

Interview with Dr. Charles “Monty” Roessel, President of Diné College

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CCHE 600 Leadership Skills

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Part One: Interview questions and summary of responses.

Position Description

1. *What is your position title and the name of the institution at which you are employed?*

Charles “Monty” Roessel is the President of Diné College.

2. *Where does your position fit within the organizational structure or hierarchy?*

He reports to the Board of Regents of Diné College. He is the only employee of the College hired by the Board of Regents. He reports directly to the Board of Regents President. The Diné College Board of Regents reports directly the Health, Education and Human Service Committee of the Navajo Nation Council.

3. *What is the scope of your leadership duties and responsibilities (e.g., number of people you supervise, level of budget authority)?*

He supervises an executive team, and the College has about 285 employees. He makes sure strategic goals are in place and in motion to serve students, faculty and staff. There were 320 employees when he came onboard. He oversees the College budget internally. He is allowed to oversee purchasing and spending up to \$65,000, beyond that amount he would need to seek and attain approval from the Board of Regents.

4. *How were you selected for the position you currently hold?*

There was a national wide search conducted by an outside entity led by a college presidential search committee composed of the College’s Board of Regents. There was a screening process, interview, community interview and he was selected by the Board of Regents to fulfill the position. After the final screening processes were conducted, there were 3 final candidates left for the position.

5. *What are the three areas of responsibility on which you spend the greatest amount of your time as a leader?*

He spends the most time maintaining and establishing partnerships with legislative sectors, such as, the federal government, Navajo Nation government, the States of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Secondly, he spends a fair amount of time addressing funding issues, which are directly related to the legislative initiatives. Lastly, maintaining academic programs, which include fundraising, development and staff/faculty training.

Leadership Inputs

1. *Which aspects of your education and prior experience have best prepared you to lead effectively in your current position?*

His past profession was in journalism and photography. He believes the skills sets learned from his previous profession helped him tremendously by being creative, focused and charismatic. He knows how to tell a story without clutter through his experience of photography. He feels like his current position requires that type of creative approach. He wants to tell the best story possible, like his photography skills. He believes that leaders tend to lack a creative approach to problem solving and his appreciation for poetry and photography has helped him understand the missing links in being a good leader. He served as the Director of the Bureau of Indian Education from 2013 to 2016. From this position he learned how to oversee a large capacity of work that directly impacted education across the U.S. He looked up to the University of Wisconsin to help him understand the importance of art in education, overall. Within his experience of holding leadership positions, he learned it's not easy, because you can fall, but if you choose to get back up you can move forward.

2. *What led you to pursue your current leadership position?*

He came home to the Navajo reservation after working in Washington, D.C. for several years. He came home to heal, and he contemplated applying for the position at first. His son and nephew were attending Diné College at the time the position was being advertised. When he visited his son and nephew on campus, he saw the College differently, he began to listen to students who had issues and concerns about the College. His father Dr. Robert Roessel served as the President of the College from 1968 to 1969. He often reflected on what the College could be for future students.

3. *Describe past and current influences on your leadership style (e.g., authors, mentors, role models, etc.)*

He looked up to his parents as mentors for leadership. He worked for his father for several years as a superintendent for a secondary school district in Rough Rock, AZ. He learned from his father, “you don’t always have to be the smartest person in the room, because if you did your homework, you would be fine.” His father found inspiration in poetry because in his opinion “poetry moved mountains.” He shared a story of how his father worked closely with Robert F. Kennedy, former United States Senator from New York. He explained that his father and RFK had a very strong sense understanding the concept of “words are power.” From them, he learned that leadership required a person to be a great communicator through both the spoken and written words. He stated other leaders, such as, Raymond Nakai, Chairman of the Navajo Nation from 1963 to 1971 influenced his work because of his continued advocacy for Navajo education at all levels. Lastly, he gives credit to his mother, Ruth Roessel, Navajo educator and writer for influencing him to have more patience when doing any type of work. She had a way of understanding everyone, by making sure she knew their stories. She knew

everyone in the community by properly understanding their stories. She was the opposite of his father.

4. *What is your preferred strategy for continuing to develop as a leader? (e.g., leadership development programs (internal or external to the current institution), professional associations, conferences, books, journals)*

He occasionally reads biographies. He has met several people through networking. He is part of a fellowship with Princeton University. The fellowship is a group composed of various representatives from the Arizona State Board of Education. He self identifies as an introvert. He explained that sometimes everyone expects you know to know everything, already. In those cases, he must be the expert and he can't give it away.

