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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, we honour and acknowledge Moh'kinsstis, and the traditional Treaty 7 territory and oral practices of the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, as well as the Îyâxe Nakoda and Tsuut'ina Nations. We acknowledge that this territory is home to the Otipemisiwak Métis Nation in Alberta within the historical Northwest Métis homeland. Finally, we acknowledge all Nations – Indigenous and non – who live, work and play on this land, and who honour and celebrate this territory.

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Advancing Reconciliation Today

Across Canada, a new economic reality is taking shape, one where reconciliation is not a future goal, but a present reality and responsibility. It is being shaped by the decisions we make today, so that the next generation can see and benefit from its impact. This edition of *Forward* magazine explores how Indigenous economic reconciliation can be intentionally advanced through ownership, capital strategies, equitable partnerships and workforce inclusion that drive long-term prosperity.

The reconciliation economy is about genuine consultation and engagement, building true partnerships, grounded in mutual opportunity, knowledge exchange and long-term value creation. Through strong equity-based partnership structures, Indigenous Nations are converting participation into durable prosperity, ensuring economic growth is both inclusive and sustainable.

In this issue, we explore the financial structures Indigenous Nations are using to fund large-scale projects, and how these approaches impact ownership, cash flow stability and long-term community returns. These insights provide practical guidance for navigating complex capital decisions and strengthening economic independence.

Showcased in each article are the voices of Indigenous leaders, industry experts and economic developers, using real examples of capital strategies and lived experience to make the path to growth, investment and entrepreneurship more transparent and accessible.



Miki Reeder
Founder & Convenor,
Forward Summit/
Workforce Forward

True reconciliation requires more than access to capital and partnership opportunities for emerging Indigenous organizations. It also demands meaningful inclusion within existing workplaces. Integrating Indigenous culture and investing in retention and leadership development not only strengthens representation, but enhances decision-making, collaboration and the organization's overall contribution to sustainable prosperity.

Whether your organization is building capacity as an Indigenous-led enterprise, just starting its reconciliation journey or implementing advanced reconciliation initiatives, this issue provides practical strategies and real-world examples to support long-term prosperity and Canada's economic future.

The reconciliation economy is built on understanding truth and applying intentional, practical strategies to create lasting change.

Only through collective effort will we achieve a more inclusive and prosperous future for all of Canada.



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DEAN MONTGOMERY TAKING BACK OUR CONTROL

Dean Montgomery On the Benefits of Indigenous-Owned Infrastructure

By Brittany Lavallee



Long before this country was mapped, divided and regulated, Indigenous Nations governed these lands through their own laws, systems and relationships. These laws are grounded in responsibility to the land, not its extraction. Indigenous governance is relational built on long-term accountability to the territory, water and future generations.

Yet, infrastructure has long been constructed on Indigenous territories without Indigenous control. Railways cut through territories. Transmission lines crossed traplines. Dams flooded communities. Ports and pipelines generated wealth measured in billions, while many Nations were left without consultation, temporary jobs and limited leverage once construction crews left.

Expansion of infrastructure caused displacement and conflict. Through these realities, Nations have created innovative infrastructure projects while challenging the narrative of short-term participation and instead creating long-term ownership that strengthens governance, protects land and generates predictable intergenerational wealth.

Dean Montgomery, CEO of Indigenous Initiatives, Inc., is a Métis founder of Bears' Lair Indigenous Strategies and Sunspear Renewables. Montgomery has worked to support First Nations for the past 25 years in strategic planning, consultation, grant writing and accessing capital, with a focus on large-scale renewable energy projects.



Dean Montgomery
CEO,
Indigenous Initiatives, Inc.

Montgomery also co-founded Bears' Lair Dream Camps and the Bears' Lair TV show with his wife Geena Jackson-Montgomery, a not-for-profit organization, where Indigenous youth are educated in culturally grounded business training and mentorship. Bears' Lair Dream Camps have now reached more than 68 communities and have made an extraordinary impact.



At the Bears' Lair Dream Camp at Paul First Nation in Alberta, games and activities are designed to support learning and entrepreneurial skill-building

As a leader in empowering Indigenous economic growth and partnerships, Montgomery has supported meaningful engagement in land development, infrastructure projects and education models for the next generation of future leaders.

Montgomery explains that ownership must be tangible: "The equity of a project actually sits on the balance sheet and produces cash over time … governance is really important … board seats, veto rights and real influence over decisions."

This is not symbolic partnership. It's decision-making authority embedded in corporate structures. One of the most persistent fears in infrastructure negotiations has been land surrender, but Montgomery challenges those assumptions. "The land is not collateral. Cash flow is the collateral," he says.

