

ENGAGING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Lessons for Funding and
Program Design



CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE



Mino- pimatisiwin

Mino-pimatisiwin (A Good Way) in Cree means to honor spirit and tradition. More broadly it is the process of doing something with integrity and embodying the seven sacred teachings – Love, Honesty, Wisdom, Truth, Respect, Courage and Humility. It is our hope that this learning brief will help ourselves and others to work in a Good Way – Mino-pimatisiwin.

The work of the CFT and its partners is based in the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, the Métis Nation (Region 3), and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.



We get to tell our story. We can communicate a more accurate story of who we are now and our history. The story has always been told for us. The lab [Calgary's Youth Employment Lab], re:Vision¹ and the work with the CFT gives us an opportunity to tell our own story.”

INDIGENOUS LEADER WORKING WITH
CALGARY'S COLLABORATIVE FUNDERS' TABLE

Calgary's Collaborative Funders' Table

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT)² launched a collaborative funding initiative with the goal of improving employment prospects for Opportunity Youth³ in Calgary. The initiative focuses on the interface between 'supply' (youth and youth serving agencies) and 'demand' (employers). The goal is to ensure that youth seeking work are better prepared to meet the needs of employers, and that employers are better able to recruit and retain youth.

Improving employment outcomes among youth facing barriers is a complex challenge requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders. The CFT knew it would be important to engage employers, youth serving agencies, and other community resources as critical players in the design, testing and scaling of employment strategies. The CFT chose to begin by convening a social innovation lab to engage multiple perspectives in the development of solutions to the youth employment challenge. The lab provided an opportunity to explore, learn, ideate, co-create and test strategies to create and strengthen employment pathways for Opportunity Youth. Strategies that showed promise in the lab were further developed and are currently being piloted with three years of funding from the CFT.

¹ re:Vision is a pilot project that was developed as part of the Youth Employment Lab and is being funded by the CFT for 3 years. The project aims to build awareness and capacity among employers to employ Indigenous Opportunity Youth; build capacity of youth to find and retain meaningful employment; and bring these two groups together to generate better outcomes for both.

² The Collaborative Funders' Table members are the Calgary Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, Burns Memorial Fund, the RBC Foundation, the City of Calgary, JPMorgan Chase Foundation and anonymous donors.

³ See Appendix 1 for a definition of Opportunity Youth.

“You can’t say you have a mandate to support marginalized youth and not engage with Indigenous youth and communities.”

CFT MEMBER



Background to the Case Study

In the early days of the lab process, it became evident that if the CFT wanted to effectively address barriers to employment among marginalized youth, they would need to bring Indigenous perspectives to the process. This case study reflects experiences and learning among members of Calgary's CFT, participants in the lab, and Elders and Indigenous leaders involved in the process. It does not aim to be comprehensive or representative of other experiences. It is instead a snapshot of one group's efforts to engage more fully with Indigenous youth, professionals and Elders, and the lessons and impact that emerged as a result. This document fulfills part of the commitment made to Elders who gave their blessing to this work to support employment for Opportunity Youth. A promise was made to share what's being learned to encourage and enable others who also want to more authentically engage with Indigenous peoples. The case study is not the end of the learning process for the CFT and its partners. Members of the Table and others involved in the CFT-funded pilot projects will continue to grow their understanding and capacity for engagement in a Good Way through their on-going work with Miskanawah⁴ and Indigenous youth and Elders.



⁴ Miskanawah is a Calgary-based multi-service organization, offering programs for children, youth, families, and community. Its work is rooted in Indigenous teachings, ceremonies and guidance from Elders. Miskanawah believes these traditional values and beliefs have tremendous healing potential and embed these within their service delivery practices and educational supports.

Indigenous engagement is imperative

The CFT set out to increase employment among Opportunity Youth and support employers to hire and retain these youth. Indigenous youth are an important subset of Opportunity Youth. They have had higher unemployment and NEET (not in employment, education or training) rates than youth in the general population⁵. The CFT recognized that it would be impossible to develop meaningful or appropriate solutions to these employment challenges without including the perspectives, insights and wisdom of these youth and the Indigenous communities who support them.

Further, Canada's commitment to reconciliation, the Calls to Action set out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner's Report and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have raised awareness among the CFT and made members more conscious of the need to increase engagement and allyship with Indigenous peoples in their work. Philanthropy, like most sectors in Canada, is based on wealth that was generated through the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their land. There is growing recognition of this fact among leaders of family and community foundations, and among public sector funders, and with it, a growing sense of responsibility to engage with and invest resources back into these communities.

“We cannot deny where much of people's money comes from in this country. This means we have a special obligation to engage with these communities and invest money back into these communities.”

