



TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

**THE CONTINUANCE OF ALL WAYS:
INSPIRING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP THROUGH
A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY**

TRANSFORMING YOURSELF TO TRANSFORM OTHERS

THE DALAI LAMA CENTER FOR ETHICS AND
TRANSFORMATIVE VALUES AT MIT
IN COLLABORATION WITH NIA TERO



NIA
TERO

“To gain a more profound acceptance of our cultural diversity, we must articulate and explore our values across cultural boundaries.

Only then will we see beyond our differences - and learn to cherish our common humanity and shared purpose.”

THE CONTINUANCE OF ALL WAYS:

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The dawning light of our modern era has allowed us to see the advent of a world shiny and new. A world in which a record number of people have access to education and medicine, where we can connect with anyone across the globe using computers and telephones. We have mastered the land, air, and seas with cars, planes, and gargantuan ships. However, like Milton's character of Sin from *Paradise Lost* - itself a commentary on the modern era - modernity has birthed countless monstrosities. Not every group of people experiences the mercies and cruelties of modernity in the same manner. Indigenous communities are bearing the brunt of the negative impacts while reaping the fewest benefits. The modern era has resulted in a decimation of indigenous culture and languages. The cultural identity and spirituality that indigenous people have been able to maintain has been whitewashed, made palatable to a Western audience for the sake of tourism (often the only way most indigenous communities can earn money).

In addition, there is the very tangible issue of land loss. Indigenous communities are currently struggling to regain land that

has been taken from them, or working to prevent further land grabbing. What land indigenous people are able to retain is being ravished by climate change. Due to the increasingly erratic temperature changes, subsistence living, a staple of many communities, is becoming increasingly difficult. With the increase of pollution and overfishing, many indigenous communities fear that their traditional way of life, a life connected to the earth, is at risk of not just being diminished but impossible.

In wake of the problems that have arisen out of modernity, especially concerning the problems that indigenous communities are facing, the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values in collaboration with Nia Tero have brought the Transformative Leadership Program to an indigenous setting. The Program's main focus is on who they refer to as "inbetweeners." As mentioned earlier, the loss of indigenous languages is happening at a staggering rate as well as rapid depopulation. People are moving away from historically indigenous areas to more populated urban settings for the pursuit of greater financial opportunities, resulting in a rift forming between indigenous generations. Older generations are typically monolingual, only speaking their indigenous language. Yet modernization and the pressures of western culture have dissuaded and sometimes even prohibited younger generations from learning the indigenous language. This has led to the current generation not being able to communicate and learn from older generation. Furthermore, there is an unprecedented departure from their ancestral home. Dissatisfied with traditional ways of life they are traveling to "modern" cities or even other countries.

Some community members are in a cultural position where they have a foot in both worlds, allowing them to act as a bridge between the two generations. They are called inbetweeners. Their age allows them to remember a time before the world became so interconnected. But their youth still allows them to be tapped into aspects of modernity that are critical for building up a community that is able to thrive in the modern world. Aspects which older generations might have difficulty mastering. These inbetweeners can be conceived of as a kind of middle person, standing in the doorway of time, neither a part of a dying generation nor a part of a generation whose mindless consumerism has replaced their heritage and culture. They are the ideal bridges between two and the vectors for change.

The Program seeks to equip the inbetweeners with the tools and skills needed to navigate the daunting new world they are facing and help them achieve their goals as successful community organizers. This Program is not a collection of meetings which are done within clean and sterile conference room walls and seminars with titles such as “Decolonization of Indigenous Spirituality” or “Seven Steps for Radical Liberation”. This is not to bemoan these types of approaches as creating impactful discussion is by no means futile. The Center’s program goes much deeper, where the development of emotions and deepening the participants’ internal/traditional values is the primary objective. The program is driven by values alignment, emotional training, and purpose exploration.

In order to achieve this deepening and development of emotions and values within its participants, the Program is divided into three modules with participants being nominated by members of their community who recognize strong leadership traits in their

personhood. Each module lasts five days, three days are designated for training and two days for exploring the local communities. These aspiring inbetween community leaders are taken all over the world.



*Tamaiva Mateariki - Māori. Cook Islands
Module 1, Ecuador*



The first module participants attend was in Ecuador, the topic being the exploration of values. While living with the local Quechua people, participants deepen a sense of self and community values, learning how to prioritize values and understand value trade-offs.

“ I learned a lot from my fellow participants, especially since we are from different parts of the world. I enjoyed learning about their culture, oral stories, and how they are helping their community develop. I loved the way we became supportive of one another and our goals for ourselves and our communities.” Candice Ferdinand - Deline People, Great Bear Lake. Canada



The second module took the participants to Mexico and the Maya community. This module is instrumental in helping participants find their voice, with the primary focus on emotions, exploring everything from how to set emotional tones to how to perform emotional introspection.

