



# Cultural Understanding in the Workplace

Authored by Joanne Haskin ~Zoongdekwe~

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WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES  
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IN COLLABORATION WITH



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**Author's Disclaimer** - All the shared knowledge and teachings that I have wrote about come from a variety different Elders, Knowledge Keepers, cultures, and traditions that I have personally learned and experienced from individuals and areas across Turtle Island. Not all Anishinaabe Peoples follow these same teachings. We all have our own unique ways of connecting with our Elders and the teachings that are passed on. We take what we need from these teachings and let the rest go with respect, humility, honesty, courage, love, wisdom, and truth as taught in our 7 sacred teachings.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this document is for organizations, government, employers, institutions of education and institutions of justice to better understand the unique needs of Indigenous youth and employees from a culturally sensitive and safe perspective, where the culture and the individual feels welcome, safe, respected, and inclusive. When individuals feel this, it will lead to true authentic relationship building, trust, inclusive space, recruitment, and retention of the Indigenous employee population.

The Indigenous population is often misunderstood as to what their specific culture is about, what our traditions are, what they mean and the importance of them, to us as Anishinaabe people. It is my hope that I can help alleviate some of that moving forward in some small way. It is through education and relationship building that the most growth will occur.



## Cultural Understanding in the Workplace

Created for the Indigenous Employment Advisory Leadership Table,  
led by United Way East Ontario and the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

From United Way East Ontario's environmental scan, [The Employment Gap for Indigenous Youth in Eastern Ontario](#), we learned about the importance of creating safe, culturally sensitive places of employment when attempting to successfully recruit Indigenous youth. Ensuring cultural safety is key in fostering supportive environments and relationships. It goes beyond cultural awareness (acknowledgement of one's own and other cultures), cultural sensitivity (accepting of other difference), and cultural competence (using academic, experiential, and interpersonal skills to understand difference). Cultural safety also involves a component of self-reflection to recognize our own cultural lens and develop empathy and advocacy to move towards understanding and positive change.

We would like to thank Ms. Haskin for sharing her insights and reflections on cultural understanding in the workplace as they deepen further our appreciation for creating safe, culturally sensitive places of employment. While this document's insights come from a primarily First Nations (Anishinaabe) perspective, please note they do not reflect the cultural teachings and traditions of Inuit and Métis people.

### Representation

One of the most significant barriers Indigenous employees face in the workplace is a lack of representation, when a community needs analysis was done within Renfrew County the Indigenous population stated that they wanted Indigenous services and programs that were developed and delivered by Indigenous peoples. This is due to the amount of systemic racism, lack of trust, broken promises, and lack of knowledge of Indigenous issues and sometime unconscious bias that non-Indigenous employers sometimes carry.

When Indigenous peoples walk into a workplace, school, medical facility etc. and see no representation of their culture or the territory in which they live displayed through other Indigenous persons, pictures/art, land acknowledgements etc. this lacks a welcoming presence to create a culturally sensitive, safe, welcoming, or inclusive environment for those individuals. Having Indigenous services within the organization is something that most Indigenous peoples look for when looking for a culturally safe and inclusive space/ workspace.

Some of this could include:

### Designated Indigenous Representative/Advocate

Having someone assigned as a liaison between the Indigenous youth, employees or consumers and management is extremely beneficial. Often, due to historical trauma and/or



intergenerational trauma it is difficult for Indigenous peoples to go directly to management with concerns. Having an Indigenous person to be that in between could bridge the gap of communication, trust, and relationship building. As a culture, Indigenous people customarily avoid eye contact. This is a cultural characteristic which can often be mistaken for guilt, lying or lack of confidence. In our culture, it is a sign of respect and humility. This misunderstanding has often led to false accusations with law enforcement, sometimes resulting in abuse and death with authority figures. Wrongful accusations can also be made by teachers, judges, and employers. It has led to Indigenous peoples struggling to secure employment due to not being able to look their hiring person(s) in the eye when talking to them during an interview, creating an unfair disadvantage.

### **Indigenous Support Services/Knowledge Keeper or Elder**

Some Indigenous youth, employees, consumers may be leaving their home communities for the first time and not be accustomed to settler ways. Having Indigenous support services is something that is familiar no matter where they go. This will help in the transition, be supportive with mental health, spiritual health, emotional health, and result in overall physical health of the Indigenous employees. As a culture we believe that everything has a Spirit, and all things must be in balance. Having an Indigenous Support Services/Elders/Knowledge Keepers are that constant reminder and guidance in place to keep on the Anishinaabe Mikan (Red Road) for Mino Bimaadziwin (Good Life).

