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Indian art of storytelling seeps into boardroom Firms use oral tradition to teach rising executives

By Del Jones
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — As a child, retired Citgo CEO David Tippeconnic sat on the porch of his Oklahoma farmhouse and listened to the stories of his Comanche elders.

Tippeconnic, 64, recalls a lesson handed down to his grandfather, to his father and then to himself that he says can be summarized: "Don't trust a red-faced white man."

In business, Tippeconnic has interacted primarily with white men. But he's interpreted the boyhood lesson to mean that he should avoid dealing with anyone, of any race, who angers easily, and that he should maintain his cool. It has served him well. He climbed the ladder at Phillips Petroleum, then served as CEO of Midwestern energy company UNO-VEN from 1995 to 1997, when it was bought by Citgo. He was Citgo's CEO until 2000.

Companies in their never-rest quest for the hot strategy have inadvertently backed into the art of Indian storytelling. While trying everything from Six Sigma to Zen, they never seemed interested in anything Native American, a culture that does not condone greed and is closer to socialism than capitalism. Or, as Indian mystery author Tony Hillerman says, "How do the Navajo tell a witch? They look for somebody who has more than he needs."

That's a rather alien attitude to Wall Street. But Indian storytelling is catching on, whether companies realize it or not. They don't call it Indian storytelling, just storytelling or leader-led development, but the similarities are hard to ignore. Corporate stories are told by graying boardroom chiefs to intimate groups of up-and-comers. Companies that use it, such as 3M, Ford Motor, General Electric and Barclays, have found it the most effective way to transfer certain knowledge to the next generation.

Companies think they invented knowledge management, but it's something Indians have known for thousands of years, says Wilma Mankiller, ex-chief of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma.

Dave Anderson of the Lac Courte Oreilles Lake Superior Band of Ojibwa, founder of the Famous Dave's chain of 100 barbecue restaurants in 24 states and now head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, says the best leaders pass down personal legends to instill values.

In 1996, when there were a dozen Famous Dave's restaurants in Minnesota and Wisconsin, Anderson suspected a shipment of ribs didn't meet standards. So he drove to each of his restaurants, went in the

freezer and weighed and measured each rib.

People might not remember what's in the employee handbook, Anderson says, but everyone who hears that story knows how important quality is to the company.

There may be other business lessons to mine from Indians. Long before companies discovered situational leadership, Indians had a "red" leader for times of war and a "white" leader for peacetime, says Kyle Smith, a Cherokee with an MBA from the University of Rochester. He worked a decade for energy firm Amerada Hess before becoming president of consulting firm RedWind Group, which specializes in highly unionized, bureaucratic and regulated organizations. Houston-based RedWind has 10 on staff; half are Indian.

These days, knowledge is usually stored as data by the terabyte. Still, face-to-face storytelling is the best way to transfer a lot of know-how, says Doug Ready, president of the International Consortium for Executive Development Research, who has studied 45 companies and discusses non-Indian storytelling in an article, "How to Grow Great Leaders," to be published in the *Harvard Business Review*.

3M introduced storytelling three years ago to two dozen rising executives and found it so effective that 140 received storytelling lessons this year, says Cindy Johnson, manager of the 3M leadership development institute. "We call it leaders teaching leaders," she says. 3M finds that information passed along in story form is better remembered by rising executives and is more satisfying to older leaders doing the teaching.

Indians figured that out long before 3M invented Post-it notes. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, which opens in Washington on Tuesday, is a tribute to storytelling. Stories are so important to Indians, they are entwined with art, music, dance and prayer. One exhibit points out that Indian ballgames are re-enactments of good-vs.-evil stories.

Director Rick West, a lawyer and a citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, stood in the museum's main theater last week and said it was built to resemble a clearing in the woods under the night sky, the perfect storytelling venue. The stage's curtain, not yet installed, will feature the Raven, the trickster character that stars in so many Indian stories.