CFT MEMBER

⁵In 2018/19, the NEET rate for Indigenous youth living off reserve and aged 20-24 years old was 23%, compared with 12% for the national population of the same age. (The transition from school to work: the NEET (not in employment, education or training) indicator for 20- to 24-year-olds in Canada. Brunet, S. July 5, 2019. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2019001-eng.pdf?st=sXfwLMdo>)

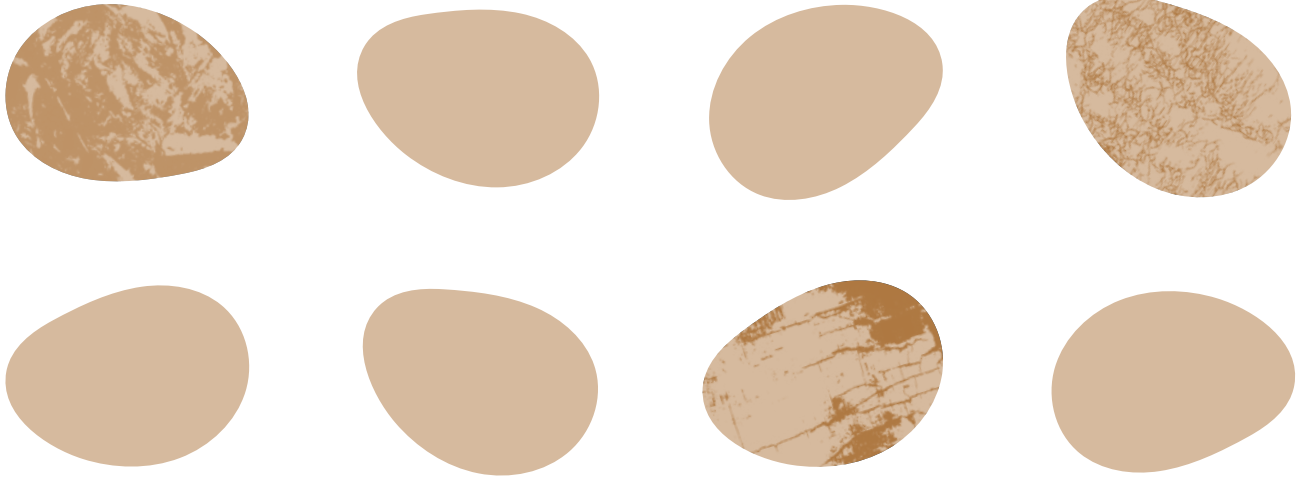


Finally, engaging with Indigenous Elders, leaders and youth brought an entirely different worldview to the youth employment initiative. Dr. Reg and Rose Crowshoe, and the leaders at Miskanawah, strengthened the youth employment lab by supporting lab members to think outside conventional Western frameworks for program design and delivery. They influenced the development of lab prototypes, the refinement of pilots, and the application, reporting and evaluation processes. Engaging with Indigenous people provided an opportunity for everyone engaged in the initiative to learn more about this worldview and to start considering employment processes within a parallel framework.

“

It feels like we began with the right intention, we wanted guidance from the Indigenous Elders, not at the end but at the beginning. We began in the right way, with the right intentions. We created ethical space and Ben [the lab facilitator] did a fantastic job of consistently bringing us back to that and keeping Reg and Rose's [the Indigenous Elders advising the lab] guidance alive in every lab day.”

CFT MEMBER



An overview of the CFT process

“It must start with Elders. Work with Indigenous people, work with Indigenous youth will not have credibility unless you take the time to engage with the Elders. They are the only ones who can give permission.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Once the CFT had made the commitment to seek out and include Indigenous perspectives in the design and implementation of the youth employment initiative, the important work of engagement began. Much of the work was taken on by two members of the CFT who reported their efforts and recommendations back to the broader table. The engagement process is described below as several interconnected and non-linear phases that were mutually supportive.

Personal learning

The CFT members began by researching and reading about Indigenous culture⁶. They focussed on building their own understanding of colonial history, cultural practices and getting curious about their own biases and trepidation.

Learning from cultural advisors

The CFT was fortunate to have an existing relationship with Miskanawah. The CFT reached out to senior leaders and advisors there to further build their understanding of what an authentic engagement process might involve. They met, asked questions and listened. They followed the advice they were given and acted on an opportunity to meet with and begin to build a relationship with two Piikani Blackfoot Elders, Dr. Reg and Rose Crowshoe.

Working with Elders

Because of the existing relationship between Miskanawah and the Elders, Dr. Reg and Rose Crowshoe came to the first meeting with CFT with some openness. The CFT shared their hopes for working with Indigenous youth and leaders to develop more innovative and effective pathways to employment. The Elders listened, asked questions and provided suggestions, and then agreed to provide more formalized support to the initiative. Throughout the process the CFT checked in with these Elders, they often had lunch together; building and strengthening their relationships with food and stories.

“ Reg and Rose understood what we were trying to do and enthusiastically came on board, connecting us to so many other Elders.”

CFT MEMBER



⁶ See Appendix 2 for a preliminary list of resources that were helpful to the CFT members in these early days.

Resourcing and participating in ceremony

After meeting with Reg and Rose, the CFT members understood more about the importance of ceremony⁷ and advised the rest of the CFT to allocate time and resources to this practice. Over the next two years, people involved in different parts of the youth employment initiative supported and participated in several ceremonies that enabled Elders and Indigenous Knowledge Keepers¹⁰ to share their wisdom, and guide and advise the overall process.

Before starting the Youth Employment Lab (YEL), the CFT were asked to bring the proposed ideas to Elders in ceremony. This meant that CFT members, the lab facilitator, the evaluator, as well as leaders and advisors from Miskanawah gathered in circle with the smudge and prayer to describe the lab process and the goals of their collective efforts. The intention of the ceremony was to validate the process and granted the organizers permission to proceed with the work.

Next, the CFT invited Reg and Rose Crowshoe to open the lab. All members of the lab came together, the CFT welcomed everyone to the process and Reg spoke about the importance of creating “ethical space”⁸ for Indigenous and Western worldviews to co-exist. Reg shared a set of principles that were taken up by the lab.