Follow up question: Is there a specific group or community that has helped you with your current position?

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) has been very helpful, but they have a very high turnover rate for presidents of tribal colleges and universities. The turnover rate is like 40% every 3 years. The financial aspects to each tribal colleges and universities plays a factor in how financial allocations are disseminated based on if they receive funding through the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act (TCUAA) of 1978 or Title II. Title II provides funding for core operations at Diné College, which is the only institution who receives this allocation. Although, Presidents of the consortium support one another in leadership positions and talk about specific issues, the allocation of funding plays a big factor in the conversations. Often, Diné College is seen as entitled because they are only institution of the consortium to receive Title II funding.

1. *How would you describe your approach to leadership or your leadership style? Is there a particular leadership theory, approach, or model that resonates with you?*

He uses the situational leadership approach because it allows him to be more charismatic. In most of his leadership roles and responsibilities, he finds himself addressing situations that demand a case-by-case solution. He deals with a great number of individuals internally and externally of the College. Sometimes individuals are in love with problems, so he needs to bound them away from that type of tolerated tradition. He doesn't mind exploring disruptive leadership like one of his previous colleagues Arne Duncan, former United States Secretary of Education. Arne's approach to leadership was more about activism, because he understood that most systems are so fragile to begin with, so there needed to be a way to change the culture of an organization by challenging the status quo.

2. *What do you consider to be your strengths as a leader? Are there aspects of leadership in which you'd like to grow or develop?*

He would like to mentor more employees to expand all capacity levels at the institution. Some of his goals include developing more leaders within the organization. He always asks, “how can we grow our own leadership?” His ideas include creating a leadership development program for employees. In his own personal life, he has set a goal to learn more about the Navajo style of leadership and philosophy.

3. *What is your biggest challenge* as a leader?*

His greatest challenge is creating a culture of shared governance for the College. Shared governance in higher education should include all and go beyond faculty. He wants to look at all the pieces of the institution to see how they all fit together.

4. *In your experience, what is unique or distinctive about leading in an institution of higher education?*

He believes one area of uniqueness is the ability for the College to serve the Navajo Nation. He is working with the tribe to be more involved in creating more programs that can help the economy in larger capacities. In the past the College was primarily engaging in transactional capacities, like admitting, registering and graduating a student. Now, there is room for more involvement within the Navajo Nation.

Leadership Outputs

1. *What do you consider to be your greatest professional accomplishment as a leader in an institution of higher education?*

He believes one of his greatest professional accomplishments is transitioning the institution from a 2-year college to a 4-year college, which is currently in progress. He and the executive team are working on changing the mindset of everyone, which will take time. He worked closely with the Higher Learning Commission to accomplish the task.

2. *What are a few of your goals and aspirations as a leader, things you'd like to accomplish in the future?*

Eventually, he would like to develop a master's degree program at the College. Another goal he has is to increase enrollment to 3,000 students by 2023. He would like to explore technology transfer like wool mills and silversmith trademarks through a regional economy proposal. He would like to build faculty capacity at the College by working with universities who have Ph.D. candidates, rather than waiting for potential faculty to come to the College's door. The College would like to expand their potential by seeking more diverse faculty applicants. Lastly, he would like to expand housing options for faculty and staff, which would

include the construction of new homes or apartments. The main campus is in a very isolated area.

3. *What are you doing in your current leadership position to promote equity and inclusion in your organization? (This could be structural change such as hiring or promotion processes, or changes affecting those served by the organization such as access or achievement)*

He was able to increase the minimum wage at the College to \$15.00 per hour. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he noticed many employees who were essential to daily operations were making less than \$15 per hour, yet they kept the College in operation and maintained a safe environment for everyone once the campus reopened. They had to resign and modify office spaces on campuses and sites. He knew it was the right decision to make by increasing the minimum wage. Another area of concern for students during the Covid-19 pandemic was access to stable internet and technology resources. He and his executive team in partnership with the larger Navajo Nation worked hard to make sure laptop and hot spot loaner programs were in place. In addition, parking lots on campuses and sites were equipped with Wi-Fi capabilities. This would allow students who gain access to online learning.

