

ABORIGINAL HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL OF CANADA
CONSEIL POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT DES RESSOURCES HUMAINES AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

Discussion Paper for the
Sixth Annual Champions' Meeting
Networks of Change for Aboriginal Inclusion

December 8, 2004



Introduction

The Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada (AHRDCC) was established in 1998 as a public-private partnership with the mission to increase Aboriginal Peoples' participation in the Canadian labour market. As part of its two-tiered governance structure, the Champions provide the Council with broad strategic direction and access to an extensive range of expertise and knowledge to facilitate the achievement of its mission. The Champions are leaders from Corporate Canada, Government and Labour, Aboriginal Organizations and Education Institutions.

The Champions' Annual Event provides an opportunity for members to respond to critical skills, learning and employment-related policy issues which, in turn, informs the Council's strategic direction and roles in the national agenda. In recent years there has been a shift from "briefing" style meetings to a more assertive "think tank with action" perspective. This reflects the Champions' desire to play a stronger role in helping to convey the mission of the Council to increase and accelerate Aboriginal employment. In 2003 the Champions expressed a strong interest in playing a more active role advancing Aboriginal inclusion on the national stage. As a result the 2004 Champions' Event focuses upon the importance of inclusion of Aboriginal People in the workforce. Champions will be asked to work within their spheres of influence to create "networks of change" that will encourage employers to embrace the principles of inclusion and achieve higher levels of Aboriginal employment.

Background

Canada has enjoyed a standard of living and economic growth rates surpassing virtually all nations of the world. While a number of challenges have arisen to threaten the continuation of this bounty, a shortage of skilled labour presents one of the most pressing, and imminent, challenges. The Conference Board of Canada has predicted there will be a shortfall of nearly one million workers in many of the skilled trade and highly skilled, knowledge-oriented occupations by 2020¹ placing serious constraints on the continued health and vitality of Canada's economy.

Canada's Aboriginal population, the fastest growing and youngest segment of the population, offers a huge potential workforce that could address a substantial proportion of the impending labour shortfall. By 2020 over 400,000 Aboriginal People will enter the workforce. As one observer noted, "Aboriginal People represent the largest untapped labour force in Canada, and thus it makes good economic sense to engage the Aboriginal population".²

The business case for increasing Aboriginal employment is compelling: access to a large source of underutilized labour; availability of a wide range of support mechanisms to ensure training and education; partnering relationships that provide guidance and support to ensure employers create an accommodating work place; and the improved productivity and creativity derived from a diverse, mutually supportive and inclusive labour force.

The benefits of increasing Aboriginal employment levels extend to a broad increase in living standards and social and health indicators in Aboriginal communities across the country. In addition, governments at all levels will benefit from reduced strain on the social and health systems as the number of Aboriginal People accessing these services decline. Finally, stronger national, social and cultural bonds will be forged as more Aboriginal People begin to participate fully in the economic and social development of the country.

The cost of inaction and maintenance of the status quo is high. Besides the enormous social and health costs borne by Aboriginal Peoples, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found that the status quo for Aboriginal People was resulting in a total cost of \$7.5 billion annually or nearly one per cent of GDP in direct fiscal costs and in the loss of net income to Aboriginal People. These costs will increase by 47 per cent to \$11 billion by 2016 and continue to grow at a rapid pace³. Clearly the status quo needs to change, if not only for purely fiscal reasons, then surely out of a wish to bring Aboriginal Canadians closer to the standard of living enjoyed by their fellow citizens. RCAP called for a fundamental renewal of the relationship with Aboriginal People and Canada and cautioned that there was the risk of serious conflict between the two groups.

The fact that there is a compelling argument for employers to hire more Aboriginal People has not meant that this connection has been made where it matters most – in the hearts and minds of Canada's employers. The reasons for this disconnect are complex but there are troubling indications that negative attitudes towards Aboriginal People continue to persist.

A major poll conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC) revealed some disturbing insights into how non-Aboriginal Canadians view their fellow Aboriginal citizens⁴. Over 20 per cent of those polled felt that "relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians were deteriorating". Over half the respondents believed that Aboriginal people were as well off or better off when compared to other Canadians⁵. This perception is strongly refuted by UN indices indicating that Canada's Aboriginal Peoples would rank 43rd in the world in terms of economic conditions. Disturbingly, the poll also found that there was low public support for treaty and land rights.

¹ Conference Board of Canada. *Performance and Potential*. 2000-2001.

² Canada West Foundation. *Achieving Potential: Towards Improved Labour Outcomes for Aboriginal People*. Vol. 2. 2003.

³ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. *Renewal: A Twenty Year Commitment*. Vol. 5. 49.

⁴ Centre for Research and Information on Canada. *Facing the Future: Relations between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Canadians*. 2004.

