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Issue 1039 ■ September 22-28, 2009 \$3.00 ■ \$79.95 annually ■ subscribe@biv.com

Culture swap to build better CEOs

SFU business leadership program partnering aboriginal with non-aboriginal leaders to promote inter-cultural business understanding and expertise in B.C.



Rick Colbourne, Learning Strategies Group executive director (left), and ICAB director Malcolm MacPherson: now's the best time to get both sides on the same side

KRISENDRA BISETTY

An innovative program that's the first of its kind in Canada will get B.C. native chiefs into corporate offices and CEOs onto aboriginal reserves as it tries to bridge a widening gap marked by decades of mistrust and lost business opportunities.

With tensions running high in B.C. over unresolved land-claims issues and the collapse of legislative initiatives concerning aboriginal rights and title, now's the best time to get both sides on the same side, say proponents of the leadership exchange program.

"The goal of the program is to create a better understanding [among] aboriginal community leaders, business leaders and corporate leaders, which then results in better business relationships," said **Katrin Harry**, executive director of the **Industry Council for Aboriginal Business (ICAB)**, a non-profit organization whose program in partnership

with **Simon Fraser University's Learning Strategies Group** will kick off in November as a pilot project. "If we can create a cohort of business and aboriginal leaders in this province, it will provide room for dialogue between the two parties, which ultimately results in business development."

Political tensions on the resource-development and land-claims front are high, but among corporate bosses and native chiefs there's a "strong willingness" to find common ground, said **Rick Colbourne**, executive director of the Learning Strategies Group (LSG), which operates out of the university's Segal Graduate School of Business in Vancouver.

"Senior leadership from corporations come from a very different place than potentially the senior leaders in First Nations, so there's a real desire for each side to understand the other," said Colbourne, "to understand their context for doing business, to understand how they make these decisions

and how they can work together and move forward in a more collaborative way and partner on business and economic opportunities."

While the program doesn't involve trading places, participating senior corporate leaders, CEOs and company presidents will host a chief in their corporation and include him or her in decision-making processes, meetings and onsite visits.

"So they're really getting a strong insight into the business, the values, the culture of the corporation and vice versa," said Colbourne.

Corporate leaders in turn will go to First Nation communities.

"Exchange really refers to the exchange of knowledge, of ideas, of history and backgrounds. The chief will spend as much time in the corporation as the corporate leader spends in the community," said Harris.

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Partnership: Relationships key in resource development

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“What makes this program unique is that it provides the participants with a perspective that is usually not accessible to them.”

Usually aboriginal-corporate leaders come together when they're dealing with a business issue, whether it's to build a pipeline through a traditional territory or to exploit minerals, rivers, trees or other resources.

However, the leadership exchange program requires that direct business relations are avoided: participants are not in it to secure business deals.

“We want to avoid the situation where participants are partnered up, have a business going or there's a potential for doing business,” said Colbourne. “The idea is to focus on the knowledge exchange and that experience and not on creating a business opportunity

in this setting.”

Harris added that the goal is to form a group of B.C. aboriginal and corporate leaders “who know each other and then they can talk to each other.”

The ICAB, whose

“The chief will spend as much time in the corporation as the corporate leader spends in the community”

– Katrin Harry,
executive director,
Industry Council for
Aboriginal Business

mandate is to help remove barriers caused by the lack of mutual understanding and business relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people, has

already identified candidates for the pilot: **Ian Anderson**, president of **Kinder Morgan Canada**, a business segment of **Kinder Morgan**, one of the largest pipeline transportation and energy-storage companies in North America, as well as a big western Canadian hotel chain, an independent power producer and three native chiefs.

The pilot program will also link male corporate bosses with female aboriginal leaders so that it involves a cross-section of decision-makers.

Initially, the program will likely be run four times a year. Coaching and other support will be available if needed.

Harry said aboriginal engagement – and early engagement – is becoming “a fact of life” for most resource companies in B.C.

“Therefore, it becomes a budget item and requires some planning and some

thought,” she said. “The more business leaders know about aboriginal engagement the better they are able to set up their project plans, their budgets.”

Malcolm MacPherson, an ICAB director and a Métis, said the program is timely because of recent developments, including the failure of the **B.C. Liberal** government's proposed Reconciliation and Recognition Act.

“I think that goes to show that there is a real need to have some common ground between industry and aboriginal leadership so as to be able to increase the flow of business deals,” said MacPherson, a lawyer whose practice at **Boughton Law Corp.** in Vancouver focuses on aboriginal economic development. “If the relationship is a good one, then the pie gets expanded for everybody.” ■

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