

**Wilma Mankiller:**

**Cherokee Leader**

**Lesson Prepared by:** Ray Tyler

**Description:**

Students will use the information they learned from reading the short biography of Wilma Mankiller, watching the video, Bell Water Project, and excerpts from her auto-biography, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* to discuss what makes someone an effective leader. Lesson will culminate in students brainstorming community based self-help projects that the class could organize at their school.

**Short Description**

Students will use the information they learned from reading the short biography of Wilma Mankiller, watching the video, Bell Water Project, to brainstorm community based self-help projects that the class could organize at their school.

**Grade Level**: 8th -12th

**Time:** Two 45 minute class periods

**Objectives:**

* Students will evaluate the characteristics associated with effective leaders
* Students will reach a conclusion about whether effective leaders must understand the culture and circumstances of the people they are attempting to lead
* Students will apply their conclusions to their own class and/or school by considering class and/or school improvement projects they believe correspond to the needs of the class and/or school

**Materials**

* Short biography of Wilma Mankiller (Link)
* Video clip of Bell Water Project available at <https://www.pbs.org/video/bell-water-project-u3ln8z/>
* Primary source: Excerpt from Mankiller: A Chief and Her People (Link)

**Procedures**

* Class discussion
  + What are the characteristics of a good leader?
* Students individually read the Wilma Mankiller biography and answer accompanying questions
  + Identify character traits of Wilma Mankiller that made her an effective leader.
  + Name three obstacles that Wilma Mankiller had to overcome in her life.
  + Identify sources of strength Wilma Mankiller used to overcome those obstacles.
* Students discuss and compare their answers with a partner

Next, show video of [Bell Water Project](https://www.pbs.org/video/bell-water-project-u3ln8z/)

Divide the students into small groups, ideally 4-5 students per group. Students will read selected excerpts from*Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* and, working in their assigned groups, will discuss and answer the assigned questions.

* How did Mankiller use her rehabilitation time to her best advantage?
* How did she envision using the “good mind approach” in her work?”
* Mankiller seems to suggest that she was less ambitious when she returned to work than she previously had been. Does that surprise you? Why or why not?
* How did Mankiller’s leadership style reflect both the needs and the attitudes she observed in the Cherokee culture?
* What problems do you think Mankiller had to overcome while recruiting volunteers for the Bell project?
* Predict how you think the people of Bell felt about their community after the project was completed.

Working in their groups, students will develop a “Shark Tank” proposal—a three minute proposal for a school based community project that identifies and need and would improve their school in some way

* As a class, students will discuss and reach a consensus on which project would be the best to pursue as a class project or school-wide project

**Assessment/Homework**

* Teachers can assign the readings for homework
* Informal assessment of group discussions of questions accompanying excerpts from *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*
* Formal assessment—Shark Tank PowerPoint presentation for class/school project
* Exit slip—review the class discussion that began the lesson: What are the characteristics of a good leader? Have the students identify one leadership action or idea of Wilma Mankiller’s that matches a characteristic identified in the class discussion.

**Future Research/Resources**

* *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* by Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, 1993

**Standards: From the C3 Framework**

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| * **D2.Civ.5.9-12.** Evaluate cit­izens’ and institutions’ effec­tiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level. * **D2.Civ.7.9-12.** Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others. |
| * **D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of chang­ing societies, promoting the common good, and protect­ing rights. |

**Autobiography Excerpts**

*In November of 1980, Wilma Mankiller was diagnosed with systemic myasthenia gravis, a form of muscular dystrophy. The disease had severely impacted her muscular strength making it difficult to walk, keep her eyes open, and even speak. She struggled to hold a pencil and brush her hair. Wilma wept upon hearing her diagnosis but she was determined to rid herself of the disease and not simply cope with its effects. She chose an aggressive treatment plan; surgery, followed by a long course of steroid drug therapy. When she returned to her work with the Cherokee Nation, after her surgery, she did so with a renewed sense of purpose.*

**Read the following excerpts from Wilma Mankiller’s autobiography, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* and discuss with the answers to the questions with your group**.

During my months and months of rehabilitation, I was able to do some writing and reading. I also studied various tribal issues. I came to realize I had been given a chance to think about what I wanted to do with my life. When the reality of how frail life is dawned on me, I set about to begin projects that I could have tackled otherwise…

When I returned to my duties with the Cherokee Nation, I did so with a fury. I was not particularly anxious to move up the ladder of hierarchy in my tribe. My work was my main priority. I was determined to work closely with self-help projects and program development. I wanted to see to it that our people, especially those living in rural areas had the chance to express their own special needs. I was determined to do this by using the “good mind” approach. **{the Cherokee belief that that “means one has to think positively, to take what is handed out and turn it into a better path”}**

In 1981, I helped to found and subsequently was named the first director of the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department… This department grew from important development work carried out in the tiny Adair County {Oklahoma} community named Bell. As the project evolved, we needed a new department so we would be eligible to receive grants…

We immediately put together several federal and foundation grants. We also recruited many volunteers to allow local citizens to construct a sixteen-mile water line and revitalize several of their homes.

Bell was a poor community with about 150 people, of which 95 percent were Cherokee. Most of them spoke Cherokee. In my mind the Bell project remains a shining example of community self-help at its very best. The local residents were able to build on our Cherokee ***gadugi*** tradition of a physical sharing of tasks and working collectively, at the same time restoring confidence in their own ability to solve problems.

We established a partnership between the Cherokee people living at Bell and the Cherokee Nation. Our goal was to bring members of the community together so they could solve their common problems. From the beginning, the Bell residents realized they were responsible for the success or failure of the project. They knew they were expected not only to develop long-range plans, but also to implement their community renewal with our staff members acting only as facilitators and funding brokers.

It turned into a massive community-renewal effort using local labor and talent and about a million dollars in hard costs, funded by grants. When we started out at Bell, it was a community in utter decline. At least a quarter of the people living there had to haul in water for household use, and almost half of the homes fell well below minimum housing standards. The mean family income in Bell was very low. Many of the young people were leaving the community to find jobs elsewhere.

But instead of surrendering to defeat, the people of Bell became involved in their project. They proudly met the challenge. In the end they were able to complete everything they had set out to accomplish. The new rural water system that brought the town its first running water was installed by community volunteers – the men and women of Bell. The rehabilitation work on the twenty homes and the dilapidated community center was carried out by the homeowners themselves. The construction of twenty-five new energy efficient residences was accomplished with resources of the Cherokee Housing Authority. The local people served as their own labor force.

* excerpted from *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*, by Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, pp. 233-234

Discussion Questions: Discuss with your group

1. How did Mankiller use her rehabilitation time to her best advantage?
2. How did she envision using the “good mind approach” in her work?”
3. Mankiller seems to suggest that she was less ambitious when she returned to work than she previously had been. Does that surprise you? Why or why not?
4. How did Mankiller’s leadership style reflect both the needs and the attitudes she observed in the Cherokee culture?
5. What problems do you think Mankiller had to overcome while recruiting volunteers for the Bell project?
6. Predict how you think the people of Bell felt about their community after the project was completed.