Before: Grounded in Nation, Values and Visions

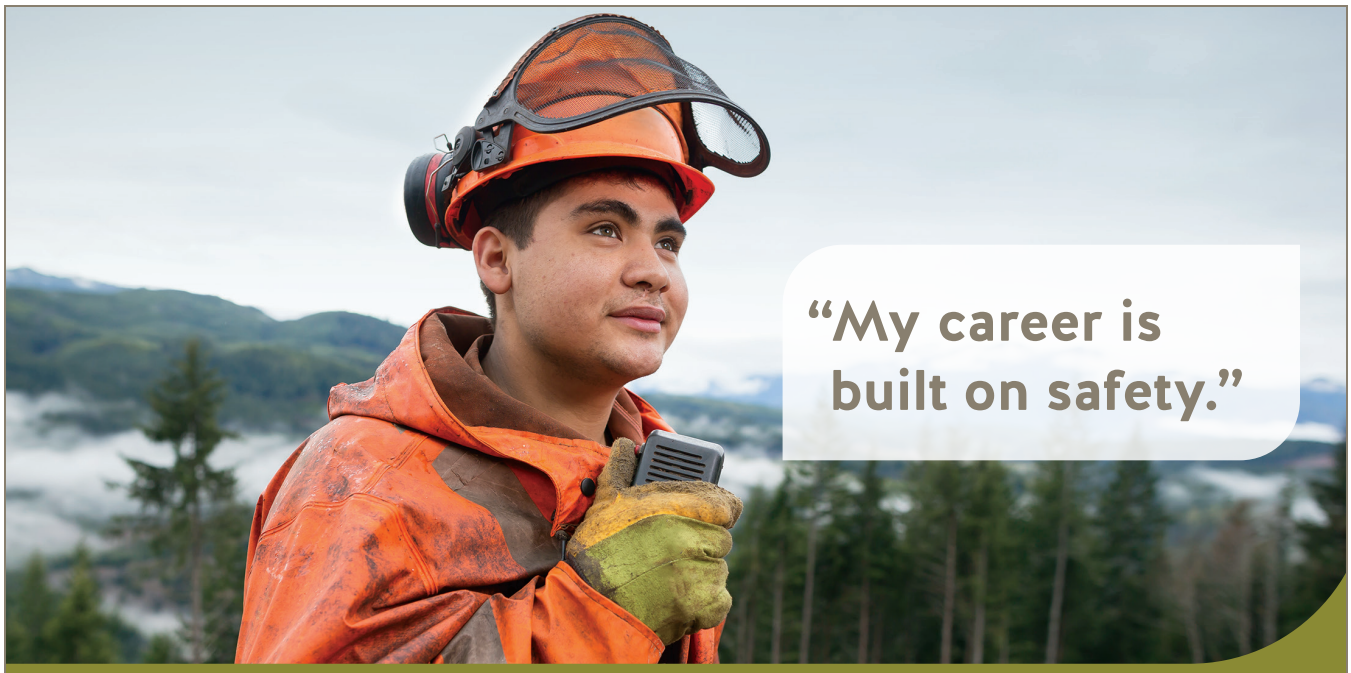
Before financing agreements, environmental assessments and construction schedules, there must be clarity within the Nation itself.

Montgomery emphasizes that the most important work happens within the Nation itself. The Nations that succeed in ownership are those that are doing the foundation work ahead of time before any deal is on the table. He frames preparedness as a combination of knowledge, structure and strategic decision-making.

"When Nations are prepared … with their own governments and their own capacity building and their ownership structures are in place … they help de-risk projects just by being ready."

Too often in the past, Nations were approached with finalized proposals and asked for consent or consultation feedback. Today, we see that necessary shift. Nations are defining their own parameters before negotiations begin. They are establishing economic development corporations, clarifying consent processes, strengthening governance frameworks and seeking independent legal and financial expertise.

Modern infrastructure finance allows Nations to retain land stewardship while participating in commercial agreements structured through



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leases or project-specific entities. Ownership does not require transferring title.

“Prepared Nations don’t slow projects down,” Montgomery says. “They actually make them work better.

“Talk to the people who’ve already done it… there are leaders who have negotiated these deals that are often very willing to share what they have learned.”

He emphasizes this collective strategy to making well-informed decisions and deciding what ownership means for their Nation.

Montgomery also advises Nations not to be afraid to walk away from deals that are not beneficial and to focus on owning systems that generate long-term value.

During: Exercising Authority, Not Just Participation

Once a project moves forward, the agreement’s structure strongly determines whether Indigenous involvement is transformative. Equity partnerships are now common in major energy, mining and infrastructure projects. A change is underway from minority positions to majority Indigenous ownership.

“The biggest risk aren’t the technicalities on the project. It’s structural,” he explains, pointing to financial terms that can override governance or agreements where equity exists on paper but lacks real authority.

A significant shift is taking place, with more projects moving toward Indigenous majority ownership. This changes how decisions are made from environmental design to financial structuring and ensures that Indigenous perspectives



Chelsee Pettit, founder of Aaniin and the winner of Season Two of Bears’ Lair, with Dean Montgomery and Geena Jackson Montgomery

are embedded throughout the process.

However, ownership also requires capacity. Nations must build the skills, knowledge and leadership necessary to manage these assets over time. This is where Montgomery sees a direct connection to the work being done through Bears’ Lair.

The Dream Camps, held over several days in community setting, bring youth together to develop business ideas from the ground up. Participants learn about markets, operations and finances while also building public speaking and leadership skills. By the final day, they present their ideas to a full audience often including Chief and Council.

The results are immediate and lasting. Youth who began the program hesitant to speak leave with confidence and a sense of possibility. Some go on to start their own businesses while others carry those skills into education and employment pathways.

“It’s about showing them that they can build something of their own,” Montgomery says. “That’s how we create long-term change.”

Montgomery says that majority ownership shifts power dynamics. They change how environmental decisions are made, how financing is structured and how profits flow. When Nations are part of core governance, design choices reflect Indigenous worldviews.

That perspective reframes, rather than opposes, economic development. In the Cedar LNG model, environmental considerations, including a floating facility and cleaner power design, align economic opportunity with stewardship.

Ownership means building capacity from within. The Cedar LNG processing facility in Kitimat, B.C., on the traditional territory of the Haisla Nation, is a good example mentioned, as the first Indigenous majority-owned liquefied natural gas project in Canada.

Montgomery explains that Indigenous governance timelines may differ from corporate expectation. Taking time to



Bears' Lair Dream Camp participants aren't just learning how to build a business as a team — they're also having fun, staying active and developing the importance of teamwork through play

understand long-term consequences does not delay; it is due diligence.

After: Intergenerational Wealth and Sovereignty

The true test of ownership appears after construction crews leave. In the past, projects delivered short bursts of employment followed by long-term dependency. Ownership can change this equation.

"Intergenerational benefits come from owning assets that generate predictable cash flow over time," Montgomery says.

Predictable revenue allows Nations to plan housing, education, infrastructure upgrades and social programs without relying exclusively on federal transfers. Montgomery describes infrastructure as an engine: "When Nations own infrastructure, it really becomes the engine that can drive change."