Once lab teams⁹ were created, the team that was focused on building employer capacity to hire and support Indigenous youth also wanted to meet with Elders in ceremony to get their guidance. For this ceremony, Reg and Rose Crowshoe tapped into their extensive network to bring more than 20 Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers together with the lab team. This Knowledge Keeper ceremony was pivotal, imbuing a broader historical, systemic and personal lens to the team’s efforts. The group of Elders shared stories of their own experiences with education and employment and helped the team to understand the deeper colonial, racist roots of the challenges that many Indigenous youth experience today. The Elders guided the lab team to focus on root causes in their work to support youth to gain meaningful employment.

When the lab team completed its design work, they brought their ideas back to the Knowledge Keepers in ceremony where the Knowledge Keepers offered further advice and recommendations to strengthen the design of the pilot project. The team was then granted permission to proceed in their work with Indigenous youth and employers.

⁷ Indigenous peoples across the continent share a tradition of regularly showing gratitude for the creation of life, health, and community through everyday acts, through rituals, and through ceremonies. A ceremony is a formal act or series of acts performed as prescribed by custom, law, or other authority (This definition is adapted from conversations with staff at Miskanawah).

⁸ Ethical Space is defined by Dr. Crowshoe “as a place where traditional oral practices and Western written practices are paralleled, leveraging the strengths of the respective processes to co-create a safe place to design, develop, validate and work together in harmony, bridging the gap between cultures and activating meaningful reconciliation.” <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canada-needs-to-build-ethical-spaces-for-indigenous-people/>

⁹ Four teams were created as part of the lab process. Each team had a particular challenge to address. One of the teams was focused on building awareness and capacity among employers to recruit, hire and support Indigenous youth into the workforce. It is this lab team that took part in the Knowledge Keepers ceremony.

¹⁰ Knowledge Keepers may or may not be considered Elders. They are typically older Indigenous people who are trusted, respected and valued by their communities. They earn the title of Knowledge Keeper through their experiences, clean way of living and willingness to help others in time of need and have direct knowledge of cultural and traditional practices. (definition from conversation with Miskanawah staff October 2020).



Indigenous Principles to Guide Calgary's Youth Employment Lab

We are all treaty people – we need to trust and support each other

Indigenous ways of seeing and western problem solving will inform the work – we won't try to integrate these two worldviews, rather we will value each equally

Make space for stories – listen to and value oral culture and stories to get at deeper insights

Create ethical space – establish spaces where we respect and build an understanding of each other's history and culture and perspective

Listen to the youth – do what it takes to engage and create space for youth to tell their stories





Adopting a parallel oral application process

As the prototypes from the YEL were developed into pilot projects, the CFT continued with efforts to respect oral tradition and storytelling. They worked with Miskanawah to develop and implement an oral proposal submission process. This process opened with the smudge and prayer and was presided over by an Elder. The teams presented their pilot project proposals to the CFT orally with supporting written materials. This combination of written and oral materials reflected the CFT's commitment to the guiding principles and honouring both Western and Indigenous practice.

Combining Indigenous and Western methods for accountability and evaluation

As the CFT moved to fund the pilot projects, it supported its evaluator to work with Miskanawah and their Indigenous Evaluation Framework¹¹ to develop a hybrid evaluation framework for re:Vision. They also worked to bring an Indigenous lens to the evaluation of the entire initiative. The team continues to endeavour to honour both conventional and Indigenous practices related to data collection and analysis (story telling, focus groups, discussion of findings), reporting (written and oral through ceremony), and accountability (to the youth, the Elders, community, the funders and each other). Although laborious and slow, the group is aiming for a process that reflects both ways of working, learning and gathering evidence of the initiative's impact in a way that respects the Western focus on results and the Indigenous emphasis on integrity and relationship.

“Safety has been created by leading with curiosity and respect and inquiry.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

¹² Miskanawah has developed an Indigenous Evaluation Framework based on the Siim'ohksin Wahkotiwini approach towards Oral Truthing. Please see Appendix 2 for an overview of this approach.

What's been learned so far

While Calgary's Collaborative Funders' Table and its partners are still relatively new to efforts to support better engagement with Indigenous people and communities, they have learned valuable lessons that may be helpful to others. These are in no way comprehensive or generalizable, but rather a reflection of the experiences of the CFT, members of the YEL teams and their work with Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe, the Knowledge Keepers, leaders at Miskanawah and the Indigenous young people involved in the process.

Get out of your own way

The significance of engaging with Indigenous partners and communities was not immediately evident to the CFT. In the early days of exploring youth employment and making sense of the issues, there was apprehension and some resistance to the idea. For some CFT members, engaging Indigenous people and addressing issues related to colonization seemed too big and complex to be possible with the resources available. For others, it was hard to know where to begin and how. People were afraid of being uneducated and as a result insensitive and potentially racist. There were concerns of tokenism and fears about being inauthentic. Despite these worries, one CFT member was emphatic that engaging Indigenous peoples is not optional but essential. The others were swayed, and conversations began, relationships were slowly forged, and the youth employment initiative was transformed.

“I was worried I didn't know enough about ceremony and culture and that I would be insensitive and make a muck of things.”

CFT MEMBER

“There is apprehension among the mainstream to connect with Elders because they are afraid they will do it wrong. Try your best and don't worry about getting it all right.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Not an afterthought - seek guidance at the outset

The CFT reached out to Indigenous advisors at Miskanawah early in the development of the youth employment initiative and the creation of the social innovation lab. They engaged with these advisors, Elders and Knowledge Keepers before ideas were fully formed and important decisions were made. Indigenous communities have different practices and ceremonies, but Elders are always at the heart of these traditions. Early engagement with Elders is essential to any process, as it fosters trust and creates an opportunity for their ideas and perspectives to shape the character and content of an initiative.

