

INTERVIEW WITH VAUGHN SUNDAY AKWESASNE FIRST NATION, ONTARIO

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Sherry Baxter

RESEARCHER

Sherry: Could you please describe some of the projects your community has completed recently? Our focus is on relationships and how they have been important to the success of those projects.

Vaughn: I'd start by saying that we have relationships with other First Nations, and we've been mentored when we were working on a project. We would go to other First Nations for advice. For example, when we did an industrial building, I visited Tom Maness, who is one of the best. They have one of the best industrial parks in Canada. I went and spoke to Tom and had a tour of Tom's facility.

We have a partnership where we provide documentation and information on projects to other First Nations. When we built the Peace Tree Mall, I went to Six Nations, which already had a mini mall, and looked at their leasing, their construction, their design. We then altered it to something more suitable for us. We have relationships with other First Nations with an open door policy whereby people give us information and we share information with other First Nations on projects.

We also have relationships with the government, both federal and provincial. Because of our geographic location, we run an entrepreneur program that receives support both federally and provincially. We have a really nice entrepreneur course, and if grants are available, we can work with various players in order to make a business successful.

In terms of other relationships, it's almost on a project-by-project basis. For example, we have a relationship internally with our housing department and we did a subdivision for profit. We will build at a certain price and sell it at a slightly higher price. The reason that we have this project is that we have a waiting list of 380, because of our large population. That is 380 families on the waiting list to get a home. So the more homes we build, hopefully we can reduce that number, and hopefully we can do it in a profitable manner. Therefore, we have a partnership with the department of housing.

I would say that we have many relationships. Another example is our tobacco quota system. We have a law that we abide by and the system used to be managed and governed by the private sector. Well, we lost control of it quite some time ago and the revenues weren't filtering into the council. I was asked to convene a board to revamp the system, and we did that. We approached the provincial government, and we now receive an annual quota of tax-free cigarettes. We put a surcharge on every carton sold to our retailers. We provide a license to our retailers and when they order, they automatically pay a fee to the council. Now, we generate revenues in the amount of \$400,000 that funds our justice program. We have a nation-building relationship with our justice program. We're talking about law development, law enactment, and

about policy and procedures to be developed within our community.

So, we have relationships with both the federal and provincial governments, with other First Nations, and with the private sector business. We have many relationships probably because of the sheer size of the community. We have a population close to 11,000 people that live on-reserve with an additional 1,800 on our list that live off-reserve. So we have a lot of demands.

Sherry: Is there a project that you're currently working on now that's going to be done in the next two or three years, which we can focus on in terms of the process you use to build these relationships?

Vaughn: Yes. Probably the easiest one is the subdivision. We put the funds together for the infrastructure and that was about \$600,000 for the first 19 homes. Again, it's a relationship with the housing department and a relationship with the community of our territory with people seeking a home. We use a mortgage program with the Bank of Montreal. We provide a loan guarantee program so people can acquire a mortgage to buy the homes in the first place. It's fairly complex, but it's very rewarding in the end. You see a need—a housing shortage—and you see some ways to get around the problem and ways that we can work together with the community and with other departments within our system. I would say the housing project would be the obvious one, where we put monies together for infrastructure, housing, design; we oversee the construction, and we do the sale—it's a tandem partnership.

Sherry: What suggestions would you give, based on your experience, of the kinds of skills or tactics that are useful in starting new relationships?

Vaughn: I would say that for any successful economic development, you need personnel with an education. You need to be able to get along and have background knowledge of things. Programs like CANDO's Certification Process, or university or college—every province has community economic development programs. For any successful economic development, education is one part of it.

