

TOOL

Decolonizing from Within the Organization



The Towards Braiding reader¹ deftly outlines common blind spots and pitfalls that many settler organizations fall into related to their efforts toward Indigenous engagement, reconciliation and Indigenizing both their internal practices (e.g. employment, programming and partnership opportunities), and external initiatives (e.g. public art and city building). The Towards Braiding project explores the practical, ethical and educational considerations underpinning civic-Indigenous engagement, with its underlying research based on the lived experiences shared by many Indigenous practitioners and thought leaders working within settler governments and organizations.

1 - Jimmy, E., Andreotti, V. & Stein, S. (2019). Towards Braiding. Musagetes.

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As part of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategy of many organizations in 2021, executive leadership and management will commit to diversifying their staff and networks, including Indigenous and other BIPOC content in their projects and communications, and developing valuable relationships with BIPOC communities and partners. However, the tendency is to approach the hiring of Indigenous staff, community engagement, reconciliation commitments, programming, and business development opportunities through the status quo lens that they handle all other business within the organization. While equity, inclusion and reconciliation are foundational values toward decolonization for any municipality, organization and company, vows to treat everyone the same and as equals is not actually helpful. Staff and partners from Indigenous and other racialized and marginalized ethno-cultural and socioeconomic identities are not the same as those from historically privileged identities as they often do not have the same worldviews and realities, or equal experiences by virtue of their identities.

2 - Ibid.

The following poem by Indigenous scholar and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples' Wellbeing Cash Ashkenew³ brilliantly captures the experience of many Indigenous practitioners and thought leaders working in settler universities, organizations, industry and government.

Academic Indian job description: have to know⁴

Have to know...

western knowledge and education

plus the critique of western knowledge and education

Have to know...

indigenous "culture" and education

plus the critique and the critique of the critique of

indigenous "culture" and education

Have to know...

how to embody expected authenticity

and how to embody expected critique

of expected authenticity

Have to know...

when and where to use indigenous literature

and when and where to use the Western canon

to build legitimacy and credibility for indigenous thought and experience

Have to know...

when to vilify, to romanticize, to essentialize

when to apologize, to complexify, to compromise

when and who to be accountable to and why

3 - Ahenakew, C. (2016). Grafting Indigenous ways of knowing onto non-Indigenous ways of being: The (underestimated) challenges of a decolonial imagination. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(3), 323-340.

4 - Ibid.

Have to know...

when, where and how to perform

competence, confidence, boldness, heroic rebelliousness

and humility, compliance and gratitude for the opportunity

Have to know...

how to be an intellectual, an activist, a therapist, and an entrepreneur

how to improve retention, attrition and social mobility

and how to stop exploitation and ecological disaster

Have to know...

how to educate "my people," liberal allies, immigrants, red necks, colleagues

how to relate to gang members, business sponsors, elders, politicians

how to speak with the crows, the trees, the sea, and the media

Have to know...

how to solve, how to fix, how to spell and to pronounce

colonialism, capitalism, racism, slavery, patriarchy

hetero-normativity, ableism, elitism, and anthropocentrism

Have to know...

how to Indigenize and decolonize

disciplines, protocols, ethics and methodologies

to make non-indigenous people feel good about their work.

Have to know...

how to live with the guilt of having credentials, a secure job

and the awareness of compliance with a rigged system

built on the broken back and wounded soul of your family members

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The contemporary Indigenous professional is expected to hold (simultaneously) many potentially contrary roles, worldviews, knowledges, agendas and ways of being and doing, but to be ultimately, a living paradox. The poem and preceding discussion speak to the unrealistic, unfair and unattainable expectations and experiences that are either explicitly or tacitly levied onto Indigenous professionals and staff. They are required to be:

- Indigenous in ways that are of value to and strategic to the settler institution; and mainstream enough to maintain the status quo institutional culture and practices.
- Well situated in western worldviews, thought traditions and methodologies (depending on the discipline) to substantiate Indigenous discourse, yet critical enough to be current and progressive.
- Proficient in pan-Indigenous culture and knowledge (singular), but only as it complements or provides local legitimacy for western/institutional views.
- Capable of recognizing, repairing, and solving entrenched structural, systemic and environmental problems (i.e. colonialism, capitalism, racism, oppression, classism and elitism, environmental exploitation and destruction, climate change, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, and anthropocentrism).
- Capable of reconciling, decolonizing and Indigenizing institutions, public spaces, disciplines, protocols, ethics and methodologies on behalf of settler institutions and diverse Indigenous Nations
- To make non-indigenous people feel good about their work
- An authentic Indigenous person but only according to the assumptions and perceptions of the settler institution.