### **Culturally Safe Space (including representation of the culture)**

This primarily refers to the sacred space for ceremony and safe space to gather. Although many workplaces have made the accommodations to have “prayer rooms” this is very much a non-Indigenous, settler or colonial practice. Having a culturally safe space for us Indigenous peoples to go to for ceremony includes one we can connect to our sacred medicines, which there are 4 of: Sage, Cedar, Tobacco and Sweetgrass. For us, smudging is one of our most important daily ceremonies and helps with clearing and purification. It helps us restore balance. It clears and opens our mind, opens our eyes to the beauty that surrounds us, our ears so we may hear what we need to hear...even in the silence, our mouth so that we speak the good...words that uplift one another, our voice so we can speak the truth...that our ancestors want you to hear, and those children that didn't make it home would say today, our hearts so that we can continue to love well through our actions towards one another and in forgiveness, also that Creator can help ease the burden of pain that we carry, and our centre for women as carriers of Spirit, and men the seed, our bodies...so that it will be cleansed and purified, our feet...so we walk a kind and gentle path on Mother Earth.

### **Smudging**

Smudging is a prayer for us, a connection to our Creator. Not allowing Smudging during this prayer/ceremony indoors, is continuing to deny us our cultural rights and traditions as the



Indian agents, government, and settlers did to us many years ago and continues to suppress us as Indigenous peoples. It has been scientifically proven that sage has purification properties to the air, lungs and is healthy for the environment. This does not harm in any way. Some fire alarms are based on heat sensitivity and will not be affected by smudging. In most cases, there is not enough smoke made to set it off, especially if there is a window that can be open and/or an air purifier. I often think back to the days when businesses made accommodations for smoking in restaurants, bingo halls etc. there did not seem to be issues with setting fire alarms off at that time, and there were such items as “smoke eaters.”

## Sacred Medicines

Traditionally and culturally our tobacco (semma) was and continues to be a sacred medicine. It was never meant to be misused or utilized as anything other than a sacred medicine for connection to Creator and ceremonial purposes. Through colonization the use of tobacco has turned into a commercialized, unhealthy, addiction with many toxic chemicals added to the originally pure medicine. Today, many workplaces make accommodations for individuals to have a smoking area to indulge in these unhealthy practices. We as Indigenous Peoples continue to see our sacred medicine being utilized in a very unhealthy way and supported, what we do not see is a space where we can go to honour and celebrate that medicine in a healthy and positive way. Cedar represents protection for us, when we feel we need that connection to Creator and ask for protection from negativity and harm. It is also a healing medicine. Sweetgrass reminds us to be kind and gentle when we are hurting or angry with self or others. This medicine is a reminder to remain kind and gentle despite the turmoil within. Sometimes the smudge may contain all 4 of these sacred medicines depending on the specific need of the individual, sometimes it is sage alone. Having these medicines available for connection and familiarity provides that sense of belonging.

Workplaces provide space and support to many world religions with prayer rooms but lack the inclusion of the First People by removing the ability to practice sacred ceremony in its entirety. This does not represent a culturally safe, sensitive, or inclusive prayer room for the First People. There are ways that this can be remedied quite easily, and I would challenge all workplaces to find a solution. This change alone would create an increase in attraction and retention.

I personally have offices in various locations, one of the first things I ask is, does the organization/workplace/institution have a cultural space available for Indigenous people? Is there a place that I can go to practice my sacred ceremony/prayer with smudging. If I cannot find that or a willingness to accommodate my cultural practices, traditions, and culture, this to me as an Indigenous person is not being culturally sensitive, safe, and inclusive. Many other Indigenous People, and most Indigenous youth would not challenge management or organizations in this way to voice or assert their Indigenous Rights in this way. Currently I am smudging in a public mall space, space that occupied with government officials, radio stations, and forestry workers. I can light a smudge and have ceremony at any given time while at any of these locations, without any notice to any management or officials. I have not had an issue with



setting off fire alarms, nor has the fire department showed up. I have not received any complaints for practicing my cultural ceremony. This is an example of how willingness to work together, looking into the fire code practices and the fire department if needed, building relationships, understanding, and respecting the culture and needs, and working towards the reconciliation process, giving back right to ceremony. Although I still struggle with one institution, we are making progress to find a way to provide a culturally safe space where Indigenous youth feel they belong, and the space and ability to practice Indigenous ceremony at their own time when they need it most without any issues.

## **Examples of Cultural Practices/Ceremonies/Traditions that impact attendance**

To us Anishinaabe, culture is not a part of life it is a way of life. For those of us that are connected to or are reconnecting with culture there are many roles and responsibilities for us to commit to, participate in, and to pass on to future generations as we go through our cycles of seasons and life. Although there are numerous ceremonies that we practice at various times of the day and year, I will share with you only some of the ones that may affect Indigenous youth and employees and their decisions to accept a position within a workplace, give you a better understanding of culture and how you may look at ways to make accommodations for attraction and retention of Indigenous employees.

### **Naming Ceremony**

For those who did not receive the honour of their Spirit name at birth, there comes unique and distinct roles and responsibilities in preparing to receive this honour, including preparing a meal and give aways for all those who will be in attendance of this sacred ceremony. In addition to this responsibility, everyone may have additional responsibilities given to them by the Elder who will deliver the Spirit Name to them. Sometimes this preparation can take over a year on and off while the ceremony itself is often a full day.

