

Skills for Inclusive Workplaces and the Advancement of Indigenous Peoples



Partners



The [Diversity Institute](#) conducts and coordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by under-represented groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results. The Diversity Institute is a research lead for the Future Skills Centre.



The [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the [Government of Canada's Future Skills Program](#).



The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) is committed to the full participation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada's economy. A national, non-partisan association with a mission to promote, strengthen and enhance a prosperous Indigenous economy through the fostering of business relationships, opportunities, and awareness, CCAB offers knowledge, resources and programs to its members to foster economic opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and businesses across Canada. For more information visit www.ccab.com.

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About This Research

The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB), in partnership with the Diversity Institute (DI) at Toronto Metropolitan University, presents *Skills for Inclusive Workplaces and the Advancement of Indigenous Peoples*. This report investigates the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in leadership positions to understand the barriers and enablers that have shaped their pathways, as well as the impact of diversity in the workplace. Previous research has shown that Indigenous Peoples are rarely on boards¹ and face barriers to inclusion on boards of directors, and in executive roles and other decision-making positions within companies. Therefore, it is critical to support and promote opportunities for advancement that allow Indigenous professionals to ascend to leadership positions.



Previous research has shown that Indigenous Peoples are rarely on boards and face barriers to inclusion on boards of directors, and in executive roles and other decision-making positions within companies.

This report aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1 What are the experiences of Indigenous leaders in the Canadian business landscape?
- 2 What skills and resources do aspiring Indigenous leaders need to succeed?
- 3 How do we define leadership capabilities?
- 4 How can employers create an environment that fosters Indigenous leaders?

The results of this research aim to help governments, private sector businesses and Indigenous Peoples gain a deeper understanding of the limitations, highlight future opportunities and outline methods to fill existing gaps. The insights collected from the experiences of Indigenous leaders will contribute to the advancement of Indigenous Peoples and their careers. These insights will inform corporate Canada on how to unlock the value of Indigenous leadership through best practices for creating sustainable and meaningful relationships with Indigenous leaders.

Executive Summary

Diversity in the workplace allows for a range of perspectives, which improves decision-making processes, opens doors to engagement with diverse markets and increases a company's capacity for innovation. However, despite the advantages that diversity can bring to the workplace, Canada has a lack of diversity in senior leadership and board roles. Indigenous Peoples, and members of 2SLGBTQ+ and other equity-deserving groups remain severely under-represented in corporate Canada's leadership positions. A survey by the Canada Business Corporations Act (CBCA) found that, of the 230 companies governed by the CBCA disclosing their board diversity for 2020, about 1% of board positions were held by Indigenous individuals.² While many large companies are adopting diversity policies and making commitments to prioritize diversity within recruitment processes, barriers persist for equity-deserving groups, especially Indigenous Peoples, in accessing board and executive roles. A broader concern exists for Indigenous women, as they assume the role of leaders in community and corporate realms simultaneously. Often, a struggle to balance both roles arises from corporate expectations. It is essential that Canadian companies set forth best practices to ensure the representation of Indigenous Peoples in leadership roles.

This research has three central objectives:

- 1 Assess the experiences of Indigenous leaders in the Canadian business landscape through in-depth interviews with executives and board members.
- 2 Identify the skills and resources that emerging leaders need to reach the executive level.
- 3 Understand how employers can create environments that foster and support leadership opportunities for Indigenous Peoples.

For this study, 25 First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders from a wide range of industries in Canada participated in research interviews about their career advancement, leadership values and skills development. The interviewees included 20 senior leaders established in their organizations, two aspiring leaders in mid-management roles and two senior leaders working in human resources. Their insights and experiences provided invaluable data for understanding the barriers and opportunities faced by Indigenous leaders in Canadian businesses.

The key takeaways from the interviews are as follows:

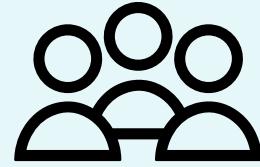
- > **Corporate Canada and Indigenous leadership values are not aligned.** Qualities of Indigenous leadership are valued differently from the leadership qualities sought by corporate Canada. Indigenous leadership is founded on the values and beliefs of Indigenous cultures, which place high importance on community success, storytelling, collaboration and responsible stewardship of resources. In contrast, leadership norms in Canada focus on individual success and assertive communication techniques, and prioritize profit over interpersonal values. Indigenous leaders often feel forced to alter their leadership styles and forgo Indigenous ways of knowing to assimilate into these corporate values, which are based on the leadership style of individuals who have typically held those positions, as the standard of excellence, contributing to the lack of Indigenous role models in leadership. Rethinking what leadership looks like is a topic of increasing importance for the future of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
- > **Take an intersectional approach to recognize the needs of Indigenous women in the workplace.** Several Indigenous women expressed that they were not taken as seriously as their Indigenous and non-Indigenous men counterparts, and were subjected to higher standards. This highlights the harsh experiences for Indigenous women leaders as they face gendered and racial systems of disadvantage

that can be perpetuated by workplace bias. Furthermore, Indigenous women are at a crossroads when it comes to parenting and professional development. Contextually speaking, Indigenous women have consistently been leaders in their communities. Pre-contact, Indigenous women played a central role within families and government, and in spiritual ceremonies.³ Prior to colonization, Indigenous women held leadership and decision-making roles in their communities and families. With the introduction of the Band Council structure, Indigenous women were stripped of agency, autonomy and capacity as leaders, disallowing them from participating in ways they had done previously. The men-dominated governing structures that came with colonization undermined the traditional leadership opportunities that existed in matrilineal societies and limited the success of Indigenous women. This led to fewer opportunities to develop experiences as leaders, eroding perceptions of their ability to lead. For all women, the importance of balancing parental or caregiver, community and professional commitments is not reflected or respected in many work environments. With the proper resources, agency and support, Indigenous women can take their places as leaders in business while still prioritizing imperative personal responsibilities to family and community.

> **Empower Indigenous voices by ensuring substantial representation on boards and in senior leadership positions.** It is evident that Indigenous individuals are not adequately represented within Canadian

corporations and board structures. Board involvement is a mechanism for leaders to make meaningful change while also furthering their personal and professional development. Increased diversity on boards has been proven to allow for different perspectives and necessary structural change. The lack of Indigenous representation has been noted to instill feelings of doubt within Indigenous employees concerning their ability to advance into leadership roles. In contrast, the inclusion of Indigenous people in these roles enhances confidence, raises aspirations and creates resiliency. Furthermore, diversity within C-suite positions benefits businesses by strengthening organizational resolve, increasing overall effectiveness and fostering innovation by promoting diverse perspectives. Although change will take time, effort and resources, an immediate effect of this change is leaders challenging the status quo.

> **The disparities in Indigenous representation in corporate Canada require decisive action through increased diversity.** Leadership qualities in corporate Canada are associated with individuals who are predominantly homogenous in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and other dimensions. These associations can lead to unconscious biases that undervalue and diminish the representation of Indigenous leaders in the corporate world. Addressing these biases through Indigenous-focused training to enhance cultural awareness, adapting policies that advance Indigenous inclusivity and organizational change, and fostering



*Furthermore, **diversity within C-suite positions** benefits businesses by strengthening organizational resolve, increasing overall effectiveness and fostering innovation by promoting diverse perspectives.*

accountability are critical to cultivate inclusive work environments that allow for diverse viewpoints and representation in leadership. Organizations must require that extending respect and inclusivity toward all others is done throughout the organization and understood as a priority for every employee. Diversity is a strength that should be harnessed to dismantle barriers and champion equitable opportunities for Indigenous Peoples.

> **Continue to move forward on Canada's commitment to reconciliation.** Structural barriers, including educational gaps and socio-economic disparities, contribute to limited opportunities for Indigenous individuals seeking leadership positions or advancement into senior roles and board positions. Lack of education, access to job training and secure high-speed internet all hinder the participation and advancement of Indigenous leaders. These issues disproportionately affect

Indigenous Peoples, especially those living in rural areas or on reserves, where overcrowding, substandard housing, inadequate educational facilities, and poor or unreliable internet infrastructure are common barriers. These challenges require all levels of government and organizations to work together to provide solutions.

> **Create Indigenous-specific EDI policies within workplaces.** Some non-Indigenous organizations are falling short in their efforts to create equal opportunities for Indigenous peoples. In the workplace, Indigenous Peoples are under-represented, have unequal access to professional development opportunities, experience isolation due to a lack of Indigenous role models at senior levels, and are regularly surrounded by colleagues who do not understand their histories and cultures.⁴ This report's findings highlight a need for Indigenous-specific EDI policies within workplaces rather than those commonly established that generalize all equity-deserving groups. As Indigenous individuals have unique histories and constitutional rights in Canada, and face unique challenges, EDI policies must be established to reflect these needs. Formal policies may include strategies for promoting the hiring and retention of Indigenous employees; support for retention and access to advancement opportunities; initiatives to acknowledge Indigenous culture and traditions; establishment of affinity groups; and flexible work arrangements to accommodate community and family responsibilities. Organizations must

engage and include Indigenous Peoples in the discussion and development of these policies.

> **Improve access to child care for Indigenous families.** There is a lack of safe, affordable and culturally appropriate child care for Indigenous workers that is required to provide accessibility for Indigenous leaders to pursue their professional goals. To ensure past histories are not repeated, child care options with culturally appropriate resources that are Indigenous-led or -owned and -operated are needed. Access to safe and appropriate child care empowers Indigenous leaders through self-determination while enabling them to pursue their professional goals.

The results of this research make it clear that, to create genuine organizational change, employers must focus on establishing inclusive and diverse leadership teams. Despite the recognized benefits of diversity, disparities persist in the representation of Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups in senior roles within Canadian corporations. The interviews with employees and leaders highlight the need to understand the obstacles Indigenous individuals face in reaching leadership roles. Canadian businesses need to do more to remove those obstacles and actively create inclusive and supportive settings to create a future where diverse leadership is the standard, not the exception.

Introduction

In the pursuit of a diverse and inclusive society and workforce, it is crucial to examine the representation of all individuals with leadership and decision-making positions. Within this context, exploring the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in leadership roles and on boards is of unique significance.

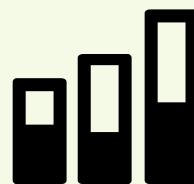
Indigenous communities have long faced historical discrimination that has shaped their access to opportunities and hindered economic growth. Indigenous Peoples have endured colonization, marginalization and the suppression of cultural identities that still exist. Actions that have left lasting imprints on their communities include poor access to education, employment and availability of leadership positions. The lack of diverse Indigenous representation can be attributed to the deeply rooted historical discrimination that has disproportionately affected Indigenous Peoples for several reasons.⁵

First, many Indigenous Peoples and communities face social and economic challenges due to the historical events of colonialism.⁶ The systemic barriers connected to this affect educational attainment, struggles with self-confidence, imposter syndrome, access to employment opportunities and career advancement. Under the current cultural norms, education is often critical for

obtaining employment.⁷ Barriers rooted in colonial legacies and discriminatory practices result in a substantial opportunity and earnings gap for Indigenous individuals.

Second, a lack of cultural awareness and understanding within organizations creates unwelcoming and unsupportive environments that do not nurture the strengths of Indigenous candidates.

Third, mainstream Western leadership models that differ significantly from Indigenous leadership structures and ways of knowing create a disadvantage for Indigenous individuals to succeed within these structures and force assimilation to existing leadership styles.



*Barriers rooted in **colonial legacies** and **discriminatory practices** result in a substantial opportunity and earnings gap for Indigenous individuals.*

Last, lacking representation perpetuates cycles of exclusion and systemic disadvantage for Indigenous Peoples; without diverse perspectives at executive levels, critical Indigenous issues and needs may be overlooked, which worsens their social and economic outcomes. The personal and professional lives of Indigenous women, for example, are influenced by structures of oppression, explained by the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality looks at “the ways in which the social categories of gender, ability, age, race, sexuality, nationality and class symbiotically reinforce one another to produce marginalized subjects.”⁸

While acknowledging these barriers, it is equally important to recognize the strength, determination and resilience Indigenous leaders have demonstrated despite numerous

challenges. Indigenous communities hold true to values, uphold traditions and pass down wisdom, all fostering a spirit of self-determination and resurgence. These qualities not only empower Indigenous leaders to overcome barriers, but have also equipped them with unique perspectives and skills that enrich leadership spaces if allowed.

This report sheds light on the landscape of Indigenous representation in leadership and on boards in Canada by engaging in conversations with Indigenous leaders. By exploring career trajectories and experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of barriers encountered and how challenges were navigated. This report highlights the invaluable contributions made by current and aspiring Indigenous leaders while promoting a shift in the perception of leadership.



The History of Indigenous Leadership: An Environmental Scan

Context and background

Previous CCAB research shows that Indigenous Peoples tend to be under-represented in leadership positions and have a more difficult time finding employment in Canada.⁹ This current research gathers insight into the experiences of Indigenous leaders in corporate Canada to understand their leadership styles, how they got to where they are today and the challenges they faced along the way. It explores enabling factors such as networks, mentorship, skills development, education and obstacles, including discrimination, unconscious biases, unequal expectations, scrutiny within employment and hiring processes, and the narrow definition of leadership.

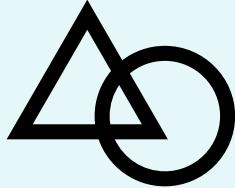
This report lays out our findings from in-depth interviews, showcasing common experiences of the leaders who participated. These findings are supplemented by a literature review and case studies of leadership programs geared toward Indigenous leadership. Using these resources and the guidance from our participants, CCAB and the Future Skills Centre created a toolkit based on Indigenous leadership experiences for organizations

to improve Indigenous representation in leadership and to create an inclusive environment for Indigenous employees. In addition, this will give insight into how Indigenous Peoples can prepare for leadership positions, based on the experiences of Indigenous leaders involved in this research process.

Using these three objectives, CCAB, in partnership with Rise Consulting, developed a framework informed by Indigenous experience, which aims to increase Indigenous leadership in corporate Canada and to promote an inclusive environment for diverse employees.

Indigenous leadership and colonialism

While Indigenous leaders are under-represented in the current Canadian corporate landscape, we must note that Indigenous leaders and Indigenous leadership have always been present, long before colonization and still today. Research dedicated to understanding pre-contact Indigenous societies indicates that “these leaders possessed qualities, worked within frameworks, and created strategies to successfully lead their people and nations.”¹⁰ Indigenous leaders hold extensive wisdom



*Based on the well-established idea that systematic variations in values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour exist across cultures, it seems likely that the **meaning and importance of leadership** also **varies across cultures**.*

of traditional knowledge, languages and practices that are not always appreciated in Western leadership and corporate systems. Colonial policies aimed to diminish Indigenous communities' culture, identity and, ultimately, their economic power. These negative effects have been exacerbated by post-colonial governments' lack of support and focus on the advancement of non-Indigenous interests over those of Indigenous Peoples.¹¹

Colonialist effects blocked the capabilities of Indigenous Peoples, leading to a lack of Indigenous representation in leadership. Organizations and governments have continued to support the advancement of non-Indigenous leaders and praise Western leadership styles without considering what aspiring Indigenous leaders contribute. Indigenous-led research and initiatives are necessary to shed light on the challenges that exist for Indigenous Peoples and facilitate change. Drawing on the

perspectives of Indigenous leaders helps facilitate a pathway toward reconciliation and reconceptualizing what is accepted as mainstream or effective leadership is a key component along the way.

Research has been dedicated to understanding the value of diversifying leadership strategies to consider the value of those that might operate outside the frameworks established by Western corporate systems. These findings show that, "Based on the well-established idea that systematic variations in values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour exist across cultures, it seems likely that the meaning and importance of leadership also varies across cultures."¹² To allow for multiple perspectives within a singular organization, we suggest the application of the Two-Eyed Seeing framework. Two-Eyed Seeing values the strength of Indigenous and Western worldviews.¹³ This approach has been advocated for use in research with Indigenous Peoples as it creates a space for Western and Indigenous ways of knowing to come together using the best of both worldviews to aid understanding and solve problems.¹⁴

"Central to the application of Two-Eyed Seeing is a respect for diversity of thought and ways of knowing which facilitate understandings that are responsive to changes and fluctuations in the world. Adopting Two-Eyed Seeing involves recognizing the importance of diverse knowledge systems rooted in different spaces and places and grounded in local perspectives, languages, understandings, ways of knowing and being in a manner

that promotes self-determination and the socio-economic well-being of Indigenous peoples.”¹⁵

Incorporating a Two-Eyed Seeing framework into leadership practices can establish a landscape that is more inclusive of Indigenous worldviews while increasing representation that can support Indigenous individuals in leadership roles. While leadership varies across individuals, by acknowledging diverse leadership styles, we can ensure that Indigenous leadership is recognized and respected in corporate companies. Research demonstrates that diverse companies are likely to outperform those companies who have a less diverse workforce in terms of profitability.¹⁶ Additionally, increased diversity and inclusion are associated with greater productivity, innovation, employee retention and workplace well-being.¹⁷ Increased diversity and inclusion have been consistently linked to improved corporate outcomes and performance, therefore valuing diversity will establish a more inclusive leadership landscape.



