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Giving Indians the Job Opportunities They Deserve

By Donald Greve*

THE OPPORTUNITIES we have for industrial development today among our Indian people are utterly fantastic. I used to be one of those dogooders who said that if a person were poor in the United States of America, if he didn't have a job, if he were impoverished, it was because he was lazy. But that is a misconception. . . .

In the nation as a whole, 40 percent of the Indians who would like to work, don't have job opportunities. In the state of Oklahoma, Indian unemployment is six times as great as national unemployment. The tragic thing in citing statistics such as these is that we tend to overlook the human element. We talk about this group or that group and forget that the Indian is a human being. . . .

I'll tell you something about our experiences. I am chairman of the board of Sequoyah Industries. Six years ago we started. We were small. The first year we did \$5 million worth of business. The primary goal of our company was to provide job opportunities for Indian people. We went to a little town called Anadarko, Oklahoma. We didn't have too much money, and we had to have help from a lot of people. Anadarko needed to raise \$60,000. One day in talking to a group of people about help needed to establish our industry, we said we wanted to give Indians a chance to work. I was hoping everyone would jump up and say, "I'll put in a thousand," or, "I'll go five hundred." But no one moved.

Indians Considered Poor Employees

Finally, one young man stood up and said, "I'll say what everybody else is thinking. We don't think your industry can succeed if you employ Indians, because Indians are lazy. Indians drink too much booze. Any time they have a payday, they go off and get drunk and they will not come back for several days. We don't think you can be successful employing them."

I also visited my banker. He was the man who had loaned me \$5,000 when I had zero assets and was 20 years of age. He had a lot of faith in me. I talked to him about borrowing a little more money. I didn't have quite enough. He said, "Don, it's a shame you're going to lose everything you have worked for. I have been around Indians all my life and they just won't work."

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Now, you and I have heard this, but it just isn't true. An Indian is like any other human being. The Indians have been bypassed and their problems overlooked, and we have not been as concerned as we should be. . . .

Most of the Indians I know can tell in a minute if you are for real or if you are false. If you are sincere and are concerned with them, they will do anything for you. They'll love you, respect you, and work their heads off for you. They'll be your friends for life. We hear a lot about problems between management and employees. If you will treat an Indian right, you will never have a labor problem. He will be totally on your side because he appreciates the opportunity you have provided for him.

We have to look toward the Indian employment problem a little differently than we would others. . . . You need to find a method of testing that fits his background. I think this is very, very important.

Pop Warner's Great "Discovery"

Pop Warner, a football coach, had a group of Indians on his football team. He tried to get them in shape. He had them doing calisthenics as all football players do. They didn't like it. He couldn't get them to do the exercises. He didn't say all Indians were lazy.

Instead, Pop Warner went around and talked with some of the Indian parents to find out what could be done. With their help, he figured out a new way to motivate Indian players. He loaded them on the school bus and went two miles away from the college. He put each one of the players off the bus and handed him a tow sack. He said, "Take this tow sack, go out there and catch two rabbits any way you want to. Then run back to town as fast as you can." They did it! They got in shape. He learned to motivate these fellows based on their background, not based on his. As a direct result, he had a nation's champion in his football team.

There was one fellow in particular, a 158-pound fullback who was not very big for a fullback, but was a great athlete. His name was Jim Thorpe. I doubt that Jim Thorpe could have become the outstanding athlete that he was if Pop Warner had not learned to motivate him based on his background.

I'll tell you some of the experiences we have had in starting Sequoyah Industries. . . .

We sat down with a group of them and one Indian mother told me, "You know, we have trouble with some of our Indian boys in school because they never hold up their hands to answer questions."

I said, "What do you mean?"

She replied, "We teach them that they shouldn't try to push themselves and work ahead of someone else." I asked her where could they push themselves ahead, and she answered, "In hunting and fishing and athletic contests and things like that."

