

CEO Global Network

Building a Stronger Economy Together

“People are opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity because they fear looking wrong, saying something wrong, or being wrong. Choosing our own comfort over hard conversations is the epitome of privilege, and it corrodes trust and moves us away from meaningful and lasting change.”

— Brené Brown

Tabatha Bull

[Tabatha Bull](#) is the President and CEO of the [Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business](#). Tabatha, an Anishnaabe Kwe from Nipissing First Nation, has a Bachelor of Science, Electrical Engineering, from the University of Waterloo. She informs Canada’s energy sector by participating on the boards of Ontario’s electricity system operator IESO, the Positive Energy Advisory Council, the MARS Energy Advisory Council, and the C.D. Howe Institute’s Energy Policy program. In addition to being a Board Member on Wigwamen Incorporated, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, and Young People’s Theater, Tabatha is a WE Empower Canada Advisory Board Member with UN Women. When not working to help rebuild and strengthen the path towards reconciliation and a prosperous Indigenous economy to benefit all Canadians, Tabatha can often be found in baseball diamonds, hockey rinks, and lacrosse fields with her two sons.

Reconciliation Through The Economy

Sharing the quote above from Brené Brown, Tabatha began by emphasizing that, too often, meaningful and gainful dialogue is thwarted by uncertainty and fear—uncertainty about what to say and what not to say, and fear over asking something inappropriate. It is precisely for this reason that education and engagement of the kind that Tabatha led on today’s CEO Global Network Roundtable is so critical.

What follows is a summary of Tabatha’s prepared remarks as well as the fruitful Q&A that took place afterwards.

In the first portion, Tabatha: delineates some of the best ways forward for leaders from companies of all sizes keen to *build a stronger economy together*; identifies key

opportunities to work with Indigenous organizations presently making huge impacts coast-to-coast-to-coast (such as the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business); and details ways in which corporate Canada can work towards [economic] reconciliation with First Nations businesses and talent.

Among those topics addressed in the Q&A: best next steps; how to get certified; company size requirements for the Progressive Aboriginal Relations program; *and more*.

Residential schools. Abuse. Mass graves. Children's remains. Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Usurped territories. Unpotable water. While the reality of these horrors have been known to those closest to them for a long time and ought never be forgotten, many Canadians have only recently begun to recognize the injustices and causes of the fault lines that cut through the heart of this country. That is to say, many are only now taking substantial steps—individually, collectively, and corporately—to make advancements towards reconciliation.

Though the road to reconciliation in Canada is long and far from easy, it is absolutely worthwhile and necessary. Business leaders have a big role to play in that regard. After all, no small part of the harm demanding remedy is / was economic.

In 1867, through the [Indian Act](#), Indigenous inherent economic rights were systematically and expressly stripped. From 1881 until as recent as 2014, the Indian Act contained a permit system, which controlled First Nations' abilities to sell products off of the reserve. That alone would be hugely detrimental in and of itself, but Tabatha noted further that, until 1951, Indigenous peoples were not considered 'Indians' under the Act if they obtained a post-secondary degree. Of course that meant that for an Indigenous person, becoming a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or any other papered professional meant their status would be stripped away and that they would have to leave their community. This bereaved First Nations communities of mentors and role models, and further denied them the opportunity for intergenerational wealth distribution.

For all of the reasons just mentioned and innumerable others, respectful economic partnerships are necessary to support the Indigenous economy, caltropped by historic injustices, and in doing so to bolster Canada as a whole.

Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business

The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) is a national nonprofit organization, founded in 1982 by pharmacist and Shoppers Drug Mart founder Murray Koffler, along with Maurice Strong, Paul Martin and Edward Bronfman. Its mission: **to foster sustainable business relationships between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, and businesses in Canada.**

While originally an initiative launched by corporate Canada, the CCAB now boasts as many small, medium, and large Indigenous businesses as non-Indigenous businesses. Its growth in terms of membership and enthusiasm is undeniable. At the end of 2019, the CCAB had 900 members. Today, it is pushing 1,750. Over 55% of its members are Indigenous businesses or entities, and many among the remainder are other recognizable names and brands. Many of the member organizations used to draw from the energy, natural resource, and financial sector, though now there is even greater diversity, with substantial uptake in the tech and tourism sectors.