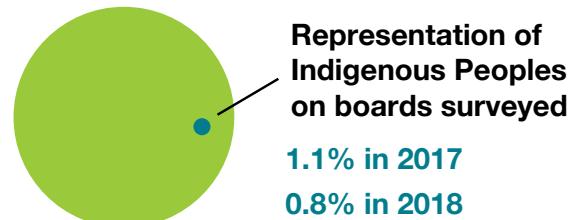
The Current Leadership Landscape: A Literature Review

Indigenous representation in leadership: Challenges

The presence of predominantly homogenous shareholders and executives largely characterizes the present state of leadership within organizations. Historically, equity-deserving groups have encountered significant challenges in their pursuit of leadership roles and meaningful representation in the workforce. While there has been some progress in increasing the ratio of women, Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups, this representation falls short of reflecting the diversity of our society. This lack of proportional representation poses a concern for equity-deserving groups, as their interests may not be protected and their voices may not be championed by individuals in positions of power. Consequently, because leadership roles in corporate environments may not adequately represent diverse voices and Indigenous perspectives, the broader Indigenous community is not benefiting from the positive impacts that result from inclusive leadership and diverse perspectives.

While there have been some improvements in diversity practices over the last few

years, we are still far from reaching the goal of more inclusive leadership and board representation. A study about diversity in leadership positions in Ontario's non-profit and public sectors, and in Ontario agencies, boards and commissions, showed that, although diversity has increased in the past four years, it is still far from representing the population, with racialized people and women being under-represented.¹⁸ The Canadian Board Diversity Council conducted a survey with 72 of Canada's 500 largest organizations as measured by revenue.¹⁹



DiversityLeads,²⁰ a project by the Diversity Institute at Ted Rogers School of Management, analyzed the representation of Black people, women and other racialized persons among 9,843 individuals on the board of directors of large companies. They found that women are under-represented on boards overall, occupying only 40.8% of board positions in the locations studied, with some variations across cities and

sectors. The qualitative statistics are even lower for Indigenous Peoples, Black and other racialized people, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities; interviews with these groups have shed some light on the barriers they face to inclusion in leadership roles.²¹

DiversityLead's study of eight major cities in Canada found that racialized people make up 28.4% of the population of these cities but comprise only 10.4% of board positions.²² When comparing cities, we can see how vast the disparity is. Toronto and Vancouver have the largest racialized populations but the numbers of racialized people in board positions, especially women, are almost non-existent. Racialized people make up the majority of Toronto's population, and more than one-half of Vancouver's population (58.9% and 51.4% respectively) but the percentage of board positions held by racialized people are 15.3% and 12.3% respectively. Although these cities have the highest number of racialized board members, racialized people are still vastly under-represented.²³

Women are under-represented in board positions; however, we can see that vast disparities between racialized and non-racialized women have emerged as well. When intersectional data is considered, non-racialized women outnumber racialized women by a wide margin. In Toronto, for example, where racialized women outnumber non-racialized women in the population, there are more non-racialized women in board roles than racialized women at a margin of 12 to one.²⁴

Diversity on boards of directors and among senior management is a significant corporate governance issue in Canada.²⁵ In 2021, 2% of

corporations (in a sample of 536 distributing corporations) had at least one Indigenous person on the board, which increased from 2020 when 1.7% of corporations had Indigenous representation.²⁶ All individuals, organizations and governments must strive to improve Indigenous representation on corporate boards and in businesses.

"There are so many highly talented and capable Indigenous people in this country that could take those seats on boards, but we have to ensure that we're ... looking outside of the criteria that we've always looked at."²⁷ —Tabatha Bull, CEO, Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business

Indigenous Peoples are the fastest growing sector of the Canadian population, with a higher increase in youth demographic growth compared to the non-Indigenous population,²⁸ but they are under-represented in the labour market, specifically in mid- to senior-level roles in larger corporations.²⁹ Targeting this demographic with skills training and other culturally appropriate resources could increase the number of Indigenous Peoples in executive and senior roles.³⁰

Indigenous Peoples have shown their resilience and readiness to be included more completely in the Canadian economy. In 2020, the GDP attributable to Indigenous Peoples in Canada was \$48.9 billion.³¹

**\$48.9
BILLION**

The GDP attributable to Indigenous Peoples in Canada in 2020.

There is an immense need for Indigenous Peoples to be represented in senior

leadership roles in corporate and government arenas so that Indigenous leaders can make decisions for high-level changes, as they are more informed, often by experience, of what is required by Indigenous communities.³²

The lack of diversity in leadership among corporations poses significant challenges for aspiring Indigenous leaders, as it does not enable companies to prioritize the needs and interests of Indigenous employees. This lack of representation also restricts opportunities for accessing networks that could result in the success of Indigenous leaders. Apart from the adverse effects on Indigenous Peoples, communities and other equity-deserving groups, organizations lacking diverse leadership miss out on a crucial element vital for their success. Embracing diversity in leadership can foster innovation, enhance market adaptability, improve competitiveness and lead to heightened productivity,³³ all resulting in enhanced profitability. A lack of diversity in leadership negatively affects the overall company and disadvantages the workforce.



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The barriers to the advancement of racialized groups, women, 2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities and other diverse groups are complex and exist at different levels of society, which calls for a more integrated approach to combating the problem.³⁴ Initiatives like The 50 – 30 Challenge help research and advance inclusive practices, which lead to more inclusive employment practices at all levels of organizations and encourage a more proactive approach to tackling the problem of under-representation of certain groups in leadership positions.

Diversity in leadership: What is being done

The push for more diverse representation in leadership requires a closer look at the state of leadership in Canadian businesses. The 50 – 30 Challenge is an initiative between the Government of Canada and Canadian businesses to promote increased representation and inclusion of diverse groups on boards and/or in senior management within workplaces.³⁵ It asks organizations to aspire to gender parity (50% women and/or non-binary people) and 30% representation of members of other equity-deserving groups, including those who are racialized, Black, living with disabilities, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+ and/or gender and sexually diverse.³⁶

A study by the Laurier Institution on board diversity in Metro Vancouver indicates racialized people comprise 11.1% of people on boards in Vancouver, with 1% of them being Indigenous; when looking by sector, the corporate sector has the fewest racialized people.³⁷ Results from studies and research across sectors are unanimous: boards and

executive leadership must see an increase in diverse gender and racial representation.

Furthermore, influences such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action³⁸ are helping to advance Indigenous representation in leadership. Call to Action #92 declares:

"We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include ensuring that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector" (p. 10).

Canada's National Indigenous Economic Strategy³⁹ expanded upon this call to action to share an economic vision for Indigenous Peoples that is critical for their inclusion in the Canadian economy. It is based upon four pillars:

- Finance (including revenue source, stimulus funds, procurement, and trade)
- People (Indigenous entrepreneurship, leadership and governance, labour force/ labour markets, social capital, workplace)
- Lands (land sovereignty, land management, environmental stewardship)
- Infrastructure (physical infrastructure, institutional infrastructure, financial resources).

The calls are interconnected, with none taking precedence over the other.

Specific initiatives are critical in addressing the historical disparities created by colonization to promote greater inclusivity and diversity within all levels of the labour market. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations prioritize and promote reconciliation within their business processes and organizational values, Indigenous individuals must be able to access positions of leadership to represent Indigenous interests better and act as catalysts of positive change, while dismantling systemic barriers and promoting workplace diversity. While signs of change are emerging, reshaping corporate leadership in Canada is progressing slowly, highlighting the need for accelerated and meaningful transformation.

The future of diversity on boards and in organizations: Current realities that pave the way for future opportunities

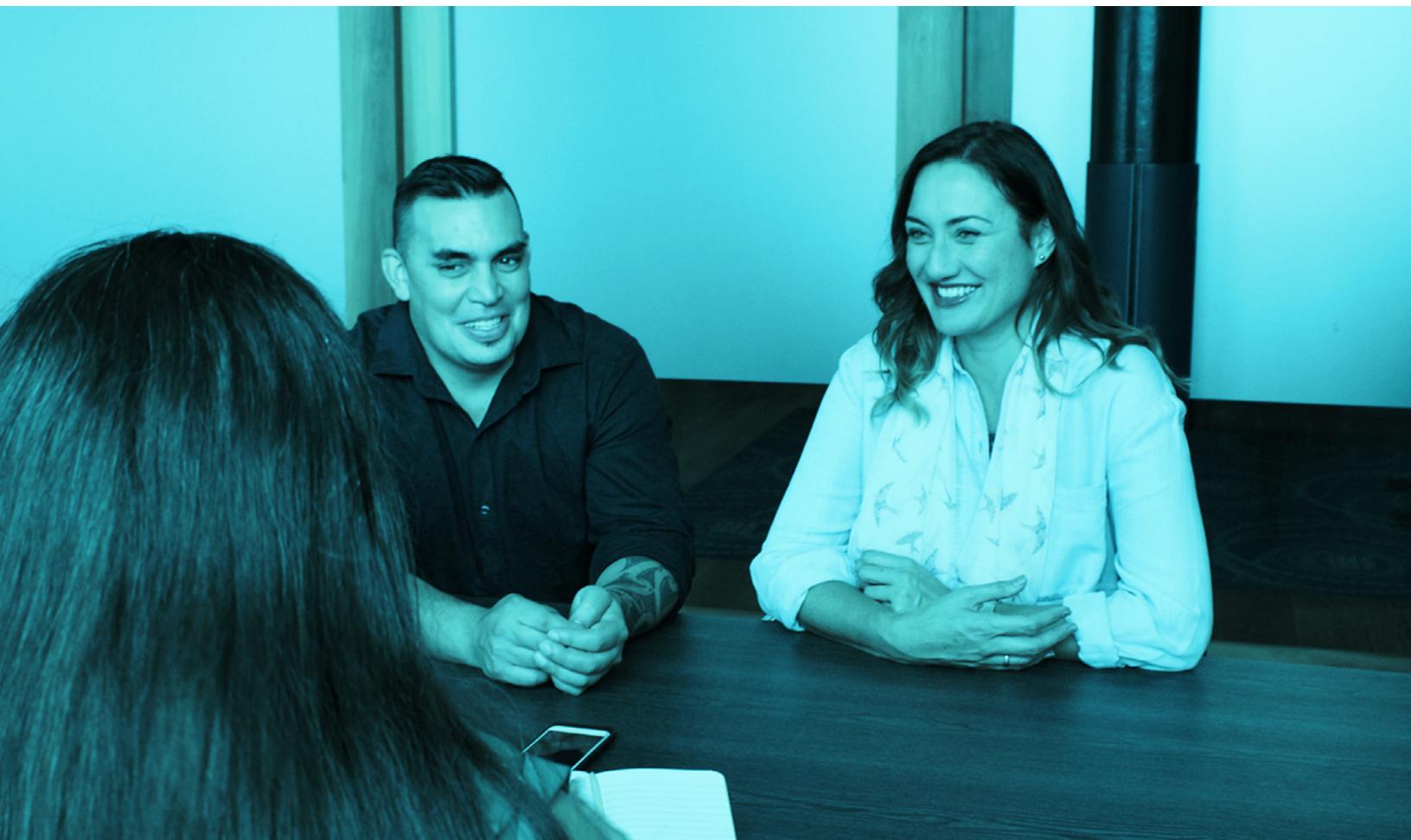
Indigenous Peoples are under-represented in the labour market, specifically in large corporations' mid- to senior-level roles. As Indigenous youth are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, with a population increase of 42.5% between 2006 and 2016, and 44% of the population being under 25 in 2016,⁴⁰ skills training and career development programs must be available to Indigenous youth and young professionals. With the correct tools and

training programs tailored to the needs of Indigenous youth, we could see an increase of Indigenous peoples in executive and senior roles in under-represented fields such as law, medicine and politics. The research concludes that elevating Indigenous leaders and professionals in the workforce will foster prosperous and long-term sustainable futures,⁴¹ laying the foundation for the next generation of Indigenous workers to have career opportunities in these fields. The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business' *Readiness and Resilience* report shows that, out of 1,207 Indigenous organizations in Canada offering either training, mentorship or funding opportunities, 54% offer some type of practical training.⁴² It is important that we identify what these programs offer to advance the careers of Indigenous Peoples. The data from the report does not specify what training

programs look like, although Indigenous training providers acknowledge that there is a greater need for senior management training rather than entry-level training to facilitate career advancement. The experiences of Indigenous executives and aspiring leaders shared in this report provide insight into how these individuals advanced their careers.

Leadership programs and training opportunities

The lack of representation of Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups in leadership is not a new issue. Programs have been established to help Indigenous Peoples attain leadership training and access to suitable roles, such as the Certified Indigenous Leadership Program offered by the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association



(AFOA).⁴³ Many organizations with these offerings are Indigenous-owned and operated and share their expertise with aspiring Indigenous leaders and build connections with non-Indigenous businesses. Increasing Indigenous representation on boards and in executive roles is a multifaceted challenge, so while training and skills development is important, corporate Canada must consider how it must change through learning to provide a safe and healthy environment for all professionals.

The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business conducted an environmental scan of organizations working in this space and highlighted several organizations to showcase different approaches to increasing Indigenous leadership. A list of other resources for Indigenous professionals and companies is included in Appendix B.



Indigenous Leadership Development Institute

Website: ildii.ca

Vision: Indigenous professionals building leadership capacity for tomorrow, today.

Mission: By actively promoting good governance by identifying needed training and by providing unique educational and capacity-building opportunities, Indigenous Leadership Development Institute prepares Indigenous people for the challenges of the 21st century.

Indigenous Leadership Development Institute is an Indigenous non-profit organization run and directed by a volunteer board that reflects the diversity of the Indigenous community. They aim to build Indigenous Peoples' leadership capacity through training and educational opportunities. The organization partners with government, educational institutions and private companies and offers customized training to understand the best approach for each learner. The institute's executive training program includes topics such as governance requisites, board training, nation-building, negotiation and strategic planning. It also offers technical training, such as proposal writing, media training, project management and financial management. The institute also offers programs such as Indigenous language and culture revitalization, Indigenous awareness training, and programs in construction and carpentry. It takes a research-based approach to understand what works and what does not work, and where capacity building is needed. The approach

helps develop leadership attributes. Courses are often sponsored by partners, so they are offered at reasonable rates.

Rise Consulting

Website: riseconsultingltd.ca

Vision and Mission: Rise Consulting's purpose is to support the rising presence of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Its mission is to foster meaningful relationships built on trust and respect, bringing together Indigenous and corporate communities in Canada to create shared value. The vision is a future where one group's prosperity doesn't come at the expense of another's rights or well-being.

Rise Consulting is an Indigenous-owned national management consultancy supporting Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. Rise Consulting is a Certified Aboriginal Business member of the CCAB, the Northeastern Alberta Business Association and the Canadian Business for Social Responsibility.

Rise Consulting is an Indigenous-owned boutique consultancy firm formed by Annie Korver in 2013 to advance reconciliation and Indigenous inclusion. Annie is an entrepreneur and a member of the Métis nation. She and her team take a values-based approach to their work, which includes areas of practice such as community relations, workforce lifecycle, leadership, supply chain, business development, sustainability and ESG. Their work fosters leadership and enhances appreciation of Indigenous culture in the workplace. Rise Consulting offers services to support Indigenous professionals and

corporate clients. Past clients mention Annie's leadership, work ethic, passion and kindness, and are grateful for the team's expertise and guidance in developing strategies for Indigenous inclusion and reconciliation.

System-3

Website: www.system-3.com

Vision: System-3 was born to achieve excellence and diversity in the executive suite and boardroom by more accurately predicting the success of executive suite and boardroom recruitments and promotions, and by focusing on what is important: the assessment of the unbiased competencies required in today and tomorrow's world and the capacity to apply them. System-3 uses SaaS-based predictive leadership simulation software that measures and assesses scores using AI to provide overall assessments to companies of potential leadership candidates.

Mission and Objective: System-3 aims to improve the successful selection of outstanding and diverse executive and board talent. To accomplish this, the company minimizes the inherent bias in the assessment and selection process and predictively identifies prospects who might lack the experience but can and will perform.