⁵ Ibid

The Canadian public is not alone in harboring persistent negative attitudes towards Aboriginal People. A recent National Post Compass survey contained three specific references to CEOs and their concerns regarding the effectiveness of current government policies and funding programs related to Aboriginal People. When asked to score the performance of politicians, policy makers, policies and institutions, the worst scores were attributed to the federal government for, among other items, the poor performance with respect to Aboriginal programs. In regards to Aboriginal policy, they “wanted to see proof that federal spending works”. As well, the survey pointed out that in the Throne Speech, of the ten elements in the speech, only spending on Aboriginal programs received a failing grade. Clearly there is a need to address these misperceptions and negative attitudes in order to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for government investment in strategies leading to the hiring and retention of an Aboriginal workforce.

The basis of these conflicting and negative attitudes lies in part with the way Canadians get their information regarding Aboriginal People. Most non-Aboriginal Canadians have been educated on a concept of Aboriginal Peoples as if they were frozen in time with little exposure to contemporary issues or events affecting them. The media has also presented a picture of Aboriginal Peoples that has tended towards emphasizing the extremes – from the tragedies of Davis Inlet to the multi-million dollar land claims agreements. Too often the impression non-Aboriginals receive has been that Aboriginal Peoples are in need of vast amounts of assistance, or they are better off than the average Canadian. As early as 1990 an Angus Reid Group poll indicated that most Canadians have only limited social contact with Aboriginal People – over 70 per cent indicated that they occasionally, rarely or never had social contact with Aboriginal People⁶. Non-Aboriginal Canadians are not exposed to a broader portrait of the everyday successes that form part of modern Aboriginal life – successful businesses, strong community programs, innovative educational programs, vibrant and confident people who are productive and contented members of the larger society. This development is precisely what R. Ponting referred to as the “Broken Window concept”, a reference to the tendency of people to extrapolate from a limited experience to come to an inaccurate conclusion⁷.

Within this context many employers may not perceive Aboriginal People as a viable potential source of employees or may attribute incorrect attitudes to them. In a study conducted by the Canada West Foundation, respondents identified “not enough education and training” as the main reason Aboriginal Peoples experience low employment levels. A significant number indicated that “not willing to work” was the primary reason. It is interesting to note that the study also identified substantial support for public policies that supported increased education and training for Aboriginal People. The disparity in attitudes illustrates the challenges encountered by those attempting to develop policy initiatives to address these issues.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) recommended that a communication and awareness program be undertaken with a view to counteracting public apathy and a general lack of awareness about Aboriginal People and their institutions. The federal response to the RCAP, “Gathering Strength”, was based upon renewing the relationship between Canada and Aboriginal Peoples and specifically acknowledged the need to conduct a public education campaign to increase the understanding of non-Aboriginal Canadians of their fellow Aboriginal citizens. Without the development of an effective action plan to achieve this goal, it should not be surprising that to date little progress has been made.

There is no silver bullet to overcome these challenges. A variety of strategies involving all levels of stakeholders must be developed to effectively address the problem. One thing is clear: all stakeholders must participate in developing and implementing these strategies. Governments must continue to work in partnership with Aboriginal People to develop and implement supportive policies and programs that create a positive environment for change. Aboriginal People have the responsibility to become employment-ready, particularly in relation to essential skills. Employers must become more aware of the potential of the Aboriginal labour force, recognize their responsibility to make their workplaces more accommodating of Aboriginal People, and assume a strong leadership role in promoting positive attitudes towards them.

⁶ Angus Reid Group. *Native Issues Study*. October 1990.

⁷ Ponting, R. *Profile of Public Opinion on Canadian Natives and Native Issues: Knowledge, Perceptions, and Attitudinal Support*. Module 3. Research Unit for Public Policy Studies, Faculty of Social Science, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, 1987.

⁸ Canada West Foundation. *Achieving Potential: Towards Improved Labour Market Outcomes for Aboriginal People*. September 2003.

What may be needed is a fundamental shift in the way many organizations conduct their business. While the above section provides a rather stark view of the persistence of negative attitudes towards Aboriginal People, there are some reasons for optimism. A Conference Board of Canada survey of 300 large firms indicated that 91 per cent of respondents would like to hire more Aboriginal People but 88 per cent didn't know where to start. Connecting interested employers with the Aboriginal labour force involves, not just introducing them to contact lists, but embracing a culture of diversity and inclusion. There is a growing skills shortage in Canada and this too presents an opportunity for Aboriginal People as employers seek human capital solutions to their labour market crisis. And finally, a third reason for optimism is the growing emphasis on employment, education and healthy communities on the part of Aboriginal leaders and entrepreneurs.

Inclusion and the Networks of Change

The Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada (the Council) has recognized the critical need to encourage the widespread adoption of a more inclusive workplace ethic to increase the employment of Aboriginal People. An inclusive workplace embraces the diversity of its workforce and encourages and values the stimulation and creativity this diversity brings to achieving the organization's goals. An inclusive workplace ensures all employees feel comfortable, valued and equal. Encouraging the transformation of the Canadian workplace has become a focus for the efforts of the Council and its Champions.

