



Circles for Reconciliation Gathering Theme

Call to Business

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES:

“AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESS HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT”

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Facilitator:

The title of our theme is a phrase borrowed from Indigenous Works (<https://indigenousworks.ca/en>), a national non-profit agency headquartered in Saskatoon that is focused on Indigenous employment. The phrase is part of their report on a national study of businesses and their interest in partnerships with Indigenous companies. It seems like an appropriate description of what we wish to address today.

In our Circle, in the next few minutes we will do four things;

- First, read Call to Action #92
- Second; reflect on the key points of this call to action
- Third: Ask, why should business care
- Fourth; reflect on how to move forward

Then, with the use of a talking stick, we will share on how we might proceed or whether we are already doing so.

First; let's take a moment to read Call to Action #92

Participant 1:

Call to Action #92

“We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include, but not be limited to, the following:

Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.

Ensure that Aboriginal^[1] peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.

Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.” (TRC, 2015, p. 10)

For those of you who perhaps have never read this before, let’s summarize this call to action:

It addresses a number of dimensions under what the commission calls a “Reconciliation framework for applying the United Nations Declaration.” It asks for:

- Meaningful consultations,
- respectful relationships,
- employment opportunities,
- informed consent before moving to economic development projects,
- access to jobs, training and educational opportunities,
- benefits to Indigenous communities and not just to individuals,
- education of management and staff on the history of Indigenous peoples

Participant 2:

What is the level of involvement now?

In 2016, Indigenous Works, the company we mentioned above, commissioned a national study of 500 large and medium-sized businesses in Canada. The result reported that 85% of companies have no relationships with Indigenous people. Only 2% of corporations were committed partners (for the full report, see:

<https://indigenousworks.ca/en/partnership/what-does-partnership-research-tell-us>). While the situation is slightly better on the Prairies, Manitoba has the weakest engagement with Indigenous people of the three Prairie Provinces.

Nationally, the study found:

- Only half of the businesses wanted to do more business with Indigenous groups.
- Less than half were prioritizing hiring Indigenous people

¹ The term “Indigenous” is used throughout our documents, except in cases where a source is quoted that uses the term “Aboriginal”.

- Only a third of businesses considered investing in Indigenous communities as a priority.

In a *Globe and Mail* article in 2020, Gladu and Hyder suggest that “Canada’s role in reconciliation is underappreciated.”

They offer six examples of a trends towards “deeper and more engagement between Indigenous communities and corporate Canada.” However, in spite of these six examples representing billions of dollars, there much remains to be done.

Returning to the Indigenous Works document, the authors report that companies offer up to 20 reasons as to why they are not involved with Indigenous communities.

Here are some **examples** of responses from the corporate leaders:

“Never thought of it.”

“We need people with specific designations, so that is our priority.”

“Not applicable to our business.”

“We would if they reached out to us.”

“Never occurred to us.”

etc.

Five key factors were identified as to why businesses did not consider such engagement:

- There are few indigenous people around our business, or if there are, we are unaware of them.
- Indifference; that is, we don’t discriminate, but we don’t reach out.
- There is limited value for us in being engaged.
- We don’t really know the situation of Indigenous people very well.
- It is costly to reach out, and we have limited capacity.

Participant 3:

Why should business care; the benefits

In October of 2017, Don Drummond, former senior economist with CIBC, now at McMaster University, wrote that 52% of the future economic growth of Manitoba will depend upon Indigenous work force participation. That number is 72% in Saskatchewan and 83% in the Northwest Territories. So, independent of the moral responsibility one could raise, there are economic benefits for business. The Drummond Report estimates that closing the gap would increase the size of the Canadian economy by \$36.4 billion by 2031 (Drummond & Sharpe, 2017).

The research by Indigenous Works suggested some solutions.

Things that need to change:

- Businesses want to be approached directly by Indigenous groups.
- Businesses need to see the employment and business potential.
- Businesses need more experience and knowledge on how to do this.
- Economic conditions and policies from government need to change.

What supports do businesses need to change?

1. Guidance from Indigenous groups
2. Mentorship from experienced businesses
3. Direction from third parties and from government
 - a. On the government side, Drummond identifies several obstacles to be overcome;
 - i. Lack of predictability in funding
 - ii. Currently there is greater focus on social service funding to the detriment of funding that addresses economic needs
 - iii. Lack of high-speed broadband in many Indigenous communities
 - iv. Need for greater Indigenous autonomy

Participant 4:

So how can businesses proceed?

