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## B.C. First Nations & Business

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New view: Plutonic CEO Donald McInnes (right) visits Chief William Charlie at the Chehalis reserve.

### First Nations and Business Leaders Trade Places to Undo Stereotypes and Discover Common Ground

William Charlie, chief of the Chehalis Indian Band, was a visitor at the Vancouver offices of Plutonic Power Corp. – sitting in on meetings, talking with staff, learning their day-to-day business – when it became clear that his neighbours needed to hear a story. Those around him were discussing how a group of aboriginal people had become upset after workers buried cedar logs alongside a road they were building.

His hosts understood that this was a problem, Charlie recalls, but not the depth of it: “The guys in the meeting were saying, ‘Yeah, it’s not the best road-building practices and they took shortcuts and they shouldn’t have.’ And I

said, ‘But do you know the cultural significance of that cedar log?’”

Charlie explained that the cedar tree was once a kind, generous ancestor who took care of people all his life. “The Creator saw what a good man he was and said, ‘When this man dies, where they bury him will grow the sacred tree.’” And this was the cedar tree, which still helps its people today, Charlie told the group: “When these cedar poles were buried, that’s like burying one of our ancestors that’s still alive.”

This kind of learning moment was exactly what was supposed to happen. Charlie was



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present at Plutonic headquarters thanks to a leadership exchange put together by the Industry Council for Aboriginal Business (ICAB) and SFU's Learning Strategies Group. Four B.C. CEOs and four First Nations chiefs were paired up, and each leader spent a few days at his or her partner's workplace early this year.

Charlie says his community wants to attract business investment to help support infrastructure and social programs, but it can be difficult to reach sensitive agreements when stereotypes still label aboriginal communities as unreliable business partners waiting for government handouts. He joined the project partly to share a different perspective, but spending time with Plutonic CEO Donald McInnes and his family also highlighted lessons for his community about businesspeople. "Lots of times, our perception of them is that they don't have a conscience, that the only thing that means anything is the bottom line," Charlie says. "The majority of the businesspeople that I've met are real down-to-earth, respectful people, and they have the same passion to understand and to learn."

Graeme Barrit admits he had a selfish reason for participating in the exchange. As president of Coast Hotels Ltd., which runs 40 hotels in the Canadian and American west, he's facing an upcoming labour shortage as the population ages. He wanted to learn how to make his company an employer of choice for young aboriginals. But during his exchange in January, his conversations with Chief Harold Aljam of the Coldwater Indian Band quickly expanded into a more open discussion about the leadership challenges they both faced.

In many ways, it showed him how lucky he was, Barrit says. For example, Aljam's council is shaken up by an election process every two to four years, as demanded by the Indian Act, while Barrit can rely on a team with decades

of leadership experience. "But contrary to that, he has incredible cultural strengths," Barrit says. "In corporate Canada, there are a lot of organizations with unhealthy cultures. And no matter how good the leadership of that organization is, they're doomed to failure."

Although half their time together was spent high in a steel tower in downtown Vancouver and half in a small reserve near Merritt, they did not speak about social injustice, Barrit says. The focus of the project was leadership, he explains, "the belief being – and I share it wholeheartedly – that if you can get a healthy organization built around strong leadership and a strong culture, those other problems will resolve themselves."

Marlane Christensen, president of the ICAB, says she grew up in a First Nations reserve and later went to work for an oil and gas company. It took months to begin to understand a business culture and environment, she says. Similarly, when businesspeople first learn of the constraints the Indian Act imposes on First Nations communities, their reaction is typically outrage, she says. This gap in understanding is what the exchange is trying to fix, and the first cohort is only the beginning. The program will continue matching business and First Nations leaders, creating a growing network of alumni with personal relationships formed on shared experience. The hope is that such a resource will lead to better business and governing decisions.

These days discussions between businesses and First Nations can easily get mired in legal squabbles over rights and responsibilities. "This program puts all of that aside," Christensen says. "It's about common sense. It's about coming together as human beings and saying, 'I'm interested in knowing who you are.'"



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