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Author: Itoah Scott-Enns

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Reconciliation in Philanthropy: Learning By Doing

By Itoah Scott-Enns

In Dene culture, preparing fish requires careful and acquired skills with a knife. I watched an elder a few times before picking up the knife to try myself. I hesitated, but the elder told me “you just have to do it, it’s the only way to learn.” I was embarrassed when I mistakenly cut through the fish’s bladder. The elder chuckled and encouraged me to keep going. After, she showed me again where to put the knife to avoid puncturing organs. You can watch an expert do it a thousand times, but until you try yourself you will never know how it feels to let the bones guide your knife. You learn and make mistakes, but you trust the elders to correct and encourage you. Dene learn and educate through a very hands-on approach of listening, watching, and doing.

While Canada journeys through its 150th year, more than 90 foundations have signed the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada’s Declaration of Action to demonstrate commitment to reconciliation. Funders are adopting values of respect, reciprocity, relationship, and responsibility to improve understanding and relations with Indigenous communities. As an Indigenous person working in philanthropy, I am always keen to see what these values look like in practice. While the ongoing dialogue and commitments to change are positive, they must be followed by action. Funders keen to support reconciliation tell me it also paralyzes them. The fear and anxiety of doing it “wrong” is holding them back from acting.

Allocating more funds towards Indigenous causes is critical. However, as much as we aim to demonstrate respect and reciprocity, traditional grantmaking reflects paternalistic power dynamics that do not facilitate true reciprocal relationships between equal partners. Indigenous organizations must ask for money and foundations hold the power to grant it – or not. I want us to be honest in the fact that no matter what feel-good version we tell ourselves, that we value grantees as equal partners. Indigenous grantees are ever aware of who makes the decisions for resources they desperately need, and it is not them. We will be held back from leading the necessary change if we cannot accept this truth first.

To be more inclusive and improve relations with Indigenous communities, we must take a critical look at our own policies and processes and how that dictates our relationships with Indigenous organizations. Tremendous innovation exists within Indigenous communities and yet accessing resources remains a key obstacle despite the strong and diverse skills they hold. Learning to network with funders,

philanthropic speak, and to effectively communicate the impact of holistic designed programs within our neatly categorized boxes may not be the most efficient and effective way for organizations to tell their story and the impact of their work. Application and reporting policies could be more inclusive and create the space for Indigenous partners to determine what strengths and assets empower their organizations and what methods and approaches best tell their stories. Committing to supporting their self-determination is the nation-to-nation respect that should characterize reconciliation across all sectors.

Reconciliation will require us to make space for the power of Indigenous leaders and communities within philanthropy. To advance our collective journey to reconciliation, they need to be included in the decision-making over funding priorities and the governance of grantmaking processes. The Tides Canada Northern Manitoba Food, Culture and Community Fund and the NWT On the Land Collaborative Fund allow donors to pool funds for a grantmaking program governed by community advisors. Local people set the priorities for how the funds will be used and distributed, and grant partners are encouraged to identify their strengths in the administrative process. Philanthropy needs to build relationships that respect the leadership of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples and we need more Indigenous people engaged in the sector, in decision-making positions, on staff, and on boards, to ensure the Indigenous perspective is co-leading reconciliation in philanthropy.

We seek high impact to investment ratios from our grant partners to support our charitable missions, however, what Indigenous organizations really need is the support to simply exist. They need core and general support grants. The heavy emphasis we place on project and impact means that Indigenous organizations are operating over capacity, running more projects than they should, just so that they can accumulate enough administrative support to sustain staff and operations. We are asking Indigenous communities to lead world-changing social and environmental justice initiatives in some of the most economically challenged regions of Canada, as volunteers. Responsible grantmaking should recognize the greater balance needed between project and core support funds to achieve lasting impact. Identify strong organizations, support them unconditionally, and you will see great things happen. The support for the grassroots organizations led by next generation of leaders in the Canadian North such as Qanak, Our Voices, and Dene Nahjo, is proving that providing unconditional seed and general support funding will lead to positive community and cultural impact.

At the international level in the Arctic, the Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council recently launched the Algu Fund. Indigenous peoples from across all Arctic states collaborated to develop their own Indigenous-led foundation, so that they could be self-determining and no longer struggle with year-to-year, unstable, and unpredictable core funding.

Reconciliation will not happen overnight, but philanthropy must push the boundaries and start acting if we are going to make real progress. We might make mistakes as we evolve, but we need to trust in the strength of our relationships with Indigenous partners. If the trust and respect is there, they will let us know when we need to realign ourselves. Dialogue alone will not help us to get our hands dirty: clean a fish and experience the education and learning that can only happen by doing. Masicho.