

INDIGENOUS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: Wise principles and practices

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A note on context

Context is crucial to any conversation about Indigenous youth engagement. Canada's historic and ongoing legacy of colonialism – of which the residential "school" system is a major part – continues to have daily impacts on the lives of Indigenous peoples. Those seeking to engage Indigenous youth – particularly non-Indigenous settlers – are encouraged to engage in ongoing listening and learning, continually reflect on their own power and privilege, and familiarize themselves with key documents. These include the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, Indian Act, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, and Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice.

Funded by the Future Skills Centre, the Two-Eyed Seeing Network aims to engage a network of Indigenous communities, industry leaders, workforce and social development experts, and education and training providers to address barriers and establish a shock-proof pathway to work for Indigenous youth in British Columbia. Led by the Construction Foundation of British Columbia, project partners include Two Eyed Seeing Consulting CCC Inc., Foresight Cleantech Accelerator Centre, Vancouver Island University, the Electrical Joint Training Committee, and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC).*

To support the Two-Eyed Seeing Network in its activities, SRDC was tasked with conducting secondary research on wise practices in Indigenous and Indigenous youth engagement, particularly in the context of employment and skills training. This brief is informed by experiences from industry, research and

academia, environmental management, natural resources development, and social services, both from across Canada and internationally. It is not intended to be prescriptive, recognizing that meaningful engagement is contextual and without a "one-size-fits-all" approach. It is also not exhaustive: readers may know of or apply additional principles and wise practices.

This is part of a series of three research briefs developed for the Two-Eyed Seeing Network. To learn more about the Two-Eyed Seeing Network, provide feedback on this resource, or ask questions about the project, visit www.2esn.ca or send an email to info@2eyedseeing.com.

Indigenous engagement

In terms of Indigenous engagement, we focus on wise practices associated with four key principles: 1) respect, 2) trust, 3) self-determination, and 4) commitment and reciprocity.

*SRDC is an independent, non-profit social policy research and evaluation organization with staff located across Canada. The team supporting the Two-Eyed Seeing Project includes those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry, all of whom are located on the unceded and unsurrendered land of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people, in the city colonially known as Ottawa.



RESPECT

Recognize the connections your work has to Indigenous communities and territories, how the history of colonization and past relationships frame those connections, and how the historical and current colonial context impacts Indigenous communities and your own power and privilege.

Have reverence for and ensure your engagement is informed by **spiritual values and practices**, including understanding that all of creation is interdependent and interconnected.

Ground the engagement, project, and work in an **Indigenous perspective**, including making an effort to incorporate and apply Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge through engagement and project approaches.

Ask as many **questions** as you need to be both informed and respectful.

Understand, follow, and if needed, ask about, respectful Indigenous **protocols of engagement** that may uniquely apply in each community, which may include providing gifts and/or honoraria to Elders, youth, and any distinguished or invited guests.

Take time to learn and thoroughly understand any **concerns raised** by the community/ies.

Expand your understanding of the **titles, rights, and treaty rights** of the Indigenous communities you are engaging with.

Recognize any **overlapping interests** on the issues or territories among Indigenous people.

Build **community and area profiles**.

Critically reflect on your own **social location, power, and privilege** and how this impacts your relationships with Indigenous people, communities, and Nations.

Engage, relate, and work in **culturally-competent and culturally-safe** ways by seeking out self-directed learning, professional development, and training around cultural safety, as well as seeking and accepting cultural mentorship or advice from local Indigenous people.

Honour and acknowledge Indigenous lands, leadership, ways of being and knowing, and Indigenous territory and rights unique to each community and Nation.

Review the **history and territories** of the lands you are on, and familiarize yourself with the Indian Act, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and Calls to Action, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, among other documents.

Acknowledge and honour differences between First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, as well as the diversity of nations, languages, cultures, teachings, and traditions belonging to each.

Use appropriate **communication styles**, including using terms that can be commonly understood; provide information in a range of accessible formats.





TRUST

Ensure you have considered **all relevant Indigenous voices** on the matter, including asking those you hope to engage with whether there are other people with whom you should be inviting to the table.

Be clear about **why** you are engaging, and ensure you have the support for the level of engagement you are proposing.

Be transparent about aims, benefits, expectations, resources, budget, timelines, limitations, and constraints of the project, so that Indigenous partners can make an informed decision about their involvement.

Ensure that engagement and involvement in the project **benefits the Indigenous community** and does not harm them or their members.

Mitigate any risk of harm, ensuring consent and confidentiality, providing benefits, returning any research or outputs to the community, and ensuring respect for participants.

Connect with well-respected Elders, community members, or tribal or band government officials who have pre-existing trusting relationships.

Involve Elders, including considering a face-to-face meeting for introductions before any formal meetings and making space for Elders to speak first and last.

Involve youth (see the next section for more).

Involve women, including honouring their respective roles in Indigenous communities, capturing individual and collective perspectives, and ensuring women's political leadership and political organizations are engaged.

Find ways to **collaborate on smaller projects first**, using participatory approaches and based on Indigenous aims and priorities.

Recognize that Indigenous engagement is a **spectrum** that involves 1) gathering information, 2) connecting and communicating, 3) listening and learning, 4) dialogue, 5) collaboration, and 6) formal partnership. It may be necessary to return to previous steps to build and maintain trust.

Hold **distinct engagement sessions** with Indigenous partners, organizations, and communities, in addition to inviting them to mainstream consultations.

Engage Indigenous people living in **urban areas** and the organizations that serve them, and respect local protocols even in an urban setting.

Consider a **'neutral' location** if you are involving multiple Indigenous communities; if meeting with one Indigenous group or Nation, try to meet at their location or one they are most comfortable with.

