

## **Presentation to NCMA AGM**

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Thursday, 07 May 2009

According to the agenda, the title of my presentation is “Aboriginal Engagement”. I have to admit I was remiss in getting the necessary information to Maxine, so she went ahead and put a title to my presentation. I guess the title is okay; however I like to think I am going to talk more about improving the quality of life in our communities, communities which are the economic heartbeat of British Columbia. While my focus is obviously going to be on Aboriginal people, my remarks are equally transferable to any marginalized segment of our communities.

Before continuing, it is important that I provide several disclaimers. I am not a scholar, I am a practitioner. I am here today as a passionate advocate for the role of Aboriginal people in improving the quality of life in our communities. I am not speaking on behalf of anyone other than myself, I do not represent any particular First Nation, and I take full responsibility for my words and for my actions.

It is also important that my comments today are not taken out of context. They are not intended to downplay or disparage the Aboriginal or First Nations reconciliation efforts that are currently underway across this great province of ours. I am passionate about what I do, so sometimes I come across as being negative about what is currently happening. As opposed to being negative, I like to think about myself as being intentionally naive. I have learned over time to pretty much ignore what is happening at the provincial or federal level, as I find that it has little or no impact on my day to day efforts at improving the quality of life in my community. If anything, I find that it has the opposite effect – it makes my job harder.

Studies have shown that connecting people with each other enhances their ability to talk about and address community issues, and together overcome barriers to improve the quality of their lives. Quality of life is a complex issue. A vibrant community is one with strong relationships. Communities with strong relationships are more resilient. They have greater capacity to address problems, nurture leaders, build stronger organizations and mobilize resources.

I would hazard a guess that no one in this room would argue that you are all trying to attain a higher quality of life for the citizens in your community. It is my argument today that improving the quality of life in your community is not possible without adequate Aboriginal engagement.

Why bother engaging Aboriginal people? I hope none of you are asking that question anymore, but just in case I will provide you with a short answer. Aboriginal people take up a disproportionate amount of our social programming, but we are also the solution to the problems. Aboriginal people are a disproportionately large percentage of the unemployed in our communities, but that means that we are the solution to the pending labour shortage. 10 years ago we all knew about the “2010” labour crunch that we were facing, but we pretty much turned a blind eye to it.

Aboriginal people were crying out for assistance to work with our youth so that they would be ready in 2010 to fill that gap, but our cries for assistance went largely unanswered. It is my argument that this downturn in the economy has given us a chance once again to answer that cry for help. The 2010 crunch will now be spread out over the next 10 years, and Aboriginal youth are the answer to that problem.

We need to be more effective in our Aboriginal engagement efforts if we are all to benefit equally. When dealing with a First Nations or Tribal Council there is, however ambiguous and confusing it may be, a political structure with some level of accountability. When dealing with the off-reserve urban Aboriginal population, there is no corresponding structure to rely upon. Therein lies the problem – it is not always easy to discover who to engage with in an urban setting. Do you talk to the closest First Nation to your community and assume that they represent the entire Aboriginal population? In a few rare instances that may be the case, but I would argue that in most it is not.

I am not going to spend much time talking about engaging with your local First Nations. That is usually a political step that needs to happen, but often has little positive outcomes within a larger urban community. I am speaking about engaging the Aboriginal people who live within your communities.

I know you are all asking the question – how do I do that? It is actually easier than you think. I will briefly touch on it in this part of my presentation, but I hope to uncover more during our conversation after I am done. It is all about building relationships – relationships have to be in place before you can begin collaborations or form partnerships. Relationships are central to everything we do. Relationships start at a very basic level.

Learn who’s who in the zoo within your local Aboriginal population. Find out who the true movers and shakers are. Find the common ground where you can get to know them. This could start within a business environment – invite them to your Chamber of Commerce functions, invite them into your organization to take part in training, make sure they are part of everything that is going on within your community. It is not easy, but it needs to be done. In Prince George for example, we have over 10,000 Aboriginal people, yet my partner and I are usually the only Aboriginal people showing up at the mainstream business functions – that is just not right!

Once you get to know them a bit better in the business environment, invite them out for golf, invite them to a local hockey game, a dinner, take them out for lunch – get to know them at a personal level. You will find out it is no different than what you already do if there is a potential non-Aboriginal business contact who you want to get to know better. Our skin may be a different colour, but inside we are all the same, we are all human beings, we all value and appreciate relationships.

I am not going to bother elaborating about the social problems facing Aboriginal people. We know all about them, most of us face them on a daily basis. The reasons for poor outcomes for Aboriginal people are many and complex. I believe that in order to make real change in the lives of Aboriginal people we must move beyond the lenses through which we see the world.

We need to be able to step back and to really listen outside of what we think we “know” to be true. With searching minds, we need to be unafraid to explore challenging ideas and be willing to think outside of the proverbial “federal”, “provincial”, “municipal, and “organizational” boxes. When we can shift our minds, and maybe more importantly our hearts, to this place of “not knowing” we will experience our greatest potential to achieve the results that we envision for our communities.