Additional Questions

1. *If you could give one piece of advice to an aspiring leader, what would it be?*

Don't be content with mediocrity.

2. *If you could change one thing about your leadership position or organizational environment, what would it be?*

He would like the organization environment to be more open to change. He feels like in every organization a leader must change the mentality of the overall community to be more inclusive and open minded. He knows prior leadership might have done work differently, but he would

like employees to feel empowered. He would like to maintain trust through his actions. He knows it's important to keep your word as a leader.

Part Two: Reactions and Reflections

In this paper I will reflect on the leadership style of Charles “Monty” Roessel, President of Diné College. I will draw focus on my reactions and reflections in relation to the leadership theories, styles model and approaches covered in this course. As explained in the course, leadership is the process of helping followers move in one direction using the organization's vision (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 4). Dr. Roessel has showcased his ability to motivate and inspire his followers to take action to accomplish tasks designed to improve services at the institution. He has legitimate position power because he was selected by the Board of Regents to carry out assigned tasks with roles and responsibilities (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 6). He has demonstrated leadership capabilities because he has long-term goals, ability to influence followers to embrace change and he would like to disrupt the status quo with effectiveness. The interview was conducted to help me understand how the leaders in higher education maintain their roles and responsibilities.

Dr. Roessel's preferred leadership style approach is situational leadership. Situational leadership is easy to understand, and it is used by a variety of organizations. There are four situational leadership styles, which are directing, coaching, supporting and delegating (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 2, p. 3). Dr. Roessel's style of situational leadership appears to be “supporting”. He seems to enlighten employees of the institution by bringing changes in various capacities. When he decided to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour for all employees, it was a clear indication of how he expected staff to improve their work performances by allowing them to grow their own personal salaries. He noticed how rewarding employees can increase their morale and attitude to get their tasks done with motivation. This type of factor could be categorized as

transactional leadership by a contingent reward. The followers are enticed to perform work in exchange for a specified incentive (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 3, p. 3). This could be beneficial, if the College developed a system of compensation based on work performance or evaluation, meaning if employees perform well, they will be rewarded with a raise or bonus. I found this aspect of the interview interesting because it addressed the promotion of equity and inclusion in the workplace by changing and modifying the salary scale during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dr. Roessel mentioned “charisma” during his interview. He would like to be more charismatic because it allows followers to feel more comfortable around their leader. If he continues to strive to be more charismatic, it will allow for clear, compelling and inspirational communication with his followers, which will allow for his followers to trust him (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 10). According to the trait approach, Dr. Roessel has “intelligence” to make him a well-rounded leader in education especially on the Navajo Nation and within larger Native American communities. He has the experience and expertise in addressing issues and concerns within the community the College is serving. In addition, his “determination” is seen in some of his goals, such as increasing enrollment and potentially adding master’s degree programs to the College’s academic programs. Determination includes persistence and breaking down barriers (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 10). He demonstrated his “self-confidence” by working hard to build a culture of shared governance at the College. Successful leaders approach very difficult tasks to inspire followers to achieve challenging goals (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 10). He mentioned the most challenging task of the College is building shared governance, the culture of the environment needs to be changed and maintained. He is aware of the how followers are easily drawn to problems, and he is encouraging employees to change their mindsets. Although he identifies as an introvert, he has maintained a close community at the College during the Covid -19 pandemic. “Sociability” is

when leaders are approachable, friendly and able to collaborate (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 10). He is very approachable because when I initially asked to interview him, he agreed without hesitation to support my educational goals. Dr. Roessel collaborates with multiple entities within the Navajo Nation, federal government and local state governments, which showcases his ability to collaborate. He values, “integrity” by keeping his promises to his followers. Followers rely on trustworthy leaders, and it must be earned (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 1, p. 10). After assessing Dr. Roessel’s leadership traits in correlation to the interview, I have determined the amount of work and pressure a College President faces daily to address multiple issues and concerns can be overwhelming but rewarding once goals and tasks are met.