- Capable of straddling and working to create bridges across multiple Indigenous and settler worldviews and modes of practice; and have the innate understanding of how, when and in what space to perform optimism, confidence, criticism, humility, emotion, accountability, heroism, deference, boldness and skepticism.
- Capable of holding multiple and shifting roles as social connector, anthropologist, scientist, creative, intellectual, strategist, activist, therapist, spiritual/cultural advisor, entrepreneur, and administrator.
- Able to secure the interest and engagement of Indigenous community and practitioners in any activity, event, committee, and consultation – often at short notice and/or without appropriate compensation or recognition of their unique contributions.
- Capable of improving access to, and productivity and retention of Indigenous staff; and creating opportunities for capacity building, skills and economic advancement and leadership in the target Indigenous community.
- Tireless in the pursuit of educating, building awareness, and shifting cultural attitudes (and repeat) among staff and executive leadership, Indigenous community, partners, program participants and wider society.
- Capable of being both a community and an environmental whisperer i.e. the innate ability to translate knowledge and agendas from institutions to community members; and communicate to the land, plants and animals, ancestors and spirit world.

- Reconcile the cultural contradictions and relative privileges (vis-à-vis many members of urban and rural Indigenous communities) of being an educated, professionalized and securely employed Indigenous person in compliance with the inequitable systems of government, higher education, industry, private and research institutions.

An imperative learning for settler organizations interested in engaging Indigenous staff and partners in relationships and processes that genuinely include their worldviews and disrupt and reconfigure inequitable power dynamics and colonial patterns, is for leadership to listen to and learn from the experiences and needs of Indigenous staff and partners. There can be no genuine righting of relationships and transformative reconciliation with Indigenous peoples without an organization's openness to:

- Critical reflection and truth-telling;
- Decolonizing employment practices, workplace culture, relationships with BIPOC staff and communities, and programs and policies; and
- Course-correcting around harmful systemic patterns that are often imperceptible because they have become so normalized.

Willingness by leadership to create space for critical reflection of internal biases and blind spots (no matter how unintentional), and deep learning from and deference to Indigenous leadership, worldviews and methodologies is often challenging for organizations, especially those with long-established systems and cultures.

Yet, the positive outcomes of these actions can lead to enduring and reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous community, as well as deep cultural and humanizing shifts within the organization that benefit all staff, partners and community participants.

It is therefore not enough for organizations to disrupt patterns of internal bias and privileging settler forms of knowledge and practice above Indigenous forms, but to co-create new relationships and institutional practices with Indigenous staff and partners based on trust, mutual respect and benefit, and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, protocols and methods. For both civic and Indigenous partners, the work of transformative reconciliation and Indigenous engagement becomes "an experiment to try and rewrite how a story like this generally ends, in an effort to interrupt the cycle, and to see what else is possible if we approach things differently...This requires patience, humility, generosity and a decision on both parts to take a risk, knowing that it might not work."⁵

Organizational decolonizing and inclusion actions

As part of truth-telling and decolonization⁶, it is essential that settler organizations and leadership understand that for Indigenous staff or partners to have a seat and voice at the table, and to be valued as equal members or partners of an organization, should not mean they have to fit themselves into the more mainstream convention of the knowledge, communications and practice set by the organizational culture or discipline.

5 - Jimmy, E., Andreotti, V. & Stein, S. (2019). Towards Braiding. Musagetes. p.9.

6 - See: Context section and Tool – Truth-telling and Indigenous Cultural Awareness

While Indigenous staff should be treated equitably and respectfully, they should also be supported to be Indigenous people and enact their Indigenous identities in the ways that are comfortable and meaningful to them.

Civic leaders should acknowledge and support the self-determination of Indigenous staff and partners, including their unique cultural, spiritual, and land relationships and practices.

Decolonization calls on settler institutions and practitioners to examine their own beliefs about Indigenous peoples and cultures by learning about themselves and the programs/services they deliver, in relationship to the Indigenous communities and treaty lands or homelands where they are guests and conduct business. Settler governments and organizations work within systems that perpetuate colonial ethos and relationships, and privilege Western knowledges, cultures and methodologies because it has been normalized for a very long time.

Colonial ideology is embedded at systemic and structural levels, entering into the fabric of organizations, institutions, governments and social networks in ways that are tacit and not always explicit. That fabric comprises institutional attitudes, policies, ethics and processes, providing advantage for particular settler worldviews and professional cultures while marginalizing the worldviews and expertise of Indigenous and other BIPOC peoples.

Decolonization within the organization must also be approached through systems and structural transformation by: decentering settler biases and dominance in institutions and professional fields; and valuing and revitalizing Indigenous knowledges and approaches. Decolonizing our municipalities and civic organizations is an ongoing, evolving process that requires both settlers and urban Indigenous peoples to work together to create public institutions and spaces that are equitable,

inclusive and honour Indigenous presence, cultures, and futures. Guided by the teachings and protocols of Indigenous staff, practitioners and knowledge-keepers, civic organizations should⁷:

- Include Indigenous perspectives, values, and cultural understandings in organizational cultures, policies and practices.
- As a core facet of transformational reconciliation, position Indigenous values, knowledges and sovereignty at the heart of the institution, which then informs all partnerships, programs and services in support of community.
- Champion self-determination, leadership and positive transformation in the wellbeing and advancement of Indigenous peoples.
- Include cultural competency training, and Indigenous protocols and practices in the institution's operations.