We must be willing to ask the critical question as to why so little progress has been made in the quality of lives for Aboriginal people. In his poem, *The Road Not Taken*, the famous American poet Robert Frost describes walking along a path in the woods that splits into two directions. He can see that one path is well traveled -- the other less so.

In the last stanza of the poem, Frost writes: I shall be telling this with a sigh; somewhere ages and ages hence; two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by; and that has made all the difference. Today, like Frost, we find ourselves at a crossroads having to decide what path to take and years from now we will look back on this decision as having been critical to shaping our future.

We live in a time that proves Einstein right that, “No problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it”. At some point, to achieve an improved quality of life in our communities we must confront the barriers of the basic values and strategies of existing arrangements. A truly inclusive society is one that nurtures a sense of belonging by recognizing and valuing the contributions of all members of the community.

We live in challenging, turbulent times. It has been said that remarkable times call for remarkable solutions. If we are clear on our vision and values, build meaningful personal relationships, and are prepared to work collaboratively with others, we can begin the journey down the road less travelled with confidence. We need to work collaboratively within communities to create an environment that is safe and in which we do not feel too vulnerable to co-create and to learn. We need to learn that the ‘who’ question is just as

important as the ‘what’ question. Who can I invite? Who can I connect with around this issue?

We need service over competition. In a lot of our existing organizations, the goal is to “look good” rather than “be good. To “look good” we need to know the right answers, and we fake it when we don’t. Instead of looking good we need to focus on providing “best service and practices” and empower others to change their lives. We need to work across disciplines.

Another way we tend to deal with complex issues is to work with like-minded individuals. It is simply easier to get things done when we surround ourselves with people who think like we do. Because we share the same perspectives we share the same view of the issues and therefore the same solutions. We need to take advantage of our different perspectives of the issues and the possible solutions. We need to understand that there is strength in diversity. A coalition is often stronger when it draws together members who are not often seen as partners. A wide diversity of perspectives and constituents creates a broader, holistic picture of the issue at hand.

Taking the road less travelled is tough work. It is not just hard, it is perilous. It calls for a radical letting-go and openness to the unknown. It is hard to imagine a task more daunting or a path more promising. The road less travelled involves more than just engagement, it also involves collaboration. It is my argument that collaboration among local government and community organizations needs to intensify. Collaboration will not only accomplish tasks that will improve community conditions, it will reinforce social fibers and increase the communities’ capacity to get more done in the future. Collaboration is essential if we are to effectively tackle the really important issues facing society – such as poverty, conflict, crime and so on.

Okay, how do we do this? One step at a time is the only way to go – think of the words once spoke by Galileo: *“I would rather discover a single fact, even a small one, than debate the great issues at length without discovering anything at all.”*

To be successful you need to start small, identify an issue that is important enough to warrant attention, but is not too daunting. This will allow you to work with the individuals within the rank and file of our social and political organizations – the ones who actually get the work done. If you are lucky enough to have the luxury of being able to pick and choose who you are going to target, look for organizations or individuals who exhibit flexibility and adaptability – those who are really into collaboration and do not always feel the need to claim all the credit and the glory. Look for the people who work for organizations that have a history of cooperation.

It is necessary for local political and community leaders to adopt a grass roots process that ensures fairness and inclusiveness. In terms of my presentation, the most important part of this process is the inclusiveness. Inclusion is not easy; you have to put a lot of effort into

engaging those who are at the core of the issue you are attempting to address. You need to put an “Aboriginal lens” on all of your activities, or else you face the risk of excluding Aboriginal people. At one point in time I used to view this lack of inclusion as an unintentional oversight, but given the state of our economy, and the cold hard fact that the economy in this part of our country is not going to substantially recover without meaningful Aboriginal participation, pleading ignorance to the need for Aboriginal inclusion is no longer acceptable.

Until our collective leadership rediscovers the value of engaging community residents and those who work with people struggling with poverty, we will continue to have business as usual, and history has shown that the business as usual approach is not working. Too much engagement happens at the political level, and this ends up replacing the real meaningful engagement and dialogue between community members, service providers and most importantly those affected by the social problems in our communities.

It is through conversations with other people that we learn how to think creatively and act collaboratively. Given the current demographic trends, there is no doubt that Aboriginal people are and will continue to be increasingly important players in the way our communities grow and change.

One important thing to keep in mind is that as we move forward, we must not forget the past. We need to allow time for acknowledgement and healing. We must use the pain and suffering of our past to ensure that history is not repeated. I mentioned earlier that if we really want to make positive changes to our quality of life, we need to take the road less traveled. If we accept this task, we should do so knowing that it will not be an easy road. We may be required to leave behind those who chose to take the well travelled path.

My challenge to you is to get out of your comfort level, push your boundaries, and make sure you are engaging the entire community in your conversations. If you want to effect change, you can't do it without involving different people. We all need to take responsibility for where we are at, and if we recognize that Aboriginal people are a source of opportunity and competitive advantage for the economy in Northern BC, we would move ourselves into a better and brighter future.

This takes deliberate policies and strategies, it takes hard work, and it takes new attitudes that will allow us to move to a place of collaboration and understanding.

But most importantly – it takes you.

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