A big reason behind the growth of the CCAB is that we find ourselves in an era of reconciliation, geared toward what Tabatha termed '*reconcili-action*'. The growing stakeholder desire for and pressure on companies to commit to good corporate citizenship is another key factor.

In 2017, Sodexo conducted an Indigenous business survey, the results of which were telling:

- 73% agreed that Indigenous businesses have much to offer the Canadian economy;
- 77% believe supporting strong Indigenous businesses is an important pathway to healing Canada's relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people;
- 80% recognize Indigenous businesses strengthen the country's social fabric; and
- 81% agree that Canadian corporations should include Indigenous-owned businesses in their supplier networks wherever possible.

Despite being effectively excluded from the Canadian economy for a long period of time, Indigenous peoples have persisted. That marked resilience can be seen, not just in the industrious businesses presently flourishing, but demographically.

Indigenous peoples are the youngest and fastest growing demographic in Canada. 44% of the Indigenous population is under 25. They are creating businesses at nine-times the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts. In fact, today there are close to 60,000 Indigenous businesses across Canada, represented in every sector, every province, and in every territory. Tabatha noted further that Indigenous businesses have been found to be three-times-more likely to introduce a new product or service, and twice as likely to introduce a new process or way of doing things. This innovative spirit is especially true amongst businesses led by Indigenous women.

The Indigenous population in Canada contributes close to \$32Bn annually to Canada's GDP, with the private sector contributing just over \$12Bn. The potential exists today for that first figure to grow to \$100Bn.

Referring to an in-depth study undertaken by [Indigenous Services Canada](#) demonstrating that Indigenous business in Canada can meet nearly 24% of the current federal government's spend, CCAB is pushing the feds to increase their procurement

spend to 5%, which would bring the Indigenous procurement close to \$1Bn. In August of 2020, CCAB joined the Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada in affirming just such a commitment: a great start, but nowhere close to constituting a satisfactory terminus.

This isn't new money, Tabatha emphasized. It's neither a new spend nor an increase on the tax base. Here, we're talking money that the government and corporate Canada is already spending on goods and services. The needed realignment of the current spend is a means to better empower Indigenous communities and to help close the socio-economic gap that persists.

CCAB: Key Programs

CCAB's key programs are: Progressive Aboriginal Relations (**PAR**); Certified Aboriginal Businesses (**CAB**); Tools & Financing for Aboriginal Business (**TFAB**); Research; and the Supply Change, which includes the Aboriginal Procurement Marketplace.

A key area of improvement that CCAB is focused on is the supply chain. There is intense mutual interest for Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses alike in improving and facilitating procurement opportunities, and this serves as one of the key elements of economic reconciliation.

To this end, Tabatha highlighted the Aboriginal Procurement Strategy, which is focused on identifying and exploring the opportunities and value of Aboriginal procurement relationships. Its multi-year strategy consists of five pillars:

- Recruiting leaders from the business community to serve as Aboriginal Procurement Champions (APC);
- Aboriginal Procurement Campaign—an ongoing national media campaign;
- Creating Canada's largest directory of Certified Aboriginal Businesses, which are independently certified as at least 51% Aboriginal owned and controlled;
- The Aboriginal Procurement Marketplace, an online portal that acts as a two-way directory between CAB companies and procurement representatives from the APC group; and
- Aboriginal Procurement Best Practices, a peer-to-peer sharing of how to make a difference.

Though only launched a few years ago, Tabatha noted that there are now close to 1,000 CABs.

All CAB companies gain a marketing profile that can be searched among CCAB's Aboriginal Procurement Champion companies when taking to the market on bids. Furthermore, each APC will provide an internal procurement representative, similarly identified in the Procurement Marketplace for CAB companies to reach out to.

Accordingly, mid-procurement opportunities, otherwise unavailable on conventional procurement platforms, can be posted such that Aboriginal businesses can connect.

Finally, there is PAR—the Progressive Aboriginal Relations program. This is the only corporate social responsibility program that focuses on Indigenous relations across your organization. Its four key pillars are: leadership actions; business development; community engagement; and employment. The focus, as you can see, is not singularly on recruiting and retaining top Indigenous talent, although that is a critical piece. Partnership opportunities, procurement from Indigenous businesses, and mentorship of Indigenous businesses also play an important function in PAR.

