

## Seven Skill sets for Partnering with Aboriginal Organizations and Communities

### REVISED

Successful partnering with Aboriginal groups is an important corporate skill. Most companies that have acquired that skill over years of effort regard it, rightly, as a competitive advantage. What are the components of that skill?

1. **Forthright Relationship Building.** What is all-important for corporate officers who wish to work with Aboriginal groups is that they recognize that frankness, forthrightness, honesty and openness from the first handshake are the only sure grounds for relationship building. Tom Paddon is General Manager of Vale Inco Labrador, a copper mine boasting more than a 50% Aboriginal employee base. It took Paddon years of negotiation to achieve that threshold. His advice: “Earn credibility. It can’t be bought. It takes time and usually pain to attain.”
2. **Mutual Respect.** The glue of a growing relationship is respect, and that respect is meaningless if it is not mutually accorded. Entire retinues of executives have shown up at reserves with lawyers and negotiators in tow, offering what the corporations thought were excellent benefits – only to be shown the door out. A relationship of respect is a relationship of equals, and one that best grows from a meeting between “two chiefs” who themselves grow to respect one another.
3. **Mutual Trust.** Within Aboriginal communities, mutual respect is the soil for growing healthy partnerships, mutual trust is the living, delicate life form that grows in that soil. No enterprise will prove self-sustaining if it does not grow from the mutual trust of the partners. Conflict resolution specialists recommend that corporate negotiators give special attention to difficulties in communication. Such problems can erode trust with amazing speed. Researchers who have examined failed partnerships note that many difficulties first appeared as communication glitches, and because the parties failed to recognize the source, they lost trust in one another and in the partnering process.
4. **Open Communication.** When companies and Aboriginal communities enter into protracted discussions and negotiations, a common need emerges: for both sides to have open access to the other side when the need arises. This can occur between legal officers, between people representing environmental issues, or “chief to chief.” Whatever the formal channels of communication may be, informal communications are also important.
5. **Explicit Mutual Goals.** A mining company and an Aboriginal community in the North strike a joint venture to create a small airline that can rotate workers in a remote locale. This is a reasonable proposition, so long as the company and the community share the same goals for that airline, short-term and long-term.
6. **Clear Roles, Responsibilities, and Accountability.** The most elaborate provisions of a partnership agreement are often those involving accountability and responsibilities. These should be distributed fairly and clearly, and overseen

by governance groups that themselves represent people from both sides of the partnership.

7. **Commitment.** No serious partnership can grow without an equally serious commitment from both parties. The history of negotiations between mining companies and Aboriginal bands shows that where real commitment existed between mining companies and their partnering bands, progress could be made in Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) and other partnering agreements. When commitment is lacking, almost always, these negotiations fail.