



CHEHALIS RIVER, OAKVILLE, WASHINGTON NEAR THE CHEHALIS TRIBE RESERVATION

# TFA

## Monthly Newsletter

October 2014

IN THE NEWS

## Form Over Substance

by Kristi Jackson

The team here at TFA often hears me say—let's focus on substance over form. By that, I'm conveying the strong message that we should be concerned with the message we are delivering, and that (in certain circumstances) it's ok not to be too fancy with the presentation. Cut to the chase and tell us what you are thinking.

Unfortunately, we frequently observe the opposite in Indian Country, we see many tribal interactions bogged down with the form. At times, getting to the real point and understanding may never be allowed to happen due to politics and procedure.

Has this happened to you?

- A tribal staffer has an important message to deliver to council, but needs to get on the agenda first—the agenda is set up a week in advance, and there's "no room" to fit another issue;

- Council meets once a week (or a month), and an important decision must wait until the next meeting to be heard;
- A difficult subject, such as a revenue decline or a tough management change must be discussed, and nobody wants to deliver the message to council;
- Council members must meet on-the-record in a formal setting, with all discussion recorded, questions that should be asked go unasked due to reluctance to be recorded as not knowing the answer; or
- A guest is delivering a presentation to council and the subject is difficult to grasp at first, a call for questions passes with just silence as it is easier to just move on to the next issue;
- The list goes on...

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### Judge Denies Injunction over Tribal Gambling Deal

9/11/14 – [SanteFeNewMexican.com](http://SanteFeNewMexican.com)

### State Panel Selects Wynn Casino over Plan for Revere

9/16/14 – [BostonGlobe.com](http://BostonGlobe.com)

### Navajos to Get \$544 Million to Settle Suit against U.S.

9/24/14 – [NYTimes.com](http://NYTimes.com)

### Viejas Tribe to Pay County \$150k, Gets OK on Second Casino Tower

9/24/14 – [NYTimes.com](http://NYTimes.com)

### N.Y. Businesses Agree to Take Sun Points

9/27/14 – [TheDay.com](http://TheDay.com)

### California's Attack on Big Lagoon is Absurd

9/30/14 – [IndianCountryToday.com](http://IndianCountryToday.com)

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With roadblocks such as these, it is difficult to facilitate a good dialog with decision-makers. We find that having decision-makers (council members in most tribes) informed on a subject leads to better questions being asked, and in turn, an understanding of alternatives and better decisions.

How can this occur, particularly when the subject matter is a more complicated one, like finance? We offer a few suggestions—practices we have seen in tribal communities we have worked with across the country:

1. Hold informal meetings on complicated subjects prior to the formal on-the-record meetings. The purpose of these sessions is to inform and educate decision makers and allow them to ask questions in an open forum—nothing is off-limits—just to enable a better understanding.
2. When an advisor or presenter is discussing a difficult or complicated topic with council, try to set the meeting in a conference table format vs. a formal dais or elevated chambers seating arrangement. This subconscious relaxation that occurs by being at a level table with the person educating you will enable you to feel more comfortable asking questions.

3. Encourage follow-up dialog after the meeting is over—get email addresses and ask additional questions as they come to you.
4. Ask for written copies of a presentation that will be offered on a screen or online. Often, people are better able to process information if they can re-read the important message and take their own notes. If you are a visual learner (vs. an auditory learner), having the notes to refer back to may further your understanding.

We aren't suggesting wide-sweeping changes to political and tribal policy and procedure. We know that having order and procedure is very important. Based on our experience in dealing with tribal councils and finance related matters,

we've seen that it is fundamental to making a good informed decision that leadership fully understands the issues before moving forward. Ask questions. Create an environment where there is some informality—less form and more substance—in order to obtain the best and most useful information in making the best decision possible for the good of the tribe.



## TRIBAL FINANCIAL ADVISORS INCORPORATED

# TFA

400 Continental Boulevard  
Suite 320  
El Segundo, CA 90245  
tribaladvisors.com

**KRISTI JACKSON**  
VICE CHAIR and CEO  
310.341.2335  
kjackson@tribaladvisors.com

**JEFF HEIMANN**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR  
310.341.2518  
jheimann@tribaladvisors.com

**DAVID HOWARD**  
PRESIDENT  
310.341.2795  
dhoward@tribaladvisors.com

**WILLIAM CRADER**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR  
310.341.2336  
wcrader@tribaladvisors.com

### TRIBAL BOARD OF ADVISORS

**RICK HILL**  
CHAIRMAN  
310.341.2796  
rhill@tribaladvisors.com

**BOARD MEMBERS**  
BRIAN PATTERSON  
TOM RODGERS  
VALERIE SPICER  
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DANIEL TUCKER

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