“Typically, we get invited in at the end, to endorse decisions that have been made without our input. This was different. We got invited in at the beginning.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

“The way CFT connected with the Knowledge Keepers, the way the vision was communicated to them with humility, paved the way for all the future work together.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Engagement takes time, resources and innovation

The description of the CFT process described in the section above makes explicit that meaningful engagement takes time and resources, especially in the early days when relationships are being built and trust is fledgling. The CFT learned that it's helpful to prepare for this. Others doing this work should ensure that someone has engagement as an explicit part of their job and has the resources to pay for ceremonies and to provide gifts of tobacco and/or blankets and/or whatever is customary to demonstrate respect and gratitude to Elders in the territory where you work. Many of these expenses are atypical and paying for things in cash is common. The accounting can be messy and onerous. But all of this is part of engaging with people on their own terms and in ways that honour and respect their traditions and cultural practices.

“We had discretionary resources and we were able to spend them on ceremonies and gifts and honoraria and other things that we didn't realize we would need when we started out. We paid for things we wouldn't typically pay for, but it was all worth it.”

CFT MEMBER

“The funders' willingness to pay for Elder consultations and ceremonial process was everything. Not many funders are there yet, they don't see the value in that. But CFT saw the value and they were willing to pay for it.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Connect to cultural advisors

The CFT was fortunate to have an existing and genuine relationship with Miskanawah. They leveraged this relationship to connect with leaders inside the organization and seek their invaluable advice and guidance. These advisors guided members, helping them to understand and respect important protocols and navigate their relationship with the Elders and others from the Indigenous community. To find cultural advisors to help strengthen new initiatives, consider reaching out to Indigenous organizations in your community or seek advice from Indigenous professionals with whom you work.

“The Indigenous people we reached out to were so willing to engage with us. All we had to do was be sincere in our efforts, be willing to listen and meet them halfway.”

CFT MEMBER

Recognize and compensate these advisors

The CFT learned to recognize that asking for support and guidance from advisors requires the advisors time and resources; these need to be compensated for. The CFT made a special donation to Miskanawah to honor the generosity and expertise of these leaders.

Say yes as often as possible

Some of the requests that were initially made to accommodate the needs of the Elders were unfamiliar to CFT members who had little previous experience with this kind of engagement. Gifting tobacco and blankets, providing honorariums in cash, organizing Indigenous meals, and protocols in ceremony were mostly new to the CFT members involved. Despite this, the group said yes to these requests without asking too many questions. They trusted the process and wanted to foster relationships of openness and goodwill. These early signals helped to demonstrate commitment to the Elders and showed that the CFT valued their contributions. This meant a lot to the Elders and other Indigenous people who were involved and helped to lay a solid foundation for the relationship.

Show up fully and differently

One of the most important things that the CFT members working with the Elders learned was that they needed to show up “whole-heartedly” – to be curious, to really listen and to be fully engaged in the process without worry too much about results. Western ways of working tend to be more transactional and focused on outcomes. This work is different and requires participants to set aside conventional expectations for immediate results. The CFT learned that tending to the relationships must come before all else.

“Leave your notebook or your tablet behind. Just listen to the stories. Don’t ask too many questions. Think about their underlying meaning.”

CFT MEMBER

“Engaging with Elders requires a willingness to just sit and listen. This is a skill that does not come easily if it is not part of your own cultural practices.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Be curious not defensive


As CFT members engaged with Elders and Knowledge Keepers and listened to their stories, they heard difficult things. The Elders shared past and present experiences of themselves, their families and friends, and their ancestors – stories about the very personal, and often painful, impact of colonialism and present-day racism. CFT and lab members heard about other people’s realities which sometimes included criticism of those who do not bear the brunt of colonization. They were invited to stay curious and to listen without trying to respond or defend. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn and work together, and to move towards reconciliation, increased equity and inclusion, these stories need to be heard.

Value ceremony and protocols

Part of reconciliation is taking the time to build our understanding of, and appreciation for, Indigenous traditions. The CFT members learned how to give tobacco and blankets, and how to participate appropriately in ceremony. They learned the importance of these ceremonies and other oral practices and recognized that they hold equal value to their conventional, western counterparts.

Change the rules if you need to

Valuing and respecting ceremony and protocols may mean challenging existing policy or procedures. For example, the fire regulations at the venue for the youth employment lab prohibited smudging and the tight timelines for the lab meant the CFT was unable to change or enable exceptions to these rules. Working with the Elders and Indigenous youth made clear that smudging is central to any kind of gathering. As groups do more to support reconciliation and more together with Indigenous peoples, we need to address these kinds of constraints.



“It felt disrespectful and such a contradiction to hear the Knowledge Keepers describe the importance of smudging and then to work in a space where it wasn’t allowed. We need to figure this out.”

CFT MEMBER

Partners working with Indigenous groups should make the ability to smudge a key criterion in selecting venues or ensure there can be exemptions. Ultimately, fire regulations need to change to allow smudging in public and collective spaces. If CFT could begin again, they would either ensure the rules were changed or they would find a different space for the lab.



We couldn’t smudge in the lab space and we didn’t.
I will never let that happen again.”



