

Strategic Leadership: Kelly Lendsay, CEO of Indigenous Works

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CEO of Indigenous Works

INTRODUCTION

Kelly Lendsay is the President and CEO of Indigenous Works,¹ an International Standards Organization (ISO) certified Not-for-Profit (NFP) Indigenous organization with a mandate to increase Indigenous engagement in the economy. Lendsay has led the organization since it started in 1998 (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020). He is an award-winning social entrepreneur who is internationally recognized as one of Canada's foremost innovators and

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organizational development experts in workplace models, corporate/Indigenous partnerships and Indigenous inclusion strategies. A proud Canadian Indigenous leader of Cree and Métis ancestry, he moves seamlessly between both worlds, fostering economic inclusion, well-being, and prosperity for Canada.

Lendsay's personal satisfaction links to Indigenous Works' mission to increase Indigenous engagement in the economy through employment, workplace, and corporate/Indigenous strategies. He enjoys pushing boundaries for innovative approaches to problem resolution in the areas of employment, workplace, and partnership development. These efforts impact Indigenous peoples and all Canadians by building social and economic capital, with serious attention paid to helping people reach their human resource potential.

Indigenous Works' mandate rests on recommendations made in the 1996 Report on the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020). Founding Co-Chairs of Indigenous Works' Board were Eric Newell, President of Syncrude, Ray Ahenakew, Meadow Lake Tribal Council. In October 1998, Lendsay was hired by the Indigenous Works board to build partnership strategies and create a more inclusive work environment for Indigenous peoples in the corporate world (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020).

Indigenous Works received federal government funding support up until 2014; these public funds were used to leverage support for private funding. During this time Indigenous Works explored how different sectors impacted the overall job market. A number of projects were completed with the assistance of project staff and contractors. Indigenous Works connected Indigenous people with employment opportunities through the National Recruitment Fair, which ran from 2009–2016. Many Indigenous students benefitted from these fairs by connecting with employers. Lendsay is proud to see many in top management positions in various corporations and sectors across Canada. The job fair was cancelled due to government cutbacks, making it no longer sustainable as a public/private funded initiative.

GOVERNANCE

Currently 65% of the board of directors are Indigenous, in excess of the 50% minimum set for Indigenous director representation by Indigenous Works (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020). This balance of ethnicity is important, as Indigenous Works focuses on the world of inclusion and bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together. The approach also guides Indigenous Works' own work force in maintaining the voice of Indigenous leadership. Lendsay aims for balance in incorporating a western and traditional approach with cultural perspectives for the best decisions.

Indigenous Works incorporates many Indigenous values into their agenda. Elders are often part of the decision-making process, with board members, executives, and employees relying on the seven generation teaching to guide decisions and consider impacts on children now and in the future. They also incorporate the medicine wheel and consider emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual ways of thinking (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020).

According to Lendsay, effective leaders must care about the people in their organization, operate with integrity, and constantly focus on vision and innovation. Partnerships offer a means to increase effectiveness and build a solid reputation over time as a means to achieve their mission. Lendsay notes that reputations take years to build and a day to break.

Passion, strong communication skills, including listening, and balanced thoughtfully with a playful attitude make Lendsay an effective leader in achieving Indigenous Works' mission. Lendsay knows that a good CEO must make hard decisions by gathering information and operating by consensus.

Building future capacity to achieve Indigenous Works' goals is a critical focus in order to make the desired economic impact. Lendsay identifies achieving effective scalability as Indigenous Works' biggest issue. Most NFPs do not have the capacity to reach their mission statement due to the pressure of understaffing. Indigenous Works is stretched thin, with five full-time and one half-time employees filling multiple positions. His goal is to increase staff to ten. At that level of staffing, plans to expand the membership program and services and to also coordinate more private sector consulting services can be accomplished. As CEO, Lendsay wants to continue striving for mission statement impacts as well as developing a research arm to bring academic researchers in line with Indigenous community needs, which is presented in the next section. Hopefully, increasing Indigenous Works' national profile will demonstrate value-added services that attract increased corporate funding (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020).