Let's back up just a bit. Perry Bellegarde, National Chief stated recently in the *Globe and Mail*: "Before you try to build anything, build a respectful relationship." The TRC report—which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission formed to redress the legacy of residential schools—stresses over and over again that respectful relationships are the beginning of reconciliation. And the TRC argues this starts with knowing the Truth. The title of the final report of the TRC is "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future." A businessman commented, "Why worry about the past, let's just move on to the future." The TRC refutes that. If we don't honour the truth of the past, we will never have reconciliation. If we don't know the past, we will never understand intergenerational trauma.

Participant 5:

Another common sentiment about residential schools is the following: "They didn't know back then what we know now. They didn't realize it was wrong" (CBC Radio, 2017). However, Dr. Cindy Blackstock, member of the Gitksan First Nation challenges this position by sharing the story about Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce. Dr. Bryce was the chief medical officer for the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of Immigration. In 1904, he was asked to report on the health conditions of children within the Canadian Indian residential school system in Western Canada and the Northwest Territories. When he released the final report in 1907, Bryce exposed the inhuman and unsanitary conditions of residential schools. Bryce revealed: "It suffices for us to know

... that of a total of 1,537 pupils reported upon, nearly 25 per cent are dead,” and “of one school with an absolutely accurate statement, 69 per cent of ex-pupils are dead, and that everywhere the almost invariable cause of death given is tuberculosis.” He continued, “We have created a situation so dangerous to health . . . that I was often surprised that the results were not even worse” (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2016).

The report was eventually leaked and appeared on the front page of the newspaper that is now the *Ottawa Citizen*, making the report public knowledge. Despite Bryce’s damning report, none of the report’s recommendations were immediately implemented.

As Cindy Blackstock passionately states, Dr. Bryce’s publicized report “puts a red hot poker stick into this myth that people in the period didn’t know any better back then” (CBC Radio, 2017).

So we need to first honour the truth.

Participant 6:

Once that truth is acknowledged, then Murray Sinclair’s, Chair of the TRC, message is loud and clear; he says: “Don’t feel guilty about the past, don’t feel shame, they don’t do any good at all, do something about it.”

So let’s return to the role of business. Call to Action 92 suggests that as *relationships grow, meaningful consultations* will grow. The reverse is also true. Honest consultations will lead to relationships. The first baby steps toward partnerships can begin. The most progressive companies are those that develop an internal business strategy as it relates to Indigenous peoples. They have a procurement strategy; an employment strategy. They have benefits sharing.

Participant 7:

Call to Action 92 calls for informed employment decisions; it calls on corporations to investigate where to find new talent, how to design training, and partnering to support employment of indigenous people; ensure cultural sensitivity, maintain an adoptive and innovative workforce. Companies don’t have to start from scratch. Here are just two examples of opportunities. Indigenous Works is a national non-profit social enterprise headquartered in Saskatoon with “a mandate to improve the inclusion and engagement of Indigenous people in the Canadian economy” (Indigenous Works, n.d.). The Manitoba Construction Sector Council trains Indigenous people for jobs. BUILD Inc. offers a training program for those Indigenous youth facing barriers to employment. Opportunities for Employment (OFE) is another agency that both trains and seeks employment for people, including Indigenous people. Amik provides employment services. Clayton Sandy, who is key to our Circles for Reconciliation, conducts all kinds of workshops on preparing Indigenous people for employment.

Participant 8:

Once reconciliation is on a business radar, business development decisions and community development decisions can also begin to be considered. On the business development side, those interested can begin to think about how reconciliation can influence where to open new locations, how to market their business, their procurement policies, mutual development of their business and Indigenous businesses to grow market share, diversify products and service, strengthen reputations

Participant 9:

Companies that begin to think about reconciliation can reflect on *community development decisions*, specifically what groups or events to sponsor, how to minimize their impact on environment, how to strengthen communities where they operate, invest in education, combine intelligence and information, and identify other opportunities for involvement.

Facilitator:

I am now going to pass out a list of possible personal actions and corporate actions you might take (*Pass out the “Get involved sheet. Facilitator should have a copy for everyone*).

These are examples only.

We are going to go around the circle reading the actions.

Now we will use a talking stick, passed from one to another. Please speak only when you have the talking stick. Let me remind you that we have to be finished by ____ (time) so as you share, please be mindful of the time and remember we want everyone to have a chance to share.

References and Resources

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