

Exchange program finds common ground for business and aboriginal leaders in B.C.

Industry executives and First Nations chiefs switch seats to improve intercultural understanding

JOEL MCKAY

A boriginal and business leaders gathered in downtown Vancouver recently to celebrate a leadership exchange program aimed at reconciling decades of mistrust between industry and First Nations.

In partnership with Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Segal Graduate School of Busi-

ness, the Industry Council for Aboriginal Business (ICAB) placed six corporate executives and aboriginal leaders in each other's seats for several days last fall to help them understand the issues that affect their respective worlds.

The participants were: ■ Chief Kim Baird of the Tsawwassen First Nation (TFN), who switched places with Ian Anderson, president

of Kinder Morgan Canada Inc. (NYSE:KMP);

■ Chief Willie Charlie, Chehalis First Nation, who switched with Donald McInnes, vice-chairman and CEO, Plutonic Power Corp. (TSX:PCC); and

■ Chief Harold Aljam, Coldwater Indian Band, who switched places with Graeme Barrit, president of Coast Hotels and Resorts.

B.C. Lt.-Gov. Steven Point spoke at the event. He talked about the decades of suspicion between businesses and aboriginals that have crippled communication and left both sides isolated.

"You can take an elephant when it's wild and you need a huge chain to keep it down. Within a few years just a thread around the ankle will hold that elephant in check, because

they've learned through hard experience that they're confined, so experience has been our teacher," explained Point. "The relationship between aboriginal people and the rest of the country has been marked by mistrust... we don't know who to trust."

The program was the first of its kind in Canada, but ICAB president Marlane Christensen said it was suc-

cessful and won't be the last.

Point said the exchange was a sign of progress.

"The steps that you've taken... are long overdue," said Point. "You're building bridges and you're creating better understanding and, Lord knows, we need more of that."

Anderson and Baird agreed to answer questions about their experiences for BIV. ■

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What were the most surprising things about your leadership exchange experience?

How quickly and easily Kim and I got to know each other and were able to talk openly about our views; the laser focus the TFN has with respect to translating its commercial and industrial opportunities into meaningful education, employment and social value for the community; how easily Kim's community and my company embraced the exchange.

What did you learn from the exchange that you could apply to your business?

The need and benefit that will come from developing a deeper and more meaningful understanding of a First Nations community that I am in business or commercial discussions with.

Was the exchange challenging?

The most challenging aspect of the exchange was the co-ordination of calendars and setting of agendas. SFU helped us with how to think about and approach our exchange, but it was largely and, in hindsight, appropriately, left for us to design our unique exchange experiences.

Was six days long enough?

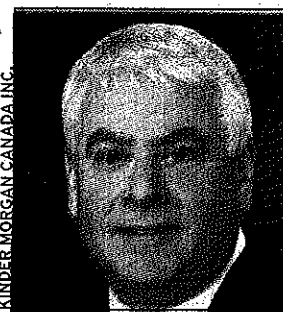
I don't think there's ever enough time to work and understand the aboriginal-to-non-aboriginal business issues and dynamics. I think these six days provided an important step forward to help my industry and me understand how to better prepare and approach business opportunities in the future.

Would you change the time frame were you to do it again?

I think that the timing for the program was probably about right. To find more time would be difficult, and less time would hamper the learning.

Why is a program like this important?

It will take decades of progress and change to undo generations of mistrust and fear that has dominated aboriginal-to-non-aboriginal business relations. This exchange was a small but important step forward in that progression. In that regard, every forward step is good. As Kim so rightfully told me, "we can't let perfection be the enemy of the good."



Ian Anderson, president, Kinder Morgan Canada Inc.: "we must be prepared to take risks, engage and park our pre-existing biases at the door"

I was surprised at how like-minded my partner Ian and I were in relation to aboriginal relations. I expected to have to "educate" Ian about aboriginal issues, but he already has a great understanding.

I was pleasantly surprised about the depth of discussion we were able to have about regulatory processes, environment and engagement.

I'm able to apply better knowledge about how decisions are made in businesses, which will hopefully help identify the alignment of interests when dealing with business in the future.

The exchange was challenging because I really committed to participating to my fullest, which takes energy that I am always challenged to find. Spending time with a stranger in such immersion into a new environment is also challenging. These opportunities are exciting, but involve some personal risk taking.

It seemed to be enough time for a good immersion.

I think this time allowed for the immersion, but was manageable, even though our respective schedules were so busy. I don't know that having it shorter would have provided the same benefits, yet having it longer would have provided for more information without an ability to digest it. I think it was OK.

This program made me much more optimistic about the future with respect to reconciliation and alignment of interests between First Nations and the business community. My engagement with Ian taught me that business leaders can be extremely creative and understanding and have an interest in meeting in the middle and finding common ground. ■



Chief Kim Baird, Tsawwassen First Nation: "it was the experience of a lifetime that I really benefited from"

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