

First Nation Projects – Case Studies

By Louise Nichol, President, OARS training, Inc.

1. Local Inuit Community Offers Taxidermy Training

An early experience in First Nation communities came from working with the Canadian College of Taxidermy and the Inuit community of Coral Harbour on Southampton Island, Nunavut (pop. 800). The Community Council had an economic plan that included training locals in three different areas: nature photography, jewellery making, and taxidermy. My role was the development of the taxidermy training. The animals being preserved needed to be indigenous, so the training had to be delivered in the community, not at the College campus in McCreary, Manitoba. The large amount of racks and hides left behind in the Caribou hunting fields and the increasing interest of American hunters indicated a market for taxidermy services. Forty local people lined up for the training, many with inadequate literacy or language skills.

The first step was helping the CED officer write a proposal. Second, we secured an appropriate space to deliver the training. Third, we secured accommodation for trainers and students, and lastly, we created an assessment to help the community select the trainees. The program was very successful, and a second was delivered the following year. Highlights of the key program customization and alterations include:

- Final students selected included 3 from Coral Harbour, 3 from Repulse Bay, and 3 from Arviat. They needed to consider how many taxidermists the market could support.
- Changes to the curriculum included:
 - Removing the knife skills lessons; students already possessed superior knife skills.
 - A translator was available at all lessons.
 - Writing requirements were reduced and cut out where possible.
 - Delivery happened with one animal at a time, so if the student did not return, they would still be able to completely do one animal (i.e., ptarmigan, arctic fox, arctic char, or caribou).
 - Delivery was scheduled around the local hunting and fishing season and occurred for two weeks at a time, for three overall sessions, instead of six continuous weeks. Six straight weeks promoted homesickness, which caused dropouts.

The program produced some amazing results. Highlights include:

- A couple of students became business and marketing agents, helping everyone access customers and taking care of paper work.
- A few students learned to create taxidermy gifts, like ornamental racks, key chains, and tanning hides.
- One student became materials and equipment supplier for the region.

2. Fisher River Community Transition Project

In 2004, I was contracted to deliver a pilot research project that would identify better ways of helping people in Fisher River prepare for, find, and keep employment. The goals of the Fisher River Community Transition Project were:

- To develop a holistic workplace transition program targeted to residents who are seeking employment, further education, job training, or personal counselling.
- To facilitate a community planning process that includes labour market information and analysis, and community services such as health and education
- To develop intake, assessment, and job-matching tools to support the Transition Program, and
- To facilitate the transfer of capacity to deliver future transition programs, by training a local counsellor in community planning, intake, assessment, and job matching

This project happened from a request to assess a group of students on the reserve who were dropping out of training like flies. We developed a PLA process for the remaining students to allow them to self-assess their fit with the program. The plight of these young people became evident and began to get the attention of both government and community. Most of the students were chronically unemployable. We created a transition program to culturally, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically prepare them for work or training.

The transition program had capacity built in, and the second delivery was done 100% by local people. The Band School Board picked up the core costs of the program, and “all” band members wanting support for further education are required to successfully complete the transition process. This project was followed by a community analysis, using a Spiral Dynamics framework to guide the research. In March of 2006, the community took over their own process of employment planning.

3. Aboriginal Management and Leadership in Retail

I had the pleasure to consult with the North West Company for about seven years. The North West Company is the exclusive retailer in Canada’s far north with more than 4,000 employees in over 160 rural, remote, and northern communities. Approximately 80% of their employees are Aboriginal. Consistent funding support from the Province of Manitoba allowed us to research the development of Aboriginal employees into management roles. This research took us into about 30 communities and included in-depth interviews with more than 100 Aboriginal employees. Our efforts were rewarded when this project won the Conference Board of Canada Award for Best Literacy Programs, Large Business.

4. Tseshah First Nation, Human Resource Strategy

The Band office staff and the Council leaders in Tseshah First Nation had been given very little human resource training or support. A recent move into brand new office space created the perfect timing for an organizational change process. Staff members were introduced to the idea of change happening in their workplace, and their input was sought for the development of job assessments and job descriptions. Human resource planning with the Council led to visioning and clarity around their role as an employer. The Council approved a new organizational restructuring and delegated the performance management process to the appropriate personnel.

A familiar refrain in First Nation projects is that they all begin with a funding proposal. A collaborative effort in Tseshah secured funds to help create a high-performance workplace. The project was able to create new job descriptions, re-align the workflow process, and introduced job standards and a performance management tool and process. Human resource records have been developed, and a new Chief Operating Officer is implementing the new performance expectations and policies.

This was not an easy process for anyone, and I had to appreciate the Aboriginal culture impacts of inclusion and integrity. Behavioural changes are slow, and there will continue to be new improvements as this group transitions into a high-performance workplace. A key factor in this project is the community's willingness to continue the growth process. Tseshah Leadership was able to examine the value of building the skills and strengths of their people, for both their own and the outside labour market.