So, the next morning we had a meeting with our tufters. We said, "You think this is work running this machine? No, it's not work. It's an athletic contest. The person who has the best coordination between eye and fingers and the guy who would be the best at shooting a bow and arrow will be best at seeing each one of these threads when they start to come loose, and the guy that's on his toes and moves the fastest is going to win this contest."

They started to work and within that week we had jumped from 35 percent efficiency to 97 percent efficiency. Today we average better than 95 percent efficiency.

There is a big thing at Sequoyah called loyalty. We had a big fellow who was a direct descendant of Geronimo. His name was Elmer Jay. Elmer was one of our first 22 employees. Since he was a leader, it wasn't long before he became supervisor in charge of shipping and receiving. One day Elmer walked in and said, "Don, I just got a call from my home. My house is on fire. It's burning up."

I thought, now what kind of trick is Elmer going to pull on Don today. I took a look at him and said, "Elmer, I don't know how you're pulling my leg, but usually a house burns down, not up." He said up or down it was on fire.

I asked him why he wasn't home, and he said, "I can't go home. My assistant is off, and I don't have anybody to supervise the loading of carpet. I've got to get it loaded before I go home." I asked him who taught him to load carpet and he said I did. I took charge while he went home to see about his house. It burned down to the foundation.

But that man did not leave his job until someone took over the responsibility he had. By the way, it took us three

months to correct all the mistakes I made when I supervised the loading of that carpet.

Where can you find this type of loyalty? Can you buy it? I don't think so. I think that one thing you can gain by locating a plant in Indian areas is total loyalty and commitment.

We once uncovered a theft ring at our carpet mill. We hired private detectives. We found that 31 people were involved. And though over half of our employees were Indians, not one of the 31 was an Indian. . . .

Here is a story about our plant opening. We had 3,000 people who came to the opening ceremony. We had a United States Senator, a Congressman and our Governor, and I was taking them through the plant. Our son, John, was six years old at the time. He was very proud of his dad's being chairman of the board.

The Story of the Proud Little Indian Boy

But John wasn't as excited as another lad the same size as he. This boy's father was an Indian who had lived on welfare and had never held a job for more than six months duration. The guy wasn't the smartest in the whole plant. His job was one of least technical. However, there he was, standing straight and tall at his job, which was to take the roll of carpet when it came out of the final drying oven and tie a string around one end of it. He was to do this all day long. Along came this man's son, a boy I remember seeing, with his brothers and sisters, stand in the food commodity line that the County Commissioners have for people who don't have enough to eat in Anadarko. The little fellow was clean, not too fancily dressed, but clean. We had ropes up to prohibit people from entering the work areas but I saw the boy run under the ropes and go to the work area. He turned and looked at all the people standing there, and happened to face right between the Governor and the United States Senator. I don't think he knew what important dignitaries they were and I doubt that he cared. He merely pointed up to his dad, and said with greatest of pride, "That's my Daddy!" When he looked up at his dad, I saw pride and admiration, but I wondered whether he could have said that if his dad had had no other opportunity than to go to the commodity line and get free groceries.

Could you imagine this little boy standing there with pride, pointing at his dad standing in that line, living on handouts? In just a few weeks, he had learned that it was self-respecting to make your own living, and he was proud of his father in that job. That was six years ago. His father is still with us, and he's a good employee. That young man is now approaching his teen years. I know that when he becomes an adult, he will want to make a living for himself, and he will want to help others do the same. . . .

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"Come with me to the playgrounds of an integrated high school . . . see how level and flat and ugly the black top . . . but look . . . now it is recess time . . . the students pour through the doors . . . soon over here is a group of white students . . . and see . . . over there near the fence . . . a group of native students . . . and look again . . . the black is no longer level . . . mountain ranges rising . . . valleys falling . . . and a great chasm seems to be opening up between the two groups . . . yours and mine . . . and no one seems capable of crossing over. . . . When you meet my children in your classroom, respect each one for what he is . . . a child of our Father in heaven, and your brother. Maybe it all boils down to just that." —Chief Dan George at an education conference.