With each successful agreement, Nations build important knowledge, frameworks and strategies that work for them. Community members and youth can see career pathways in engineering, finance, law and project management within their own Nation.

Projects like the Wawatay transmission line, a large transmission project involving multiple Nations in Ontario, demonstrates shared ownership models, leasing models and long-term revenue.

It's very important to understand that ownership also strengthens cultural continuity. Community members can remain on territory with meaningful employment, connection to land, language and ceremonies.

The Role of Government and Partnerships

Governments can support Indigenous ownership by providing access to capital, early-stage funding and regulatory clarity. However, Montgomery emphasizes that ownership must never come at the cost of jurisdiction or control.

Programs can enable participation, but they cannot replace true equity.

Strong partnerships are equally critical. Projects succeed when Nations are engaged early, when trust is built and when all parties are aligned in their understanding of long term-goals.

Montgomery stresses the importance for industry partners to understand the risk-reducing benefits of Indigenous ownership.

A Rebalancing of Power

Infrastructure once represented extraction. Resistance and transformative change have allowed it to become a tool for Nation-building.

From Montgomery's perspective, the shift is clear:

Before ownership: Nations define their values, governance and vision;

During ownership: Nations exercise authority in design, financing and operations;.

After ownership: Nations generate predictable revenue, build capacity and expand sovereignty.

Montgomery says he has observed a shift in mindset. "The Nations are doing well; they are not chasing deals. They're building systems that are going to last forever."

Indigenous Nations are moving from consultation towards structural ownership. Infrastructure built without Indigenous authority shaped the past. Infrastructure owned and governed by Indigenous Nations is shaping a transformative future.



FUNDING THE FUTURE

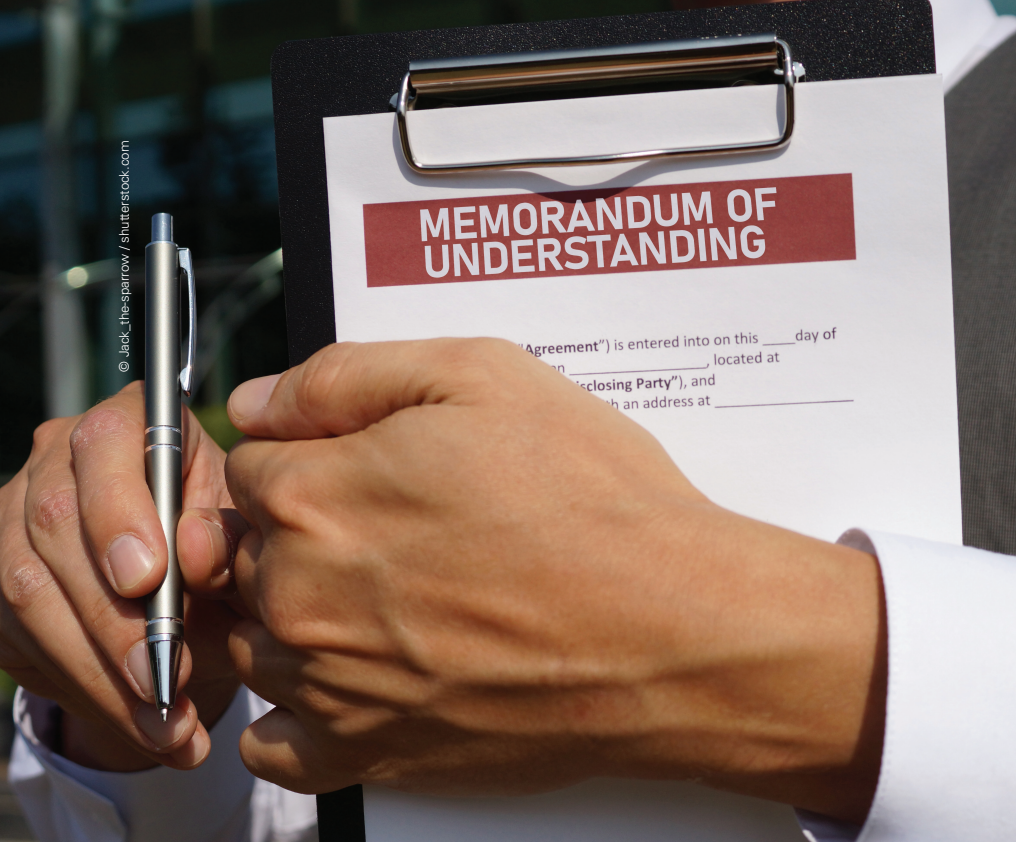
How First Nations Are Financing Economic Projects

By Nikita Weiss Day

For Indigenous Nations looking to build long-term prosperity on their own terms, large-scale infrastructure and economic development projects have become an important pathway. Behind these projects, however, lie many complex financial decisions that shape how they are funded, who holds control, how risks are managed and what benefits ultimately flow back to the community.

Financing is just one piece of a bigger picture. Projects move through a series of steps shaped by both community priorities and economics. Wade Griffin, a member of Six Nations of the Grand River and national director for Indigenous Engagement at BGIS, has spent more than three decades working alongside Indigenous communities in economic development and leadership roles.

As Griffin explains, it begins with early concept and community alignment, followed by feasibility studies and options to determine whether the project is viable. Governance comes next, defining how decisions will be made and overseen. Then follows commercial structuring, which includes offtake agreements, community benefits and environmental safeguards. Assembling the capital stack brings together sources of funding, while consent and



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approvals ensure requirements are met. Finally, financial close and notice to proceed (NTP) mark the official start of construction. "The sequence is consistent, but the pace is set by the community and its governance traditions," says Griffin.

Jeremy Thompson, founder and president of Eagle Spirit Indigenous Relations and a member of the Okanagan Indian Band, acts as a bridge between Nations and developers. "You might see on a big project where the developer, the proponent, will come to the Nation and say, 'we're looking for partners,'" Thompson explains. Initial agreements, such as memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or joint venture frameworks, allow both sides to explore the project and agree on the Nation's role, whether through equity ownership or other participation models.