NEW REALITY

Lendsay claims the key reasons for Indigenous Works' continued success, following the government cutbacks, were a new business model and self-sufficiency measures. New revenue streams gave them enough money to survive the transition and become independent of government funding. Today, Indigenous Works has no core government funding, which is very impressive for an NFP agency. Cuts were made to 33 staff and contractors, with a current staff of six and a handful of contractors maintaining operations.

Lendsay says the new reality means the opportunity to leverage public funds disappears, whereas in the past, each dollar raised in the private sector was matched. Indigenous Works' approach is to create products and services the public will buy and keep the organization afloat. Indigenous Works' leadership challenging responsibility is to develop continuing revenue streams which support programs and services that achieve their mandate. He states that the work Indigenous Works does is in the public good; but similar to other organizations, they have to continually make this case to the public sector.

Lendsay's approach relies on three questions from *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001): What can we be the best at in the world? What is going to drive our economic engine? What are we passionate about? The answers for Indigenous Works resulted in excellence at workplace systems reviews where the goal is improved Indigenous employment and workplace strategies. What is the Indigenous employment gap, and what is the best way to make a positive difference? Comprehensive reviews highlight gaps, which are filled by connecting them with potential Indigenous employees. Various consulting services are offered, such as employment system reviews and workplace assessment, as well as online and in-person training, which provide companies with the knowledge to seriously address Indigenous-focused goals.

From their research, Indigenous Works discovered that 85% of Canadian businesses are disengaged with Indigenous businesses. Lendsay says it is a disappointing experience to see the apathy among disengaged companies — Indigenous engagement is not on their radar. He has observed that many of these disengaged companies do not understand the value of con-

sidering and building a business case for Indigenous engagement. As a result, it is difficult for them to invest in Indigenous strategies and develop an Indigenous workforce (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020). Efforts to reach these disengaged corporations are in the planning stages.

Kocihta, Indigenous Works' charitable arm, has a mandate to increase the human resource and career potential of Indigenous youth, including youth with disabilities. Programs seek to address the Indigenous education gap that exists in Canada (Indigenous Works, 2020). Kocihta programs help Indigenous youth overcome barriers by addressing career awareness and planning. The Guiding Circles project has trained over 2,000 practitioners and delivered over 50,000 books to help people direct their own career paths. Other programs Kocihta offered in the past are Leadership Skill Build and eMentoring. Leadership Skill Build was an annual four-day event where Indigenous post-secondary graduates learned soft skills to effectively participate in job fairs. Lendsay's message to these young leaders is to be bold. An exciting world welcomes hard work, moving past personal comfort levels and, most importantly, sharing the benefits by giving back to community, both local and national. A career path trajectory must offer ways to develop hard and soft skills.

The corporate world is ready to attract these Indigenous dynamos by adopting a culture of innovation by embracing creativity and change. Indigenous organizations are experiencing the same problems that other organizations are when it comes to hiring skilled Indigenous people and putting them on meaningful career paths. Employment trends note an increased demand for skilled Indigenous employees. A major challenge for NFPs is that they cannot match competitive salaries offered by large corporations to Indigenous people. This conundrum often results in people being lured away from NFPs, minimizing the opportunity to keep Indigenous voices and cultural perspectives at the table.

Some of the downsides of Indigenous communities becoming too economically reliant on raw resource-based sectors include unstable market conditions and lack of human capital and financial experience, as well as limited access to the required resources. The first step for a community to become economically viable is investing in its own community capacity building (Beaudoin, 2012). Lendsay recommends that Indigenous CEOs continue to diversify their companies beyond the resource sector. Collaboration with partners and mentoring their youth will help develop their economic potential.

Mentorship is one of the most powerful forms of training when it comes to changing performance. Lendsay says that older and youthful mentors had a continuing, powerful effect on his personal and business goals over the years. People that his organization have helped find jobs often end up coming back into his life. They share their success stories and what they have learned, and this pushes Lendsay to go further (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020).