Dr. Roessel is on the verge to become a transformational leader, because he values creativity and he is passionate about empowering his followers by interacting with the entire College community. He has a deep connection to the College from a historical perspective, because his parents were heavily involved in the development and creation of the first tribally controlled college in the U.S. He is passionate about his work because he wants the best for the College by exploring options beyond the traditional approach to higher education, specifically community colleges. He has accomplished a major task of transforming the status of the college from a 2-year college to a 4-year college. This transformation is currently in progress and there is room to include a graduate program soon. The entire process of attaining permission for a status change requires a large amount of work with the Higher Learning Commission, therefore it is one example of his visionary characteristics. It demonstrates his ability to delegate tasks and complete an overall goal of the institution to expand the College’s horizons. He had to demonstrate his interactive leadership characteristics by thorough communication with all members of the executive team and governing

board to execute the change in status from the HLC. This one example of a major change and task completed by Dr. Roessel and his team.

Dr. Roessel mentioned he wanted to increase enrollment by 2023. The task of increasing enrollment can be a challenging task during a pandemic for a community college transitioning to a 4-year college. Like many community colleges, Diné College serves primarily Navajo students from rural parts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. Like many community colleges during the pandemic, Diné College had to become innovative in offering online courses to all students, which was a challenge because not all families and households had easy access to reliable internet or even desktops, laptops or tablets to effectively complete required course work. With research and common trends, we know community colleges “tend to serve people of color from lower income communities and they have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic” (Gardner, 2021). There was a very large impact on enrollment at community colleges, which often included a decrease in enrollment. From the U.S. Census data by the Community College Research Center, “in the fall of 2020 found that 40 percent of households that included members with community college plans were canceling them, more than double the rate for households with four-year college plans” (Gardner, 2021). More than ever students were concern about the effects of Covid-19 and how it would impact their future goals. Some students caught the virus or were afraid of catching the virus, which prohibited them from deciding to return to college or event start college. I wanted to draw the comparison of community colleges and tribal colleges, because understanding the commonalities and differences influences how leaders make decisions. Dr. Roessel mentioned how the college moved quickly during the peak of the pandemic to provide Wi-Fi in parking lots with a laptop loaner and hotspot loaner program for students in need. It was a time for him to truly become innovative in his approach to leadership. By creating this type of program, he was able to

regulate distress among followers. The students and employees were able to have a solution to a problem. It is important for leaders to manage change by establishing priorities (Guerriero, 2021, Unit 3, p. 13). One of main priority of any higher education institution is student success, so Dr. Roessel and his team made sure to find solutions to implement success among the students and their instructors, because the Navajo Nation is such a rural community who lacks basic infrastructure. Those uncontrollable circumstances did not stop the College from being accountable the larger community, which included student, staff, faculty and administration.

I wanted to highlight the uniqueness of the student population at a tribally controlled college like Diné College. For instance, “despite historical trauma, overwhelming challenges, daunting statistics, there has been a regeneration of tribal values, Indigenous languages, and efforts to strengthen Native families. And in many Indian communities across the United States, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are leading the way” (Shreve, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the College worked hard to maintain several options for students because students had very few alternatives. For example, the residence life program for living remained open to students because some students did not have suitable options. Again, Dr. Roessel and his executive team had to make some hard decisions to maintain a healthy space for students and staff. They had to work with various entities to make sure everyone was safe and secured. The leadership of the college had to quickly redesign many programs, which were inclusive of student family living. “Diné College has likewise implemented a variety of initiatives to cater to families. Most recently constructing a new family housing complex just minutes from classrooms, the library, cafeteria, and daycare” (Shreve, 2021). In tribal communities there are close networks of families and during the Covid-19 pandemic, leadership was teased because they had to quickly devise plans that could accommodate traditional teachings and maintain protection and safety for all by using modern

research and medicine. At the end of the day, Native people remained resilient and learned to adapt to new ways of communicating through technology and virtual platforms to maintain their family values.

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity in interviewing Dr. Roessel, because it gave me a clear insight of what to expect if I ever decide to pursue a leadership position at the tribally controlled college or university. I was drawn to his compassion of achieving his goals within the field of higher education. I enjoyed how he valued his father and mother’s teachings. I was inspired to research more about tribally controlled colleges and universities along with the self-determination era of higher education for tribal communities. I hope his program to mentor more employees in the area of leadership launches soon. It is very important because Native American communities need more individuals in leadership positions in higher education to address disparities and offer grassroots perspectives. I am excited to see what Diné College accomplishes within the next few years under the leadership of Dr. Roessel.

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