust an Indian!” I don’t know about you, but those words always make me mad beyond belief! However, it is true that these words are often used, even if just as a supposedly “humorous” aside between non-Natives. They are particularly maddening right now as we are in the throes of a presidential campaign where it has become almost impossible to separate the lies from the truth used by candidates, spokespeople, political parties and PACs...let alone the media outlets, which don’t seem to bother to honestly assess their statements.

About 10 years ago, I started thinking about our teachings of the Seven Grandfathers and the challenges of communication between tribal nations and nontribal worlds. It is quite apparent that if everyone followed the teachings, we would be more effective and content. Wow! It must be that wisdom/*nbwaakaawin* actually does come with age!

But how does this question of truth affect tribal businesses, governments and their communications? Specifically, how does it affect the people who are tasked with getting the tribal communications or tribally owned business information out to various audiences?

Take a look at your communication structure. Many businesses just throw the communication requirement to their advertising department and many tribes use their public relations department or agency for the same. This is too bad. First, it is unfair to all because these departments are not in the business of telling the truth. They are tasked with crafting and delivering messages

for their bosses to their constituents or customers. Second, and this is the difference with public information offices and officers, your PIOs have to be trusted! They are the ones who deliver true information – whether it is comfortable or not!

In the world of communications, there is always pressure to spin a fact, to massage the message and to cover one’s derriere. What this means is that those of us who are grouped with public relations, advertising, marketing and public information offices are tasked with making facts sound less onerous, reports more supportive and announcements more slanted to the will of the “boss.” Basically, we are asked to “lie,” at least a little bit.

Public information officers are tasked with getting their facts correct. Years ago, the National Information Officers Association (NIOA) taught that PIOs are to “get the right information to the right people at the right time so they can make the right decisions.” Old-time professional PIOs live by this credo, oftentimes to their own personal detriment. Why do I say that? Because tribal and nontribal PIOs have been forced out of their profession because the facts that they presented to their superiors (and often to the public) had not been sanitized, massaged, manipulated or couched in terms that their bosses wanted. It is not that the facts were wrong, just that they didn’t put the right spin on things.

If we, as representatives of our tribes, tribal businesses and Native Americans overall, wish to combat the stereotypes presented by Hollywood and haters, we must return to our teachings and consider

keeping them foremost in our eyes and minds as we go about our business. We need to start living the Seven Grandfathers and demonstrating to the world at large that we are to be admired and that we can be trusted. We truly bring something to the world that is sorely needed right now, and now is the time for us to act upon our teachings in our businesses and governance.

On my desk is a mug with the Seven Grandfathers shown in English and in Anishinaabemowin. This mug is a constant reminder.

- Love/*Zaagidewin*
- Honesty/*Gwekwaadeziwin*
- Bravery-Courage/*Aakidehewin*
- Respect/*Mnaadendmowin*
- Humility/*Dbaadendiziwin*
- Truth/*Debwewin*
- Wisdom/*Nbwaakaawin*

In a world with much “sickness,” we can demonstrate traits that will not only teach others, but will help us to be successful with our governments and with our businesses. Once we demonstrate (and others learn) that we are operating truthfully and with honor, we will succeed.

It won’t be right away, because what is being suggested is an unusual trait today, but it will help in the future. And, after all, aren’t we supposed to think in terms of Seven Generations? ♦

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