System-3 takes an innovative approach to talent and diversity. It takes a "leadership readiness," approach, putting participants through an online simulation of business challenges. It emphasizes leadership competencies instead of past experience. To minimize human bias, participants'

responses are compared to benchmarks developed through proprietary data and evaluations of other diverse leaders, and then an overall assessment is conducted using machine learning models. The evolving leadership competency framework is strongly modelled on decades of traditional leadership research and verified through large-scale studies that establish what is necessary for leadership success in the workplace today. System-3 is led by a diverse advisory committee of executives from Indigenous and other equity-deserving groups committed to diversity in leadership.

Indigenous Leadership Circle

Website: indigenouslc.com

Vision: The Indigenous Leadership Circle is a group of First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals who work together to build their networks, exchange and advance their ideas, and push each other forward. This initiative was created to elevate emerging Indigenous business leaders.

Mission and Objective: The members of the Indigenous Leadership Circle seek to be agents of change by fostering allyship between business professionals (Indigenous and non-Indigenous members or participants). By bringing together emerging Indigenous leaders with inspiring speakers and industry professionals, the Indigenous Leadership Circle aims to help young Indigenous leaders enhance their leadership skills, network and business acumen. This is a one-year program consisting of events, mentorship and activities to build leadership capabilities.

Indigenous Business Leadership Executive MBA

Website: beedie.sfu.ca/programs/graduate/ibl-emba

Vision: The Indigenous Business Leadership Executive MBA at SFU Beedie is designed for mid-career Indigenous leaders who strive toward community economic development, growth, sovereignty and nationhood within the context of the modern-day economy. This is an internationally accredited MBA grounded within Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

Mission/Objective: The mission of this program is “growing the wealth of our nations.” This learning journey encompasses Indigenous business, strategy, decision-making, governance, entrepreneurship and leadership. It was designed to honour full-time working, community and family responsibilities while studying using a blended program delivery model.

Chartered Professional Accountants

Website: cpawsb.ca/indigenous-learners-in-accounting

Vision: The Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Alberta, the Chartered Professional Accountants Western School of Business and Chartered Professional Accountants (CPA) Canada have launched an innovative accounting education pilot for Indigenous learners. In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, this pilot addresses systemic barriers and incorporates Indigenous content,



context and culture to increase Indigenous representation in accounting.

These courses are based on the regular CPA certification program but are tailored to address the challenges unique to Indigenous learners and incorporate Indigenous culture and context.

Mission and Objective: Indigenous learners encounter significant obstacles within post-secondary and professional education owing to societal biases, colonial legacy and other barriers. Recognizing these pervasive issues, the pilot program is dedicated to redefining the conventional approach to accounting education.

In conjunction with subject matter experts from First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples, CPA Canada incorporated content relevant to their communities and reflective of their world views and experiences in the learning materials.

ICD-Rotman Directors Education Program Diversity Scholarship

Website: www.icd.ca/Education/Scholarships-and-Grants/ICD-Rotman-DEP-Diversity-Scholarship

Mission: The ICD-Rotman Directors Education Program Diversity Scholarship facilitates the development of a diverse representation in boardrooms across all sectors of the Canadian economy by providing access to governance education to advance and strengthen directors' contributions to Canada's boardrooms and beyond.

Vision: The program allows equity-deserving individuals to gain a strong governance education through Canada's leading director education program, the ICD-Rotman Directors Education Program. Preference is given to those who demonstrate a financial need and belong to one of the following groups: women, Indigenous Peoples, people with visible or invisible/episodic disabilities, members of racialized communities and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+.

Interviews With Indigenous Leaders: Methodology

The framework of this project consisted of two phases. Researchers first conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to gather primary data on the experiences of Indigenous leaders. Then, they developed a tangible framework based on research insights that would serve as a tool for leaders and organizations. The project included several stages of data collection, data synthesis and summarizing findings. An iterative approach was chosen for this research to ensure that the findings would resonate with leaders, aspiring leaders and organizations.

In-depth interview design and methodology

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: for the established leaders category, participants must have been in a leadership or board position in a non-Indigenous organization; for the aspiring leaders category, participants must have been in a mid-management position aiming for advancement into an executive level role. All participants were required to identify as an Indigenous person and be at least 18 years old. Participants were representative of each Indigenous identity group (First Nations, Inuit and Métis), from differing geographic regions and diverse industries.

Each interview was estimated to last about one hour; however, due to rich insights from participants, many interviews were 90 minutes. The in-depth interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams, recorded and transcribed through in-app software. Participants were asked to state their name and consent to the interview before beginning the process.

The interviews were guided by questions that varied for each sample group. Interview questions included the following themes:

- Roles and responsibilities of participants
- Essential skills for successful leadership
- Gaps and barriers for Indigenous leaders
- Supports for success, such as mentorship
- Leadership styles
- Cross-cultural perspectives
- Equity, diversity and inclusion strategies and culturally welcoming workplaces
- The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on career advancement

Researchers compiled and transcribed the interview data and used thematic analysis to identify themes and key findings from the perspectives of each individual.⁴⁴ The interview approach of this study enables a deeper understanding of the experiences of the desired research group that allows this research to be guided by answers that cannot be quantified or data that cannot be easily measured numerically. Rather, this research focuses on the complex experiences of individuals.

In the first stage of data collection, researchers developed an in-depth interview questionnaire that explored topics such as work history, education, experiences in the workplace, barriers to leadership and enablers to success (see Appendix A). This was developed by our researchers with guidance from CCAB's senior leadership team and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, and then reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at Toronto Metropolitan University. Using CCAB's network of Indigenous business professionals and member list, and an environmental scan, researchers compiled a list of Indigenous leaders that were contacted as interview participants.

Following participant outreach, CCAB researchers conducted 25 in-depth interviews with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders from a wide range of industries across Canada between January and March 2023. Interviews were conducted with three of the following sample groups:

- > Established leaders: 20 established senior or executive leaders within organizations to speak to their overall experience of leadership.

- > Aspiring leaders: three leaders in mid-management positions who are poised to take on leadership roles later in their careers and could identify the skills necessary for aspiring Indigenous leaders.
- > Leaders with human resources expertise: two established senior leaders who work within the human resources industry and could speak to hiring, recruitment and retention processes as well as equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within companies.

Following data collection, researchers analyzed interview transcripts for themes, observations, trends and common experiences. Key findings from this phase are detailed in the interview analysis section of the report. Figures 1 to 5 show the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

FIGURE 1
Preferred pronouns

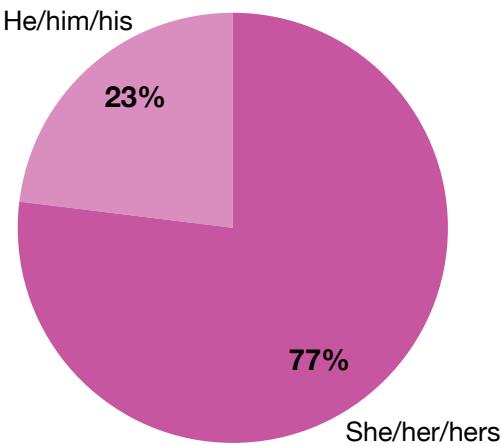


FIGURE 2

Two-spirit, Indig(e/i)queer or 2SLGBTQ+ identity

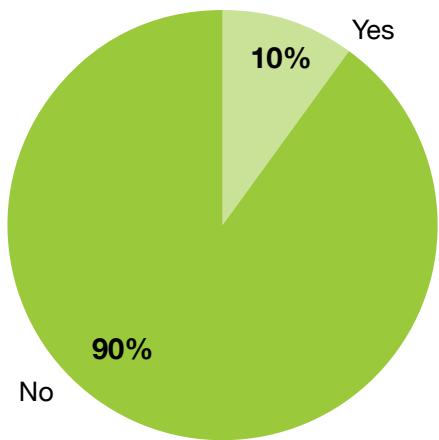


FIGURE 4

Age of leaders (years)

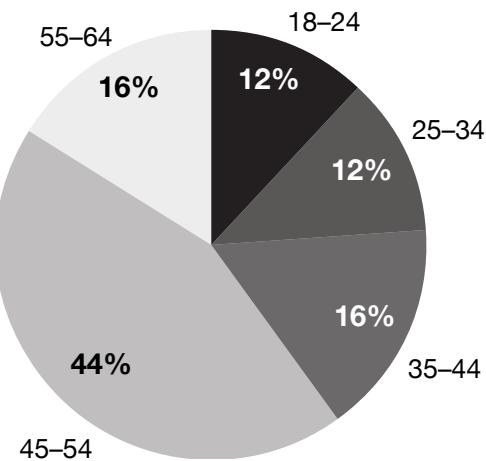


FIGURE 3

Disabilities (physical, mental, developmental, cognitive, learning, communication, sight, hearing or functional limitation) disclosure

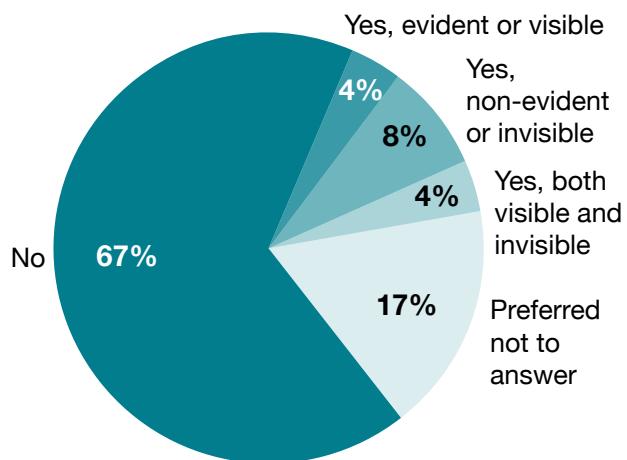
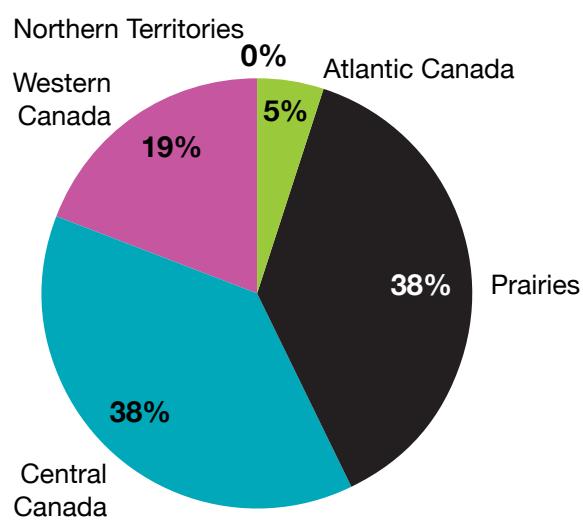


FIGURE 5

Geographic distribution by region



Statement of limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into a range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weight of the opinions held as would be measured in a quantitative study. While the results of the in-depth interviews cannot be projected to the full population of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, they can be used as directional information in developing policy and communications.

Although the experiences of the participating groups are not representative of all Indigenous leaders in Canada, they can create meaningful generalizations. The findings reflect a range of themes, opinions and thoughts of individuals that help paint the landscape of barriers and opportunities that exist. The experience of one Indigenous leader may vary from that of other Indigenous leaders depending on personal histories, geographic locations and other factors. Future research would benefit from a demographic study of the northern territories, particularly Nunavut, where 86% of the population is Inuit.⁴⁵ Additional insights from areas with a majority Indigenous population could offer a new lens for policy changes.

Interviews With Indigenous Leaders: Qualitative Findings

Section 1: Leadership and career trajectory

Roles of leaders

Participants were asked to describe their current roles within their organizations, including titles and responsibilities.

In varying industries, some positions included director of a startup program, vice-president of Indigenous markets, president and CEO, partner of a law firm and director of Indigenous relations. The responsibilities of these individuals included team management, overseeing corporate transactions, providing strategic advice, managing and growing the business, and developing and implementing Indigenous frameworks and training programs.

Many participants held a role that related to Indigenous matters, whether it was through community engagement, Indigenous personal finances or supporting the organization on its journey toward reconciliation.

Overall, participants had diverse roles and responsibilities, but many shared a focus on Indigenous communities, reconciliation and talent development within senior leadership roles.

Section 2: Career pathways and skills development

Career paths of leaders

The study asked participants to recount how they got into their position, what strategies they used along the way, and their overall motivation for pursuing a leadership role. Many cited career progression and experience as insights into the specific skills and knowledge that have contributed to their success. By analyzing the career paths of Indigenous leaders, we can identify factors that enable career advancement into senior-level positions. Furthermore, understanding how Indigenous individuals have advanced into senior positions in their careers can help to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about the professional abilities of Indigenous Peoples, as well as motivate those aspiring to leadership roles.

*By analyzing the **career paths of Indigenous leaders**, we can identify **factors that enable career advancement** into senior-level positions.*

When examining career advancement, we should note how leaders found their current positions. The participants noted five common themes:

- Recruitment or headhunting
- Applying for a job through a job posting
- Being referred to the company by an internal employee
- Progressing organically
- Building a reputation within the company as a potential leader

The 25 participants all faced differing journeys on their career paths. The following points were drawn from conversations regarding how leaders found themselves in their role:

> **Natural career progressions:** There is a diverse range of progression among individuals; some started in one field and transitioned into another. For example,

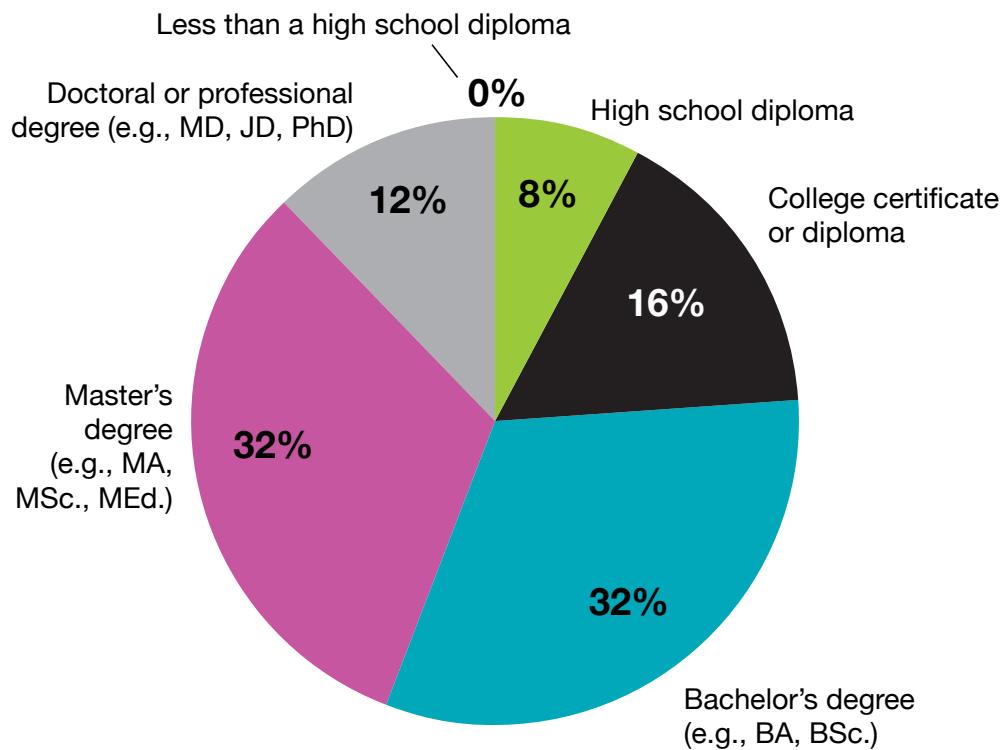
one participant started in the legal field and transitioned into working in the oil and gas industry. Others identified beginning in a lower-level position within a company and working their way up through a series of promotions.

“My motive for accepting a leadership role was a natural career progression. I never was interested in having an impressive role or making more money; it was more about doing good and making a positive impact.”

> **Education and qualifications:** Many participants have a strong educational background and cite obtaining higher degrees and certifications in their fields as essential to their success. This includes obtaining an undergraduate degree, a law degree, an MBA or a master’s degree. Most participants held a master’s or bachelor’s degree (32% each), followed by a college certificate or diploma (16%; Figure 6).



FIGURE 6
Educational level of participants



"I've always valued higher education. I don't have white privilege, I don't have male privilege. So as a single First Nations mom, I knew the only way I was going to succeed was if I armoured myself with post-secondary degrees."

> **Recruitment:** Several leaders were recruited into their current companies through an internal employee, an existing relationship with the company or a recruiter. Multiple participants mentioned being asked by companies to step into Indigenous relations-related roles, specifically to "Indigenize the company."

"I was headhunted by a professor; the opportunity was given to me because I was Indigenous and they were looking for an Indigenous employee."

