

The Indigenous Employment Toolkit





Smudging | Starting off in a good way

As part of introducing this toolkit, we'd like to begin by acknowledging the practice of smudging—an Indigenous tradition that uses the smoke of sweetgrass, sage, cedar, or tobacco for purification, blessings, and connection with the Creator. Smudging is traditionally done to begin sharing in a good way. Learn more about smudging by checking out **Embracing Smudge in Recreation Spaces**.

The Importance of Reconciliation

Indigenous reconciliation in Canada is about recognizing the deep harm caused by colonization, including the theft of land, the destruction of cultures, and generations of trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples. It's a commitment to right these wrongs and rebuild relationships based on respect, justice, and healing.



Take cultural awareness seriously to ensure sensitivity is taught and understood. Learn what words like “Wahkitowin” means.”

Marvin N. Yellowbird B.A. BCom

Former Chief & Council
Samson Cree Nation

Every individual has a belief system they've become accustomed to from their early youth. Indigenous Peoples have a deep-rooted connection to their beliefs because of the intergenerational traumas caused by the Residential School or Day School eras. Because of this, most have become guarded and protective of how they practice and believe traditionally.

Historically, this stems from their parents and/or grandparents having to hide their prayers, practices and beliefs from those who wanted to strip them of those core values and traditions. In order to understand these complexities, one could ask firsthand:

How does an organization demonstrate cultural sensitivity when it comes to an Indigenous employee without offending or causing a harmful interpretation of their beliefs?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Report is a perfect guideline to follow in terms of understanding experiences of Indigenous Peoples. Organizations, businesses and individuals alike can learn much from this document based on actual case studies filed.

Today, more organizations now recognize the land by opening events with a statement acknowledging the treaty location at major sporting events, concerts and awards ceremonies, for example. Yet there is still much to learn in terms of what triggers the colonial mindset when interacting with Indigenous Peoples, especially in workplaces.

Introduction

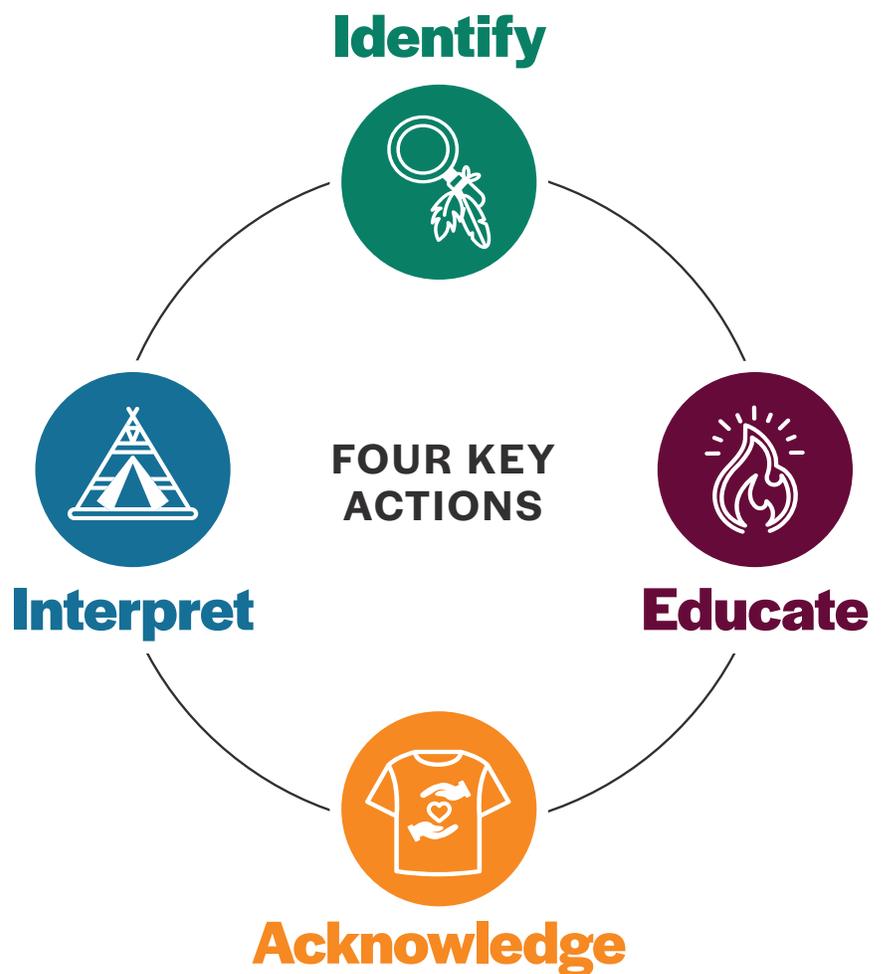
The Indigenous Employment Toolkit is designed to help organizations foster cultural sensitivity and inclusivity for Indigenous employees by addressing their unique practices, beliefs, and experiences. The toolkit offers four actionable steps to achieve this: Identifying gaps in your own knowledge, educating yourself on Indigenous culture and practices, acknowledging the diversity of your staff, and interpreting different communication styles and preferences.