Indigenous Works' current strategy is to relaunch their membership program in September 2020 with a new employer certification program, new workplace services, and a new lower cost membership fee structure. They are also focusing on making these programs affordable for small and medium sized enterprises to help them on their journey of inclusion. This strategy is being tested and should be ready to roll out in September 2020.

Lendsay's organization also focuses on research and innovation to grow new talent and engage economic wellbeing and prosperity with a new initiative called Luminary — Advancing Indigenous Innovation, Economic Transformation and Well-Being: Growing Increased Cooperation and Collaboration among Indigenous Businesses and Communities, University and College Researchers and Research Agencies. Lendsay has assembled an

impressive list of over 100 partners from universities, colleges, Indigenous business and economic development corporations plus committed stakeholder agencies and champions. Research agencies are encouraged to target economic issues and priorities facing Indigenous communities. Some research and mapping exercises will be done by Luminary, including baseline assessments of the Indigenous labour market and engagement of Indigenous research students.

In summary, Lendsay defines his personal style as a CEO as follows: “Leadership is not only about doing things right, it’s about doing the right things. Innovation in leadership means embracing failure and setbacks; what counts is how you respond to them, learn from them, and grow from these experiences” (personal phone interview, March 15, 2020). Indigenous Works team is based on solid vision and planning skills to meet the challenges of the day.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Works seeks a balanced, inclusive business strategy in line with viewing the world through both an Indigenous and a Western World view. The goal is to balance both perspectives in the most inclusive manner. He prides himself with being able to incorporate this into his organizational strategy and value-based principles. This is important, as he moves forward with one foot in the Western World and one in the Indigenous world as a CEO and leader. It is also beneficial, considering that Lendsay’s main focus is to facilitate greater labour market opportunities for Indigenous people into both Indigenous and mainstream organizations and companies. Lendsay holds that the best programs an organization can offer are extensions of their core values. He and his team have worked tirelessly to build on their core competency of offering workplace and workforce consulting.

Meanwhile, their charity (Kocihta) focuses on educating Indigenous youth about their career planning and developing their human resource potential. Indigenous Works cannot close the employment and skills gap on its own; it must help corporations to understand the value of Indigenous partnerships, customers and employees. This requires a collaboration to build social and economic capital for all Canadians, capital which will help the country reach its full economic potential.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I agree with Lendsay on his strategy for effective leadership as well as the importance of mentors for young Indigenous leaders. Indigenous people continuing to invest in each other is the first step towards economic sustainability. Lendsay’s organization does just this by consulting other businesses and making them more open to Indigenous values. Lendsay mentors and facilitates a climate of mentorship.

I have learned that many Indigenous people within Canada suffer from situations of poverty, sickness, and unemployment, mostly stemming from a lack of support. A good way to put a stop to these issues is to start at the foundational level and develop organizations such as Lendsay’s NFP. This way Indigenous people can bring themselves and their community members out of poverty through better employment and workplace inclusion, thus making them less reliant on government assistance and creating lasting revenue streams for

communities. Leadership on its own is a difficult job, but when you add in the Indigenous element it becomes even more complex. Now leaders are responsible to lead a culture, race, and civilization to a place that is economically sound. Challenging years of colonialism as well as attempts at cultural genocide is at the core of the fight for victims of oppression to leave victimhood behind and carve out a place of economic well-being.

My research has also taught me that good will is not enough, and creating an employment environment that fosters Indigenous success is based on proper cultural knowledge and acceptance. If businesses in Canada today do not understand the histories and issues of Indigenous people, then they are only fostering an environment in which Indigenous people are once again assimilated into an unsupportive system. The result will be harmful social divides within the company and society.

Lindsay has taught me the importance of educating society and the benefits which his organization will provide to businesses. As a young Indigenous person and an aspiring leader, I plan to incorporate these wholistic lessons in my own business practices of inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and balance.

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