



Chief Kirk Francis
Penobscot Indian Nation

You Can't Focus on One Thing as a Leader

Chief Kirk Francis

In 2006, when I ran for the first time as Chief of the Penobscot Indian Nation, I think I presented a new energy and a progressive approach that was very comprehensive. We realized we had to focus on the Tribes' 85-plus programs and 20 departments, managing 200,000 acres of Tribal land, and building our sovereignty. Then we had to evaluate the on-the-ground essential service based programs. My 14-years on Tribal council taught me about the complexities of our Tribal programs. The leadership model I wanted to create was one that developed and seized opportunity, realistic growth, and sustainable enterprises, building our social programs to fully serve the community and take an approach to being who we say we are. Because I have some amazing advisors and well respected mentors guiding me, we are rebuilding our nation and strengthening our sovereignty.

When leading a Tribal nation, the older and younger generations must hold hands. It is important that our people understand their vision of where they want the Tribe to be and how they are being directed. It was extremely important to focus on the younger demographic of the Tribe and also making sure our elders involved them to create a picture of the realistic needs and give us a vision of what kind of resources we build to meet our future needs. It took guidance from both groups to create this comprehensive approach to rebuilding our Tribe.

Being a young leader is not easy! I grew up being taught a couple of rules. One of those rules was listen, take advice from your elder elected officials, and when you speak show intelligence. Some greater minds advise you to understand before being understood. If you do this it gives you more credibility, especially in the more traditional culture like ours. The challenge of a young leader is you're just bubbling with ideas and you're trying to

find yourself. Because your elders still see you as a kid, you have to overcome that image so people will take you seriously once you share your good ideas.

Once you are a leader, it is tough not to make a speech. In a multifaceted organization, like United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. (USET), you will see many different leadership styles. I think our Penobscot elders taught us to be quiet and listen. I struggle with that sometimes. It is the one of the most important traits to have. Listen and be certain to have a productive conversation. That's really been my style. It is difficult to sit and defend every point on your agenda. If you can listen and understand, you will realize the origins of your challenges and problems. That type of listening will lead our leaders to solutions.

The entrepreneurial spirit has been a guiding force for the Penobscot. Leadership here has to be extremely creative and never stop working. We don't have the ability to build a huge casino because of things like the Restrictive Settlement Act. I believe we have been able to take the good from not having it. It has allowed us to stay focused on why we are here and what we represent as a people. Leadership must develop skills based on the obstacles preventing you from achieving your goals as a Tribe. We have worked with Harvard, consultants, and other experts to give us technical assistance. We must be entrepreneurial and develop our critical thinking to create revenue generating projects rather than sitting around pining for a casino and Indian gaming. So we look at complimenting business to our high stakes bingo operation like tourism and hospitality and seize other opportunities.

Building alliances is essential to rebuilding your community. I've been going to USET and National Congress of American Indians for about 20-years. With these organizations,

you must formulate partnerships and friendships in order to fight for your sovereignty. As a leader, you have a responsibility to understand the larger picture. Today there are Tribes playing a prominent role in Congressional and Presidential elections compared to years ago when they were very disenfranchised. All of that is really translated into more success for Tribes. One may ask how that helps us locally. A key element to creating our Tribal budgets is understanding the national atmosphere influencing our budget.

Build a legacy that educates. Set the foundation so the Tribe is in a position to be successful and benefits from the work of your leadership time period. My leadership is really just a blip in time. We really want to build an educational piece. Because if you don't leave anything behind that someone can learn or build upon, I don't think you can coin that period of time as being successful. Our overall goal is to get to a point of autonomy.

Chief Francis has been the elected Chief at Penobscot Indian Nation for over 7 years. Before becoming Chief, he served in a number of leadership roles within the Penobscot Nation including various committees and a member of the Tribal Council. He was the youngest elected to the Council at age 20. Chief Francis has focused on improving the Penobscot Indian Nation's economy; including helping lead an effort to form the Penobscot Federal Contracting Division in the Native 8a program through the U.S. SBA. He has been instrumental in the creation of Penobscot Indian Nation Enterprises (PINE).

Chief Francis also serves as a leader nationally on many issues facing Native Americans. He currently serves as Treasurer of the United South and Eastern Tribes (USET). Chief Francis also chairs the Natural Resources Committee for the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

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