The career progression of Indigenous leaders showcases how individuals have different experiences. Common career paths of leaders may begin with education, moving into post-secondary education, incrementally building skills applicable to the industry and obtaining a series of promotions until securing an executive role. Indigenous leaders demonstrate that leadership is not always gained in a traditional manner.

Although education can be an essential contributor to success, 8% of participants did not have post-secondary education and were able to obtain leadership through dedication and hard work to build their skill sets. In terms of recruitment, specifically recruiting Indigenous talent can open doors for opportunities not otherwise available. Finally, some participants noted that advancement into senior leadership roles was the obvious progression, as they have always felt like a leader formally or informally, whereas others had to be vocal about their goals to push for advancement.

A common theme was involvement with Indigenous communities and a desire to work for the social, economic and educational growth of their communities. Some worked in government roles or with non-profit organizations to achieve this goal, while others worked directly in Indigenous engagement or Indigenous business. Although participants had differing career progressions, they shared a common goal of working toward the betterment of Indigenous communities.

Professional development, leadership training and career advancement

In discussions with the 25 participants to understand Indigenous leadership, we asked questions regarding the development of skill sets and what skills played a role in their career success. The interviews revealed themes of continual learning, on-the-job experience and Indigenous-specific training programs. Conversations with participants

revealed that they often sought training that incorporated Indigenous values, history, traditional knowledge and world views.

Continuous learning: Participants developed their skills through continual learning in the forms of formal education, certifications, and leadership and professional development training. Some participants developed skills through post-secondary education, including undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degrees. One participant pursued education in a lower-pressure environment, where they could acquire knowledge and skills without the formal structure and stress of typical educational environments. Other individuals participated in continuing education certification courses, including nation-building, governance and economic policy, communications and negotiations. Finally, several participants mentioned taking part in leadership- or professional development-specific courses, training programs or extracurricular activities, all of which allow for improving leadership skills, a sense of leadership and defining leadership styles.

On-the-job experience: Several participants developed skills through on-the-job experience, which included internships. Observing and learning from others within a profession can expose individuals who are looking to expand their knowledge and skills on a first-hand basis. On-the-job experience enables individuals to participate in different practical settings and apply skills to actual work. One participant noted that, by investing effort and dedication to learning a skill, the proficiency regarding that skill improved significantly.

Indigenous-specific training: Indigenous business leaders cited Indigenous-specific training as integral to their development. Indigenous-specific training focuses on two key areas: first, it centres cultural awareness and Indigenous relations; and second, it focuses on a more academia-centred Indigenous-specific educational output. Indigenous relations and cultural awareness training provide an opportunity to develop skills related to Indigenous engagement by understanding histories and creating culturally safe environments for Indigenous Peoples in an informal setting. Indigenous education programs administered via post-secondary institutions allow individuals to develop professional and leadership-



specific skills applicable to senior-level or decision-making positions. One example of an academic program cited by participants is the Indigenous Business Leadership Executive MBA at Simon Fraser University. This program develops the business-related skills of experienced Indigenous leaders while incorporating traditional knowledge, culture and history. Another example of is the AFOA/CPA program, which encourages Indigenous Peoples to participate and grow within accounting professions. Although there is an overlap in the development and skills learned, there is an assumed disparity in the value of credentialed and non-credentialed learning. The difference between traditional colonial educational structures and Indigenous ways of learning and how they affect doing business is not adequately addressed in current support systems.

Skills development

Skills development is a critical component of successful leadership, as a robust skill set allows for a leader to become more confident and adaptable, communicate effectively and successfully manage a team.⁴⁶ Identifying areas of opportunity where skills development is underused can create greater access to training programs. Participants described the skills and knowledge that played a role in their success: communication and interpersonal skills, analytical skills, technical skills, resilience and determination, and cultural training.

Communication and interpersonal skills: Strong interpersonal and communication abilities were cited by participants as a foundation for success, specifically the ability to build relationships, connections and networks with clients, stakeholders or colleagues. Communication and interpersonal skills enable individuals to connect with others, create meaningful relationships, work effectively in a team and have empathy for others.

Analytical skills: Participants use critical thinking and other analytical skills to identify challenges and create solutions. Within senior-level roles and team management, this is an essential skill for problem-solving. One participant identifies as a strategic thinker and has the ability to recognize opportunities and possibilities.

Technical skills: Most participants noted having strong technical skills, which are related to specific mechanical or operational skills that allow one to perform specific tasks relating to different industries or professions. Technical skills vary from industry to industry as seen through the professional range of participants and are critical for success.

Hard work: The importance of being action-oriented, setting goals and defining purposes has created efficiency and enables participants to be built up within their careers. The skill of hard work allows for persistence, continued improvement and dedication, all of which often drive further achievement and success.

There were also two skills that were mentioned that are critical and unique for Indigenous Peoples and those who belong to equity-deserving groups:

Resilience and determination: A specific skill that emerged from some participants was the ability to persevere and adapt despite adversity. Indigenous Peoples possess an innate determination to succeed and overcome challenges, which was reflected by the experiences of the leaders. Resilience can come in three forms: natural resilience, with which individuals are born; adaptive resilience, or the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and thrive within those changes; and restored resilience, where one learns the skill of resiliency.⁴⁷ Participants showed the skills of determination and resilience in their careers; one participant cited their strength in identifying challenges to overcome them, or adaptive resilience.

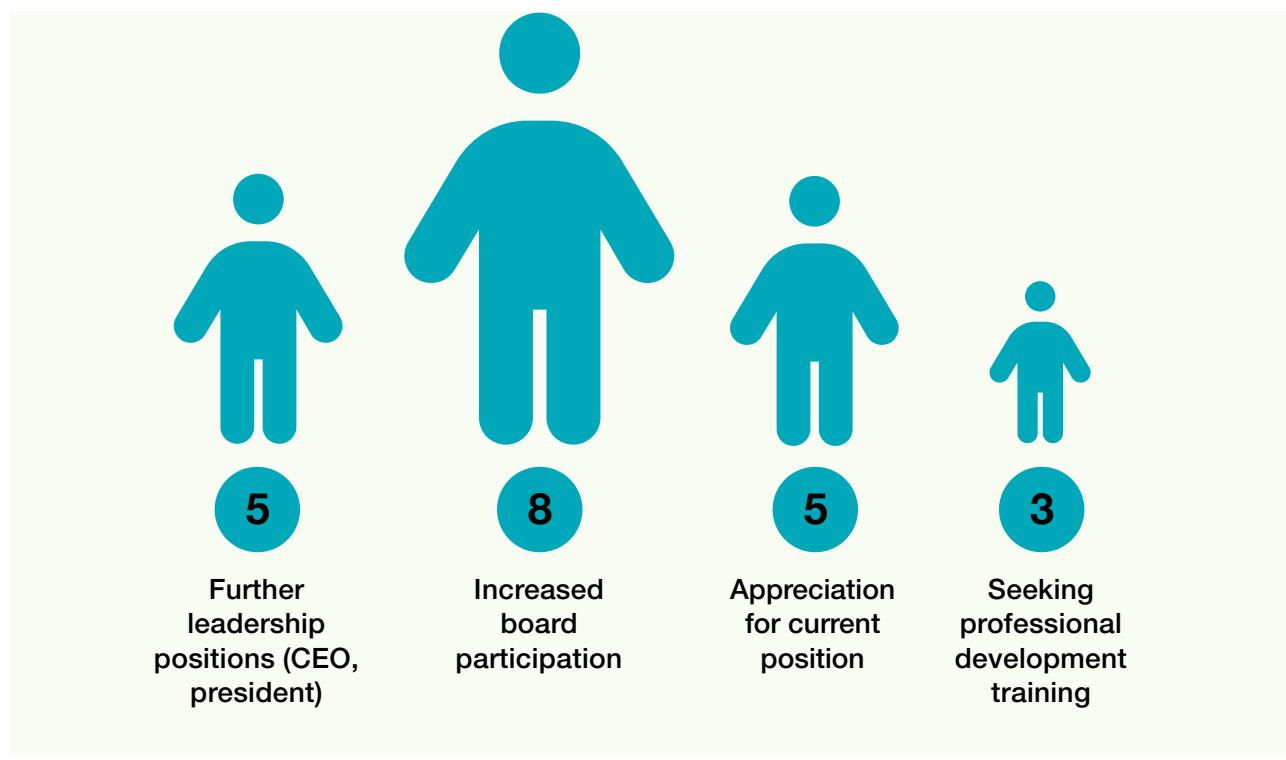
Cultural component: Several participants mentioned the ability to walk the line between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world, bringing Indigenous cultures into the workplace and using one's identity as a skill or strength. One participant used authenticity as a skill within the workplace, shedding light on the histories and oppression of Indigenous Peoples with colleagues. Informally incorporating Indigenous perspectives into everyday skills is critical to Indigenous leaders.

Career advancement of leaders

The leaders involved recognized the value of gaining experience and developing their skill sets, which contributed to their success and career advancement. Leadership and career success does not peak when an

individual reaches a senior or executive role, which is why the study asked participants to discuss future aspirational roles and how they planned to advance their career, if at all. Based on the responses, the following themes emerged (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7
Career aspirations and future advancement goals



Further leadership positions: Several participants in senior roles were working toward attaining a higher leadership position; some roles they aspired to included vice-president, CEO and shareholder.

Increased board participation: Most participants expressed an interest in furthering their involvement with corporate or non-profit boards. One participant mentioned aspiring to be involved with corporate boards due to the opportunity

to make meaningful change. The desire to work on initiatives that have a positive socio-economic impact on Indigenous communities was also noted.

Professional development training: Some participants revealed that they planned to or were taking part in training such as formal management training, directors' education or board training to advance their careers and deepen their expertise.

Appreciation for current position: A few participants mentioned that they were not aspiring to further leadership positions; they were taking time to make the most out of their current positions rather than focusing on future career goals.

The insights provided by participants highlight the importance of having clear aspirations and specific goals for career advancement. Some participants are satisfied with their current role, whereas others seek to advance or make a greater impact. It is evident that Indigenous leaders work toward the common goal of making meaningful change and creating opportunities for advancement for Indigenous Peoples and communities. Indigenous leaders interviewed had an overall desire within their careers to work in Indigenous spaces and were driven by the desire to make a difference.

Characteristics of leaders

Participants were asked about the various characteristics they see in good leaders, keeping in mind that the understanding of good leadership varies from individual to individual based on personal beliefs and values. Responses reflect what leaders need from other leadership, what they would like to see from senior leaders in the workplace that is lacking or a projection of characteristics within themselves. This is not to suggest one type of leader is more valuable than another. Instead, this question aims to demonstrate the variety of traits that a good leader may possess. Based on participant responses, key characteristics all possess qualities of support and well-being (Table 1).



TABLE 1**Leadership characteristics of participants****HUMILITY**

Respondents mentioned the importance of being able to admit wrongdoings and striving to better oneself. A few participants noted that humility is the most important trait one can have as an Indigenous person. Humility is highly valued and taught within Indigenous cultures, making it a critical factor in leadership.

VISION AND INNOVATION

Having a strategic vision and being innovative were also highlighted by participants. This was described as having a clear vision of where they can take the company and how they can inspire others to work toward that vision.

COMPASSION AND EMPATHY

Being both compassionate and empathetic toward others was emphasized as a critical component of leadership. Participants noted valuing leaders who listen to their team, support others and make their employees feel valued. One participant stated that a good leader is somebody who allows others to come into a workplace feeling respected and valued for their unique perspectives.

RESPECT AND KINDNESS

Respect and kindness were mentioned frequently by participants as effective strategies for creating a supportive and uplifting work environment. Kindness from leaders was said to create increased productivity and happiness of employees.

FLEXIBILITY

A good leader knows how to work in different environments. Whether that is a metropolitan area or a remote First Nations community, these leaders are also open to change and continuous learning. They also know how to work well with a variety of working styles that might be contradictory to their own practices.

AUTHENTICITY

Good leaders are genuine in their interactions. They embrace honesty with themselves and with others and are not afraid to share their thoughts regardless of the pressure associated with the outcome. They are true to their personality and embody this in the workplace.

INTEGRITY

Good leaders are guided by a moral compass that plays a role in the decisions they must make. As leaders, they are tasked with setting the standards of excellence within the workplace. Many participants noted that good leaders in their lives have always stood out as being strong-willed and highly principled.

CURIOSITY AND AWARENESS

Participants noted that quality leaders are often the beacons of curiosity within the workplace. They share new ideas, collaborate with their staff to pursue uncharted topics and always stay aware about what is going on in their respective sectors or fields. They encourage innovation and new approaches among their staff networks.

INCLUSIVITY

Good leaders ensure that they create space for all parties to share their thoughts and opinions. According to participants, the most successful leaders leverage the diversity of perspectives produced by their employees as the foundation of their decision-making.

The characteristics of good leaders share an overarching theme; one participant noted that they relate to the Seven Grandfather Teachings of truth, courage, respect, integrity, love, wisdom and humility.⁴⁸ These teachings outline the principles by which Anishinaabe peoples are taught to live. Based on participant responses, it is evident that, whether intentionally or not, Indigenous leaders are building these principles into their desired leadership styles. It is important

to understand the similarities between the characteristics cited of good leadership and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. While this reference is from the open textbook, there are many variations of the teachings respected and used by many communities. These stories originated with the Potawatomi and Anishinaabe. We have included the translations to Anishinaabemowin with the animal that represents each teaching below (Table 2).

TABLE 2The Seven Grandfather Teachings⁴⁹

Teaching	Explanation and Definition
Wisdom – <i>Nibwaakaawin</i> Beaver	Wisdom is the importance of knowledge and intelligence, meaning using good judgment, making wise decisions and acting with integrity. Wisdom is to be used for the good of all people; to cherish knowledge is to know wisdom.
Love – <i>Zaagi'idiwin</i> Eagle	Love is unconditional and must be given freely. This allows us to be compassionate and show respect for all living beings.
Respect – <i>Minaadendamowin</i> Buffalo	Respect is mutual and reciprocal; to receive respect you must give respect. This encourages showing respect for oneself, others and the earth and acknowledging the value of all our Relations.
Bravery – <i>Aakode'ewin</i> Bear	Bravery is to live with a strong heart. This promotes courage resilience and strength to face challenges.
Honesty – <i>Gwayakwaadiziwin</i> Bigfoot	Honesty, truthfulness and sincerity are important in thoughts, words and actions.
Humility – <i>Dabaadendiziwin</i> Wolf	Humility calls for thinking modestly about oneself, and recognizing that each person is part of a larger whole and should not boast or seek attention.
Truth – <i>Debwewin</i> Turtle	It is important to seek and speak the truth about what you have lived and experienced while not being deceitful with oneself and others. Truth is also about living in a slow and conscientious manner that is in alignment with one's values.

Leadership attitudes (Indigenous leadership vs. Western corporate leadership)

Indigenous leadership is founded on the values and beliefs of Indigenous cultures, which place a high importance on community, collaboration and environmental stewardship. From participant responses, we can conclude that Indigenous leaders, whether intentionally or unintentionally, incorporate these ideals into their leadership styles. Relationship building, collaborative decision-making, incorporating all voices into decisions and empowering the collective are central to Indigenous leadership. The leaders within the sample concentrated on impact-oriented objectives while supporting and encouraging others.

“For me, what I’m trying to do is create a more equitable and inclusive workplace, which will lead to more diversity of thought and perspectives within the organization, but ultimately that requires having conversations around uncomfortable truths and changing systems and the way that you know systems operate internally and externally within organizations.”

To understand better how Indigenous leaders approach leadership, we asked participants how their leadership styles differ from that of others in corporate Canada. It is clear from the responses that Indigenous leadership is significantly different from the leadership experienced by survey participants in the Western style of leadership. One of the key distinctions is that Indigenous leadership is collaborative and values collective

thinking and community, whereas corporate leadership can be intrinsically individualistic in that a community prioritizes the individual over the collective group,⁵⁰ and with a “one for all, all for none” approach.

Approaches to leadership by Indigenous participants focus on three main styles:

- > **Inclusive leadership:** This values and leverages diverse perspectives and experiences of individuals within a group. Leaders strive to create an environment where every individual feels valued, respected and included regardless of any personal characteristics.⁵¹ This approach aims to foster an environment that enables employees to contribute to their fullest while bringing their perspectives into the work.
- > **Collaborative leadership:** This is an approach that emphasizes teamwork, collaboration and support.⁵² Leaders seek to engage the team in decision-making processes to come to a consensus. With communication, active listening and looking to others for their consideration these leaders rely on creating a sense of community that supports the team’s success.
- > **Interpersonal leadership:** This is the ability to inspire and engage others to do their best work toward achieving a shared goal.⁵³ Leaders use an interpersonal approach to bring out the best in others through empowerment, motivation and role-modelling. Many participants highlight the importance of supporting their team to motivate and encourage growth, while also putting the success of others before the success of yourself.