Wade Griffin
National Director for Indigenous Engagement, BGIS



Jeremy Thompson
Founder and President, Eagle Spirit Indigenous Relations

"My role is more of the glue and brings everybody together and then make sure that we stay on track." Thompson says. "It's typically anywhere from six months to two years before you get to a point where we're having a pipe ceremony to kick something off and everything is in place." He adds, "Then from there it starts that process: signing an MOU that those Nations are going to work with that developer. The next step would be a joint venture, putting together the financial modelling, doing all the work on both sides to make sure everybody is OK with everything."

Thompson notes that equity models have become more accessible in recent years thanks to programs supporting Indigenous ownership. "With the different organizations across Canada, like the AIOC (Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation), the Canadian Infrastructure Bank, provincial and federal governments have been putting up money for that Indigenous equity." Depending on the project, developers may also use bridge financing to keep work moving while equity is finalized. "A lot of times, you end up having some type of third-party financial institution that will be a part of it because those infrastructure-type grants and projects don't always have all the financing. So Nations have to look at different financing and typically, it's working with that partner to secure the overall financing."

To fund large-scale projects, Nations can use a variety of financing structures. Griffin highlights how these structures operate in practice at Six Nations. Through the Six Nations of the Grand River Development Corporation (SNGRDC), in Ohsweken, Ont., the community has built a portfolio spanning roughly 2.5 GW across wind, solar, transmission and energy storage. It achieves this using a combination of SPVs (special-purpose vehicles), staged feasibility studies and blended capital, including its own equity, loan-backed debt and investments from strategic partners. "Common structures I see: minority or majority equity

in SPVs, joint ventures with reserved matters, transmission partnerships with regulated returns, project finance supported by Indigenous loan guarantees and capacity/offtake contracts that stabilize cash flow," Griffin explains.

These financing decisions don't just determine who pays, they also shape who governs. Projects are often structured through limited partnerships or corporations, creating an arms-length entity between the Nation and the project. "Financing determines the board table: who votes, who has reserved-matters vetoes and how stewardship is enforced," Griffin says. He points to projects like the Niagara Reinforcement Line, structured as a limited partnership with Indigenous ownership alongside Hydro One and Mississaugas of the Credit.

"I've also seen leaders use phased ownership, starting with a minority stake but negotiating step-up options as debt amortizes, so outside capital can enter without surrendering environmental standards, cultural protections or land stewardship encoded as reserved matters and compliance KPIs (key performance indicators)," Griffin says.

For Nations deciding how these projects will be structured, managing risk and ensuring stable revenue remain central. Risk is sometimes contained through arms-length corporations, Thompson explains. "With setting up that arms-length corporation away from the reserve, all the liabilities would lie in that. So there would be some guarantees put up by the Nation, but at the end of the day, it decreases their liabilities back to the band or to membership."


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Due diligence is also critical before any agreements are finalized. "So Nations typically do their due diligence; they'll have either in-house people or they'll use a third-party firm." Griffin takes a structured approach to managing both risk and revenue. "The approach I advocate is layered and staged: stage-gated development, right-sized leverage and contracted revenues."

SUCCESS IS CASH FLOW WITH CULTURE.

Long-term capacity and offtake contracts create predictable cash flow, while Indigenous loan guarantees lower borrowing costs and free up funding for community priorities. Griffin also emphasizes the importance of building capacity within communities. "The Aecon-Six Nations (A6N) partnership, now a general partnership, has delivered major utility work with a majority-Indigenous workforce and approximately $50 million in Indigenous payroll since 2015, converting 'construction risk' into 'community capability.'" Based in Toronto, the AECON Group is an infrastructure development and construction company.

For many Nations, revenue alone doesn't define success, but rather how that revenue supports the community over time. Thompson points to the importance of steady income that can be reinvested where it's needed most. "So looking at long-term success would be that revenue generation that would be paid back to the Nation that could be put into housing, can be put into different avenues like social services or public works."

In line with this perspective, Griffin explains, "We look at economic, social/capacity, cultural and environmental outcomes." In fiscal year 2024, SNGRDC