Tabatha cited the case of Uber, a recent PAR enrollee, as a good example of a company that, while looking to utilize Indigenous talent, is also seeking to make strides in the way of community engagement. For instance, recognizing the dangers facing Indigenous women, Uber could create impact in community relations by considering ways to ensure that Indigenous women have a safe ride home. Suffice it to say, this program aids organizations in looking at the relationships they can build with Indigenous communities and the positive impacts they can have together.

On the employment side of PAR's phased approach, recruitment plays an important part, but also addressed is cultural awareness training, DEI networking opportunities, and the matter of succession lines and advancement for Indigenous talent.

PAR also works with leaders to consider corporate obligations, their supply chains, their Indigenous inclusion strategies, and opportunities to work with other members in the program.

To date, PAR has approximately 150 corporations in the committed level, 36 corporations in the certified level, and over 200 organizations working towards getting involved. The program starts with a three-year commitment. In that time, you'd set your mandate as well as targets across your organization with the intention of working towards supporting Indigenous economic reconciliation and Indigenous inclusion in a way that accords with your corporate context and ability.

After three years in the commitment phase, Indigenous independent verifiers run an audit. They speak to your Indigenous employees, look at your procurement spend, reach out to the communities with which you are engaging, and dialogue with your executive team. On the basis of their findings, and with the goals you've set in mind, they will then recommend a certification to an independent Indigenous jury with a level of bronze, silver or gold.

Beyond this synergy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses, there are also individual actions that can be taken. Tabatha concluded by pointing out that, just as is the case with your business, there is power in your wallet; power in your purchasing ability, your vendor choices, and in your investments. Change doesn't necessarily

require a greater investment or a bigger spend, but rather a conscientious redirection towards Indigenous businesses, towards solidarity, and towards reconciliation.

Q&A

If there was one single call to action you'd like us to focus on straightaway—one top priority—what would it be?

Our biggest priority right now and the way that we think we can see the biggest impact is Indigenous procurement policies within corporations. That means setting targets around your spend. It also means having someone within your procurement team who's focused on building those relationships with Indigenous businesses. So much of business is about networks and who you know, so it's incredibly important to open those networks and build those relationships, especially with procurement in mind.

How does a company go about getting certified through the program?

First, you have to be a member of CAAB. Once you're a member, we have an incredible, passionate team ready to help you along the way to setting goals across your organization. On the basis of the goals you set and your performance, independent Indigenous verifiers will come in and determine which certification is in order.

How do we, as leaders and businesses, tap more into the Indigenous talent pool? And how can we do a better job fostering those relationships and skills earlier on in the process?

The key is to start early: to emphasize the career paths available to Indigenous youths while they are in high school and to support organizations like Indspire (that supports Indigenous education and scholarships). It is worth noting that scholarships serve as an excellent bridge to post-secondary education. Working with community organizations to look for gaps in the talent pipeline is another way to ensure Indigenous youths are making their way to those organizations. I think it advisable to patch corporate Canada into those conversations as well.

Is there a minimum size of company that should consider PAR?

We have just developed a PAR for small businesses that have fewer than fifty employees. The criteria are different for smaller businesses and the process is simpler.

What are some unconscious biases that might be holding leaders back that they can address and resolve? How might they resolve them?

When you leave a meeting, take a moment to think about who you really listened to. Consider how you comported yourself when they were speaking. Ensure, further, that everyone has [had] an opportunity to speak uninterrupted at the table. Ally-ship is as important as highlighting and correcting for unconscious biases.

Education is *absolutely essential* in combatting unconscious bias. As much as it is important to understand the history of our country, it is as if not far more important to understand your Indigenous colleagues better.

At CCAB, we have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, but together we did the [KAIROS Canada Blanket Exercise Workshop](#). It is an interactive activity that really takes you through the history of Canada and the history with Indigenous people. This exercise really helped us to grow together. It's not an easy exercise. It can be quite triggering both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but it is an incredible opportunity, serving also as cultural awareness training.

What is the best next / first step?

Look at your organization with an eye to understanding what role it is presently playing in supporting Indigenous businesses, and then figure how best you can get aligned and involved. Addressing cultural awareness on your team may be another good next step.

Recommended Reading

- [21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act](#) by Bob Joseph
- [Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City](#) by Tanya Talaga
- [From the Ashes: My Story of Being Indigenous, Homeless, and Finding My Way](#) by Jesse Thistle