

Executive summary | February 2026

# Wipfli Tribal Government CFO Exchange

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# Introduction

Seventeen financial leaders and executives from sovereign governments met virtually to discuss pressing fiscal issues, share best practices and gain specialized insights from subject matter experts on long-term talent continuity and operational sustainability.

The conversation highlighted four primary themes: the critical need for structured succession planning, strategies for educating and preparing future leaders, adapting workplace policies to overcome recruitment challenges, and updating internal policies to maximize tax-exempt welfare benefits for community members.



# Creating sustainable succession plans for key roles

*“This talent shortage affects all organizations; we must address an aging leadership base that is taking decades of institutional knowledge with them.”*

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*“Whenever you hire somebody from outside the organization, it sends a message to the folks inside. We want to ensure that we build fortitude within our succession plan so that the next time a role needs filling, it is filled internally.”*

- Organizations must replace retiring long-term employees by evaluating internal talent pools and implementing structured continuity strategies rather than relying on reactive hiring.
- Replacing aging leaders requires intentional frameworks rather than treating succession as an unwieldy, singular event. Failing to plan often leaves organizations scrambling to replace financial executives who possess decades of specialized, localized experience.
- One executive shared a proactive approach of using talent evaluation matrices to categorize staff readiness for future roles. This internal evaluation highlights skill gaps and informs training initiatives, sending a positive message to existing employees about their long-term career prospects within the organization.



- A cautionary experience involved a CFO with 30 years of tenure who provided minimal notice before retiring. The organization spent an additional year interviewing over 20 candidates because external hires often lack the specialized knowledge required to navigate unique local laws.
- Vital organizational survival depends on documenting daily responsibilities well before a planned departure. It's also worth noting that unforeseen circumstances, such as medical emergencies, make succession frameworks vital for every critical role.

# Cultivating and educating future organizational leaders

- Participants discussed differences in demographics that respective organizations have targeted for leadership development, all while agreeing that comprehensive onboarding and mentorship programs are essential for effective governance.
- Some participants discussed their focus on engaging younger community members early to help ensure the building of interest and transfer of historical knowledge. Conversely, other participants emphasized that development efforts should target any interested individual regardless of age because older individuals often possess broader worldviews and superior problem-solving skills.

*“We must assess what elements of our past we want to carry forward while combining them with fresh perspectives to avoid simply replicating the status quo.”*

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*“I worry that we will get stuck in a status quo by grooming new people to simply follow in the footsteps of those who have been doing the same things for the last 50 years. We need fresh minds and fresh ideas.”*



- Participants recognized that heavily developing individuals from a young age risks creating an echo chamber that replicates outdated operational habits. Sending candidates to external organizations for internships cultivates a broader perspective before they return to serve locally, bypassing the limitations of internal mentorship.
- Incoming governing officials require structured education to properly understand complex financial regulations. One community successfully mandates a multi-week training program where internal departments and legal counsel thoroughly brief newly elected officials on tribal programs, administrative policies and governance limits.
- To effectively engage the next generation, one tribe has implemented a youth advisory board that strictly mirrors the actual governing council. Furthermore, introducing a selective summer program that places students directly into administrative departments aligns them with their career interests and helps ensure practical exposure to government operations.

# Modernizing workplace policies to improve recruitment and retention

- To overcome talent shortages and geographic isolation, some tribal communities are adopting flexible scheduling and remote work policies to attract and retain specialized professionals.
- Geographic isolation forces many tribes to struggle with staff burnout caused by extensive daily travel times. One executive explained that financial departments desperately need telecommuting policies to prevent exhausted employees from leaving for more convenient opportunities, despite governing boards remaining skeptical of remote work.
- Some tribes have established agreements for one remote day per week to provide crucial mental breaks for staff, thereby improving overall employee retention. Participants discussed the resulting tension between these modern remote work requests and traditional in-office expectations.

*“The more geographically isolated your organization is, the more creative you have to be to find the right balance between building your culture and acquiring the right people.”*

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*“We allow one day at home a week, which gives some incentive to the employees. It provides a mental break where they can work from home without being inundated with calls, and it really helps nurture a positive environment and promote longevity.”*



- Compressed workweeks, where employees work ten-hour shifts for four days, represent a successful implementation strategy for multiple leaders. Inconsistent schedules across departments occasionally hinder the coordination of executive meetings, even though they significantly reduce staff members' commute burdens with young children.
- One tribal leader emphasized that while remote work is challenging to manage, it remains necessary for high-level roles. He commented that organizations should remain flexible with remote arrangements for specialized executives, provided they visit the physical office periodically to maintain organizational culture.

# Tribal General Welfare Exclusion Act of 2014 (GWE) updates and how to maximize benefits

- Executives shared strategies for updating internal financial guidelines to leverage recent federal tax rulings regarding tax-exempt welfare funds for citizens.
- The U.S. Treasury recently clarified rules surrounding general welfare programs. Quickly updating revenue allocation plans is essential because enterprise and other revenue sources designated for these specific programs will not be treated as taxable income.

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*“By updating internal policies to align with updated federal regulations, administrators ensure that developmental funds distributed to citizens remain exempt from personal taxation.”*

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*“Money that we put into the minors trust can fall under the General Welfare Act, and that determination is made when the money is taken out, not when it was put in. If you update your plans to reflect this, that money will not be taxable for the individuals.”*

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*“We created a youth housing and education program, and we make them sign a document stating that the trust funds are exclusively intended for housing and education.”*



- How these federal updates impact minors' trust funds has become a major focus for many tribes. Young adults will avoid massive tax burdens when accessing their funds if internal guidelines clearly classify trust disbursements as welfare assistance upon withdrawal.
- One tribe adopted a proactive strategy that mandates youth sign documents legally designating their trust withdrawals exclusively for housing or educational purposes.
- Because modifying local laws requires meticulous preparation, organizational leadership must remain diligent. An executive cautioned peers to thoroughly develop their program structures before implementing changes, emphasizing that strong internal governance helps prevent compliance issues when claiming federal tax exemptions.

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