

*Jamie Wilson:  
Today's Indigenous Powerhouse Leader*

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Ashley Richard  
B.COMM., UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA



“[A guy in the army] once told me, ‘Make sure when you die, it’s one of the last things you have to do’”

— Wilson, 2017

The most common reason Indigenous initiatives fail is inadequate leadership. So what makes an Indigenous leader great? A sense of collectivism, strong respect for traditions and teachings, and an awareness of the realities being faced by Indigenous communities today are among some of the characteristics that make a successful Indigenous leader. But adding in the element of economics creates a new realm of problems of which Indigenous leaders must face. Accusations of “selling out” or attempts at character assassination are fallacies commonly faced by Indigenous economic leaders. This is only because Indigenous peoples have been so focussed on salvaging what has been lost in their culture that the majority have not yet had the time or opportunity to understand the importance of economic development and healthy leadership in many impoverished communities across Canada. Once communities understand how important economic strength is, they will understand that modern economic leadership can be in line with ideals of what it means to be Indigenous.

While there are many Indigenous leaders in Canada, there are not as many Indigenous economic leaders. Indigenous leaders lacking expertise in economic theories is the reason why so many communities are on the lowest end of the socio-economic ladder. Indigenous economic leaders are a dynamic and growing group in Canadian society. Indigenous peoples in Canada have faced a plethora of problems related to identity, self-reliance, and sovereignty due to many contributing factors such as the Indian Act, residential schools and other areas related to colonization. Contemporary Indigenous economic leadership that respects cultures and traditions will be a way for communities to alleviate some of the restraints of poverty and the economic sanctions imposed by the Indian Act. Contemporary Indigenous economic leadership requires a modern interpretation of the treaties. The treaties promised Indigenous people their livelihood — but what does this mean in modern terms? Understanding economic development in a contemporary Indigenous context requires a holistic interpretation of the historical and spiritual aspects to the treaties and blending this knowledge together with contemporary societal issues, in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. With this knowledge, we can foster economic leadership in our communities — we can seek guidance from empowered leaders who realize the impact that positive economic development can have on Indigenous communities. Modern day leader Jamie Wilson is an example of this type of leader.

Jamie Wilson is from Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba. Currently, he holds the position of Deputy Minister of the Economy, Growth, and Trade in the Government of Manitoba. Prior to this position, he was the Treaty Commissioner for Manitoba and the Director of Education for the Opaskwayak Educational Authority Inc. He was also a well-respected Infantry Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces and an Infantry Soldier in the US Army for a number of years. With this impressive list of accomplishments, Wilson is the epitome of an Indigenous economic powerhouse. He faces challenge after challenge, but is always eager to take on the next role and strengthen his community.

Being considered a “sell-out” is more common than it should be for Indigenous people in the business world. Wilson has been called a sell-out, but these words do not make him question his indigeneity in any way. Wilson says a huge challenge today is defining our Indigenous identity through economic means. Indigenous people have survived this long by learning how to adapt and grow in an ever changing economy, and business minded leaders are focussed on coming up with solutions to create a stronger future for the next generations. Wilson says, “Having a business mentality does not make you “less Indigenous” or a complacent agent in assimilation, it just enables you to work through challenges in a different way.” Yes, Wilson understands the importance of preserving the environment and the harm

of mass oil extraction. But you will never catch him rallying on Parliament Hill; instead, you would see him inside Parliament Hill, coming up with concrete solutions that will make tangible changes. He adopts a “Yes — And” mentality — yes, he understands your grievances, and what do you want to do about it?

A good leader can be defined as someone who encourages a sense of meaning to a collective and empowers a group to achieve a common goal. In order to do this effectively, leaders must embody specific characteristics. One vital characteristic is to have a high level of emotional intelligence and, relatedly, a strong sense of personal integrity. Wilson says one of his greatest accomplishments was building the successful team of staff at the Treaty Commission; he did this through building inter-personal relationships with his staff and empowering them to take on responsibilities. He understood how to read peoples’ strengths and areas requiring attention and how to encourage their best work. When leaders want to achieve great things, it is their responsibility to establish a coalition of supporters who also support their vision, and he was able to do that with his staff.

One of my greatest accomplishments was the team I established at the Treaty Commission. I was able to help create empathy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and I think people started to see the Treaty relationship as double sided — I never wanted to guilt trip anyone.

— Wilson, 2017

Finding balance and harmony in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world is tough, but it is something that Wilson has been able to accomplish. During his time as Treaty Commissioner of Manitoba, Wilson was tasked with the mandate to strengthen, maintain, and enhance the Treaty Relationship in Manitoba — a job that literally required working in both worlds every day.

