A Message for Leaders on Building Diverse and Inclusive Worksites and Projects

Any type of infrastructure construction project requires not only the correct permits from officials, but also a social license to operate in order to acquire community acceptance. With the increase in economic development projects both on and off reserve in Saskatchewan, that means understanding each community’s unique culture, and in some cases, building trust and coming to a common understanding of project impacts and benefits socially, economically and environmentally.

According to Derek Hoffman, a partner at Miller Thomson law firm in Saskatoon, “you have to be aware that what your cultural norms and practices are may not be the same in Aboriginal communities.” In a presentation to business leaders at the Construction Law Conference in April 2018, Hoffman shared his insight on Aboriginal engagement:

Know and Understand What is Appropriate Engagement

Hoffman recommends conducting research at the planning stages of a project, this can include asking for guidance and observing how things are done. Obtaining the answers to questions like, “will there be opening prayers or closing prayers for meetings?” or “will a gift of tobacco be expected?” are key to understanding cultural norms specific to a community.

Acceptance; however, goes beyond solely respecting the Indigenous customs and culture – it’s important to engage with the community to ensure that inclusion is evident. Attending and sponsoring community events is one way Hoffman suggests engaging a community, but cautions against failing to consider other options and executing an event that is too extravagant. “Be careful not to be over the top about it because that can draw an adverse reaction. Don’t be the centre of attention,” he adds.

Obtain Leadership Buy-In

The ultimate goal of ‘social license to operate’ is to gain community support, or at the very least, non-opposition. The first step in gaining community support has to take the form of a commitment from the leadership that they won’t oppose the proposed development plan or construction project. It’s a good idea for a company’s senior leadership to meet with the community’s leadership and be prepared to track changes in leadership and other pertinent information.
Relationship Building

"Relationship building and trust requires buy-in from your leadership down to your front-line people, and unfortunately all it takes is one off-the-cuff remark from someone that’s not aligned with those values to destroy a lot of the time and effort that’s been invested in establishing a relationship and open communication channels," says Hoffman. "With this in mind, it’s important to check your organization’s internal capacities. Do your leadership team and staff have cultural sensitivity training? Is there a clear understanding of communication protocol - who talks to whom, for example?"

Another component of creating a solid foundation for trust in the community is the commitment to a diverse and inclusive workforce. Hoffman suggests that part of the engagement efforts may include identifying Indigenous employment or subcontractor opportunities or working with training and apprenticeship organizations to develop the skills required for a particular project.

From the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, "The importance of economic development to the wellbeing of First Nations in Saskatchewan and contribution to the health and resiliency of Saskatchewan’s economy cannot be understated. The entrepreneurial spirit of First Nations in Saskatchewan is acknowledged as a critical engine of economic growth, innovation and diversification in our province.