

YOUR WORKPLACE AND ABORIGINAL DIVERSITY

By Robert Laboucane

Aboriginal people have been studying and learning everything there is to know about the newcomers to North America for the past 500 years. If you want more qualified Aboriginal employees in your workplace, maybe you should return the compliment.

Here are two questions I hear a lot. “Robert, can you teach us about Aboriginal culture?” And, “Do you teach cross-cultural awareness?”

Please note the singular use of the word ‘culture’ – I’ll tell you more on that later.

Aboriginal people have also been studying the cultures of North America’s newcomers. They speak your language. They know your religion, political systems, laws and justice systems, education requirements, decision-making processes, business ethics and morality expectations. And they participate in a multitude of ceremonies . . . Halloween, St. Patrick’s Day, Christmas and Easter.

Consider what you know – better yet, what you don’t know. Do you know how Aboriginal people celebrate the holy season? Have you’ve ever had the good fortune of being invited to a sweatlodge ceremony? Have you ever been smudged? Visited a pow-wow?

Have you joined Aboriginal people in celebrating National Aboriginal Awareness Day – their national holiday, celebrated every year on June 21st?

If not, I suggest you’re missing many opportunities to learn about others – and find out how much others have already learned about you.

I hear stereotypical comments, too. “Those Indians are always late for meetings. Why hire these people when we know they will never stay? It seems they have no sense of loyalty. What’s the matter with these people?”

Now the emphasis should be on non-Aboriginal people to learn more about Aboriginal people. There’s no better way to dispel the myths and correct the misinformation that have led to negative stereotypes.

Changing a community’s paradigm about some of its fellow citizens, however, can be a daunting task. If you haven’t started, there’s no time like the present.

Which Culture is That?

Government and private sector employers frequently ask me to explain cultural issues. My response goes like this: which culture would you like to learn about? Usually by now, the employers look pretty puzzled, because they don’t understand that within the Aboriginal communities in Canada, there are literally hundreds of cultures.

There are 53 separate and distinct languages and well over 200 dialects. Think of the words Aboriginal or Native in the same context as European or Asian. These are terms referring to a great number of very diverse and distinct cultures that are from a particular geographical region.

The opposite of assimilation is separation and that is precisely what the Aboriginal people of Canada have endured for some 300 years.

Integration and even adaptation to the workplace environment is perfectly acceptable. However, with all the work being done by employers to diversify their workforce and take a visible stand against racial discrimination, I have to ask: What are employers doing to prepare their workplaces for the arrival of Aboriginal employees?

I often hear, “Pull up your bootstraps, forget all the historical garbage, just get to work everyday, fit in, do what we do and all will be just fine in your life and mine.” That is simply not the reality of the workplace today, and rightly so. Giving up who you are to become a part of something else is a medieval concept, and even newcomers to Canada won’t accept that drivel.

Tapping into the Aboriginal labour market to attract qualified candidates is not the same as your typical mainstream search for staff. The training needed for recruiters and hiring managers is different, when it comes to interviewing Aboriginal candidates and measuring their merit. Also critical is properly preparing the workplace to improve retention rates, should these candidates be deemed qualified.

In the Job Market

With 50,000 Aboriginal students in post-secondary classes and 4,000 of them graduating each year, what are employers doing to attract these highly qualified candidates? Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45 per cent, with the Métis population numbers increasing by a whopping 91 per cent in the last five years alone.

There are potential workers within these numbers, and it’s time you, your companies and our governments took notice.

While everyone from major oil companies to tiny consultancies feel the sting of the labour shortage, Ottawa and the provinces are making it easier and faster to recruit staff from overseas. The reasoning is that there are no qualified Canadians for hire here.

An obvious place to look for workers, however, is being ignored – the pool of 156,200 Aboriginal Albertans, whose unemployment rate is three times that of the non-Aboriginal sector. Not a bus driver or a heavy-duty mechanic among them, eh?