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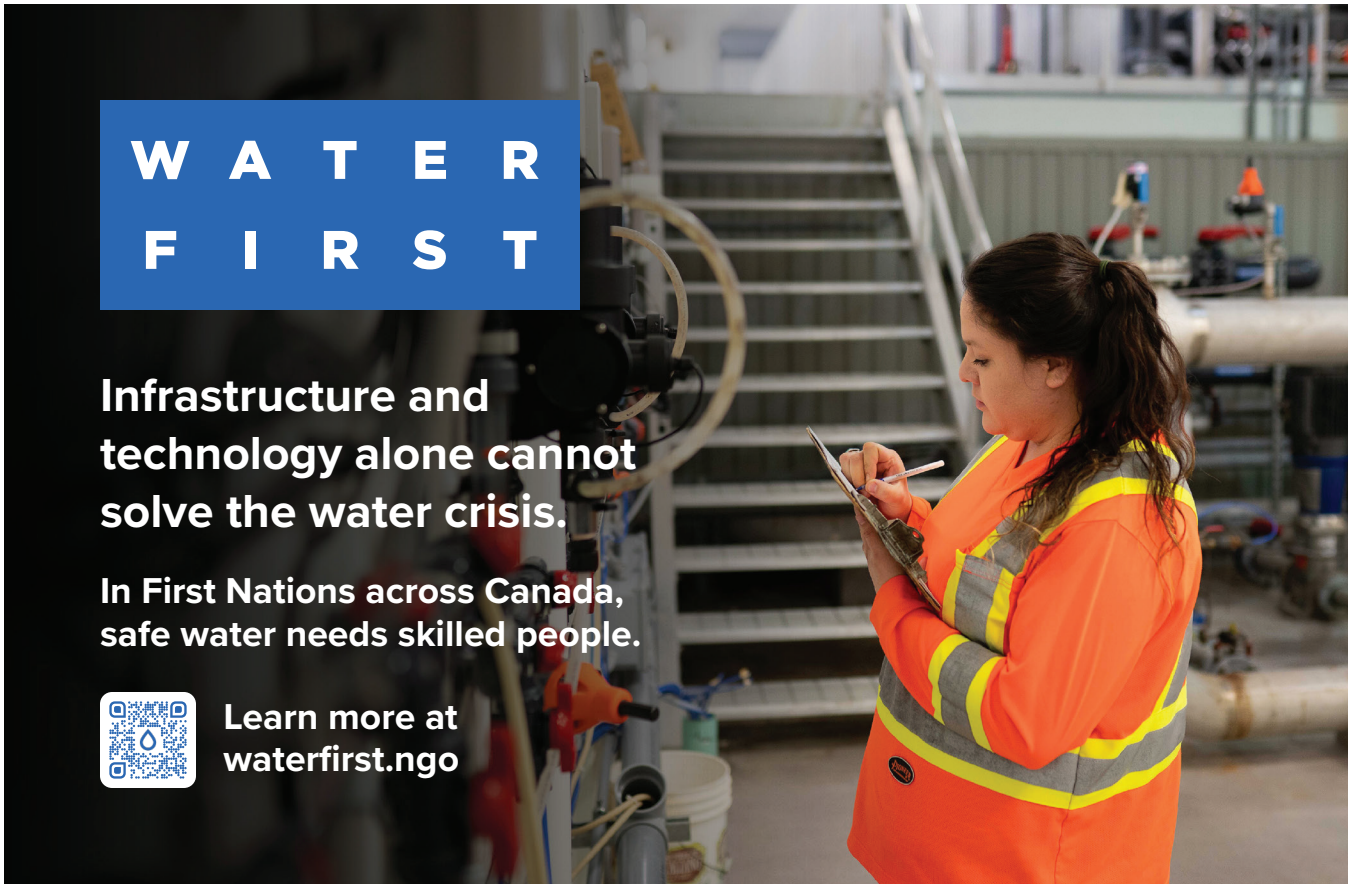
reported $46.9 million in revenue and $2.9 million distributed to the Economic Development Trust for community priorities. The EDT funds "everything from fire trucks and waterline extensions to mental health and elder programs, turning project cash flows into measurable well-being." It also builds capacity through apprenticeships, procurement and Indigenous business participation, while embedding environmental standards and Indigenous knowledge. "Success, in other words, is cash flow with culture," says Griffin.

For Nations considering similar projects, both Thompson and Griffin emphasize the importance of process, communication and long-term thinking. Thompson stresses that knowledge should remain within the community. "Someday, when we're not here and that project is finished and it's time to return it back to its natural state, we want that knowledge in the community."

He also highlights the need for transparency throughout. "I think the main part is to have the right people doing your due diligence and making sure that your communication, along with your potential partner on any major project, that the communication back to the First Nation and band members is open and transparent as much as it can be."

Griffin offers a final reminder: "Authentic community engagement, consent and internal approvals can't be compressed."





TAZA AT TSUUT'INA

Lessons from a Landmark First Nation Partnership

By Jennifer Ashawasegai-Pereira

Sometimes it's hard to remember how far First Nations have come. It wasn't really that long ago when the *Indian Act* prohibited First Nations from reaching their economic potential to achieve the parity their ancestors envisioned. There are now so many exciting examples of First Nations taking the reins of their journeys towards economic prosperity. Urban proximity is one of the big drivers in some of those successes.

First Nations have been creating their own economic opportunities and running with them. Lately, there's been an explosion, if you will. Before we dive into a few of those exciting ventures, let's first examine a couple of the prototypes.

For more than a decade, we've been hearing about the success stories of First Nations like Membertou First Nation, a Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq community that has developed 13 corporate entities, including a convention centre, a gaming entity and fishing enterprise. Their journey began in 1989, which means almost 40 years of business development.

Going almost all the way west, the other well-known example is British Columbia's Osoyoos Indian Band (OIB) which has flourished over the past few decades. OIB's development corporation owns a number of different enterprises from commercial leasing and tourism to construction-related services. The Osoyoos Indian Band website indicates OIB has generated just over $120 million in revenues over the last five years. Their partnerships have resulted in a world-class golf course and winery.

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Newer to the scene are two more First Nations which have been working hard at creating their own economic opportunities in the West and taking full advantage of either proximity to urban centres or in the urban centres themselves through thinking outside reserve boundaries.

Taza Development Corp. (TDC) — a 50/50 partnership between the Tsuut'ina Nation and Canadian real estate developer Canderel, is advancing one of North America's most significant First Nation development projects. Spanning 1,200 acres on Tsuut'ina land, just southwest of Calgary, Taza consists of three interconnected community villages, Taza Park, Buffalo Run and The Crossing. Designed to reflect Tsuut'ina history, culture and stories, each village has a distinct charcter guided by its own design principles and a shared framework of Tsuut'ina and City of Calgary infrastructure.

A standout recent milestone is the announcement of a Walmart Supercentre as the major anchor tenant at Taza Park, a 470-acre village currently under active build-out. When complete, Taza Park is planned to accommodate 16,000 residents alongside a diverse mix of retail, offices and other key anchors.

First Nation economic development in urban areas is accelerating and the Tsuut'ina Nation is leveraging this momentum through partnerships and disciplined execution. "It really comes down to how we are working with private companies and communities and looking for ways to leverage our strengths to achieve economic sovereignty moving forward," says Bryce Starlight, vice-president of business development at TDC. "We see long-term benefit; we're always looking at economic strength and prosperity and making sure we're doing that in the right way."



Ponds and Pathways


Bryce Starlight
Vice-President,
Business Development,
Taza Development Corp.