Traditionally, the archetypal and sought-after leadership style in corporate Canada focuses on individual success, is goal-oriented and based on patriarchal systems:⁵⁴

- > **Authoritarian leadership:** These leaders make all the decisions without input or direction from other team members. The leader holds complete authority and responsibility and may not consult others in decision-making processes. This style is rarely effective and can contribute to demotivation and low satisfaction of employees.
- > **Bureaucratic leadership:** These leaders uphold the processes and policies of an organization with no flexibility. Leaders ensure team members adhere to the strict rules. Input from employees may be considered by the leader but is rejected if it does not adhere to the policy since the organization has found success with current policies. These leaders are often associated with formal Western organizations.
- > **Delegative leadership:** Also referred to as “laissez-faire leadership,” leaders trust their employees to complete tasks and offer minimal interference or direction. This is a non-intrusive leadership style that could either empower a group or limit its development due to lack of internal support. Employees often need direction or course correction but are unlikely to receive it with such a leader.

Corporate and Indigenous leadership styles deviate and must be examined to understand variations. While several participants noted that their lived experiences and personal

perspectives shaped their approach to leadership, there were differences in opinion regarding the ideal leadership style. Some felt there was no right way to lead, while others stated the importance of being a passionate, courteous and inspiring leader. Most leaders are emphasizing inclusivity and diversity in leadership and are becoming more well-rounded and thoughtful of others.

Indigenous leadership in the workplace

SENSE OF BELONGING AS AN INDIGENOUS LEADER WITHIN A NON-INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATION

Understanding whether Indigenous Peoples feel like they belong in a traditional workplace in Canada is important for several reasons. First, based on the equity of Indigenous individuals who have historically faced systemic discrimination and exclusion from Canadian institutions, understanding feelings of belonging can help address injustices. Second, feelings of belonging in the workplace can have positive outcomes for the employee and organization, such as higher productivity, increased commitment and reduced turnover.⁵⁵ Last, as diversity within workplaces grows, it is vital that Indigenous Peoples can bring their unique perspectives to organizations to further inclusion.

To understand diversity and inclusion in the workplace better, we asked participants if they feel like they belong and if their identity affects how they are viewed as a leader. In a recent survey,⁵⁶ 25% of Indigenous Peoples

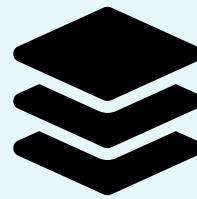
stated that racial identity is fundamental to their identity and 35% indicated that their Indigeneity has made it harder to succeed. Some common responses emerged regarding why participants do not feel like they belong as leaders:

- > **Imposter syndrome:** Many participants expressed feeling imposter syndrome in their roles. This included feeling as if they had to work harder than their non-Indigenous counterparts to prove their worth as a leader, feeling fraudulent and doubting the value of their contributions due to their Indigeneity. These experiences of imposter syndrome are amplified for many Indigenous leaders, especially within environments where dominant cultures or values differ from their own. Some participants felt pressure to prove themselves and their skills to be taken seriously.
- > **Conflicting values:** Several participants felt distant from their organization due to an observed clash between personal and corporate values. Participants experienced a focus on short-term goals and individualism. The upbringing of many Indigenous leaders clashes with corporate reporting cycles that emphasize short-term results, often without long-term context. These conflicting values contribute to a diminished sense of belonging.
- > **Stereotypes and tokenism:** Participants spoke about having to overcome stereotypes and biases that have been historically built into organizations. A few participants mentioned feeling tokenized

within their workplace by being offered a position because they are Indigenous, thus not feeling like they belonged or valued as a leader. One participant noted being involved in all meetings regarding diversity, even though their position had nothing to do with increasing diversity.

- > **Lack of diverse representation:** Some participants cited a lack of diversity within senior and executive roles within the organization as a deterrent to belonging in a leadership role. The lack of diverse representation at higher levels may not motivate but instead impede others to strive for leadership positions.

Overall, Indigenous leaders have complex experiences with their sense of belonging in the workplace. Many of these experiences lead to a negative and unwelcoming workplace environment that discourages and hinders the pursuit of leadership roles. Others have learned how to leverage and use their identity as a strength to promote diversity and inclusion, allowing for positive change and diverse perspectives to be brought into the workplace.



Overall, Indigenous leaders have complex experiences with their sense of belonging in the workplace.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

The experiences of Indigenous leaders can be significantly affected by stereotypes and biases, including misconceptions of homogeneity among Indigenous peoples, choice to depend on social services and disinterest in education.⁵⁷ Often, leadership qualities are narrowly associated with individuals who are predominantly gender-homogenous. These associations can lead to unconscious biases that undervalue and contribute to the under-representation of Indigenous leaders in the corporate world. An audit of succession planning in the financial sector found that, while 25.7% of employees identified Indigenous men for management or other key positions, only 14.3% of employees identified Indigenous women for the same positions.⁵⁸

Addressing these biases is of utmost importance to cultivate inclusive work environments that allow for diverse viewpoints and representation in leadership. Focusing on inclusivity at the decision-making level of a company has been shown to strengthen organizational resolve, increase overall effectiveness and foster innovation by promoting diverse perspectives. Additionally, diverse and inclusive companies find and nurture the best talent and increase employee engagement, which is then translated into increased revenue via improved customer interest. If these biases and stereotypes are not addressed, then Indigenous leaders may be subjected to higher scrutiny than others restricting access to career advancement opportunities. To determine if these stereotypical qualities

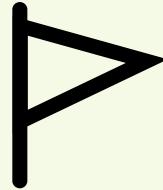
of leadership (e.g., assertiveness, and hierarchical and authoritarian leadership), which are predominantly associated with white leadership, are affecting the careers of racialized leaders, we asked participants to reflect on their past experiences and views of leadership. Before revealing what participants stated, it is key to mention that other studies indicate that leadership traits are strongly associated with white-majority group members in Western societies.⁵⁹

The responses from participants indicate that the current corporate structure suffers from negative consequences due to a lack of diversity, especially in terms of Indigenous representation in leadership positions. The qualitative data reveals that Indigenous leaders are feeling forced to alter their leadership styles to assimilate into a corporate structure that values traits associated with white man leadership as the standard of excellence. This exacerbates the lack of role models with diverse leadership styles. One participant acknowledged that they adopted a strategy of “looking the part” to counter stereotypes. Another felt as though their role did not genuinely include them. It is evident that the participants’ experience as leaders have been influenced by a need to adhere to stereotypes, thereby limiting opportunities and increasing pressures to conform to norms. This makes it difficult to advocate for diversity and inclusion. To achieve meaningful change, it is essential to challenge the deeply embedded stereotypes that society has attributed to corporate leaders to ensure that those in positions of power accurately reflect the diverse sectors of the population.

“Yes, these stereotypes have influenced me, and I have adopted some aspects of white culture, like dressing or looking the part. I have been stereotyped and been seen as meeting a quota. When you look the part, it reduces stereotypes.”

“I have been influenced in the sense that I have a certain look that is agreeable to the mainstream leadership. I also never really aspired to leadership, so I think I have been influenced in that way, although I gravitate to smaller organizations and entities.”

The findings above highlight the harmful effects of using outdated and stereotypical leadership characteristics as the baseline for exemplifying quality leadership. A reconceptualization of leadership is essential to create a corporate world where leadership and perspectives are diverse. Research from the technology sector states that it is crucial for Indigenous leaders to have influence and decision-making control in managing resources; developing strategies, policies and programs; and adapting technologies for Indigenous communities.⁶⁰ To reshape leadership, organizations must prioritize the creation of inclusive environments while implementing unbiased strategies and policies to combat the unequal leadership that is commonly experienced. Actively promoting diversity within workforces and providing equal access to opportunities where individuals do not feel as if they must change to advance will allow leaders to thrive and contribute their unique perspectives and talents.



*In a survey of 98 non-Indigenous corporations in Canada, **Indigenous women held .3%** of board, executive, senior management and senior management pipeline roles.*

Diversity on boards: The influence of diversity and how to increase representation

When discussing diversity within companies, it is important to consider diversity at the board level. Many participants who had experience as a board member or were currently sitting on a board provided valuable insights that reinforce the scarcity of Indigenous directors in Canadian companies. From the examination of 269 company boards, only 0.9% of all directors were Indigenous.⁶¹ Research conducted by Osler on diversity disclosure found that only 0.5% of board members in 270 publicly traded corporations governed by CBCA are Indigenous, despite representing 5% of the general population.⁶² A survey of 213 Canadian companies indicated that although 86 had written board policies for Indigenous representation, there were only seven Indigenous board members among them.⁶³ Companies suffer from the absence of Indigenous voices on boards and, according to research on Canadian boards,

increasing the representation of diverse or equity-deserving groups on boards is linked to positive corporate performance, attracting and engaging diverse employees, and increased innovation.⁶⁴

Diversity on corporate boards greatly affects the way the board operates and has a significant impact at the organizational level. When asked about the importance of diverse board composition, participants mentioned the following:

- > Fostering understanding of those from different backgrounds and lived experiences can be beneficial.
- > Diversity of thought enriches decision-making processes and helps combat problems by providing insights that homogenous boards lack.
- > Collective and diverse thoughts shape leadership and inherently influence the way a company operates.
- > Boards that lack Indigenous representation do not or cannot accurately consider factors impacting Indigenous Peoples, which can lead to improper engagement and uneven development.

“It is about not just having one person represent all First Nations peoples; it is that we make an intentional effort to have more women, more Indigenous people, more people of colour, so it’s not just one person that stands out as representing a whole group.”

Section 3: Barriers to and enablers of Indigenous leadership

Barriers

To further understand the experiences of Indigenous leaders, we asked participants about the barriers they faced or noticed within their careers. In this instance, a barrier refers to any obstacle or hindrance that has prevented or restricted an individual from achieving their professional goals or progressing within their careers. Barriers can arise from internal and external factors and can be in the form of educational limitations, discrimination, lack of necessary skills and limited access to resources.⁶⁵ Various barriers were identified by the participants based on their experiences including: lack of representation, racial discrimination and unconscious bias, gender bias, stereotyping, structural barriers, and lack of EDI efforts.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION

There is noticeable concern among participants regarding the lack of representation of Indigenous Peoples in senior- or executive-level leadership roles. A report from Corporations Canada⁶⁶ found that Indigenous Peoples held only 0.2% of all senior management positions. Within organizations or corporate boards, a lack of diversity can affect the advancement of aspiring Indigenous leaders or perpetuate a cycle of non-diverse leaders. Several participants noted that candidates are often chosen for leadership positions based on who

shares characteristics with existing leaders, demonstrating a failure to prioritize promotions that would lead to more diverse senior-level representation. We must acknowledge and address these barriers to allow for more diverse characteristics and perspectives within leadership structures. When diverse candidates, specifically Indigenous Peoples, see leaders in their organizations who reflect their characteristics, they feel inspired and motivated to pursue career advancement.

“When a board is at least 50% female and there is diversity among those levels [senior leadership and executive leadership], that is really encouraging to see that and gives me hope.”

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Indigenous individuals mentioned feeling racially or ethnically discriminated against in the workplace. Research indicates that 54% of Indigenous Peoples experience serious or very serious racism in the workplace.⁶⁷ Several participants noted being passed over for leadership positions more often than non-Indigenous individuals, leading to feelings of inferiority and exclusion. When discussing racial discrimination, we must also examine unconscious biases, which are ingrained attitudes or stereotypes that form about specific racial or ethnic groups. From the insights gathered, unconscious biases seem to exist within the leadership of corporate Canada, playing a role in the lack of diversity within leadership and putting Indigenous Peoples at a disadvantage to being able to advance. One participant noted

that unconscious biases stem from colonial implications and negative assumptions of Indigenous Peoples, which creates barriers to success and can perpetuate racial discrimination.

“I’ve probably had to prove myself more than anybody else, more than somebody that is not Indigenous would have to.”

GENDER BIAS

Indigenous women face additional barriers due to intersectional biases perpetuated against women and Indigenous peoples. According to a recent survey of 98 non-Indigenous corporations across Canada, while corporations may be moving closer to gender parity, Indigenous women remain grossly under-represented with overall representation of less than 1% in board, executive and senior management pipeline roles (see Table 3).



TABLE 3

Snapshot of women's representation

Role	White Women (%)	Racialized Women (%)	Women With Disabilities (%)	2SLGBTQ+ Women (%)	Indigenous Women (%)
Board roles	34.2	6.7	0.9	0.4	0.3
Executive officers	29.2				
Senior management roles	41.9				
Pipeline to senior management roles	54.8				

Source: Prosperity Project. 2023 Annual Report Card.⁶⁸

Several women in the sample noted that they were not always taken as seriously as their men counterparts or may be held to higher standards. While many organizations are taking a stance to ensure gender parity, the responses collected regarding gender bias demonstrate that there are ongoing issues with the treatment of women in the workplace. These biases, such as the notion that leaders are typically white men, negatively influence the possibility of promotion for Indigenous women seeking to undertake leadership positions, causing feelings of inequality.

“A lot of women leaders are more approachable, inclusive and collaborative; that was something that was always held against me. I found people did not take you as seriously when you had a different approach [to leadership] and I did not want to change my approach to what corporate Canada viewed as leadership.”

STEREOTYPING

Indigenous employees can sometimes be stereotyped or “pigeonholed” into specific roles or Indigenous-related sectors. One participant stated that it was expected for Indigenous Peoples to be involved in a role within the company relating to Indigenous relations. Some feel as if they are chosen for a role strictly due to their identity and not seen for the value they can bring into other non-Indigenous focused roles. For these reasons, the abilities and qualifications of Indigenous individuals wanting to move into leadership roles often are not fully recognized, resulting in them not being considered for leadership positions where their Indigeneity is not a beneficial factor. Organizations must strive for Indigenous representation within all aspects of a company rather than assuming that all Indigenous employees unilaterally desire to contribute solely to Indigenous-related fields.

“The assumption that Indigenous professionals, whether you’re a lawyer, an accountant or a banker, there’s an assumption that because you’re Indigenous you must want to work in a space that serves Indigenous clients.”



Structural barriers, such as educational gaps and socio-economic disparities, **contribute to limited opportunities** for Indigenous individuals seeking access to leadership positions.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Structural barriers, such as educational gaps and socio-economic disparities, contribute to limited opportunities for Indigenous individuals seeking access to leadership positions.⁶⁹ Structural barriers are generally understood as the obstacles that affect a group disproportionately and perpetuate marginalization. In this case, the sample group we interviewed gave glimpses into the contributing factors of these disparities. While the lack of education, access to job training and Internet connectivity all hinder the achievements and advancement of Indigenous leaders, Indigenous Peoples who live in rural areas or on-reserve may face additional issues such as inadequate

educational facilities, substandard housing, and poor internet connectivity.

To understand how structural issues create significant challenges and profoundly affect future professional opportunities, we contextualize how limited educational facilities, housing and Internet connectivity is impacting Indigenous communities.

Education: Educational facilities on First Nations⁷⁰ reserves are chronically underfunded by the federal government.⁷¹ In 1996, the federal government imposed a 2% cap on national funding for all First Nations programs and services.⁷² While funding for on-reserve education is hindered, turning to the provincial system would strip Indigenous communities of autonomy over schooling. Funding and the need for higher levels of funding was indicated as the single most important issue within First Nations education.⁷³ There is an unfair gap between on- and off-reserve schools: on-reserve schools receive at least 30% less funding than schools under provincial jurisdiction.⁷⁴ Another issue facing education on reserve is the lack of secondary schools; nearly one-half (46%) of First Nations students do not have a high school on reserve, requiring them to leave their communities to pursue education.⁷⁵ Through enhanced access to education and increased funding, Indigenous individuals will have improved socio-economic outcomes and opportunities to pursue meaningful employment.

Connectivity: Regarding access to the Internet, this also poses a significant structural barrier that affects career and economic opportunities. Less than 43% of

households on reserve have access to high-speed internet.⁷⁶ This lack of connectivity creates a digital divide for First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, demonstrating a lack of prioritization in the adequate infrastructure required for Indigenous communities to have reliable Internet.⁷⁷ Proper connectivity will allow for access to online resources, job opportunities, remote work and professional development that can further career and advancement opportunities for Indigenous individuals, especially those situated on reserve.