Another exhibit describes bird dancing, in which women mimic the movement of birds as they hop while singing stories that are metaphors for life.

Shareholders might not be bird hopping at their next annual meeting, but when CEOs speak to up-and-coming executives, they deliver stories that have been rehearsed for months and are intended to strike an emotional chord with the future chiefs of business.

"This is not some stump speech," Ready says. "It's from the heart." Done right, he says, stories "are so powerful, you can hear a pin drop."

Effective stories must be delivered one on one or to a small group, he says, and they must be told by top chiefs who have earned respect. Stories can't be off the cuff. They must be planned to make a point, reveal personal tales of success — or, better yet, failure — and be full of drama and ethical intersections.

Effective storytellers don't have to be good speakers. They need only be honest. The best stories often show the underbelly of leadership and force future executives to question whether they really want the responsibility. In an *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, Ready refers to a story told by Royal Bank of Canada Vice Chairman James Rager.

Ready's article said Rager took five or six weeks to hone a story about a time he had to lay off workers but couldn't tell them why because the company was involved in secret acquisition talks. In his storytelling, Rager admitted to the younger executives that he had conflicting emotions. On one hand, there was the

exhilaration of doing the deal. On the other hand, there was the trauma of firing dedicated colleagues. Royal Bank declined to comment.

Business leaders are getting rid of PowerPoint presentations in favor of storytelling, Smith says. "How can you evoke an emotion with a bullet point?"

There is an obvious clash between the cultures of Native Americans and business, Mankiller says. But they have found a common denominator: Knowledge is valuable, and those who fail to pass it along are dooming others to repeat mistakes.

Learning is ingrained in Indian culture, Tippeconnic says. He says his father, John Tippeconnic, born in 1901, was the first Native American to earn a college degree. John Tippeconnic became principal at an all-Indian school in Farmington, N.M. His son, the future CEO, attended that school and went on to earn a chemical engineering degree from Oklahoma State University and an advanced management program degree from Harvard.

Now, as Native Americans succeed in gaming and look to diversify into other industries, such as broadband and energy, the challenge is to get them to be more accepting of the ways of business, says Tippeconnic, chairman of Cherokee Nation Enterprises.

In the language of the Tuscarora, the word for leadership is *gustowah*, which means, "We speak through them." That sounds respectful, but Indian stories commonly poke fun at chiefs, says Marty de Montao, author of published Indian stories and manager of the resource center at the National Museum of the American Indian. In one of the best-known Indian stories, a greedy chief keeps the sun and moon in a box for himself until the Raven tricks him and releases the light for the masses.

Indian stories seem too ancient to apply to modern business. They teach values, but author Hillerman says there is a wide canyon between Indian beliefs and anything resembling capitalism.

Hillerman has an Indian friend who was a successful bull rider. One day he quit riding because, Hillerman says, he felt he was being selfish for winning too much.

Bird dancing may make its way into the boardroom long before that attitude does. "Frankly, none of the tribes are competitive," says Hillerman, whose next book, *Skeleton Man*, is due out in November.

But, Tippeconnic says, he grew up surrounded by competitive sports, and Comanches are known for standing up and fighting. Indian business is on the verge of a boom that will be "the economic driving force in Oklahoma" in one or two decades, he says.

LaDonna Harris, a Comanche and wife of former Oklahoma senator Fred Harris, acknowledges the conflict between Indian and business culture, but she says it is "workable."

Indian values of modesty and generosity should be seen as assets to business, Harris says. "We can't be individual capitalists, but we can be collective capitalists," she says.

Harris, who, like Tippeconnic, sits on a board that's trying to help Indians use casino profit to branch into other industries, recalls an Oneida Nation story about a village of animals making an important decision. They fail to include the wolf, a strategy that backfires and creates a lesson in diversity, Harris says.

Indian stories sometimes tell of women who take Indian men down a notch when they begin feeling overly important. That may be the next lesson of the Indians as all women assume an important role in business, she says.

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