### **Coming of Age**

During our adolescence, the coming-of-age ceremonies refer to puberty, for young men this time can consist of a 4-day, 4 nights fast in the wilderness supported by other men, Elders, and community. For young woman it is menses, or what we refer to as moon time. During these times the youth learn what it means to become a young adult, they receive teachings from the aunties, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers of the communities of how to live out their responsibilities within their families and communities. During this time, the young men would be gone for the duration of the “vision quest” to seek purpose. The young women would spend the duration of her full moon time gathering her teachings from the aunties and grandmothers of the community, by them coming to her.



## Fasting

This ceremony is one that brings us closer to Creator, in some cases this can be intermittent, but in most cases for us it is one that is a land-based practice, once per year and can be anywhere from 1-4 days in duration depending on the purpose of the fasting ceremony.

## Harvesting

While most populations like to take large game (deer and moose) and small game (birds, rabbits) season off for sport hunting and to provide for their families, the Indigenous population have an added responsibility. To the Indigenous population we do not see this as hunting but as harvesting. To us, harvesting is a sacred ceremony, one where we ask the animal to sacrifice its life for us to feed our families and communities, to provide parts of itself for our ceremonial items including hides for drums, bones for whistles, tools and medicine, meat for food, fur for warmth, brain for tanning. We utilize as much of the animal as possible. In some communities the young men are considered the warriors and have the responsibility to provide for the Elders. In most communities we work collectively to ensure that the families and communities are all provided for. When this time has been requested off, often it is based on seniority vs on cultural responsibility, traditions, and ceremonial practices. This is often a deterrent for Indigenous employees.

## Pow wow

The Indian Act had taken away and made the ability to practice ceremony illegal. Since the reclamation of ceremony, the pow wow has allowed for the opportunity for the communities, and nation to meet throughout the summer months. These pow wows often take place every weekend from May to October. Families from all over Turtle Island gather to celebrate their culture through ceremonial dancing, drumming, singing and prayer. Celebration of the culture and the resiliency of Indigenous people are honoured at these gatherings. Indigenous peoples have suffered and experienced trauma collectively, these gatherings offer the individuals, families, communities, and nations to heal together.

## Recognition of Indigenous Days

Acknowledgement of National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21st to participate in cultural activities, as well as September 30th National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. September 30th, which is categorized as a day of mourning for the Indigenous Peoples is not recognized as a paid holiday unless you are part of the Federal government. This is a day that should be recognized by all people, not just the government who were a large part of the creation of the Residential School System, Indian Act, which still exists, and genocide of the Indigenous Cultures. Allowing the observations of these days to claim connection or mourn our lost ancestors with all Ontarians would be the true act of National Truth and Reconciliation Day, not just with Federally recognized employees while the Indigenous population works.





## Death

According to current government labour laws, bereavement consists of 2 days unpaid for immediate family members or dependents. This is allowable once per calendar year. Each organization can choose to change this at their discretion if they choose.

This poses a challenge for Indigenous youth and employees surrounding death of family and community, and our roles and responsibilities. One of the most significant challenges is that for the Anishinaabe, it takes 4 days from the passing of one of our own for the journey into the Spirit realm. During this time, there is a ceremonial cedar bath for the deceased, a sacred fire lit that cannot burn out nor be left unattended for those 4 days, 24 hours a day, so 2 are required. This fire requires a sacred fire keeper that holds the sacred teachings that have been passed down over several years and has apprenticed with an Elder. There are not many firekeepers in our communities and these responsibilities are held in high honour and respect. There can also be an Elder or knowledge keeper there to support the family and fire keepers during this challenging time, drummers are present at least on the 4th day for the ceremony and talking circle. During these 4 days, the community will stop in to visit the family to pay its respects to the deceased one. Again, as a culture we are inclusive and live as a community structure supporting one another collectively. When someone passes, this impacts the responsibilities of our sacred firekeepers, Elders/Knowledge Keepers and community leaders which may have no immediate relation to the family but still require the time off for bereavement.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are unique cultural traditions, needs, responsibilities and ceremony that impact the employment choices, decisions, attraction and retention of Indigenous youth and employees, to take into consideration regarding the labour market and workplace to make it culturally sensitive, safe, and inclusive.

The ways in which this can happen is to implement the supports as mentioned by having Indigenous representation for Indigenous employees. These Indigenous individuals could also support management and non-Indigenous staff to bridge the gap with relationship and trust building. This support could also include offering cultural training, mentorship and education regarding policies including Indigenous Rights.

Developing personal relationships with Indigenous individuals, learning about specifically where they come from, their strengths, cultural gifts, and responsibilities within their communities is vitally important to creating more inclusive workplaces. For example, this will better equip you with the knowledge of understanding why Indigenous individuals may have attendance issues. It could be a sacred ceremony that they are responsible for attending instead of an assumption that they just do not want to be there.



Creating an environment where Indigenous employees can connect to their sacred medicines, ceremony in prayer the cultural way or with other First Nations, Inuit, or Metis individuals when they need to take a moment to rebalance is one of the leading attraction and retention strategies you may make.

Through constant communication, learning and inclusion, the gaps will tighten, where the Indigenous population will feel they have purpose and belonging in any workplace. We are all in this together and we can make it happen.