“We all knew that there was a voice but about making that voice into something positive and to our advantage was something totally different. I mean, we learn to look in the mirror and say: you are beautiful, you matter. I liked that very much. Another component is connecting more to our emotions, I thought being emotional was a bad thing and not that you should not show emotions, because it was a sign of weakness we learned. These exercises made me realize that emotions are actually part of being strong. By being able to connect to your emotions you can control what emotions to show, so this was very helpful in learning

*experience. Be the thermostat instead of the thermometer.”
Jupta Itoewaki - Wayana. Surinam*

“One very important concept that sticks with me today is the analogy of the Thermometer and Thermostat. We begin by being able to read the energy of a room/crowd, but to be leaders we must evolve and begin acting like thermostats where we not only read the energy, but then transform that energy into something more suitable if necessary.” Mandy Bayha - Deline People, Great Bear Lake. Canada



*Mandy Bayha - Deline People, Great Bear Lake. Canada.
Module 2, Mexico*



The anticipated third module was set to be in Kyrgyzstan and the focus of this is surrounding issues of purpose and sense of fulfillment.

*“I have known myself as a leader, community- person, a family oriented individual, a mother. However, what I didn't really know is who am I to all these titles? Questioning myself has helped me think and reflect deeply to get to know myself better” [...] “I've learned I am a strong woman who comes from indigenous community. Has many purposes to pursue in order to sustain, help, and hold it down for the communities I represent” [...] ”Regaining and re-strengthening my beliefs of indigenous knowledge, and understanding about transformation on a personal and community level are the most valuable insights I take from the program.”
Jessica Phillip - Women of Hope Community. Federated States of Micronesia*



*Jessica Phillip - Women of Hope Community. Federated States of Micronesia
Module 3, Kyrgyzstan*



The goal of the Program is the development of leadership skills, and yet it is something much deeper, powerful and authentic. Leadership looks different to everyone, especially for indigenous community members. So, what does leadership look like within an indigenous context, and what unique challenges are there in being an indigenous leader? Indigenous community leaders are often placed in precarious situations as they not only have to deal with their own insulated community but must do so in a way that is constantly monitored and judged by outside powers. These powers can be large corporations looking for in-routes into the community, foreign/non-indigenous governments attempting to remove or relocate, or even other indigenous groups looking for guidance on how to deal with issues such as artifact reparations. Indigenous community leaders need the ability to make hard decisions that affect the entire community, while both staying true to their personal and native values, and those of the encroaching modern world. One significant decision that participants of the program spoke about is land allocation and treatment. With corporations and tourism industry is interested in owning the remaining land indigenous communities have. Leaders must be knowledgeable of their community, have perspective and be able articulate their vision to weight the benefits. They often have to choose to stand strong or sell/ share their land. The actions taken will alternate cycles, values systems, and expose the communities to other ecological and social impact.

“ Spending time with different people from around the world helped me realize that we are more alike than we know. We might come from different locations with different cultures and traditions

but we all want the same thing. We are all connected through our spiritual self. Spending time with my fellow participants helped me realize the importance of my culture and traditions, and how we as indigenous communities are constantly fighting to protect our home lands and traditions.” West Panuelo - Ponapei. Northern Pasific Islands.



West Panuelo - Ponapei, Northern Pasific Islands.
Module 3, Kyrgyzstan

One way the Program fosters these kinds of decision-making skills is through inspiring a conscious reconnection with past leaders, both in this world and the next. This rebuilding of bridges between ancestors and the current inbetweeners has resonated greatly. Many of the current participants can remember their relatives, and the stories of relatives, that have held traditional roles of power and authority such as a chief or elder. Through memory and oral tradition participants recall how their past leaders governed with traditional values. For one participant, Liam, this was his grandfather. Liam's grandfather was a chief among the indigenous community of the Cook Islands. Liam remembers him as a traditional man who governed based on traditional values such as honor, loyalty, and pride. He didn't speak often, but when he did he was profound. Due to the times in which he was chief he had to deal with the issue of land allocation, a role he took gravely serious and performed with the utmost care and compassion due to the Cook Islands not being geographically spacious like other areas.

Liam says that he communicates with his grandfather regularly, remembering his selflessness, humility, and public speaking skills, all traits Liam desires to emulate. For Liam and many other Program participants, connection with loved ones both present and past is a key to understanding identity. Especially for indigenous communities, ancestry and genealogy are not just novelties and stories to ruminate upon fondly, but a way in which current indigenous people understand where they stand in the world. Ancestry becomes a way to stand in the world. The past, a method of preparation for the future. The tools for indigenous community leaders to pave a better life for themselves, their family, and their community has already been given to them by their loved ones. The Program simply acts as a mediator between the two.