CFT MEMBER

Recognize and compensate Elders for their expertise

The Elders and Knowledge Keepers shared their time, knowledge and expertise with the CFT and its partners. It is essential to acknowledge and value this time and expertise. Traditionally, Indigenous communities would care for Elders by taking care of their daily responsibilities – hunting, preparing food, constructing longhouses and teepees, and caring for them when they were unwell. Gift giving is the modern equivalent. The cultural advisors at Miskanawah helped the CFT to figure out how to do this respectfully. In Treaty 7 territory, gifts of blankets, tobacco and an honorarium are appropriate. When meeting with Elders or participating in ceremony find out what gifts are appropriate in the territory where you are working and/or learning.

“Do not use these people, don’t take their generosity for granted. Pay them for the ways they are helping us to educate ourselves.”

CFT MEMBER

“Recognize Elders as a traditional version of a PhD and pay for that wisdom and knowledge.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Educate everyone involved – ignorance is pervasive and persistent

Not everyone involved in the youth employment initiative had the opportunity to take part in ceremonies and other gatherings with the Elders. This decision was made mostly because of time constraints and the logistical challenges related to including everyone¹². However, those that did participate felt more should have been done to leverage these opportunities to build awareness and understanding among the broader group. This could have strengthened the lab process and resulting pilot projects by further integrating Indigenous considerations as well as bolstering other efforts towards reconciliation.

“I wished everyone were part of the work with the Elders.”

CFT MEMBER

“I was surprised by how many people have had no exposure to ceremony and Elders. I am constantly reminded how far we have to go. So many people still know so little about our history or anything about our culture.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

¹² More than 40 people took part in the youth employment lab and the CFT has 8 members making it difficult to find times and locations that would work for everyone.

The learning should be experiential

Those who were involved in the ceremonies emphasized the importance of the learning being experiential. People need to be in the room, with the Elders, taking part in the smudge, prayer and storytelling. Reading, watching films and documentaries, and talking to others about Indigenous history and culture, and colonization are important ways to build understanding, but participation in ceremony can take that understanding much further. Whenever possible, support opportunities for people to physically gather in ceremony¹³.

“I can read a lot and I have but the impact of that one circle was everything – it changed so much for me.”

CFT MEMBER

“We can talk about it [ceremony and Indigenous history] all we like but until someone actually experiences it [ceremony with Elders] they will not value it.”

CFT-FUNDED PROJECT STAFF

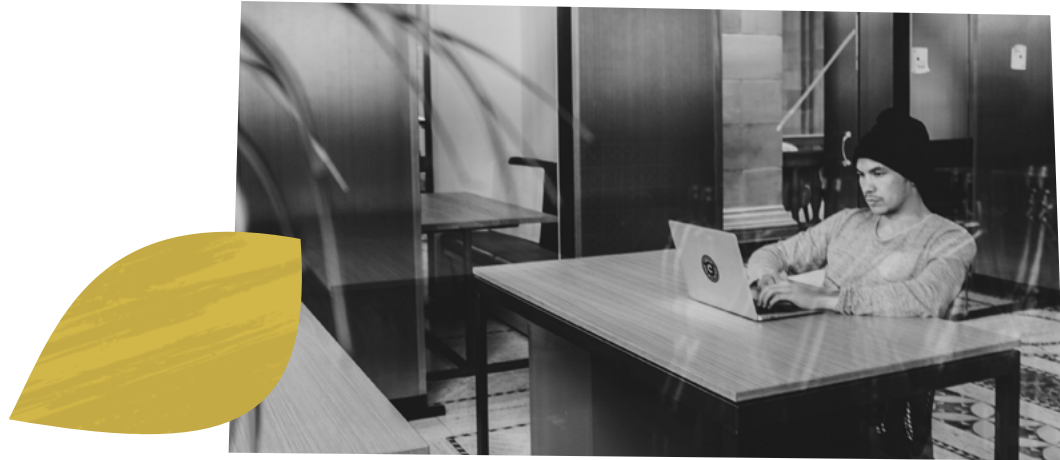
Adapt conventional processes

Based on learning with members of the Indigenous community, through the lab and into the development and funding of the pilots, the CFT has been willing and supportive of adaptations to conventional funding processes. They created an oral application process that was overseen by an Elder and included a prayer and the smudge. Some supporting written documentation was also submitted but funding decisions were made largely on the merit of the oral proposals.

The CFT is also exploring oral progress and evaluation reporting where ceremony and oral testimony will be an embedded part of supporting collective accountability. These adaptations are not about taking what is typically written and making it oral, but rather about bringing different perspectives to reporting processes and a more wholistic sense of accountability that is mutual and includes principles of respect, responsibility and discipline¹⁴. The CFT will continue to develop and refine these processes in collaboration with Miskanawah, so that the relationships between the funder, the implementing agency and program participants are more meaningful and less transactional. The CFT is learning that there is not a single or right way to adapt conventional processes. It requires instead a willingness among all parties involved to understand more about what is meaningful to the others in terms of truth telling, accountability and success. Working with Indigenous communities to explore and develop alternative reporting and evaluation processes is an essential part of sincere engagement with these communities.

¹³ The COVID-19 pandemic creates new challenges for these kinds of physical gatherings but Indigenous organizations in Alberta are being creative and adaptive, holding ceremonies outside or in spaces where people can physically distance. When this is impossible, people are invited to take part remotely using Zoom or other remote meeting technology.

¹⁴ Please reach out to Miskanawah to access copies of Building Capacity for Cultural Evaluation and Measurement: Emergent principles and protocols for an Indigenous evaluation framework, oral practice, and wisdom seeking: Creating parallel processes. January 2019. This document was developed with support from Elders and helps to guide oral truthing processes between Miskanawah and its funding partners.