Starlight emphasizes that the Nation pursued the path that best secured long-term benefits. "It's not a one-size-fits-all," he notes. "We have to be flexible and amenable to changing circumstances. For Taza, we are looking at resource maximization: increasing profits and reinvesting in properties long term. This is what works for us. Other communities may be different."

That pragmatism extended to the land framework. With technical land issues and historical encumbrances to consider, the *First Nations Land Management Act* was not an option. Instead, the Tsuut'ina Nation moved through the *Indian Act* to designate land. "There were outstanding encumbrances to the reserve for historical uses," Starlight explains. "Land code would have required the whole rez. We didn't want to take the risk of reducing the claims we have against Canada with the Department of National Defence (DND)." Within that framework, TDC structured the partnership and development with Indigenous Services Canada to move the project forward.

"At the end of the day, Taza is one of the best projects in North America," Starlight says. "We hope there will be bigger and better commercial opportunities with the private sector."

In a similar vein, Alberta's Chiniki First Nation has spread their wings outside reserve boundaries, operating businesses in cities in several provinces. They've innovated and created their own opportunities. They own the Chinika Group of Companies (CGC), which has created abundance through their endeavours in real estate and health care. CGC's portfolio also includes procurement and supply chain, technology and innovation.

Ryan Robb, CEO of CGC, says this started because of Chief Aaron Young's dream to reduce or eliminate the number of



Taza Park Rendering

children going into care. Young has a background in child welfare and fully understands the over-representation of Indigenous children in care. "The concept was to see where we can interrupt and break colonial structures and not lose kids to care," Robb says. The profits are reinvested into the community to ensure family well-being.

CGC has also looked into health care as an economic pursuit. Last year, CGC partnered with Infinity Healthcare. Kam Rai, CGC's director of health and education, lists off a menu of services available through Infinity, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and others which contribute in a culturally informed way to the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual well-being of community members.

Infinity not only has an office in Mînî Thnî (formerly Morley, Alta.), but also in Calgary and two offices in British Columbia with new offices in the works. "I like what we're doing," Rai says. "We should be able to throw a rock at both oceans with stops in between." Infinity is planning to open an office in Edmonton as well as Ottawa this year. A video about Infinity Health and its good work will also be released soon.



Ryan Robb
CEO,
Chinika Group of Companies



Tim Laronde
Director of Indigenous Relations,
Chandos Construction

Grant writers are on staff and they access multiple funding sources to support the organization's goals, including transportation to get people to and from their appointments. Infinity also boasts state-of-the-art equipment for athletes.

Robb offers a great analogy for their economic pursuits throughout the country. Historically, he says, buffalo would have addressed all of the needs of the local Nation from shelter to food to clothing and more. And now, "Our hunting grounds are anywhere we want them to be."

In addition to economic prosperity through, close to and in cities, there are many ways to map out successes and every little bit helps. Another way is through partnerships. Chandos Construction has been partnering with First Nations on water infrastructure and other construction projects. Tim Laronde (Nipissing First Nation) is Chandos Construction's director of Indigenous Relations and says the company has placed importance on relationship building. Its Indigenous relations strategy focuses on four pillars: Indigenous cultural awareness, Indigenous talent recruitment and retention, Indigenous business procurement and business development.

Laronde notes that relationship is the most important before a project starts. He says there are two key goals: creating wealth and creating capacity in our communities. While some companies are still trying to figure things out, Laronde highlights some of the great projects that Chandos Construction has worked on in different parts of the country. It has built schools in various First Nations and multi-unit housing projects on- and off-reserve. One of the recent projects the company is most proud of is in Frog Lake, Sask. (Treaty 6 territory), where it developed the largest water infrastructure project, which the Nation led.

"When all parties come together, trust is built, we create wealth and build capacity," Laronde says. "We want to make sure the community benefits from things."

Thriving communities provide hope for others and there are so many pathways to success.


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Southern Chiefs' Organization Grand Chief Jerry Daniels

WEHWEHNEH BAHGAHKINAHGOHN

New Life for The Bay in Downtown Winnipeg

By Brittany Lavallee

For over a century, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) stood as a symbol of Canadian commerce. Rising over Winnipeg's Portage Avenue since 1926, the massive six-storey HBC building has watched Winnipeg change around it. Generations of shoppers have passed through its doors and shared many memories about the retail store.

However, the building carries deeper stories. Its foundations are tied to the fur trade and colonial expansion that re-shaped Indigenous lands and economies. For decades, it stood as a monument to that era. When its doors officially closed in 2020, the historic building sat empty — an architectural giant at the heart of the city.

Now, after years of vacancy, the structure is beginning a new chapter. The former HBC building is being reborn by First Nations leadership in Manitoba and is one of the most significant First Nations-led urban developments in Canada.

Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn

Jerry Daniels is Grand Chief for the Southern Chiefs Organization, representing 33 First Nations and more than 92,000 citizens. For the SCO, which Daniels says was "created to protect, enhance and promote the spirit and intent of the treaty-making process," the HBC building represented both a challenge and an opportunity. Rather than allowing the historic structure to remain empty or be redeveloped without First Nations participation, SCO took a proactive approach.

"The Hudson's Bay building was vacant for quite some time," Daniels says. "We wanted to make sure that we were front and centre. So, we reached out directly to Richard Baker, the owner of the Hudson's Bay, and shared our ideas about what could go into The Bay."

The new vision is to transform the historic building into a mixed-use development. For many First Nations, the transformation is not simply about redevelopment, it is about reclaiming space, building economic opportunities and reshaping relationships between First Nations and urban infrastructure.

As Daniels explains, the vision reflects SCO's broader mission to advance the spirit of the treaties while creating opportunities for First Nations citizens.

The building will now be known as Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn, which means "it is visible." The name reflects more than a title change. It signals that First Nations' presence, leadership and vision are no longer hidden in the urban landscape. In many ways, the building is being awakened.