During his time as Director of Education for Opaskwayak Educational Authority, Wilson was starkly aware of the growing gap in First Nations education in comparison with the rest of Canada’s population. Wilson knew he needed to set a precedent to cause a disruption in this pattern. He raised the standard for on-reserve education beyond the Province and proved to people that it is possible to set Indigenous standards higher than mainstream standards and come out successful. Education is one of the foundational stepping stones for helping communities out of stagnation and poverty. If a community does not believe in educating and supporting one another, they are only holding each other back.

An advocate of continuing education, Wilson believes that there is always something new to be learned in any role. Wilson admits that it was difficult working on the reserve; he says it presented him with a set of challenges that people who have not worked on reserve could never understand. Being able and willing to move through your fears is the only way to avoid paralyzing behaviours. Many people are handed amazing opportunities, but they turn them down out of fear of failure. Wilson uses fear as fuel — there has not been a challenge he has backed down from and when he is challenged, he confronts it head on. Not being one who has the luxury of remaining out of the public eye, Wilson handles conflict and contention with tact and dignity.

Wilson has a success-oriented mind but his sense of humility sets him apart. It is important to acknowledge that money and titles are good measures of success, but more importantly, it is imperative to realize that success is not something that is achieved, rather, something to be continuously worked at. Achieving success is an ongoing process and there is no amount of money that can make up for feeling stagnated or trapped. Wilson has pro-

gressed from the military, to education, to Indigenous politics, and finally onto economic empowerment. With each role, he has been able to experiment with new processes and test new theories.

A good leader must have an internal locus of control and their confidence must be fostered through a sense of belief that you have control over your own destiny. This internal locus is what gives effective leaders, such as Wilson, the confidence to take risks and encourage personal change. There is an underlying sense of indigeneity in all Indigenous leaders that is woven into every fibre of their actions. For example, Wilson credits his successes and opportunities to the path his father laid out for him and he facilitates the learning of others through storytelling.

Effective leadership characteristics were instilled into Wilson by the guidance of his father. Wilson did not come from a poor background; he came from a very educated background. This fact does not make him any less Indigenous, nor does it mean he should be criticized for his life choices. Wilson's father was an "outside the box" thinker, not unlike himself. Wilson's father quit jobs to pursue higher education and Wilson says he would do the same. When his father was in residential school, a group of his peers built a raft to escape back to the reserve. Wilson's father chose to stay at the school and finish his degree. He was chastised for not joining his peers in their escape, but he knew what was best for the future of his life. He was creating a new path for his life, just as Wilson does today. Having such an influential parent has helped to shape the person Wilson is today; he is an innovative thinker, a leader, and more importantly, not held back by any restraints of jealousy and competition.

They called him a sell out for not joining. To this day, none of those guys have ever finished high school. They called him a sell out for getting his Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, his doctorate, for working with other people ... People may have called me that behind my back, and for a while it bugged me, but I'm confident in myself — I've fasted, pierced, and I go to ceremony, but I don't need to broadcast it.

Wilson, 2017

It is hard not to notice the high level of respect Wilson has for his father. In every story, his father is brought up as a source of inspiration. Having a role model who can instill good values is a huge determinant of the type of leader people can grow up to be. Family relations and teachings of love and respect are very important in Indigenous culture. Wilson does not explicitly state the Seven Sacred Teachings in his words, he unknowingly gives examples of the teachings in the stories he shares.

Storytelling has always been a huge tradition in Indigenous culture, and facilitating learning is an important aspect of effective leadership. Wilson embodies both of these characteristics; he is often empowering his employees' sense of innovation through storytelling. When asked about personal challenges and accomplishments, Wilson does not rattle off a coherently planned list resembling a resume. Instead, he tells stories of past experiences and creates a visual image for the listener.

Wilson is mindful of Indigenous teachings in every decision he makes, but maybe not the teachings that may first rush to mind. Wilson does not explicitly talk about the Seven Sacred Teachings, he simply just lives them because he believes those teachings should go without saying. The modern Indigenous teachings Wilson says he follows are the teachings of perseverance, hard work, collaboration, grits, accepting diversity, and remembering a greater purpose for your life. Indigenous people have made it this far by learning to adapt to

new surroundings; assimilation may have been the goal of the government at one point, but Indigenous perseverance did not let that happen. Wilson stresses accepting diversity as vital because he is aware that modern business and economics are not seen by most as “traditional”, but he believes that getting people working together and building their own wealth is the modern implementation of the livelihood aspect of the treaties.

The Elders said, ‘Treaties are about livelihood.’ You know what, it took me a full four years to realize that treaties are about livelihood. But livelihood doesn’t mean what people thought it meant before. It means something different. It means economic empowerment and self-reliance; you don’t need to be directly involved with the treaties, you just need to live them.

— Wilson, 2017