Tap into existing resources and expertise

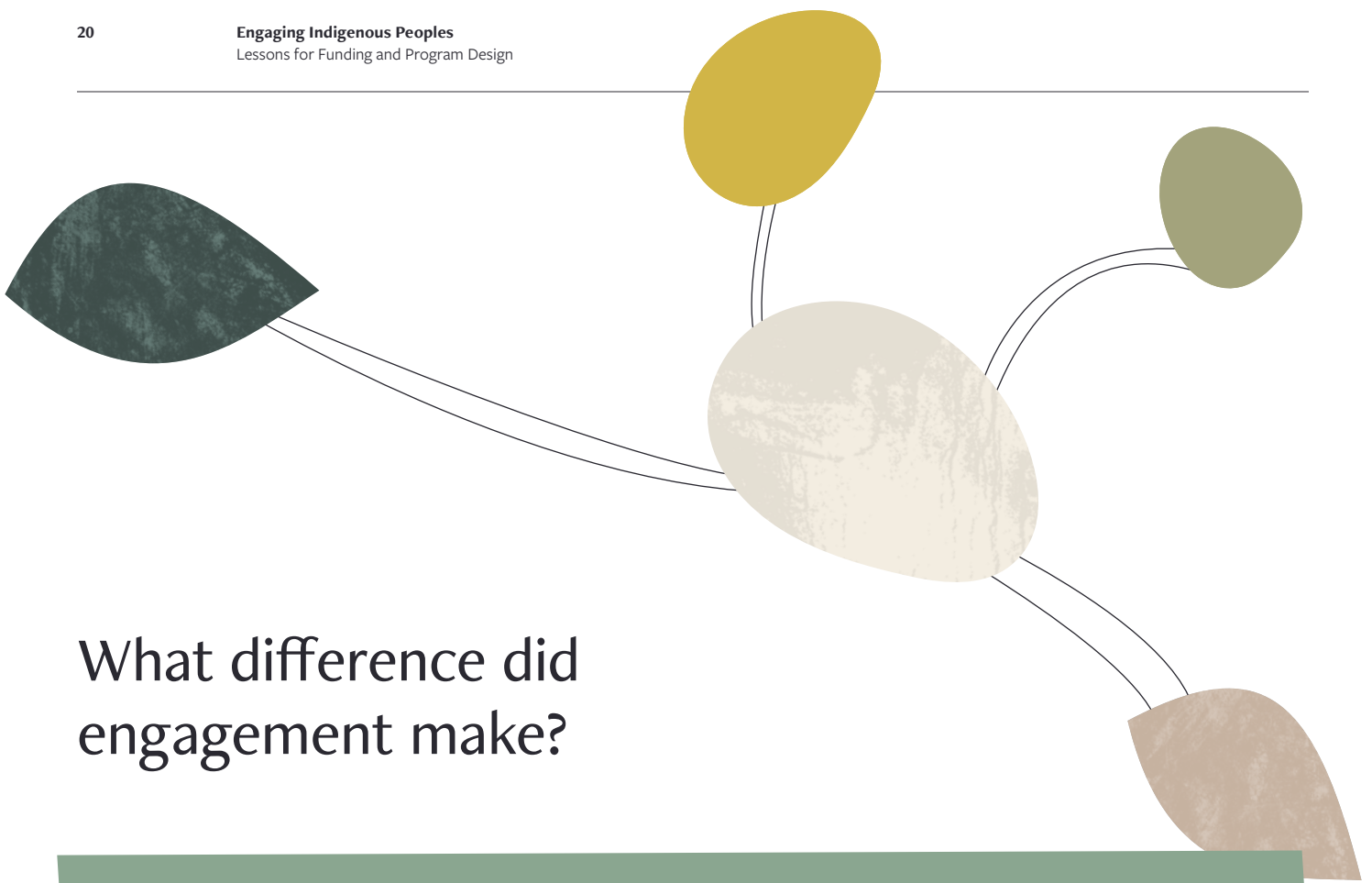
Much has been done across Canada to begin the important work of reconciliation. The CFT explored these resources and used them to guide their efforts, especially in supporting employers to engage with Indigenous youth. Seek out existing resources and adapt these as required to strengthen your funding and program design efforts. Several resources are included at the end of this guide.

Use your influence to influence others

The leadership, persistence and hard work of some members of the CFT was key to encouraging other members to recognize the importance and value of engaging Indigenous people in the process. This influence has gone on to influence others (funders, employers, youth serving agencies, employment agencies) and is stoking interest in the process and further commitment to reconciliation and inclusion. Mobilizing commitment for this kind of engagement will likely require someone with influence being its champion and supporting other champions throughout an organization.

Representation counts

The CFT invited Indigenous youth and professionals to participate in the lab and to support the development and implementation of the re:Vision pilot project. Including their perspectives, experiences and ideas changed the nature of the process and the pilot that emerged. When it involves genuine inclusion and participation in decision-making this representation is essential and needs to grow. Funders and social service agencies can hire and contract more Indigenous professionals to support their work, create greater diversity and institutionalize Indigenous practices and perspectives across their agencies.



What difference did engagement make?

“I have a new sense of possibility. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem [of systemic racism] and I didn’t know enough to even begin. But we began and now the possibilities are endless.”

