

conversation with Kelly Lendsay



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Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has become a critically important consideration for organizations today. But when it comes to DEI, where does an organization start, and how can it move from intention to action? Kelly Lendsay, president and CEO of Indigenous Works in Saskatchewan, recently discussed practical tips for organizations on their DEI journey with Alyssa Hodder, Director of Education and Outreach—Canada at the International Foundation.

DEI has become an important focus for organizations and employers in recent years. What's driving that shift in perspective?

There are a few factors driving the DEI agenda. Looking across the board, DEI positions didn't even exist ten years ago. Today, we have lots of presidents of DEI. The shift is there; it's real.

Companies are addressing the changing labour force; they are addressing diversity in the workplace. And it's not just about immigrants: there is the LGBTQ+ community, the Indigenous community, the disabled community . . . many different sectors and components of a very complex labour market.

Inclusion is really about the engagement drivers. How productive are people in the workplace? How do they feel included? How do they relate with their supervisors, their teams, the mission, the mandate?

And, of course, this is nothing new. Productivity is about engagement. Companies that can create highly engaged employees do better in terms of their products, their processes and their stock price. So, there is a business case for inclusion.

The other thing that I'm starting to see, in terms of equity, is that every week, there's news around race relations in this country. We see this overt racism, and people are starting to say, that's not the type of society, that's not the type of town I grew up in, here in Canada. We're starting to see people saying, we need to go back to enriching and embracing the values of an equitable, diverse and inclusive society.

The other interesting feature about DEI is environmental, social and governance (ESG). Every board is talking about it, it's top of mind and there's an interface between the two.

Finally, looking at societal issues more broadly, such as the unmarked gravesite discoveries at a growing number of residential schools, murdered and missing Indigenous women, George Floyd, Rodney King—and, more recently, the horrific stabbing attacks and deaths at the James Smith Cree Nation and the nearby village of Weldon—people are starting to ask hard questions. Why are these things happening? Where is society's response? Where's my employer's response? Where's my personal response? All these factors are driving the growing DEI agenda.

What can employers and organizations do to create a more inclusive environment for Indigenous peoples?

The most successful organizations have developed their knowledge capital by creating strategies and practices that were implemented and measured.

Organizations can start by simply becoming more knowledgeable. And it's not just one Aboriginal awareness course—We're talking about getting to know the communities, the companies, the organizations, the Indigenous ecosystem where a company is going to be operating and doing business. This is no different than entering any other country market. Don't go in blind. Get smart; learn about the social, political, economic and

social fabric of that nation. Embracing a systems approach (such as a road map that looks at performance, strategies and practices) will provide managers with the kind of feedback they need to go from just *thinking* about reconciliation to actually *doing* it.

Companies can also learn from the experience of employers who've been doing this now for 30 or 40 years (e.g., the resource sector). Organizations can take those lessons and adapt them for their sector and workplace.

The most successful organizations have adopted an enterprise-wide approach. There are generally five parts to every enterprise:

1. **Human resources**—People and their skills
2. **Procurement**—Where are we getting our goods and services? What businesses are we supporting?
3. **Corporate social responsibility**—How are we supporting the socioeconomic priorities in our workplace communities?
4. **Marketing and communications**—How are we telling our story? What is our narrative internally with our employees? What is it externally with our customers, our stakeholders?
5. **Leadership**—Is this on the C-suite agenda? Do we have an executive champion? Is the board of directors discussing and acting on this?

When all five parts of the enterprise are working together—not just on Indigenous inclusion but on *all* areas of diversity—you start to see some real traction and advancements.

If you could give organizations one action item to start today, what would it be?

Read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action. There are 94 calls to action under different themes like education, justice, housing and business.

Call to Action No. 92 is directed at employers, at businesses:

- Educate your employees about Indigenous history
- Break down barriers for employment opportunities
- Look at economic opportunities for Indigenous people and businesses
- Adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Doing those four things starts putting reconciliation into action. Read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, become familiar with it and build that into an overall Indigenous engagement strategy.

Taking a methodical approach requires some work—but the work will pay off. Organizations will access new markets and tap into new talent sources. And it will certainly raise the organization's social and economic capital.