
Deanna M. Kennedy, et al., eds. *American Indian Business: Principles and Practices*. University of Washington Press, 2017. Ix-221 pp. ISBN 9780295742090

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In the process of reviewing this book I shared it with a colleague of mine – an Indigenous Australian woman working in the field of economic development. I thought she would be interested in the concepts as she grapples with many of them in her job. I knew what I thought of the book and I was interested to see if our views aligned. Her response – “this is amazing work and so true” – confirmed my own thinking. This book is more than just a collection of principles and practices relating to American Indian businesses: it speaks of the wider issues facing many Indigenous people establishing and running their own business. The legacy of colonialism and the displacement and destruction of traditional forms of governance, economy and culture, is one shared by most Indigenous people. For centuries, First Nations people have fought to “hold on to their culture, land and natural resources” in the face of increasing encroachment by government and industry (Kennedy *et al* ix). Despite growing recognition of their sovereign rights, the systematic economic marginalisation of Indigenous people continues to this day in the stereotypes applied to their businesses and the discrimination they face in accessing finances. Therefore, although this book focuses on American Indian businesses, the experiences and learnings it contains are relevant to any Indigenous person or community operating or looking at establishing a business. The book is also valuable to non-Indigenous people as it will help them understand the barriers and challenges faced by American Indians (and Indigenous people more broadly) in developing business enterprises and viable economies in their communities.

The editors’ goals in compiling and writing this book were to “contribute to learning about unique aspects of American Indian business” and to provide “different cultural perspectives that could lead to richer conversations about different business approaches.” (Kennedy et al xxii). In this regard, the book succeeds, as many of the chapters are devoted to explaining the distinct and valuable aspects of American Indian culture in relation to business. For example, chapters 3, 4 and 14, make the case for business models based on core Indian cultural values and content. The book explores the complexities inherent in operating in two worlds and how to reconcile cultural values and practices with the demands of business. The paradox in having to simultaneously collaborate and compete with neighbouring tribes and to negotiate with rival tribes to develop partnerships and regional economic development opportunities. It discusses how stereotypes – both internally and externally imposed, frequently see “Indian-nous and business as antithetical on one another...” (xii). However, the book exposes the fallacy of such thinking, by providing concrete examples of how American Indians have always been entrepreneurially minded and how historically, individual forms of business coexisted alongside communally run businesses. For example, in Chapter One, the authors cite R. J. Miller (2001), who reports that Indian cultures have always: “fostered, encouraged, and supported their tribal people in private economic endeavours.” (4). Chapter two also argues that private business activity at the family level has traditionally existed within American Indian tribes and that the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) changed the paradigm by placing all the responsibility for economic activity on tribal governments (16, 23).

The value of this book is that the authors do not shy away from discussing some of the more sensitive issues facing many American Indian tribes today. In particular, the tendency for some people to want to pull down those who stand out and succeed. This concept is referred to as “social jealousy” and has been likened to crickets or crabs in a bucket - where any cricket that tries to climb out of the bucket is pulled back in by the others (33). This is an issue also faced by Aboriginal people in Australia and one of the many challenges Indigenous people experience running their own business, particularly if it is successful. Because of this, and other issues, many Indigenous entrepreneurs are making the decision to locate their business off reservations. Yet, this only further compounds the problem. The fewer small business there are, the fewer role models there will be.

According to Harrington *et al* in Chapter 3, there is an absence of small businesses on reservations and Indian people own private businesses at the lowest rate per capita of any ethnic or racial group in the United States (32). However, antipathy towards private business owners is not the main reason for the lack of businesses on Indian reservations. The primary cause is the US government’s policy of holding tribal land in trust, which makes it virtually impossible for on-reservation entrepreneurs to secure start-up financing, as they cannot use their houses as collateral (85). As a result of the absence of private enterprise, Indian reservations suffer from economic leakage – where the majority of Indian dollars are spent purchasing consumables off the reservation (84). Just as economic development can contribute to a virtuous circle (x), the absence of economic activities leads to a downwards spiral wherein because there are few employers there are fewer jobs available, which results in high unemployment and low family incomes. Due to the difficulties residents face in trying to secure employment on reservation land, Indian and indigenous communities worldwide are “bleeding young people into surrounding societies (ix).”

Although this all paints a pretty depressing picture, the benefit of this book is that it is not all doom and gloom. In fact, the authors seem to go out of their way to inspire readers with what is possible given the right conditions. Rather than simply listing a litany of problems as many books about Indigenous people tend to do, the authors provide numerous practical examples of how American Indians could improve their economic development outcomes. In chapter 4, Stewart, a professor of entrepreneurship, outlines the need for a business strategy to help managers identify their area of competitive advantage. According to Stewart, American Indians cultural capital is a particular resource that could be leveraged to set them apart from their competitors (48). He suggests focusing on one strategy not multiple strategies as companies that try to do both often end up “stuck in the middle” and being mediocre on both fronts (52).

In addition to providing advice on business strategies, the book also provides a number of questions and exercises to help people understand the concepts and apply them to real-life situations. For example, in Chapter 9, Black and Birmingham, discussing American Indian leadership practices, provide five group or individual exercises that people could do to practice their disciplining, business analysis and decision-making skills. In Chapter ten, authors Claw, Verbos, and Rosile discuss the concept of a living code of ethics (148), which promotes doing business in a way that honours American Indians’ ancestors (156). Underpinning the ethics discussed are the seven Grandfather/Grandmother teachings which are: wisdom is to be shared; love is to honor others and care for them; respect is to honor all creations; bravery is to persevere

in the face of adversity; honesty is to tell the truth; humility is to remember we are not greater or lesser than others; and truth is for American Indians to honor who they are and have integrity (146). How these ethics could be applied to different areas of business, such as sales and marketing, finance and accounting and human resources, are discussed. A practical exercise is included at the end of the chapter to help people work through the four possible ways that laws and ethics intersect (158), and to help them reflect on how following the seven Grandfather/Grandmother teachings could help improve their business practices.

Chapter 11 also focuses on providing advice to improve the management of a business – in this case a health program. The way the advice is given is unique as it uses traditional storytelling methods to help people learn about organisational management. The story of mouse and coyote is engaging and easy to follow and successfully demonstrates the importance of certain business concepts such as strategic planning, goal commitment and how to address underperforming staff (172).

Overall, this book is an extremely valuable resource, particularly as until recently there has been limited research on the contributions of American Indians, and Indigenous people in general, to business. Some people may not agree with the promotion of business and in particular individual business enterprise in this book. Those people may see it as assimilationist. Yet, while having reservations about the ulterior motives behind policy makers' promotion of the advantageous aspects of commercial activity by Indigenous people could be warranted, there is demonstrable evidence that Indigenous people are conducting business on their own terms and in their own way. Rather than seeing business enterprise as a foreign concept imposed on Indigenous people, this book highlights how Indigenous knowledge is part of the philosophy of economic development in American Indian communities.

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