CFT MEMBER

Measuring the difference made by efforts to engage Indigenous people and include their perspectives in the design, funding and delivering of the youth employment initiative is difficult. As with so much reconciliation work, it may take years to witness tangible changes in the lives of Indigenous people in this country. However, the work of the Indigenous youth, Elders, cultural advisors, members of the CFT and the youth employment lab transformed the nature of the lab, the pilot projects that emerged and several of the people and organizations that were involved. The early changes described below suggest the CFT is headed in the right direction and serves to motivate continued action to further engagement, inclusion and change.

Transformed the YEL

Early engagement of Indigenous leaders and Elders changed the nature and content of the youth employment lab. The advice and support provided influenced the YEL principles and day-to-day interactions among lab members, as well as changed the composition of the lab teams, the elements and character of the prototypes and the prototyping process.

Shaped the re:Vision pilot


The re:Vision pilot being funded by the CFT and implemented by Miskanawah was shaped by the Knowledge Keeper's recommendations. Educating employers about Indigenous history, and colonization and its effect on Indigenous youth seeking employment is a key element of the pilot. Creating cultural safety for Indigenous Opportunity Youth is an important outcome. Over time, Miskanawah and the CFT will know more about if and how this approach enables Indigenous youth to sustain meaningful employment in places where they feel they are welcome and belong.

Influencing the other pilots

The other pilots that emerged from the lab and are being funded by CFT are more attuned to the needs and assets of Indigenous youth because of their exposure to Indigenous perspectives in the lab, the oral proposal submission process and the involvement of Miskanawah staff and leaders.

Changed funding, reporting and evaluation practices

The CFT has adopted several new practices because of its relationships with Indigenous youth and leaders – parallel oral and written application, reporting and evaluation processes. Some CFT members are also looking at their internal organizational goals, practices and program policies, working to surface biases and barriers that may get in the way of more Indigenous involvement in their work. Some are committing to an increased focus on work to support Indigenous communities, and experiences with the CFT and the Elders is expected to influence their individual organizational priorities going forward.



“As an organization we need to focus on our work with Indigenous communities. We need to repair our relationship with these communities.”

CFT MEMBER

“This will remain an essential part of our work and our priorities going forward.”

CFT MEMBER

Spin off projects

As a result of their involvement in the youth employment lab, NPower Canada has forged a partnership with Miskanawah to develop a pilot (the Indigenous Youth Pathways program) to help Indigenous youth to learn more about the NPower Canada programming in a culturally safe space. This partnership has led to the co-development of a peer mentorship program designed to enable Indigenous graduates of the NPower program to support and mentor new participants. This new program will begin in early 2021 with support from the CFT.

Changed perspectives among people involved

People who took part in the ceremonies and the youth employment lab described changes in their own understanding, awareness and appreciation of Indigenous history in Canada and the unique barriers that Indigenous youth often experience because of this history. Several have gone on to engage in other training and education. This growing awareness and empathy is key to addressing racism and discrimination more broadly.

“The work with my team totally changed my perspective about Indigenous youth. It upset all my assumptions.”

CFT MEMBER

Created stronger and deeper relationships

Over the past two years, members of the CFT have forged strong and mutually respectful relationships with Elders Dr. Reg and Rose Crowshoe and the leaders of Miskanawah. These relationships could lead to other connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and agencies and these broader relationships may influence longer term change.

“I came into this [working with CFT] with some apprehension. I have walked into these kinds of situations many times before and come away frustrated because I have not felt heard. I expected no more than lip service. But this was different. Kudos to [CFT member] and her leadership. We are here because of her leadership and her humility and respect. The way she engaged with us was so different. She was genuinely curious. If she asked me for anything now, I would say yes.”

CULTURAL ADVISOR

Lent gravitas to the entire process

Ultimately, engaging with the Elders and Knowledge Keepers, hearing their stories and acting upon their advice created a deep sense of accountability for CFT and for those implementing the re:Vision pilot. Supporting young Indigenous people to access sustainable employment and helping employers to understand more about Indigenous history and experiences so that they can create cultural safety and responsiveness in their workplaces is part of much broader efforts to address historical injustice. The obligation to make positive change alongside young people extends beyond the results and accountability set out in the funding agreements. Those doing this work feel obliged to each other and accountable to the Elders who have guided the process.

“There is no going back, we need to persist with this work. So much has been done and we feel so accountable to the Elders. We must continue.”

CFT MEMBER

Conclusion

At the closing of one of the ceremonies, Dr. Reg Crowshoe repeated the words shared by Chief Dan George at a teacher's conference in Lethbridge in 1972. As we strive to reconcile our shared histories and move into a future that is more equitable and inclusive, these words deserve repeating.

“Let no one forget it. We are a people with special rights guaranteed to us by promises and treaties. We do not beg for these rights, nor do we thank you. We do not thank you for them because we paid for them, and the price we paid was exorbitant. We paid for them with our culture, our dignity and self-respect. We paid until we became a beaten race, poverty-stricken and conquered.”¹⁶

CHIEF DAN GEORGE

Engaging with Indigenous communities in the design, development, funding and implementation of human service programs is no longer optional. Funders and human service providers can build their capacity and allocate resources to do the relationship and trust building work that enables rich and authentic participation of Indigenous people. It is hoped that the experiences of the CFT and lessons learned in their work with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous youth and the leaders at Miskanawah will help to inform other grantmaking and program design efforts to more effectively work with and ultimately serve Indigenous communities.