Housing: Housing conditions and the lack of housing that exists for Indigenous communities is a national issue that can also have lasting effects on career and advancement opportunities. For context, 17.1% of Indigenous Peoples live in an overcrowded house, 16.4% of Indigenous Peoples live in a house that requires major

repairs, and 18.8% live in low-income households.⁷⁸ Living in overcrowded and substandard conditions can negatively affect mental and physical health and hinder finding and keeping stable employment.⁷⁹ Access to safe, affordable and adequate housing is critical to improving social outcomes, essential for reconciliation and will help Indigenous Peoples overcome challenges in career opportunities.⁸⁰

As mentioned by participants, existing knowledge gaps due to education levels hinder access to senior- or executive-level roles. Factors such as accessibility to post-secondary education, educational institutions rooted in colonialism and discrimination, or an inability to afford tuition often impede Indigenous people from pursuing ongoing education. Many senior or executive leadership positions value post-secondary or graduate education over lived experiences. One participant suggested that Indigenous candidates' lived experiences should be considered in addition to their educational merit when being hired by non-Indigenous organizations.

Equity, diversity and inclusion efforts

Interview responses with participants show that some non-Indigenous organizations are falling short in efforts to create equal opportunities within the workplace for Indigenous Peoples. Workplace cultures, recruitment, hiring and retention practices must change to foster EDI.⁸¹ One participant noted that Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups are often addressed in one overarching EDI initiative or policy.



This does not recognize the differences and inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples compared with those of other equity-deserving groups in Canada. As a result of this “one-size-fits-all” approach, the needs of Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups are not met. For example, Bell (BCE) survey data from 2023⁸² classifies only four equity-deserving groups: women, visible minorities, Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities (BCE terminology). Per the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous individuals have rights that are not allotted or recognized for other groups within Canada.⁸³ Grouping all equity-deserving peoples under one policy can lead to a dilution of rights and considerations for hiring Indigenous Peoples and limit gains that occur from diversification.

The findings highlight the need to address systemic barriers, challenge unconscious biases and promote diversity and inclusivity to create equal opportunities for Indigenous Peoples aspiring to



*One participant recommended creating **EDI policies that are Indigenous-specific** and recognize the inherent rights afforded to Indigenous Peoples as a **distinct equity-deserving group**.*

leadership roles. Advocating for increased Indigenous representation within Canadian corporations requires dismantling biases and discrimination that have perpetuated a lack of representation in high-level positions. This can be achieved by raising awareness about these biases and actively working to eliminate them when recruiting people from equity-deserving groups into leadership positions.⁸⁴ Allowing space for Indigenous leaders within non-Indigenous organizations may take organizational restructuring through collective efforts. One participant recommended creating EDI policies that are Indigenous-specific and recognize the inherent rights afforded to Indigenous Peoples as a distinct equity-deserving group. One way to achieve this is through a top-down approach, which includes implementing new strategies in human resources such as recruitment, hiring and retention, employee resource groups for Indigenous employees, diversity and inclusion training for management, and corporate cultural change by leaders. These changes will allow for more inclusive representation and help dismantle biases and discrimination that have perpetuated a lack of Indigenous representation in high-level positions.

Leadership and the barrier of child and elder care

Parenthood and other caregiving responsibilities can significantly affect one’s career advancement and experience in a leadership role. Women are most often affected by child care responsibilities as they shoulder a disproportionate share of family duties.⁸⁵ Balancing the demands of

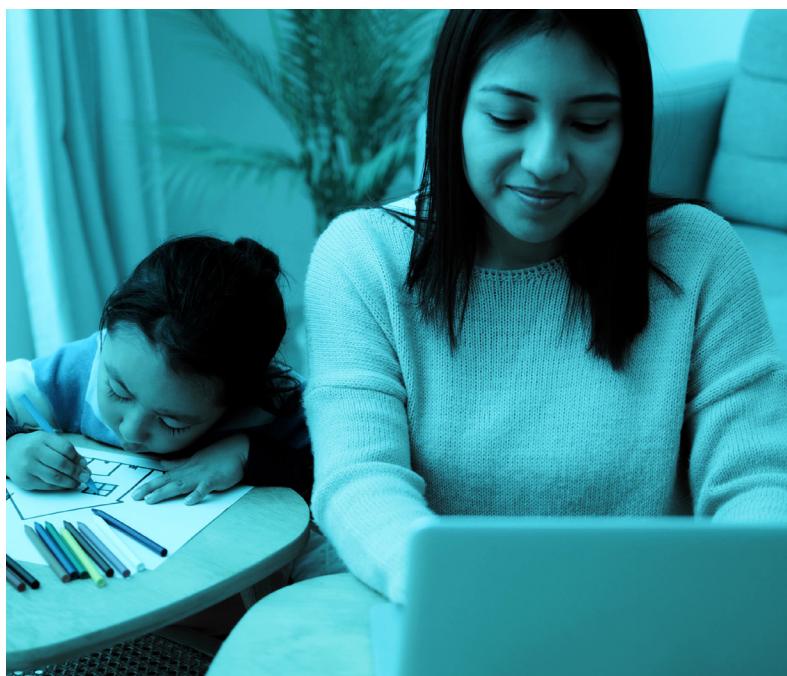
child care with professional aspirations is challenging and can affect career progression compared to individuals without these responsibilities. Women are nearly three times as likely as men not to be employed as a result of child care demands; additionally, despite increasing equality in the household, gendered expectations continue to contribute to labour market outcomes, ultimately affecting the career aspirations of working mothers.⁸⁶ While these challenges are not insurmountable, with many individuals actively balancing successful careers and parenthood, there are additional considerations specific to Indigenous leaders that could encourage advancement and promote a healthier work-life balance.

The challenges related to balancing child care and professional responsibilities can affect career advancement. When asked to share how caregiving duties have affected work experiences and the ability to access leadership roles, participants mentioned limited affordable and reliable child care options and unsupportive work environments.

SAFE, AFFORDABLE AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CHILD CARE

Indigenous leaders mentioned difficulties accessing safe and affordable child care due to high financial costs. Expanded child care options for Indigenous leaders would enable them to focus on professional duties and engage in professional development that would strengthen leadership capabilities.

Moreover, it would reassure them that their children are in a secure environment. Based on our conversations, we can infer that safe and culturally appropriate child care options are limited. Access to culturally appropriate and Indigenous-owned and operated child care options are crucial to prevent the recurrence of traumatic experiences faced by Indigenous children in “care.” However, finding information on the availability of these facilities can be challenging, suggesting that limited options exist. Policies like the National First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Framework advocate for early learning and child care systems rooted in Indigenous languages and cultures;⁸⁷ similar advocacy could ensure that culturally relevant child care is accessible to Indigenous leaders. Access to safe and appropriate child care empowers Indigenous leaders through self-determination while they pursue professional goals.



SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Participants highlighted the importance of having a supportive work environment that recognizes and accommodates employees' familial obligations. One respondent noted that their company was respectful and supportive of child care responsibilities. Although supportive environments exist, a few participants noted unsupportive work environments that could stagnate career growth or hinder personal matters such as parenthood. The insights collected reveal that discussing family matters is perceived positively for men leaders but often taken as a distraction from work for women leaders.⁸⁸ These unequal expectations can discourage women from disclosing their family obligations, disrupt the importance of family to an Indigenous person and affect professional advancement. Companies can strive to create a supportive work environment by establishing flexible work arrangements, including flexible hours, annual leave and the ability to work from home. Flexibility in the workplace is crucial for retaining working parents and those with caregiving responsibilities. It allows individuals the opportunity to strike a balance between personal and professional responsibilities, and can be especially beneficial for working women who want to pursue their career aspirations without sacrificing their family life.⁸⁹

Indigenous women in the sample emphasize the importance of their roles as both caregivers and leaders, which is consistent with their experiences where women have fulfilled both roles. In Indigenous culture, women are highly regarded and

held positions of leadership, often within a matrilineal community. However, colonization disrupted traditional matrilineal roles. The Indian Act deprived Indigenous women of many rights and excluded them from community governance.^{90,91} While some work environments may not provide an ideal work-life balance, especially for those who experience gender bias or unequal expectations, it is important to create spaces that allow leaders who are also caregivers to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. This will ensure that leaders do not have to prioritize one over the other, and can maintain a work-life balance within a supportive environment.

"The barriers I personally faced were mostly due to my role in my family being a single parent. That comes with a lot of responsibility. I might not necessarily be able to come in at a certain time, or I might have to leave after a certain time, and that hindered my career in a sense."

The personal and professional lives of Indigenous women are influenced by structures of oppression, explained by the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality looks at "the ways in which the social categories of gender, ability, age, race, sexuality, nationality and class symbiotically reinforce one another to produce marginalized subjects."⁹²

Although the barrier of child care is not exclusive to women, it can create conflict when trying to excel professionally and personally. This is especially true for Indigenous women who often face additional barriers and challenges in accessing child

care services and supports. Within many Indigenous cultures, great importance is placed on family. Through our conversations, we heard that the leaders also share this value but do not see it reflected in work environments. Those we interviewed demonstrate the profound challenge that arises when an Indigenous person wants to flourish in their career while also being involved in parenthood. It is important to acknowledge that, while the experiences mentioned may not be representative of all individuals, it is evident that Indigenous leaders require access to safe and affordable child care, as well as supportive work environments that allow them to be leaders and caregivers simultaneously.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

When participants were asked about barriers they were forced to overcome as they maneuvered through the corporate world, they provided a range of responses. Some Indigenous leaders suggested strategies for success, such as obtaining tangible credentials to become more desirable in the hiring process or developing intrapersonal skills to strengthen their resolve when faced with adversity. Some techniques participants cited as valuable in overcoming personal barriers include:

> **Practising hard work and determination:** Some participants mentioned that they often overcame barriers by working hard and putting in extra effort where their peers may not be as dedicated to doing so. Participants shared that hurdles to overcome included managing home

responsibilities while meeting work demands. For participants, in addition to working hard at the operational aspects of their jobs, taking time to make the necessary connections with other people in their industries could help advance their careers. While networking is considered important, some participants described that great effort was required to gain the trust and acceptance of other leaders in their industries and show their leadership capabilities. While some leaders may feel the need to go above and beyond to achieve their goals, the sustainability of this practice should be questioned as this extra effort is not required by their peers; situations like this can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction with work for Indigenous employees.

“I overcame the barriers by picking myself up and always preparing and looking forward and moving on, knowing that I cannot change everyone’s mind and accepting that I can make a difference somewhere else.”



*While some leaders may feel the need to go **above and beyond** to achieve their goals, the **sustainability of this practice** should be questioned as this extra effort is not required by their peers.*

> **Finding a fit that values your worth:** Some participants also mentioned that finding an organization that appreciated their talents was critical for personal and professional development. Several interviewees mentioned leaving their previous workplaces so that they could get promotions that better valued their qualifications and abilities.

“I have found opportunities that I might not have thought of in my career and I have also had barriers with colleagues who didn’t see the value of working with Indigenous communities and didn’t care about my business.”

“Having a voice in your mind that you’re different and one day I started being more honest with myself, it was liberating to stop pretending to be somebody else.”

> **Education and training:** Many participants credit academic learning and training courses as helping them hone and improve their skills. Training and education prepared participants for business endeavours and the barriers they might face by helping them maintain competitiveness by bolstering their business acumen.

A key aspect of this was dedicated communication coaching, along with the development of communication skills that occur in academic and workplace settings, which lays the groundwork for being able to express ideas more clearly and effectively advocating for oneself. It was clear from participants’ responses that, by pursuing higher education or entrepreneurship training programs, they were learning

effective operational techniques that would assist them with the barriers they might face in their professional careers.

Participants mentioned that simply attending high school or post-secondary education was already symbolic of overcoming a barrier. Some felt that, since their parents did not pursue formal education, they had already made their parents and their community proud by exposing themselves to opportunities that were not afforded to the previous generation.

“I did not have the time and money to do a four-year university program, so I see education as a major barrier as most leadership roles require four years of education.”

“I overcame other barriers at younger ages. Being able to navigate the world outside of my community was the biggest barrier. I knew I needed to find resources to help myself succeed, which often comes in the form of talking to people who have that experience to collect information that is helpful for career advancement.”

> **Being open-minded:** Some participants said keeping an open mind to opportunities that came their way was a key method in overcoming barriers. For some, changing fields or pursuing opportunities they would not have thought of was an effective strategy to mitigate barriers faced in an unfulfilling work environment. Others mentioned having to be open-minded when relying on other people with more authority



*Participants mentioned the challenges of learning **self-advocacy** during their careers as it did not align with the value of humility.*

in their organization to help overcome a certain barrier. This can come in the form of a superior giving recommendations on their behalf or advocating for their capability. Being open to having a mentor or sponsor when it may benefit career outcomes was another finding. Mentors can put their mentees in more demanding or challenging situations for their professional growth, while also being available for support.⁹³

“There have been times when I had to rely on people with more authority to help get over certain barriers, and there have been times when I have failed to do so.”

“Development, planning and mentorship could have helped in progressing my career quicker.”

> **Learning self-advocacy:** Participants said they had to learn how to advocate for themselves through formal and informal means. This happens formally via communication courses or training that allows the development of necessary skills to help them express themselves effectively. Some participants report

experiencing difficulties presenting their ideas appropriately in corporate settings, leading them to enrol in communication courses for assistance, which, in turn, improved their ability to advocate for themselves informally by learning from their mentors and asking others in their industry who could provide advice on how to maneuver in similar situations. Participants mentioned the challenges of learning self-advocacy during their careers as it did not align with the value of humility; they also noted the value of having a mentor who could help them develop this skill. The guiding value of humility recognizes that no one individual knows everything; we are constantly learning.⁹⁴ As it pertains to leadership, humility creates an internal barrier to advocating for oneself and the advancement of one's career.

Some participants mentioned having to work at growing into their outspokenness, which they said came with their experience, maturity and the desire to be successful.

“They are also not given chances and sometimes it is hard to advocate for yourself. So, I met with different women in leadership, and I have had to understand the barriers and how I can overcome them. I have also had to learn self-advocacy, which sometimes goes against what you’re taught as an Indigenous person.”

“Began to overcome barriers by educating others around me on what was wrong from right in terms of Indigenous Peoples and culture; at the same time, it is not my job to explain all Indigenous matters to others.”

Enablers

Most participants in our research have or had mentors that helped them with their career progression and professional development. As described by the participants, mentorship comes in many different forms. Whether formal or informal, mentorship is consistently cited as a valuable resource that can lay the foundation for long-term success and confidence in the workplace.⁹⁵ Below is an analysis of the key themes and trends that were identified from the qualitative data collected from interview participants.

MENTORSHIP AND TYPES OF MENTORS

Career mentors

Some participants noted having a mentor in their workplace who offered guidance on career advancement strategies. Typically, mentors within an organization hold senior roles and offer mentees their experience and insight to improve their contributions to the organization in their role. Participants mentioned various types of career mentors, including individuals at the level of vice-president, executive management, board of directors and with varying identities, including women, men, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The primary factor that led participants to select and establish a connection with a career mentor was not based upon Indigeneity, but because the mentor shared their time, knowledge, skills and experience to help them secure positive outcomes without expecting personal

gain. Career mentors are valuable as they provide specific guidance for a given job, industry, market or corporation. They use their experiences to guide and help their mentees grow their careers.⁹⁶ Our findings indicate that the healthiest and most fruitful mentor-mentee relationships are those that are organic and relationship-based, rather than rigid and formal. Creating a space where employees feel comfortable to express concerns and seek guidance from more tenured staff should be the goal of any company looking to provide a healthy work environment.

“I had a mentor [at a previous company]; he was wise and gave me advice on how to operate in environments with complex barriers. He has always drawn from experiences of people, and his mentorship helped a lot with my approach to my career, work and life.”

“I felt support from my manager, senior vice president and other colleagues around me who encouraged me. Mentorship gave me much-needed support and motivation.”

Community mentors

Participants cited community mentors as providing value and support on their journey in corporate settings. Examples of community mentors included Elders, local Indigenous leaders, family members and established members of the business community. In some cases, community mentors were directly related to the mentee, had ties to the same or nearby Indigenous community, or had the ability to provide advice on work or everyday life scenarios that might affect success at work.

Participants described this type of mentor as knowing them and their experiences more personally, which allowed them to provide a different, more nuanced style of guidance compared to what a colleague in the workplace might be able to offer. The perspectives, insights and knowledge harboured by community mentors afforded a connection with someone who could align a little more closely with their experiences.

“I don’t have a formal mentor, but I have had lots of informal mentors throughout my career. Most were people who were allies that saw something in me that I didn’t see and supported me to move to higher leadership roles.”

“I never had a mentor in the workplace. I had personal mentors who I attribute my success to. I learned to reach out to Indigenous family members as guides to reconnect to culture and find strength within that.”