Engage and communicate **early, continuously, cyclically**, using multiple tools and approaches, at the pace that is most comfortable for the Indigenous community or Nation, and over the long term to create opportunities to build meaningful relationships and partnerships.

Develop an **engagement plan or agreement** with the community, including how you will know the engagement process and project is a success as well as how you will demonstrate that and report back on progress.

Be prepared to have **multiple meetings** to ensure each community has been thoroughly informed and engaged through all stages of the project, from initiation, planning, implementation, reporting back to communities, evaluation, and any other ongoing project work.



SELF-DETERMINATION

Engage on a **Nation-to-Nation basis**, recognizing that Indigenous people are not merely stakeholders.

Recognize that Indigenous sovereignty and decision-making is a **constitutionally-protected right**; Indigenous communities have an inherent right to self-determination.

Recognize that **no one individual represents the collective opinions** of Indigenous peoples; do not invite one Indigenous person and expect them to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities.

Honour the **First Nations principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession** in all elements of the project and related engagement.

Respect and abide by **free, prior, and informed consent**, as outlined in UNDRIP and other best practices and ethical standards and guidelines, as well as considering any existing and potential legal obligations relevant to engagement.

Set up **supportive measures** such as record-keeping, process reviews, conflict resolution mechanisms, and others as appropriate.

Prioritize **Indigenous-driven projects** and ensure projects address the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities.

Be willing to **shift your engagement and project approach** based on each community's needs and priorities and based on Indigenous peoples' guidance, feedback, and concerns.

Recognize that relationships are developed both with **individuals and communities**.

Ensure collaboration with Indigenous groups builds **meaningful relationships** that integrate Indigenous groups, people, communities, and Nations as active partners playing a substantive role in the project.

Review the **governing systems** of those Indigenous communities you hope to engage.

Focus on **capacity-building**, including ensuring that communities and Nations are provided with resources and financial compensation to effectively engage and take part in the project.

Support **longer-term community capacity** by providing education, training, infrastructure, and funding, when available.

Develop community-based, decentralized **decision-making processes** or Indigenous-based collaboration protocols that include shared interests, benefits, goals, as well as how to work together, roles, processes, approvals, and practice standards.

Understand **formal approval processes** and the time involved unique to each community, which might include community meetings to provide project overviews or obtaining approval from leadership.

Ensure projects support **Indigenous social justice and holistic wellbeing**, and add value to the lives of Indigenous people.

Recognize that planning and development should be **Indigenous-led or co-created** in recognition of Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and autonomy.



COMMITMENT & RECIPROCITY

Be authentic, and work towards having an **authentic presence** in the community.

Seek out **non-intrusive opportunities to build relationships**, for instance by attending community gatherings or formal events (e.g., annual meetings) hosted by Indigenous partner organizations.

Be prepared to **share your own family background** at meetings in a spirit of reciprocity, as traditional introductions are common among Indigenous cultures.

Ensure engagements and projects are **mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and focus on the needs of the community**, not just the needs of the project.

Focus on engagement and projects with Indigenous communities as a **committed relational practice**, and not a one-time, outcomes-based transaction or engaging simply to delegate work to Indigenous partners or to speed up the process.

Have **mutual accountability** to share responsibility, including holding up your end of the process.

Actively collaborate to **share power**.

Engage with **ways of knowing other than your own** on an equal basis of exchange.

Develop and negotiate mandatory or volunteer **written agreements** that spell out mutual benefits.

Provide **responsive funding** with opportunities for ongoing reflection on how well the funding is supporting Indigenous aims and priorities.

Employ **Indigenous hiring practices**, including creating opportunities for non-Indigenous staff to mentor Indigenous staff and peoples, and creating opportunities for Indigenous people to play lead roles in the project.

Hire Indigenous staff who can help foster relationships between the company and Indigenous communities, maintain open communication, and ensure that Indigenous interests are considered throughout the project.

Source locally and support **Indigenous businesses**.

Use **community/progressive leadership styles**, including being genuinely collegial, not "turf-bound", consensus-based, accountable, committed to doing things differently without the context of bureaucratic silos, and supporting leading from the ground up and in a community-based way.

Have **flexible timeframes** with as much extra time as needed for engaging with Indigenous people and communities, as well as educating external funders, industry, and other bodies about the importance of adequate time for engagement.

Provide **resources, tools, and supports** to facilitate engagement and full partnership.

Ensure Indigenous **validation** of projects and approaches, including confirmation, and where needed, modification by Indigenous peoples, of information gained or gathered about an Indigenous community and interpretation of engagement and project findings.

Indigenous youth engagement

Building from the principles and wise practices described previously, this section outlines values and wise practices to consider specifically with regard to Indigenous youth engagement.

The following ten core values ground wise practices for Indigenous youth engagement:



COMMUNITY AS FOUNDATION



INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE



SOLUTIONS-BASED



TRUTH



NON-PARTISAN



STRENGTHS-BASED



CEREMONY



HONOUR



INCLUSIVITY



TRANSPARENCY



There are several wise practices for Indigenous youth engagement:

- **Centre** Indigenous youth voices and experiences
- Encourage **youth to lead**
- Engage in a **meaningful approach** based on Indigenous youth's perspectives
- Use **talking circles**
- Engage in **empathy mapping**
- Ensure **sector investment**
- Integrate **education and training** opportunities
- Have **flexibility** in defining and measuring "success"
- Have an **open mind and heart**
- Involve **Elders and mentors**
- Provide youth with additional **youth-friendly orientation** before any discussions
- Offer a **variety** of ways for them to get familiar with the information
- Include representation of **diverse genders**
- **Acknowledge the discrimination** faced by Indigenous youth due to both their age and ethnicity

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