Admissions of Ignorance

It’s hardly surprising that many Canadians are ignorant of this potential.

In recent surveys, 76 per cent of Canadians acknowledge they know very little about Aboriginal people, their history and how these people came to be where they are in our society today. Another five percent indicate they know absolutely nothing about Aboriginal people.

How does a team leader, manager or co-worker initiate a simple business or social conversation with an Aboriginal person without feeling high levels of apprehension? If you know nothing about Aboriginal people, their communities, political structures, decision making processes or even a related culture, you'll fear offending the person unintentionally, won't you? It's only natural.

When you shy away from initiating a conversation with someone, you contribute to that person's feeling of exclusion. This can and does happen to Aboriginal people, and to anyone else from a new or different culture.

The exit door can't be far behind for those experiencing this kind of isolation.

For example, I am an Aboriginal person but I am not an Indian, so what am I? Where do I fit into the extremely complicated diversity of Aboriginal people?

There are 1.4 million Aboriginal people in Canada and only about 50 percent are 'Indian'. Which category of Indians (and there are three) is commonly referred to as First Nations?

If 100 percent of all treaty Indians is status, why is it then that only 50 per cent of status Indians is treaty?

These are not trick questions. You might want to figure out the answers, particularly if you're a recruiter or hiring manager.

Recruiters are the windows to the whole organization. One recruiter that appears uninformed is going to generate concern in any Aboriginal candidate about what to expect in the workplace.

What's Fair?

Equity is another word for fairness. Equality is another word for sameness. Can we really be fair if we treat everyone the same?

With so many cultures represented in today's workplace, what are employers doing to teach all these very different people what their organizations' cultures are? Employers are doing some extraordinary things to ensure employees feel they are part of the team, that there exists a climate of mutual respect, that creativity and cohesiveness is encouraged and supported throughout the organization.

These efforts are based on a philosophy of inclusion for everyone. For a recruiter or hiring manager to ask an Aboriginal person where they are from is considered a very high compliment and a most welcome question - especially if the recruiter actually knows where

that place is. Being comfortable, confident and knowledgeable with the most basic terminologies leads to successful interview outcomes and a much more accurate and effective measuring of merit.

In the meantime, the public campaign to support the import of temporary workers from overseas to ease the labour shortage continues. Here are a few examples:

NEWS FLASH! City of Calgary to spend \$185,000 for city officials to travel to London, England in an attempt to lure more than 250 temporary workers to Calgary. They say we are in desperate need of bus drivers, city planners and heavy-duty mechanics. I wonder how the underemployed visible minorities in Canada, qualified to do these jobs, feel about this?

NEWS FLASH! Labour demand is projected to continuously grow for the next five years. By 2011 (in three years) new Canadians are predicted to account for all of the growth in our workforce

Technical skills are much easier to teach than soft skills. When candidates have organizational skills, verbal communication skills, problem-solving skills, tact and diplomacy skills and teamwork skills, they're highly desirable employees.

Nationally over the past 10 years there has been a 17 per cent decrease – that's right, a decrease - in corporate spending on training, learning and development programs. Yet we continue to hear about the growing need from these same companies about a skilled workforce shortage.

Trying to compete on wages alone is futile, and only about 56 per cent of corporations actually consider themselves to be a 'learning organization.' At the same time, professional associations – yours included – are increasingly calling on continuing education and professional development as requirements.

Most employers today know how important proactive workforce planning has become and that proper training tools need to be identified and prioritized. Tapping into the Aboriginal workforce requires key people with very specific skills who understand the organization's business case on why Aboriginal people must be included in their workplace.

All this is based on fully qualified Aboriginal candidates being interested in working for your organization. The better the training available, the more attractive your organization becomes.

So, there are all these differences one must learn should you wish to successfully attract, recruit and retain qualified Aboriginal candidates, making an effort to learn what these differences are is a critical component of getting Aboriginal people included in your workplace.

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