The second part is getting some mentorship from other First Nations. Let's say you want to

build a hotel, for example. Go and visit Tribal Council Investment Group in Winnipeg. They bought a hotel, I believe it's a Radisson located in downtown Winnipeg; go to Osoyoos, see how the Spirit Ridge Resort was developed. For me, a First Nation can save a lot of time and energy and avoid mistakes by going and speaking with experienced people. And across the country we have enough examples so that economic development people can go and see a successful project and bring back the how-to guideline for their own community. I would say building relationships with other First Nations, or with other business groups that have had success, and getting some good advice from them, is a very important path to success for individual First Nations and economic development people.

Sherry: What's your philosophy on what relationship means? Can you describe what relationships mean to you?

Vaughn: A relationship has to be fostered on both sides. For example, if you're trying to work with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) on a project, you need to have a relationship such that both sides have an understanding of the process of how you might do a business plan or feasibility study for a project. You might submit your project to a bank. So, you need private funding agencies, financing agencies. You need to have a combination of how much assistance you can get from the government, how much investment you can get from your council, and to do that you have to foster relationships.

I guess the philosophy is that you have an understanding of the process, from starting construction through to cutting a ribbon. So how do you get there? By understanding the process and understanding who you have to see. In terms of fostering a relationship, for example you might have a ribbon cutting ceremony, when you're just beginning construction. Invite those people that assisted you—the bank that you borrowed the money from, the INAC person that assisted you in getting funds. The second part of that is once you have completed a project, according to our culture you give everyone a piece of the result. Let's say we opened our subdivision, for example. We had a steak dinner and invited everybody—every department, every partner—that

we had, and we acknowledged them with a First Nation print that was made in my community. That was basically a “thank you”, an acknowledgement that we were successful in this project because we had many partners. It’s a relationship whereby we let our local newspaper know about these people who helped us or the bank who gave us a loan. Everybody has a picture in the paper, an article on what the project was, and how we received assistance from everyone.

So it’s a give and take. You have to know that and you have to recognize those that help you along the way and acknowledge those people. You save yourself some problems and issues if you go to people you already know or who have experience doing what you’re thinking of doing. So I’d say that kind of the philosophy. It’s got to be an understanding on both sides, what is the nature of our relationship, this is what we’re thinking about, the end result is this, and this is how we’re going to get there. It’s making sure you know those INAC people or the banks that are evaluating your project. Making sure you have dinner with them so you have an understanding. If there’s documentation that needs to be revised or reviewed you have to know that. So it’s a communication relationship and it’s also acknowledgement of assistance for anything you do.

Sherry: Have you ever had any experience with something that didn’t go so well, or that was challenging, that taught you lessons on building relationships?

Vaughn: Sure. The one that comes to mind is a political relationship we had with the Mayans in Latin America. They came to our community

and were overwhelmed with our development as a First Nation. So they asked us to visit their community. They had been in a 35-year civil war and they were just getting back on their feet. They needed basic services like bridges and roads, schools for their kids; so, they invited us to visit to see if we could provide any assistance. Based on that visit, we started buying coffee from them. They had agricultural crops and they grew coffee. We made sure that we bought coffee from their organization and we paid a slightly higher fee—it was fair market coffee, and we didn’t underpay them. We brought the coffee to Canada and roasted it locally—we had a coffee roasting operation and a coffee house on the reserve serving this high grade, high quality First Nation coffee. We could honestly say it was First Nation grown, First Nation roasted, and First Nation developed coffee.

It was a really, really good project, theoretically. But the problem that we ran into is Tim Hortons. We couldn’t convince our own people to drink the coffee that was Native grown, Native harvested, Native roasted, and Native developed. It taught us a lesson that sometimes a good idea theoretically doesn’t work practically. In this case, Tim Hortons swallows everyone else that has an idea about coffee. Now, we’re looking at meeting with Tim Hortons to try to get a Tim Hortons franchise on our reserve. It taught us a valuable lesson. You can’t just go with a political idea and expect it to succeed. You have to do some research along the way and look at your competition—the neighbouring town from our community has about 14 or 15 Tim Hortons in a town of 40,000. Well, instead of fighting against that tidal wave coming at us, turn the opposite direction and try to buy a franchise.