Most participants had positive relationships with their mentors, and some have gone on to become mentors to other people who starting their careers. Participants mentioned that factors contributing to effective mentorship include the following:

- > Mentors have a deep understanding of their mentees and their mentees’ needs.
- > An organically grown relationship not created with the intention of gaining mentorship.
- > Communication of needs and wants between mentor and mentee.
- > A mentor who can give relevant yet

knowledgeable advice that contributes to the success of the mentee, especially in the area of working in challenging environments and overcoming barriers.

- > Patience, empathy and having the best interests of the mentee in mind when providing guidance.

Participants emphasized that mentorship is helpful for professional growth and career advancement. Establishing a connection with a mentor early in their careers helped propel them in the right direction from the outset. Several ways that mentors assisted them included providing valuable advice and support, advocating for the mentee, providing honest answers while having the mentee’s best interests in mind, leveraging their networks and providing new connections to the mentee, and teaching technical or social-emotional skills needed to succeed.

“I have had many mentors or people who have helped shape and guide my career. These mentors have been effective in advancing my career by being patient in helping me learn. These mentors have a caring element where they are very personal; these are people who I feel care for me and look out for me.”

One participant experienced a negative relationship with a mentor who showed blatant racism and discrimination. Although the relationship was not successful and extremely difficult for the mentee, it sparked the mentee to overcome oppressive situations through self-empowerment and education; the experience led them to where they are today.

Sponsors

Sponsorship is a tool that can aid in increased EDI related to leadership roles.⁹⁷ Sponsors can promote growth, provide access to opportunities and advocate for the career advancement of less-experienced individuals aiming to elevate their executive careers.⁹⁸ While sponsorship was not mentioned by participants, it is critical to note as a means of leveraging relationships to develop an individual's potential and advancement within the workplace. While mentorship is more common, for individuals seeking advancement, sponsorship could be another path.

Experiences that enabled leadership

KEY EXPERIENCES OF LEADERS

Examining what leaders consider to be key moments within their careers helps us to understand what has propelled them into leadership. By examining key moments, we can identify patterns and decision-making processes that can be used by or applied to other potential leaders within their careers. When the participants were asked to describe key moments or experiences that helped them find success, they shared the following:

> **Learning from failures and successes:** Several participants shared their experiences of how their successes and failures shaped their career trajectories. Successes provide leaders with confidence and the chance to prove their capabilities, while failures offer the

opportunity to learn and develop essential skills. A participant mentioned learning from mistakes and applying what was learned to new practices that mitigate future risks.

> **Importance of taking opportunities:** Many participants discussed how taking on new opportunities helped them advance. They highlighted key moments when they were given opportunities to take on leadership roles, work on high-profile projects or establish new entities. One individual mentioned how taking on an opportunity allowed them to gain clarity about what kind of leader they were, which they could then apply throughout the rest of their career.

> **Importance of connections and networking:** Forming meaningful connections and networking was mentioned by participants as a key moment. For many, this helped them find new opportunities and advance in their careers. Mentorship or various professional relationships can play a role in professional development and open doors for new opportunities.

> **Importance of being a stable foundation in times of crisis:** Some individuals discussed how they viewed crises as opportunities to provide leadership and be a stable foundation for their colleagues and clients. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of crisis for many, one participant saw the opportunity to provide stability within their organization, which exposed them to an expanded client base that they might not have had otherwise and ended up being the impetus for advancement later in their career.

- > **Self-advocacy:** In some instances, participants found career advancement by speaking up for themselves. They talked about recognizing their own skills, abilities and potential contributions to a company and advocating for themselves by identifying that further responsibilities or leadership were necessary to advance. One participant negotiated a large salary increase by demonstrating her abilities and worth to the organization.

In their interviews, some participants were unable to note a key moment; instead, they identified that their careers naturally progressed into leadership roles. Some faced difficult situations and learned from them, while others took advantage of opportunities to showcase their leadership skills. Others had to make tough decisions, such as leaving a company after a lengthy service or struggling to find the right balance between leadership and management. The responses also highlight the importance of making connections, having reliable mentors and learning from others. Finally, the data shows that success can come from being a stable foundation in times of crisis and providing guidance, which led some to advance into leadership roles. Many moments can propel an individual into a leadership role or have an influence on later advancements. While these are enablers, it is important to note that more must be done by people in positions of power to create more equitable environments for equity-deserving groups, because taking on new opportunities and the belief in one's capabilities are not always enough.

Section 4: Assets for aspiring leaders

The experiences of established Indigenous leaders throughout the Canadian corporate landscape can help to prepare the next generation of leaders while mitigating past challenges. Building on the feedback from participants on their journeys and to further understand what is essential advice for Indigenous individuals aspiring to senior or executive leadership roles, we asked participants what knowledge, skills or attributes they perceive as playing a role in their career journeys. Recurring keywords referenced by participants include the following:

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

This involves traits like hard work, vision, determination, drive and ambition. People who aspire to leadership roles need these traits so they can put in the work necessary to take them to the level at which they want to be. Out of 25 participants, six attributed their success to their interpersonal skills.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE

To find success, it is essential to understand the industry one's company operates in, how it operates and high-level intricacies.

CONFIDENCE

Confidence provides the foundation for building relationships, communicating effectively, showcasing capabilities and promoting one's achievements.

Additional skills that participants referenced as necessary to develop in preparation for more senior leadership roles included: education (undergraduate degrees, college degrees or master's degrees), speech therapy for refining communication skills, life and business coaching, Indigenous-focused leadership training and communication courses.

Advice for aspiring leaders

We asked participants what advice they would give to young Indigenous professionals aspiring to leadership roles. Some advice includes being curious and resilient, staying focused on goals and being receptive to change.

Participants emphasized the importance of seeking guidance from Indigenous community members for navigating the nuanced aspects of development influenced by Indigeneity in corporate systems.

Having a mentor who understands the unique challenges faced by Indigenous individuals in these environments was highly valued and seen as a key enabler to success. Additionally, some participants suggested that aspiring leaders, regardless of their mentor's identity, should be open to receiving advice from those who have experienced similar challenges and apply it to their journey for career advancement.

The creation of a network of career mentors can help navigate challenges related to career development or attaining professional goals.

“Coming from a small Indigenous community, there was a lot of anxiety for me being in many of these roles and workplaces. And you often feel out of place because there’s not too many

other folks that look like you and have the same lived experience that you do.”

Furthermore, aspiring Indigenous leaders should identify goals and work in the direction of those goals. As an aspiring leader, taking steps toward achieving goals may not have immediate results, but they will occur over time as skills and capabilities are developed. In addition, maintaining authenticity and remaining aligned with one's values or principles is essential for all Indigenous leaders as these values help them live in ways that promote balance and harmony.⁹⁹

Section 5: Equity, diversity and inclusion within organizations and on boards

Equity, diversity and inclusion within workplaces refers to the collective efforts made by organizations to create an environment that values and embraces individuals from different backgrounds or perspectives. These efforts, usually mandated by formal policies, are intended to ensure fair treatment, equal opportunities and a sense of belonging for all employees. As captured throughout this research, diversity, inclusivity, fair treatment and welcoming environments are necessary for Indigenous Peoples to thrive in non-Indigenous spaces. Inequalities have infiltrated workplaces, stemming from unconscious biases and systematic discrimination perpetrated through colonial institutions and historic injustices.

The implementation of EDI policies and strategies have created inclusive workplaces, increased Indigenous representation in leadership roles and inspired further diverse growth. From conversations with Indigenous leaders employed as human resource professionals, we explored hiring and retention practices, advice on how to increase Indigenous representation and techniques for creating spaces where Indigenous Peoples can contribute without barriers.

As EDI has become increasingly important in recent years, organizations have begun to reconfigure priorities and establish measures to combat the disadvantages Indigenous Peoples have faced. Policies may include initiatives such as a targeted recruitment program to increase the number of equity-deserving individuals who apply for jobs and promotions, targeted training and mentoring programs to improve opportunities for equity-deserving groups, preferential treatment in selection decisions (e.g., hiring and promotion), and diversity training to raise awareness about bias, inequality and strategies for change.¹⁰⁰

As part of this research, we gathered insights into the formal or informal EDI strategies that organizations have implemented.

Most participants noted that there was an existing strategy, although we encountered challenges in obtaining substantial insights regarding the effective elements within these strategies. Participants noted that tracking the progress of policies, developing Indigenous talent into leadership through customized training programs and creating welcoming environments that offered the necessary support were positive outcomes of these strategies.



*The implementation of **EDI policies and strategies** have created inclusive workplaces, increased Indigenous representation in leadership roles and inspired further diverse growth.*

As EDI requires a collective effort among all levels within a company, there are areas in which these strategies are lacking. Organizations may fail to implement EDI policies for various reasons including an underlying social inequality being left unaddressed and time and resources being wasted on ineffective work; a failure of implementation may lead to tensions and conflict between groups.¹⁰¹ To improve EDI, we must understand its inefficiencies from the perspective of those it is meant to serve. When participants were asked where EDI strategies are falling short, they noted the following:

- > All equity-deserving groups are being combined into one EDI strategy; companies sometimes do not consider the unique needs of Indigenous Peoples, which cannot be reflected in a single EDI policy.
- > EDI strategies need to be constantly improved as the company and diversity within the company grow. When a policy is created, it needs to be monitored and improved to ensure that it is working.

- > Having an EDI policy but not implementing the strategy or prioritizing the creation of diverse leadership, which is often tied to not meeting quotas or being unable to retain staff.

As mentioned by one participant, there is a balance between hiring diverse talent and being intentional in creating a welcoming and inclusive workplace that allows Indigenous employees to contribute without barriers. It is critical for companies to have an EDI policy; however, if the company does not have a policy or existing Indigenous representation, then they must work to create an environment where Indigenous employees and leaders can succeed.

Inclusive practices enabling leadership

Inclusive practices are the actions and initiatives implemented by organizations to create an environment where employees feel valued, respected and included. Inclusive workplaces are critical to the success of Indigenous leaders and aspiring leaders because they create an empowering environment where these leaders feel

like they have the support, resources and autonomy to succeed.¹⁰² By promoting and implementing inclusive practices, organizations can address barriers, biases and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples have faced in the workplace. When Indigenous employees feel safe and valued enough to contribute or provide their unique perspectives, they will be well-equipped to move into leadership or senior roles.

We asked participants to identify the inclusive practices prioritized within companies that have contributed to their success, and allowed them to advance as leaders and feel valued as an Indigenous individual. From the insights gathered, it is evident that organizations are prioritizing initiatives that bring awareness and amplify Indigenous voices in the workplace. Recurring inclusive practices participants said serve as enablers include the following:

- > **EDI policies and training within companies:** Participants identified EDI strategies as enablers to success. One participant cited EDI as the foundation of good employee relations and a healthy work environment. These strategies can be found throughout the company and at the board level.
- > **Diverse representation within leadership:** Participants identified having diverse leadership within the company as an inclusive practice. The representation of diversity in senior leadership allows for a welcoming environment where all individuals can see reflections of themselves. When leadership is made up of individuals from different backgrounds,



worldviews and perspectives, a stronger team is created. One participant noted that being an Indigenous person with an Indigenous supervisor contributed to their overall success and allowed them to see themselves in positions of leadership.

- > **Anti-racism and bias training:** Training that includes a focus on anti-racism, unconscious bias and due diligence were mentioned as key inclusive practices. This training helps to dismantle discriminatory behaviours and practices while allowing participants to learn about the history of discrimination and its effect on Indigenous and other equity-deserving groups.
- > **Affinity, community groups and informal networks:** Affinity or community groups, defined as groups of people linked by common interests or purpose, can be used as inclusive practices within organizations to cultivate relationships between junior and senior staff members. These groups allow for organic, informal mentorships to develop and can help with advancement in the workplace. One participant said these informal mentorships and networks provided support, especially for those with diverse backgrounds.
- > **Cultural awareness training and incorporating Indigenous cultural practices into the workplace:** Cultural awareness training helps to foster an understanding of Indigenous cultures and histories by providing non-Indigenous employees with knowledge of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples to inform their interactions. Some organizations are attempting to take workplace inclusivity one step further

by introducing Indigenous traditional knowledge, cultural practices and values. A participant stated that their company invited an Elder to the organization to conduct healing circles, which helped foster conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees.

- > **Reconciliation action plans:** A reconciliation action plan is a strategic framework that enables an organization to support and advance reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples through actionable commitments.¹⁰³ One participant stated that their company had a reconciliation action plan and a team that focused on inclusivity and promoting reconciliation-based initiatives company-wide. This shows a commitment to advancing reconciliation, fostering positive relationships and promoting positive outcomes for Indigenous employees.

The inclusive practices identified help bridge knowledge gaps, address unconscious biases and contribute to a culturally competent company. Non-Indigenous companies are recognizing the importance of a diverse workforce and a welcoming workplace culture and creating spaces where Indigenous leaders advance professionally.

Increasing representation in leadership and recommendations on where to improve from human resource professionals

The lack of Indigenous representation in leadership can be attributed to an inadequate effort put into creating programs,

providing training and offering supports that bolster Indigenous employees and contribute to their long-term career advancement.¹⁰⁴

Participants were asked how organizations can work to increase Indigenous representation in senior leadership roles. The following factors were noted:

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

There is a need to change perceptions of Indigenous Peoples in the workplace and challenge biases.

OUTREACH TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Companies should engage with Indigenous communities and be transparent about the desire to foster inclusivity and embrace diversity to build trusting relationships.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Companies should make intentional efforts in recruitment and offer an inclusive, supportive workplace to retain and nurture Indigenous talent.

CREATION OF PURPOSEFUL MENTORSHIP

Indigenous talent with leadership potential can be paired with senior executives who can provide guidance, mentorship and support to develop the necessary leadership qualities.

In discussions with Indigenous human resource leaders who could give insights into what companies are doing to increase Indigenous representation, they noted that it is valuable to implement an Indigenous workforce development strategy. This workforce strategy begins with intentional Indigenous hiring strategies and works to aid career progression for those looking to move into leadership positions. While working to develop the professional abilities of Indigenous individuals, other supports should be offered, such as employee resource groups, internal diversity training and leadership training.

“To increase the representation of Indigenous Peoples in leadership positions is to continue to support, uplift and mentor those that want to move into leadership roles; even though they may not have all the necessary requirements, there can be supports in organizations to help achieve those requirements and move into leadership roles.”

“They should nurture Indigenous talents in their organizations and build a structure where Indigenous Peoples can succeed.”

“If you are going to make a real effort you must do it with the authentic voices of Indigenous Peoples.”

Section 6: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on leadership, diversity and career advancement

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individual careers and the overall workplace experience. Pandemic lockdowns led to major disruptions among nearly all industries and created the need for remote workplace models. The shift to remote workplaces was necessary for many organizations and transformed the way people work. A study from the Environics Institute¹⁰⁵ highlighted the major shift to remote work was significant, as in early 2022 almost one in two employed Canadians worked from home at least one day per week. Those who worked from home—especially parents—reported positive experiences. However, there remains an overall concern about the effect of remote work on young workers, workers with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰⁶

We asked participants to describe how the pandemic affected their workplace experience. Participants detailed the challenges and benefits of remote work.

One of the benefits cited was increased candidate pools for employment opportunities because individuals living in remote or rural areas had access to open positions that previously required relocation to attend a physical workplace. In this context, remote work allowed Indigenous individuals to remain within their local communities, thus promoting a better work-life balance.

However, there still are challenges attributed to remote work as highlighted by participants. Factors included isolation or lack of contact, difficulties adjusting to new roles, decreased establishment of meaningful relationships with peers or senior colleagues, and issues related to digital infrastructure capacity. We infer that these factors could affect career advancement by limiting access to leadership and mentor opportunities. One participant noted that aspiring leaders can often make connections within the organization that would help them advance; however, this can be hindered by remote work. We conclude that it may be too early to determine the long-term effects of remote work and the pandemic on leadership and advancement as participants were unable to provide tangible data relating to this.

Conclusion

This report explores Indigenous leadership and inclusive workplaces. During our investigation, we identified a significant imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership. Although substantial imbalances exist within workplaces for Indigenous Peoples and other equity-deserving groups, there is an opportunity for companies and individuals to mitigate these by creating more space for Indigenous traditional values and ways of knowing. When understood and promoted appropriately, Indigenous knowledge and teachings can be harnessed to create social, cultural and economic balance. This project sheds light on teachings that can bridge the gaps and create balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, workplaces and individuals by providing a platform for Indigenous leaders to share their experiences. Understanding the complex relations between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous settlers is especially important as society makes efforts to progress toward meaningful reconciliation. This report demonstrates how Indigenous Peoples understand and embody leadership while also detailing the intricacies of the process along the way.