Render Atrium view looking up

Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn will be a vibrant space. Once complete, it will include 373 residential units, with 200 designated as affordable housing for First Nations citizens. The building will also feature retail and commercial spaces that prioritize Indigenous entrepreneurs, as well as public cultural areas.

For Daniels, Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn addresses a reality faced by many First Nations people living in cities. "Our people are displaced," he says. "Residential units downtown just made sense."

First Nations Infrastructure and Values in Urban Landscape

The scale of the building is unprecedented for a First Nations-led initiative in Winnipeg, Daniels explains. "You have to understand that this project is bigger than some reserves in terms of the amount of housing that's being made available."

Beyond housing, the development also includes spaces designated to foster community. Among the most notable elements is a large atrium gathering space, which will host community meetings, cultural events and public forums.

The building's design reflects First Nations guidance at every stage. First Nations architects and designers have been central to the process, ensuring that cultural elements are embedded throughout the project. Ojibwe designer Destiny Seymour has contributed story in architecture inspired by traditional patterns and teachings, integrating diverse First Nations visual language into the design.

Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn is an urban space that will reflect the diverse cultures, traditions and identities of First Nations peoples.

Building Economic Opportunity

The transformation is also intended to function as an economic hub for Indigenous peoples.

During construction, SCO prioritized Indigenous participation in the workforce. According to Daniels, 77 per cent of the on-site workforce has been Indigenous to date, a number that significantly exceeds federal procurement standards.

"We wanted to exceed the minimal standards Canada put on procurement policies and show that SCO can manage a project



Wehwehneh Bahgahkinagohn

of this scale in a way that maximizes benefits for Indigenous people," says Daniels. The commercial spaces in the building will be designated for First Nations businesses. SCO also plans to include pop-up spaces to support entrepreneurs, creating new economic opportunities within the downtown core.

For Daniels, the project is intended to set a national precedent. "We like to think of this as the gold standard for the rest of the country," he says.

Partnerships and First Nations Governance

The project also demonstrates how First Nations organizations can lead complex infrastructure projects while building partnerships with municipalities and private-sector organizations.

One of SCO's key partners is True North Real Estate Development, which serves as a project manager and advisor. However, Daniels says that First Nations leadership remains at the centre of the project's governance structure.

"Our partnerships are generally First Nation majority-led," he says. This governance model allows SCO to maintain decision-making authority while drawing on external expertise in construction and urban development. The project has also influenced other developments in downtown Winnipeg, including discussions around the transformation of Portage Place and surrounding infrastructure.

Challenges Along the Way

Like any large infrastructure development, Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn has faced significant challenges. Rising construction costs, inflation and funding timelines have created obstacles that required careful planning and flexibility.

"When you start a project like this, you don't always consider the magnitude of what it could become," Daniels says. "We started with a low budget and as we got closer to the development we saw the actual costs associated with inflation and timing."

Despite these challenges, construction is moving forward. The demolition phase is complete and the crews are now entering the next stages of installation and interior development. For Daniels, the experience has provided valuable lessons for future First Nation-led infrastructure projects.

Reconciliation and the Future of Urban Development

For generations, the HBC played a central role in the trade economy that reshaped Indigenous lands and economies across Canada. Reclaiming the HBC building as a First Nations-led development therefore



represents a powerful moment in history. Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn also demonstrates how First Nations leadership can reshape relationships with governments and industry partners.

Daniels believes the project is already changing perceptions on First Nations capacity in large-scale development. “It tells people that First Nations are capable of managing major projects like this. Barriers are often artificially created. When those barriers are removed, our Nations can succeed.”

> OUR PEOPLE ARE DISPLACED. RESIDENTIAL UNITS DOWNTOWN JUST MADE SENSE.

A Model for First Nations Urban Projects

SCO hopes Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn will inspire similar initiatives across Turtle Island. Many HBC buildings across the country remain vacant, including locations in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. Daniels says SCO is exploring the possibility of developing partnerships to transform those buildings as well.

Another major example of First Nations-led urban development in Winnipeg is Naawi Oodena project, located on the former Kapyong Barracks lands in Treaty 1 Territory. That redevelopment project, led by Treaty One Nations, is transforming former military land into a major urban reserve that includes housing, commercial spaces and cultural infrastructure.



Render Atrium view from main floor

For Daniels, Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn is about the collective effort that made the project possible. Government partnership, investors, community leaders and workers have all contributed to bringing this to light. “The story of this project will be told in that building and throughout history, we will thank everyone who supported and contributed to making this possible” he says.

As construction continues, the building is awakening. Soon, its halls will fill with voices of families, bustling businesses and community events. The same walls that once symbolized colonial expansion will now hold stories of First Nations resurgence.

Wehwehneh Bahgahkinahgohn stands as a powerful reminder to the world what is possible when First Nations lead, transforming not only buildings, but relationships, economies and futures rooted in First Nations culture at the heart of Winnipeg.

Buildings hold memory and presence. Within First Nations languages and teachings, materials drawn from the Earth carry spirit and are understood as animate. This article is written with that understanding.

Daniels extends his sincere gratitude to Dan Vandal, Terry Duguid and PrairiesCan for their meaningful support. He acknowledges Rebecca Chartrand and all those who stepped forward to help advance this work.

He is especially thankful to the Manitoba chiefs who stood together in supporting a collective approach to addressing housing needs. He also recognizes Bernadette Smith for her strong advocacy, as well as the Government of Canada for its funding and support.



Bringing Forward Summit to You

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Elder Jeanette Starlight leads a smudging ceremony for Enbridge employees.

THE BUSINESS OF CULTURE

How Enbridge Integrates Indigenous Culture Into the Workplace

By Sheyenne Singh-Gauthier

Enbridge not only leads in the energy sector but also sets the standard in the integration of Indigenous culture and reconciliation into its workplace practices. Enbridge's core values are safety, integrity, respect, inclusion and high performance, and the company was determined to set itself apart by collaborating with Indigenous communities and people.