Mandatory courses taken at the University of Alberta in Native Studies should be pursued by organizations for non-native employees. Educating is the key!”

Lacey L. Yellowbird-Bull

Director of Maskwacis
Employment Center



FOUR KEY ACTIONS



Identify

Identify your own lack of understanding towards practices, beliefs and attitudes of Indigenous Peoples. Through this process, organizations can begin to explore how to add Indigenous-specific content into their human resource policies, Board governance and/or operational guidelines.

CASE IN POINT:

Deaths in the family, as well as loss due to traumatic events, can be prevalent in many Indigenous communities. This means that an Indigenous employee might have a more significant commitment to funerals or culturally-related activities than other employees. A first step in building a trusting relationship is working to accommodate their possible extended absences.

Employers should learn to identify how an Indigenous employee might cope with traumatic situations by asking how you can assist them. Responses to death and loss are also practiced differently from amongst Indigenous Peoples, depending on their individual backgrounds. By being proactive and asking thoughtful questions, rather than assuming, is the best way to identify how one deals with culturally relevant situations.



Educate

Educate yourself and the organization on cultural sensitivity with respect to Indigenous Peoples, honouring their unique cultural celebrations, practices, and beliefs, including experiences of loss and death.

CASE IN POINT:

Regardless of your background, most individuals have a belief system not openly shown or discussed with anyone. While an individual might be in a considered situation, individuals sometimes want to be left alone without having to explain the cultural significance of their actions. Offering a private moment to an Indigenous employee to process their response to either a personal or to a work situation, for example, demonstrates respect towards them as individuals.

The simplest way of putting it is to “educate ignorance.” Showing respect for a desire for privacy and for boundaries is the key and most important element to this practice. Make it clear that you are willing to learn more about cultural sensitivities and allow individuals to come to you through the creation of a safe and ethical work environment.

FOUR KEY ACTIONS



Acknowledge

All organizations need to acknowledge the diversity of employees from different cultures. Every culture has their own accepted norms and ways of behaviors that they live by that will ultimately translate into the workplace.

CASE IN POINT:

A key practice of an organization's interview and hiring process should be a deeper understanding of the nature of many Indigenous Peoples. In an interview or work setting, Indigenous Peoples may seem stoic or passive - which can easily be mistaken as acceptance or indifference. Instead, being humble is an accepted cultural norm yet the act of humility doesn't always translate well in an interview situation, for example. Or if an Indigenous employee is silent on a potentially contentious issue, it doesn't necessarily mean they are in agreement with the dominant argument.

Attracting, hiring and retaining Indigenous employees is achieved through respect foremost for these differences and creating a work culture that celebrates them. The acceptance of each individual's genuine self, and creating a work setting where everyone's voices are heard and accepted, will only make your workplace stronger. This takes commitment and the acknowledgment of our own bias around how people should show-up in a work setting. Always acknowledge that your organization needs to continually learn about the diversity of cultures and beliefs and how they correlate in the working environment.



Interpret

Understanding of the nature of Indigenous Peoples, in terms of communication styles, is key to their successful employment. In reality, organizations often have different employees from many cultural backgrounds so this is an important organizational-level skill.

CASE IN POINT:

Learning to interpret, for instance, the quiet nature of an Indigenous employee is important in terms of understanding workplace dynamics. Instead of being difficult or uninterested in your conversation, they simply could be shy or not comfortable being asked about very important or personal questions about beliefs. In some instances, an Indigenous employee may also prefer to not respond to an inquiry in a public setting. Respect plays an important role here. Don't make assumptions and interpret a quiet nature as anything else if you're not informed firsthand.

Always ask yourself: how do you interpret feelings or situations if you have no cultural sensitivity knowledge to begin with? Many Indigenous employees are the minority in a workplace and need educated allies, a support structure, and advocates so that they feel safe to openly engage with the workings of many mainstream work environments.

Case Study

Enhance Energy

Enhance Energy, a small CCUS company with around 50 employees in Alberta and Saskatchewan, is making significant strides in its commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous communities. Recognizing that all its staff are settlers, Enhance has focused on meaningful knowledge building about Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous Awareness, along with the importance of reconciliation in their work.

To make their efforts authentic and Indigenous-led, Enhance worked with an Indigenous-owned consulting firm to develop a reconciliation vision, commitment and roadmap. They also offered staff the University of Alberta's "Indigenous Canada" course, which covers the history and present-day experiences of Indigenous peoples. More than 90% of all corporate employees, along with representatives from Enhance Energy's field operations, signed up to participate. These group discussions created space for knowledge sharing, as well as personal and professional reflection. Initially, some staff were hesitant, but over time, many engaged in tough conversations about the legacy of residential schools and ongoing trauma in Indigenous communities.