This work is unfamiliar and challenging, it will take people out of their personal and professional comfort zones. It will disrupt conventional ideas and aims to create solutions to social challenges that are more equitable and inclusive, more effective, and more just – creating better businesses, better communities and better lives.

¹⁶ Chief Dan George, “Words of wisdom echo down the years”.
<https://ammsa.com/publications/windspeaker/chief-dan-george-words-wisdom-echo-down-years>

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Opportunity Youth Defined

Traditionally, this group of youth has been known as NEET youth. NEET refers to young adults that are Not in Education, Employment or Training. Young people in these circumstances are often disconnected from networks that can help them to connect to education and/or early employment. There are many factors that may contribute to this:

- Poverty which results in a lack of transportation, appropriate work clothes, and more limited access to internet or phone
- Experiences of homeless or precarious housing
- LGBTQ2S+
- Disability such as a mental illness, or a learning disability
- Childhood trauma
- Indigenous youth, whether urban or from their home community
- Racialized youth including newcomers and refugees
- Past addiction
- Not finishing high school
- Previous criminal history

Some youth experience several of these circumstances, which makes it hard for them to participate in our labour force and community.

Appendix 2

Sample of Resources to Build Awareness and Understanding

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/indigenous/cultural-protocol>

<https://calgaryfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Ally-Toolkit-web.pdf>

http://reseauintlnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ally_March.pdf

This is an organization dedicated increasing Indigenous engagement in the Canada's economy. There are several resources that may be helpful to funders and human service agencies.

<https://indigenousworks.ca/en>

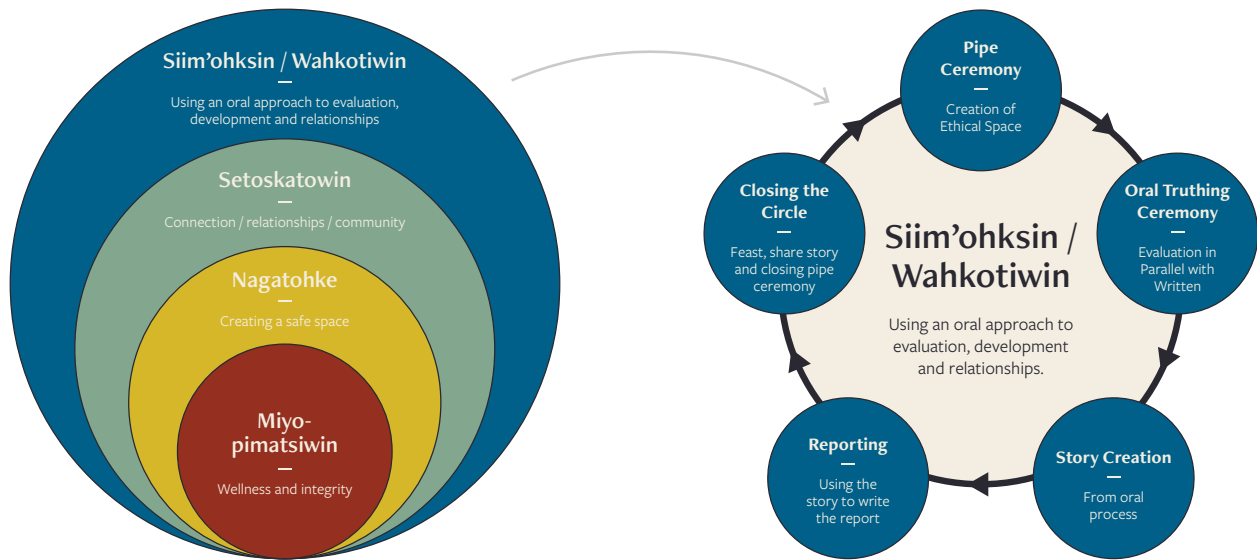
This is a free course that is now being offer by the University of Alberta. This was not available to the CFT members at the time of the lab, but members have begun to take it since in became available in 2020.

<https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html>

Appendix 3

The Siim'ohksin Wahkotiwin Approach to Evaluation: Overview¹⁷

The Wahkotiwin approach towards evaluation is depicted in the Circle of Wahkotiwin's Four Core Teachings depicted below. The core teachings are: W - Wakhotiwin; M- Miyo-pimastisiwin (good life and holistic wellness); N - Nagatohke (safety and protectiveness); and S - Setoskatowin (social inclusion and reciprocal helping). Fundamental teachings embodied within each of the Core Teachings represent why we do our work and what we want participants to gain from their involvement with us. It is essential to understand that each section is connected to the other with a natural progression of steps from top to bottom.



The Oral Truthing Ceremony (evaluation process) is a traditional way to monitor progress and/or measure program impact. The Pipe Ceremony culturally validates the beginning of each program and introduces the Core Teachings of Wahkotiwin. Early in the program, all participants and staff will participate in the Pipe Ceremony. Program content and delivery that is premised on the four Core Teachings, plus additional funder requirements unique to that program, follows. The Oral Truthing Ceremony concludes the program with participants sharing what they have learned relative to the Core Teachings. Other outcome measure data may be shared at this time, too, along with program output data. Stories (feedback) are gathered in ceremony from participants. Upon completion of the Oral Truthing Ceremony (evaluation process), themes and specific information are pulled out of the information shared and formed into narratives. As a final step, the final narrative must be shared with, and approved by, Elders and Miskanawah leadership. The Story is then drawn on as source information that collectively and individually informed and supports programs to move forward in a way that better meets client needs.

¹⁷ Extracted from Miskanawah Indigenous Evaluation Framework (2019).



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