In 2022, Enbridge published its Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan (IRAP) which was developed in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action. Call to Action No. 92 calls on the corporate sector to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).



Members of Enbridge's Indigenous Employee Resource Group participate in the smudge ceremony.



Elder Jeanette Starlight

The IRAP includes 22 commitments, laying the foundation for Enbridge to create opportunities for collaboration with Indigenous communities. The IRAP covers areas from community engagement and relationships to Indigenous economic inclusion and partnerships, environmental stewardship, sustainability reporting, governance and leadership, as well as employment and education. In the corporate sector, IRAPs can provide frameworks to guide organizations in their reconciliation with Indigenous communities and their Indigenous staff. The IRAPs ensure that companies are upholding the TRC's Calls to Action, while also providing a structured approach for workplaces to foster an environment of respect, learning and partnership.

Looking at the Past



Keira Cappo
Strategist, Indigenous Partnerships, Policy and Strategic Initiatives, Enbridge

Keira Cappo is Enbridge's strategist for Indigenous partnerships, policy and strategic initiatives. She leads the implementation of Indigenous workplace practices and programs and enhances Indigenous collaboration and awareness both outside and within Enbridge. Cappo is Salteaux from Treaty 4 territory and grew up on her reserve.

Regarding Enbridge's work to create Indigenous inclusion and awareness, she says: "(We're) really looking at some key areas that were important to our Indigenous employees and to the relationships that we have in the community. It was really being able to understand and learn about not just reconciliation, but truth and reconciliation; that truth comes before that."

Enbridge has had positive feedback from staff, for several of whom it was the first time receiving such deep and impactful education about Indigenous people in Canada and the United States. This education has helped them connect and guide their day-to-day work at Enbridge.

> I'M HERE TO ENSURE THAT IT'S NOT JUST INK ON PAPER AND THAT WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE FROM OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS TO OUR EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP, TO EVERY LEVEL OF MANAGEMENT, AND OUR INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS.

Stepping Into the Future

In 2001, Enbridge introduced its first Indigenous Peoples Policy. This provided the initial groundwork for how the company respected the traditional ways of the land, environments and heritage sites, and recognized the legal and constitutional rights of Indigenous people. Cappo discusses the quick shift from consultation and regulatory matters at that time, to more of an engagement approach in discussions with the Indigenous community. "We wanted not to just come when there is a project or when


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we need to notify. We wanted to make sure that we were engaging for the lifecycle of our assets, which is years and years and years ahead, which is how First Nations people think. They think about the next seven generations to come."

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Enbridge President and CEO Greg Ebel (centre) with Edie Severight and Mark Shilliday, members of the Indigenous Employee Resource Group

Consulting the surrounding Indigenous communities and facilitating those conversations isn't limited to external relationships and partnerships but is also practised within Enbridge's structure.

Indigenizing the Office

Indigenizing the workplace requires more than just training; it requires a commitment to recognizing Indigenous perspectives and facilitating the space for Indigenous inclusion. Cappo says that conversations have paved the way for a deeper understanding and increased awareness of Indigenous history and worldviews. There has been a noticeable shift from Indigenous inclusion within the workplace as project-based to being structurally embedded into Enbridge's corporate DNA.

"I'm here to ensure that it's not just ink on paper and that we are accountable from our board of directors to our executive leadership, to every level of management and our individual contributors," Cappo says.

With a background working in her reserve's band office, Cappo had been unaware of the opportunities at Enbridge that were available to her and her Indigenous peers. When she started as an advisor at Enbridge, her manager provided her with the appropriate career development, training and mentorship opportunities to further her growth at the company.

Doubting herself because she did not have the oil and gas industry background, knowledge and experience that she had assumed she needed, she credits her team at Enbridge for having faith and believing in her. "Now we have a whole team that goes out and shares what it's like working here and giving Indigenous students opportunities to see what work we have been doing," she says.



Reconciliation and Forgiveness

One of the 22 commitments in Enbridge's IRAP is a goal to increase Indigenous representation in the company. Enbridge seeks to increase its Indigenous recruitment and retention by engaging with post-secondary institutions as well as urban Indigenous recruitment centres, and by hosting annual career fairs. Enbridge's IRAP identifies any existing or anticipated employment barriers for current and future employees. The plan also includes regular training for Enbridge's talent acquisition teams, customizing job postings and descriptions to highlight the importance of Indigenous knowledge and experience as a key asset. Access to employment opportunities is one barrier Enbridge continuously works to address, since current barriers make it more challenging for Indigenous people.

Recognizing traditional Indigenous worldviews and practices requires commitment and action toward genuine change, beginning from within. Cappo says that her office holds quarterly sharing circles and smudging ceremonies with knowledge keepers, that are aligned with the change of the seasons. "This is what I do with my kookum in the summer, with my mom and my sister-in-law and my niece. This is what we do at home. And to see that at this big company, it's so important for us to have that representation."

She acknowledges that while her perspectives and opinions do not reflect those of the Indigenous population as a whole, she can see the positive impact and changes these practices have had on staff since the IRAP was implemented. "(It's) making space for sharing with peers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, on what our experiences are, what we are going through and how we can support each other. I think that's really important to have that space, the smudging, sharing, seeing our non-Indigenous colleagues coming in and listening to the elders," Cappo says, adding that staff learn from the teachings. She says they embrace "that smudge ceremony … understanding how it helps us and why we have been doing it for such a long time."

Reconciliation and inclusion in the workplace take more than just good intentions. They require consistent commitment from team leaders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to acknowledge and understand treaties, inherent rights and history. Deeper discussions are held with Indigenous people themselves about what reconciliation means to them. Staff reflect on past and present actions and how these processes and changes can be applied in the workplace.

To become a more culturally safe organization, a company needs individuals who feel supported by internal structures and effective processes. Companies need to think about the systems and structures that are in place and how they may be harmful and unwelcoming to Indigenous communities.

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