Enhance has also fostered relationships with the Maskwacis Employment Centre to learn how to better engage Indigenous communities, particularly in workforce and capacity building. One-third of the corporate office attended a workshop on Indigenous Engagement, and other employees have participated in MEC career fairs and events, leading to further efforts to support Indigenous employment and community initiatives.

Despite concerns that their small size would limit their impact, Enhance has realized that even small steps can lead to meaningful outcomes. The initiative has transformed staff perspectives, with many now viewing Indigenous engagement as an integral part of their work. Enhance's reconciliation efforts are focused on building genuine relationships based on understanding and trust. This journey highlights how even small organizations can contribute to reconciliation and positive change, and how organizations are able to find their own paths to reconciliation.

“

Learn to accept all nation members as not all the same. Acceptance is important as in native culture you have two-spirited members who take culture seriously and are often misread.”

Joan D. Currie

Montana First Nation Councilwoman

Case Study

Enhance Energy

2026 UPDATE

Since beginning their reconciliation action plan in 2022, Enhance Energy has continued to deepen its relationship with the Maskwacis Employment Centre (MEC). The relationship has grown from one-time interactions into regular, community-driven engagement. Enhance regularly participates in MEC career fairs, the Youth Experience Program, the MEC Golf Tournament, and the Maskwacis Youth Expo. The company has expanded its support to address key community-identified barriers that often limit access to employment opportunities, such as Driver's License training programs and resumé-building workshops. These efforts show that reconciliation can take many forms and evolves over time.

A meaningful shift in Enhance's approach has been to seek feedback from MEC on how sponsorship and financial support can be most effectively provided in the community. Funding for individual items or one-time requests has progressed into a new three-year agreement between Enhance and MEC. This multi-year commitment provides annual funding to MEC, allowing the Centre to manage how funds are used to support MEC clients, community members, and programming to maximize impact. This model recognizes that Indigenous communities are best positioned to identify their priorities and offers a practical example of how organizations can support self-determination while building trust and long-term relationships.

Enhance appreciates that genuine relationships grow through dialogue and connection. Employees are invited to spend time in community at various events, which enables exposure to Indigenous communities and strengthens the company's learning journey. A deeper understanding of community resources helps to encourage engagement with local service providers. These actions help make community presence and relationship-building routine.

Reconciliation opportunities also show up inside the organization. Learning about and appreciating Indigenous cultures helped Enhance better understand the value a more inclusive benefits program has. Part of this includes access to Indigenous mental wellness services and reimbursement for traditional medicines and ceremonial supplies. This attention to internal policies and systems shows that reconciliation extends beyond external engagement.

The Maskwacis Employment Centre regularly sees organizations that participate in job fairs or events without a genuine commitment to hiring or relationship-building. Enhance's experience illustrates that even when organizations are not in a position to hire consistently, they can still contribute meaningfully through presence, listening, sponsorship, and support for community-identified needs.

This experience has reinforced something important for Enhance Energy. Reconciliation doesn't require perfect plans or large-scale programs to get started. Organizations can find their own paths forward through consistent, thoughtful steps and by remaining open to learning from each other. Over time, that consistency builds sustainable relationships and creates space to contribute to reconciliation meaningfully and with impact.

Actionable Steps You Can Take:

- 1. Provide** Indigenous-led training for staff
- 2. Build** ongoing relationships with local Indigenous organizations
- 3. Review and Update** internal policies and practices
- 4. Support** Indigenous self-determination

About the Author

Kacey Yellowbird is an Experienced Health Specialist with a demonstrated history of working in the health wellness and fitness industry. As the former Manager for Samson Youth & Sport Development, Kacey continued his influential work and has now garnered international attention for his actions. Kacey has spoken about the legacy of his Community Freezer Program, as well as on the topic of Indigenous food sovereignty, at international gatherings like the global hub meeting of the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization in Italy. Kacey has received several awards for his work, including ARPA's *Communities ChooseWell Individual Champion Award* as well as the *Queen's Platinum Jubilee medal*.



About Us



Community Compass

This resource has been developed through a partnership between Kacey Yellowbird, the author, and the Community Compass program.

Community Compass is a program managed by the Alberta Recreation & Parks Association and funded by the Alberta Provincial Government. Community Compass' goal is to raise awareness about career opportunities in the recreation and parks sector, support job seekers by showing pathways to employment, and help the sector foster a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive workforce.



Alberta Recreation & Parks Association

The Alberta Recreation & Parks Association (ARPA) is a recognized leader of the recreation and parks sector. Established in 1950, they have continued to support our members by providing opportunities that enhance skills, knowledge and capacity in order to support the delivery of recreation and parks services.

For more information on how to incorporate Indigenous ways of being and perspectives into your workplace, check out the **Walking With Indigenous Communities: ARPA's Action Map**.

Contact Us

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ARPA would like to acknowledge the First Nations, the Métis, the Inuit and all of the people across Alberta who share a history and a deep connection with this land. We dedicate ourselves to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.