The Council has carefully studied the linkages between awareness, negative attitudes and communications initiatives related to Aboriginal People. It has incorporated what it has learned into its human resource explorations and developed a Model of Inclusion that is guided by an understanding of the history, public policy and socio-economic development of Canada's Aboriginal People. The model conceptualizes seven stages which organizations master as they successfully adopt the principles of inclusion. The model is an instrument with which to gauge the inclusionary health of an organization and helps to understand the scale of the disconnect between it and the Aboriginal labour force.

In essence, the model moves through the initial stage whereby the issue of inclusion is not on the radar screen of the organization. The process continues through successive stages of awareness embracing the concept of inclusion until, at the end, the organization has fully embraced inclusion without the need for any further support or encouragement, and in fact the organization becomes a strong proponent of inclusion within its network. A critical component in the success of this model is the knowledge provided to the organization by its leadership in regards to adopting and enacting the principles of inclusion. The Council believes this model has substantial potential as an important tool in breaking down the barriers currently limiting employers' interest in hiring, and keeping, Aboriginal employees.

Spearheading the initiative to encourage organizations to adopt the principles of inclusion are the Champions. Utilizing their significant personal, social and political capital within their respective spheres of influence, the Champions play a unique and powerful role in acting as catalysts for change, in effect acting as missionaries for change. By encouraging other leaders to become aware of, and to adopt the principles of inclusion, the Champions can excite the imagination, and capture the hearts and souls of their peers within their own networks. It is anticipated that once these new "converts" approach the final phase of the inclusion process, they in turn will pick up the gauntlet and thus themselves become agents within their own Networks of Change. The cascading effect will provide a critical catalyst in addressing some of the key challenges that currently exist to increasing Aboriginal employment in the workforce.

Networks of Change are aligned with the community of practice concept. Wenger defines communities of practice "as groups who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis"⁹. Corporations are discovering the power of these networks and uncovering the leverage gained by working with a community cluster of like-minded people. Benefits cited include helping to drive strategies, starting new lines of business, solving problems more quickly, transferring of best practices, development of professional skills, and assisting in recruiting and retaining talent.

The new Networks of Change for Aboriginal Inclusion will be driven by leaders and organizations committed to increasing Aboriginal productivity and prosperity. The strength of the network is defined by three features: the affinity between and among members for Aboriginal Inclusion, the exchange of knowledge and the leveraging of investments in real-time practices. Investments include knowledge, human, social and financial capital and the innovations arising from these investments benefit both the individual corporation and members within the network. Knowledge shapes practices and as practices are executed, new knowledge informs on new future innovations and solutions.

⁹ Etienne, Wenger and Synder, W.M. *Communities of Practice: The Organization Frontier*. Harvard Business Review. January 2000. 140-141

The leadership to sustain a commitment to Aboriginal inclusion will be comprised of organizations and leaders deeply committed to advancing a socio-economic imperative. In the book, *Leadership and the New Science* by Margaret Wheatley, she states that "leadership is about facilitating the creation of partnerships, relationships and networks" and the main leadership challenge is to facilitate processes that respect diversity while being able to arrive at a congruence of vision and purpose. Dynamic connectedness is the new fulcrum point.

Over the past four years the Council has worked with approximately 150 organizations and more than 1000 managers in a range of Aboriginal human resource development initiatives. The Council now wants to build on this experience and work with companies to launch an effective assault on exclusionary practices and to develop a systematic way to achieve a wider adoption of inclusive practices across the broad spectrum of Canadian businesses. The goal of the first pilot year of the Networks of Change initiative is to engage 50 committed companies to establish Networks of Change. The growing network of companies will be the catalyst for Canada's first community of practice of Aboriginal Inclusion. The Council's role is to work with the network to focus efforts on human resource issues, align investments in real-time tools and services, implement new knowledge practices, facilitate knowledge networks, create measurement and outcome-based reporting mechanisms and document practices. The Council's network of leaders is expected to reach 50 in the first year and expand to 100 in the second and third year capping at 150 over the long-term. These leaders will be part of an exclusive network anticipated to receive considerable attention and respect for their leadership role in this initiative. A number of other benefits will also accrue to this community including gaining an enhanced ability to influence public and private policy, participating in the creation of knowledge, benchmarks and action agendas that will leverage other members' knowledge and investment. Benefits will also include participating in the design and implementation of Aboriginal inclusion strategies which will facilitate faster recruitment and address organizations' skills gap. Participation in the cost effective collective and systematic research of inclusion strategies and being part of a network that shares this information are other benefits.

At the December 8th Annual Champions' Event, a dialogue will be facilitated with the Champions. The purpose is to stimulate discussion and gain insights and direction regarding the Networks of Change and the process of inclusion. This is a call for leadership.

Questions for Discussion

1. What role should public and private business leaders play to help foster more positive attitudes about Aboriginal inclusion in Canada?
2. What challenges do you think public and private leaders face in their efforts to create a more inclusive work place?
3. Where does Aboriginal inclusion "place" in the stack of issues that public and private leaders face in their effort to create a more productive Canada?
4. What needs to happen to radically accelerate Aboriginal inclusion in Canada?

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