While a new generation of Canadian leaders are working toward fostering more supportive relationships in the pursuit of

lasting reconciliation, more work is needed. Perspectives are shifting, and there is a burgeoning allure of Indigenous teachings filling the gaps in Western knowledge and leadership styles. Current leaders are seeking strategies for increased engagement, inclusivity, respect, empathy and kindness, which demonstrates a shift from when leaders possessed vested authority, did not seek varying perspectives and were rigid. As heard from conversations with Indigenous leaders, characteristics related to those of the Seven Grandfather Teachings are becoming more valued and reflected in corporate leadership structures. By developing a comprehensive and holistic approach to leadership and employment, companies and leaders can create a workplace that is more ethical, empathic and sustainable. Such an environment can lead to enhanced employee engagement and an atmosphere that prioritizes employees' balance and well-being mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

To see lasting change, efforts and resources must be dedicated to recognizing and upholding the value of Indigenous Peoples as leaders and corporate contributors. This is a small but important step toward achieving meaningful reconciliation in governments, workplaces and broader society.

Recommendations

For individuals

- 1 Educate yourself and those around you to challenge implicit biases and build awareness of privilege.
- 2 Amplify Indigenous voices so they can identify the supports required; localization ensures that supports, policies and programs are created by and for Indigenous Peoples.
- 3 Advocate and raise awareness of the importance of diverse representation and inclusion of equity-deserving groups, especially Indigenous Peoples.
- 4 Take actions to further the interests of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

For organizations

- 1 Develop collaboration-based resources and policies with Indigenous groups. Organizations should recognize the importance of shared values of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to build upon resources and policies.
- 2 Establish Indigenous-specific EDI policies led by Indigenous Peoples.
- 3 Rethink entry requirements for board selection to be more considerate of the socio-economic and systemic barriers faced by Indigenous Peoples, which are largely tied to Canada's history of exclusion from these leadership and economic opportunities.

- 4** Organizations should create advisory councils to work alongside a board of directors.
- 5** Embrace transparent inclusive hiring and recruitment strategies that foster diversity within the workforce.
- 6** Commit to long-term professional development and leadership training for Indigenous recruits.
- 7** Promote continual and mandatory diversity and inclusion training for all employees, specifically unconscious bias training to address existing biases affecting marginalized groups. Unconscious bias training makes participants aware of underlying biases to eliminate discriminatory behaviours through racial and gendered perspectives. In addition, Indigenous cultural awareness training should be held regularly to ensure an accurate understanding of Indigenous cultures, how to work with Indigenous Peoples and how to advocate appropriately.
- 8** Create supports that prioritize and reflect a “by Indigenous, for Indigenous” approach to leadership.
- 9** Prioritize the development of board readiness training programs that respect and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing; embracing these diverse perspectives contributes to cultural competency and inclusive leadership.
- 10** Measure progress: What is measured gets done. Organizations must establish metrics that capture progress toward advancing Indigenous inclusion and leadership, and monitor, update and take action on the metrics. For example, organizations should sign up for the Government of Canada’s 50 – 30 Challenge. The voluntary code encourages organizations to achieve 50% gender parity and 30% representation of equity-deserving groups on Canadian boards and/or in senior management. Adhering to metrics such as these can help organizations maintain accountability.
- 11** Commit to Indigenous reconciliation plans: Following the Government of Canada’s commitment to achieving reconciliation, organizations need to affirm their pledge to support the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Each organization should draft an Indigenous reconciliation plan using the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s 94 Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples framework for reconciliation to detail how they will contribute to reconciliation.
- 12** Engage in programs like Progressive Aboriginal Relations (PAR). Offered by CCAB, PAR is a certification program for successful and sustainable Indigenous relations within an organization. Organizations certified through PAR promote and advocate for advancing the prosperity of Indigenous communities and the Indigenous economy.

For governments

- 1** Educate yourself and those around you to challenge implicit biases and build awareness of privilege.
- 2** Provide additional funding for safe, affordable and culturally appropriate child care and Elder care systems for Indigenous organizations.
- 3** Introduce measures to track the representation of Indigenous leaders to inform policymaking and ensure inclusivity.
- 4** Tailor policies to support substantive Indigenous inclusion on boards and in C-suite positions.
- 5** Governments should follow Nunavut's example and establish associate deputy minister positions, where Indigenous public servants can shadow deputy ministers for several years in a mentorship capacity.
- 6** Governments should require the development and promotion of an Indigenous analysis system on par with the gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) model to consider the intersecting needs of Indigenous Peoples for leadership opportunities and within procurement and funding applications. Employing an intersectional lens leads to a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous leaders, particularly Indigenous women leaders, including their barriers and successes.

Appendix A: Approved Interview Protocol Form: Questionnaire

Career and leadership trajectory questions

1. Please tell me about your current role in your organization.
2. Do you serve on any boards?
3. Can you tell me about how you got to the role you are in today? What was your path to this role?
4. What knowledge, skills and personal attributes played a role in your success?
5. How did you develop the knowledge, skills and attributes that have contributed to your success to date, including training to help you attain your current role? Were these forms of development or training helpful in obtaining your current role, and if yes, what was most helpful?
6. How did you first find out about the position that you currently hold? Was it advertised? Did you seek it out? Did others encourage you to apply?
7. What roles do you aspire to currently (whether corporate or on boards)? How are you preparing to advance in your career or to secure board positions?
8. In your role as a leader, do you feel like you belong? How does your identity (e.g., as a woman, a racialized woman, 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous person) affect how you are viewed as a leader, if at all?
9. What do you see as the characteristics of a leader? Who do you admire as a leader?
10. Research suggests that images of leadership are highly cultural and gendered. That is, that the characteristics that are valued in leaders and leadership are often those associated with white men. Has your experience been shaped by these stereotypes?
11. What is the difference, if any, between your leadership style and the “ideal” leader in corporate Canada?
12. What inclusive practices can you identify, if any, in your company, that contribute to your success as a leader? How about in your board work? Please provide specific examples.

Barriers

1. Have you experienced or observed barriers to women, Indigenous peoples, racialized or Black people, persons with disabilities or those who are 2SLGBTQ+ aspiring to leadership roles? How are different groups treated?
2. What barriers, if any, have you personally faced in your journey to becoming a leader?
3. Do you have or have you had caregiving duties or other similar personal commitments? Have these affected your experience at work and access to leadership roles? Please give specific examples of responsibilities and how you have seen these affecting your access to senior leadership roles.

Enablers

1. Did or do you have a mentor who supported you in obtaining your current role? Or a sponsor? Or a role model? How important was this to your success?
2. What were some of the key moments, or experiences, that helped to propel you to your current leadership role? What about relationships?

Skills for aspiring leaders

1. What knowledge and skills or attributes do you think have made you successful, including in your current role as a senior leader?
2. How did you develop these skills, knowledge and attributes?
3. What knowledge or skills or attributes are you currently working on to develop your leadership skills, if any? How and why?

Organizational governance, leadership and strategy (asked of human resources [HR] expert participants only)

1. How does your organization promote equity, diversity and inclusion?
2. Is equity, diversity and inclusion part of your organization's governance strategy and structure? Part of your organization's mission? Please explain.
3. How would you describe the diversity of senior and executive leadership and the board at your organization?
4. Does your organization have out members of Indigenous communities in senior leadership positions and/or on the board of directors?
5. How does recruitment to the senior leadership team and board typically happen?

Recruitment, selection, retention and promotion (asked of HR expert participants only)

1. Does your organization have a strategy to recruit Indigenous individuals...
 - a) Across the organization
 - b) At the leadership level
 - c) What does this strategy include?
2. How do employees advance at your organization? What supports are available to employees as they look to advance to the leadership level?
3. How does your organization advance Indigenous employees in particular? Does your organization have a targeted strategy in this area?

Equity, diversity and inclusion (asked of HR expert participants only)

1. How does your organization work to provide a welcoming, inclusive and culturally safe environment for Indigenous individuals? Does your organization have policies to ensure this?
2. Do managers and employees receive specialized training on equity, diversity and inclusion, or cultural awareness training?

Skills for organizations to improve diversity and inclusion of their boardrooms and C-suite

1. Does your organization have a formal EDI strategy? What works or does not work in your view in terms of developing Indigenous people in leadership roles, within that strategy or in your experience is lacking from that strategy?
2. What else could organizations do to increase representation of women/2SLGBTQ+/ Indigenous Peoples in senior leadership roles and/or on boards?
3. In your opinion and experience, how has a diverse composition of the board influenced how the board operates?
4. How are new board members selected and onboarded?

Additional questions: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way your organization views workplace diversity and inclusion as it is related to your identity as a woman/2SLGBTQ+ person/Indigenous person?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your workplace experience?

Appendix B: Programs for Boards and Leadership

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
University of Alberta	The Indigenous Leadership Program is a program for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students that seeks to strengthen leadership processes in alignment with Indigenous world views. Through workshops, speaker events, exercises and panels, the program is approached from an ethic of kinship to discuss topics of leadership, such as self-understanding, conflict management and community empowerment.	No	<u>University of Alberta Indigenous leadership program</u>
University of Victoria	The University of Victoria offers various management and leadership programs, including Advancing Indigenous Management, BCAAFC Management Training Academy, Haida Manger Development Program, 2014 Inaugural Canadian Aboriginal Management Program, Splatsin Indigenous Management Program and Nisga'a Camp.	No	<u>University of Victoria management and leadership programs</u>
Aboriginal Financial Officers Association (AFOA) Canada	AFOA offers a certified Indigenous leadership program that is designed to set high quality competency standards and provide the learning opportunities that will enable elected leaders working in Indigenous communities to gain the knowledge and skills required to enhance their leadership roles in serving their communities.	Yes	<u>AFOA certified Indigenous leadership program</u>

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
Women in Leadership Circle	<p>Women in Leadership Circle has been awarded a contract with the Government of Canada for a project called the Indigenous Leadership Circle, which is being led by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women to explore the barriers, create tools and showcase best practices to help place and support Indigenous women in senior management and board positions. They showcase best practices for stakeholders on how to address barriers and enable employers to engage more Indigenous women in leadership opportunities. Women in Leadership Circle is passionate about being in service to Indigenous women by listening, hearing and providing these sectors the knowledge to target inequities in their practices so they may transform workspaces.</p>	No	Women in Leadership Circle
Fora (formerly G(irls)20)	<p>Fora is a centre of excellence that focuses on investing in young changemakers experiencing gender-based discrimination and creating more inclusive and equitable decision-making spaces. Through renowned leadership, advocacy and community-building programs, they help young trailblazers gain new skills, confidence, supportive networks and opportunities to build gender equity movements, advance in their career trajectories and change the status quo. For a offers a board training program that aims to build more equitable and inclusive boardrooms across Canada by training and placing emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds at the board table.</p>	No	Fora network programs
Amautiit Nunavut Inuit Women's Association	<p>The Amautiit Nunavut Inuit Women's Association is a voice for Inuit women who seek to advance political empowerment for Inuit women in all spheres of life. The organization seeks to promote Inuit women in leadership roles, address challenges limiting equity, facilitate economic empowerment and create programs to address the intergenerational impacts of colonization and ongoing inequities.</p>	No	Amautiit Nunavut Inuit Women's Association

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
PowHERhouse	<p>PowHERhouse is a house of global leaders for social impact, building strong women who lead and amplify their media story to forever change the narrative of their collective potential. They provide PowHERhouse Women's Leadership Accelerator, which offers women-focused, wisdom-based leadership activation and amplification through training and development centred around Indigenous wisdom; and PowHERhouse Impact Media Group, which focuses on impact media production, brokering financial investment and partner relationships between impact champions, social impact and innovation investors, and leading purpose-driven brands.</p>	No	PowHERhouse Impact Network
Pestun Consulting Inc.	<p>Pestun Consulting Inc. is a Métis-owned, purpose-driven consulting company that focuses on gender equality and closing the entrepreneurial gender gap. It works with all levels of government, industry and civil society to create programs that promote the enhancement of women's economic empowerment through leadership and entrepreneurship.</p>	No	Pestun Consulting Inc.
Achieve Centre for Leadership and Workplace Performance	<p>Achieve Centre provides in-person and online training, consulting, books and free resources in the areas of leadership, workplace culture, conflict and communication. Achieve Centre exists to provide exceptional professional development to better people's lives. Its services are geared toward a wide range of people and organizations who wish to develop skills in leadership, conflict management, communication and workplace performance.</p>	No	Achieve Centre

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
Manitoba Moon Voices Inc.	<p>Manitoba Moon Voices Inc. (MMVI) is a non-profit organization supporting leadership and advancement for and by Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in Manitoba. The organization is building strong connections to support a collaborative voice and empower each other: sharing and promoting knowledge and resources through positive actions and self-determination, while incorporating ancestral practices. It offers an Indigenous Skills and Employment Training program to help Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals fully participate in economic opportunities by supporting education and skills training that can help them achieve economic independence.</p>	No	Manitoba Moon Voices
Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity	<p>Indigenous leadership and management programs at Banff Centre provide leaders an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how to establish a strategic direction for their communities and organizations, implement that plan through focused effort and measure performance. Leaders also learn the knowledge and skills necessary to run effective organizations and build communities with sustainable economies. With investment in their professional development, community leaders will have additional knowledge and tools to achieve incredible change and growth.</p>	No	Banff Centre programs
Institute of Corporate Directors	<p>The Institute of Corporate Directors (ICD) is the voice of Canadian directors and their boards. As a non-profit, member-based organization, ICD delivers best in class governance education, thought leadership resources and opportunities for members to network within the director community.</p>	Yes	Institute of Corporate Directors

Leadership training organizations and consultant Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business members

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
Sacred Cow Company Inc.	Sacred Cow Company Inc. is a behavioural consulting company that specializes in organizational change leadership development, safety culture and operational excellence services. The organization takes leaders to a new level of performance that increases accountability, employee engagement and measurable results, and transfers these skills to teams for sustainability.	Member	<u>Sacred Cow Company Inc.</u>
Talent Transformation Group Inc.	The Talent Transformation Group exists to be activators of individual and organizational potential. The talent management practice of the organization supports clients with workforce planning, early career talent initiatives, performance management, leadership development, executive development and succession planning.	Certified Aboriginal business member	<u>Talent Transformation Group Inc.</u>
Schulich ExecEd at York University	Schulich ExecEd's mission is to give working professionals of all career levels the skills, tools and confidence to achieve goals. It provides educational programs, including mini-MBA and master's certificates, to enhance career advancement and leadership development.	Member	<u>Schulich ExecEd</u>
First Nations Executive Education	First Nations Executive Education offers customized, high-level programs designed to equip the skills of First Nations businesses and executive leaders by combining traditional knowledge with management practices. The programs aim to develop the skills of elected officials, business executives and managers.	Member	<u>First Nations Executive Education</u>
Coursetter Training Inc.	Coursetter is a professional development company focused on clients' success by offering training programs and resources.	Certified Aboriginal Business Member	<u>Coursetter</u>

Organization Name	Description	CCAB Membership	Organization Link
Gardiner Centre Memorial University	Gardiner Centre is the professional development arm of Memorial University's business faculty that connects organizations and individuals with learning experiences that advance leadership and business excellence. It offers practical and engaging courses and certificate programs to simulate growth.	Member	https://www.mun.ca/gardinercentre/
Tataga	Tataga was created to bridge the traditional and contemporary worlds while supporting organizations and businesses in responding to Call to Action #92 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to help all members of society help Indigenous Peoples be and feel included at all levels of organizations.	Certified Aboriginal Business Member	Tataga
Indigenous Professionals Association of Canada	Indigenous Professionals Association of Canada is dedicated to advancing Indigenous leadership in the private, public and social sectors through professional skill building, network development and recognition of excellence. It also offers a network accelerator program that connects individuals with leadership circles.	Member	Indigenous Professionals Association of Canada
Karesa Consulting Ltd.	Karesa Consulting focusses on enabling and empowering the next generation of leaders. Through planning and execution Karesa helps individuals become the leaders they desire to be through leadership development.	Certified Aboriginal Business Member	Karesa Consulting
Indigenous Works	Indigenous Works focuses on Indigenous employment and human resource development. It offers a unique set of perspectives and cultural understandings that provide a bridge between employer and Indigenous realities. Programs and services include a leadership circle membership program, a navigating employment program, and diversity and inclusion programs.	Certified Aboriginal Business Member	Indigenous Works programs
Institute of Corporate Directors	The Institute of Corporate Directors represents Canadian directors and boards across the for-profit, non-profit and crown sectors. The organization fosters sharing of knowledge and wisdom through education, professional development services and thought leadership.	Member	Institute of Corporate Directors

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