



Engaging with First Nations to Develop Meaningful Relationships

Introduction

How can we engage with First Nations to develop meaningful relationships?

I asked myself this question 25 years ago - remember the days of Forest Renewal BC?

I could not answer that question when I was asked to be one of many facilitators for a meeting here in Ktunaxa territory - and I decided I needed to learn the answer - **IT FELT IMPORTANT**

Regularly, I still ask this question of myself - strengthened by the the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for increased intercultural competency.

I have learned a few things along the way and all the work I do is focused on changing the communication structures, attitudes, and behaviours of people like me - current, dominant culture, holders of societal power.

You have probably seen the question on your table:

How do you know when someone is your friend?

I ask this question because we need to think about those qualities in all the relationships we build. Not the least of which that you may have listed in your mind - **TRUST**

Caution – there are no shortcuts to doing this work, it is a lifelong endeavor. There is no substitute for getting to know people.

Purpose of this presentation:

- To gain some insights on how culture and communication can impact relationships and relationship building in intercultural, historically negative interactions
- To become more interculturally competent - a major goal reiterated throughout the Calls to Action of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Basic definition of communication from my field of study – “Communication” does not exist until a mutual understanding of “meaning” exists. i.e. think about how many times in a day you might say or think “what do you mean?” when talking with someone.

Intercultural communication is based in the premise that “cultural value priorities and worldviews add difficulties to achieving mutual understanding” One of these major barriers is about cultural expectations around what is the “right” way to interact with others.

Intercultural communication research is based on looking for **patterns of communication behaviours** (written, verbal, non-verbal...), **structures** (times, places, ways and expectations around how interactions take place...), and **attitudes** (humility, openness, respect, etc) within cultural groups.

Things to remember as we go forward in becoming more interculturally competent:

- The context of any communication interaction can change how we respond and participate.
- Be very careful to NEVER assume that someone has a particular cultural worldview.
- Whenever you find yourself making a negative judgement about someone else's way of doing things (i.e. they are rude, or pushy, apathetic, etc.) take a mental step back and think about yourself and your expectations of a particular situation.
- "Common Ground" is always the ground of the dominant culture.

Worldview orientation continuums that can have a particular impact in the context of intercultural relationships. The following list contains the outer ends of the spectrum (cultures are not just one or the other)

Time orientation: major focus on schedules/deadlines; or more focus on what is taking place.

Focus of decision-making: what is best for individual participants; or trying to make something work for those with little historical power (A goal of "common ground" usually serves those that already have the power)

Attitudes towards the natural world: to control and use; or to maintain harmony with, in consideration of future generations.

Attitudes towards conflict: to win; or to create solutions that work for the future.

Beliefs about the purpose of communication - is it mainly about having accurate information; or is it more focused on building and maintaining good social relationships.

How much emphasis is placed on verbal or non-verbal interactions to attain mutual understanding: is there more reliance on direct words and documents or is there attention paid to actions that signal feelings about what is going on in interactions.

Use the 5 Rs of Decolonization

Respects – Relevance – Reciprocal – Responsibility - Relationship

Respect – instead of expecting Indigenous colleagues/partners to leave their culture/value priorities at the door; leave yours!

- Humility when learning about a First Nation culture
- Appreciation for time to think and slow decision-making rather than expression of personal opinion and majority rule
- Prioritize how others are feeling rather than just thinking about you are feeling

Relevance – Each First Nation is unique;

- Listen for the purpose of learning. Learn about the land from stories of place names, stories of the distant past, personal stories.
- Learn some of the language
- Ask, listen to, and follow through on how the First Nation you are working wishes to interact
- Consult how each First Nation wants to consult
- Take action in a way that honours what the First Nation sees as essential

Reciprocal – Obligation to honour any time and work that you ask of a First Nation community

- Ensure that your relationships with First Nations are not based on expectations of taking and gaining
- Continually consider that your priorities are unlikely to be the same priorities of the First Nation and actively learn what those are

Responsibility – Create a collaborative climate for social interaction, discussion, and decision-making

- It is the responsibility of those within dominant culture power structures to change the way you do things.
- Use or learn how to use collaborative/consensus-based models for any kind of decision making.
- Use flexible, incremental timelines rather than hard deadlines
- Build purposeful social time into all interactions (learning about each other at a personal level)

Relationship – Build relationships that focus on the far future, not just the moment

- Listen, as a priority over talking
- Use words that highlight collaboration, not competition
- Be active in expressing support for new ideas
- Actively look for a variety of ways to make sure everyone is included
- Take the time to talk about cultural differences in communication expectations (use of protocols, interrupting, turn-taking, timelines, information that is OK to share and that which is not)