Allyship Exercise: Reflecting on our Fluid Positions as Imperfect Allies⁸

- What people or communities have I made myself available to as an ally?
- Who am I comfortable/experienced being an ally to?
- What ally positions do I hold vis-à-vis Indigenous community other BIPOC communities?

7 - Cull, I., Hancock, R.L.A., McKeown, S., Pidgeon, M. & Vedan, A. (2018). Pulling Together: A Guide for Front-Line Staff, Student Services, and Advisors, Professional Learning Series. Victoria: BC campus. <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfrontlineworkers/>

8 - Reynolds, V. (2013). "Leaning In" as imperfect Allies in Community Work, Narrative and Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice, 1(1). <http://journals.gmu.edu/NandC/issue/1/>

- What qualifies me as an ally to Indigenous peoples?
- What ways of being and qualities do I hold that are useful to me in being an ally?
- What trainings/learnings from my life have taught me how to be an ally in this context?
- What ally positions have I not taken?
 - Why?
- What trainings/experiences in my life have made me less capable/able to be an ally in this context?
- What qualities and ways of being about me/this organization get in the way of being an ally to Indigenous peoples?
- What barriers get in the way of me/this organization acting as an ally to Indigenous peoples in these other contexts? (for example: ignorance, bias, not reading the situation, fear of being wrong, political correctness, the “politics of politeness”, past harms, self-interest, indifference, being tired, being busy...)?
- What will it take for me/this organization to act as an ally in Indigenous community contexts?
 - What would it look like?

Prioritizing Indigenous peoples and transformational reconciliation in civic organizations

The following questions can guide a deep process of critical self-reflection and path toward decolonization and centering Indigenous knowledges and approaches within an organization⁹:

- What could transformative reconciliation look like for your organization?
- What are the responsibilities of the organization to the place/land and ancestral custodians from the perspectives of the local/urban Indigenous community?
- Can you identify programming, content and service gaps (specific to your organization) that still exist for Indigenous community?
- What are some examples of specific measures taken by your organization to address these inequalities?
- What role can your organization play in the community to facilitate reconciliation and champion Indigenous-led initiatives and priorities?
- Does your organization currently have a relationship with Indigenous organizations or communities in your local area? Are they formal or informal relationships? How do both parties benefit from this relationship?
- Do your employees have a good understanding and knowledge of Indigenous histories, diversity of Indigenous cultures and the historical impact of colonization?

9 - Indigenous Working Group of the BC Association of Social Workers. (2016). Towards a New Relationship: Toolkit for Reconciliation/Decolonization of Social Work Practice at the Individual, Workplace, and Community Level, prepared by the British Columbia Association of Social Workers.

- Do your employees demonstrate respect for Indigenous cultures and communities?
- Does your organization have an over or under representation of Indigenous staff, vendors and partners?
- If there is under-representation, what is being done to address it?
- Is the physical space welcoming for Indigenous staff and community partners?
- In what ways is your organization supportive of reconciliation discussions with staff?
- How accessible are these conversations to Indigenous community?
- How is your organization taking the discussion further than staff training?
- How can your organization show leadership and best practice in:
 - Indigenous employment and retention;
 - Community engagement and partnerships;
 - Development of cultural competencies and protocols;
 - Business development and procurement; and
 - Co-designing, planning and delivering initiatives with Indigenous partners?

Guiding questions for civic-Indigenous engagement and relationship-building¹⁰

- In light of a history of injustice and mistrust, what principles could make reciprocal and rigorous forms of engagement possible across Indigenous and civic institutions -- helping us move together toward more equitable relationships and wiser futures?
 - What principles could help us achieve shared values and goals for placekeeping and city building that are inspired by Indigenous and intercultural models?
- In thinking about ways that we can challenge and decentre the dominance and damage of settler forms of urban planning and design, land use planning, architecture and managing public spaces:
 - How can civic institutions and leaders learn from and defer to Indigenous leadership and models in terms of decolonizing and transforming these dominant systems and practices?
 - How can civic institutions and municipalities play a role in championing both Indigenous approaches and leadership, and collaborative and intercultural approaches?
- Community engagement is such an important element of the planning, design and implementation processes for any type of project that impacts Indigenous communities.
 - How have you been able to integrate community participation and ownership in the design and delivery of your projects?
- What is your approach to championing and engaging younger generations in Indigenous placekeeping initiatives and actions?

¹⁰ - Questions are from a Roundtable of Indigenous and civic placekeeping practitioners and thought leaders, hosted by Evergreen and Future Cities Canada (FCC) as part of the FCC: Unexpected Solutions series.