*Liam Kokaua & Josh Jim - Māori. Cook Islands
Module 1, Ecuador*

Another substantial topic that appears in discussion between participants quite often is that of fear. Fear of the uncertain future, of adapting to new technologies, of not knowing the “right way” to proceed within their own communities. Though if there is truly a right way to proceed no one has found it yet. While in Mexico participants learned how to embrace their fear and gain a voice through their experience. On a warm May day, the participants hiked into the jungle. When they finally reached their destination they discovered that it was a natural well “Cenote”. Their goal was to jump in and go swimming in the crystalline waters. But in order to get to the water, they first had to plummet 20-22 ft in total free fall. Participants were skeptical of their ability to perform this task at first, a chorus of “hell no” ringing up from the group. But when all was said and done every single member of the team took the (quite literal) leap of faith. This task of jumping 22 feet into unknown waters is not just an adrenaline rush, it is also an apt metaphor for the uncertainties that come with leading indigenous communities to a new and not yet realized future. Which, to indigenous leaders, can be even more fear-inducing. This activity of jumping teaches members of the program on how to overcome the fear that prohibits them from actualizing their plans “Limiting Beliefs”. In overcoming their fear they are able to find a voice, connect with inner voices that drive them to take action, move them out of their comfort zone into a zone of learning and growth.

“The most two valuable insights I had during the program was listening to my inner voice and overcoming and challenging my comfort zone. [...] These components have contributed to my learning experience because I never thought I would ever jump

into a freaking cenote [...].” Candice Ferdinan - Deline People, Great Bear Lake. Canada

From another and more subtle aspect of this Program that takes participants out of their comfort zone in a way one might not readily expect is through the exchange of values that takes place during the experience. For example in Kyrgyzstan participants learning about values systems, asking questions around purpose, meaning and fulfillment that would help define and encourage to identify their role in their communities. By witnessing local indigenous rituals and festivals around the world, for example: The Golden Eagle Hunters festival in Kyrgyzstan, participants learn about ancient tradition and how Kyrgyz people work not only to preserve their tradition but also through it, proudly project to world: who they are and what they believe in. Inbetweeners are motivated to self-reflect and interact through powerful conversations to explore meaning and the role of each in their communities. The Program’s methodology aims for participants to engage in a process of self-discovery, self-trust, to identify and embrace their leadership signature, gain confidence and motivation to go back to their own communities and lead with purpose. For participants, this venture is an eye-opening experience.



*Golden Eagle Festival.
Module 3, Kyrgyzstan*

“The Program helped me focus on my personal values and the values of my community. [...] By focusing on my core values, I am noticing that I am more calm minded. I can think and work better through times of pressure. [...] One of my biggest values is my homeland. During the trip to Kyrgyzstan, we were all around the bond fire, and each person got up and presented something from their homeland. I was moved by the chants and dances that was performed by my fellow participants. But when it got to me, I had nothing to show. This really made me realize how my own culture and traditions are slowly fading. This made me feel sorry for my home, my people, my Pohnpei. We are too busy trying to protect the land itself but we are forgetting about our true self. The training has helped me value life on Pohnpei a lot more than what I use to.” West Panuelo - Ponapei. Northern Pasific Islands.



The outcome of this Program is cohesion, a harmony between the fractured identities and values of inbetweeners that occupy such a pivotal space and responsibility in their communities. It is also a desire for further conservation of the natural environment, leading to a harmony between nature and human population, between peoples. A continuance of all ways of indigenous ancestral based knowledge, eco-knowledge, and arts. The Program is the empowerment of the inner voice, the establishment of self-worth, a revival of the forgotten.

Six months after concluding the program, participants have been actively working in their communities each implementing their own vision on how to strengthen their community. Lima's project, for example has successfully reached across Rarotonga's community and now serves as an example across the globe.

“The project is already spreading awareness of our mountain knowledge to the community via online platforms, but the largest impact will be from us having recorded much of the traditions and history relating to mountains both in HD video and in a written report. The video footage will be turned into a series of short episodes for online and television distribution and I believe they will have a huge impact in the Cook Islands community internationally. The project has definitely evolved as initially I was looking at doing a report only, however now it has expanded to a documentary series, and social media presence.” [...] “I needed to dig deep for inner strength at some points, for example when we were required to push our limits in the cenote, similarly I also found getting my project off the ground quite daunting, as I knew nothing about budgeting, and organizing a film crew, but I had the self-belief to get through that.” Liam Kokaua - Rarotonga Māori. Cook Islands

To see more images and videos of the Transformative Leadership in Indigenous Communities, visit us at thecenter.mit.edu



*Transformative Leaders.
Module 3, Kyrgyzstan*