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The Challenge of Indigenous Leadership within Mainstream Organizations

Abstract

In this paper I examine Indigenous leadership styles in relation to mainstream leadership styles. I use my own experiences within mainstream organizations as examples. Leadership styles set the tone for meetings and for shaping the nature of participant engagement. By examining typical mainstream approaches and Indigenous approaches to leadership, we can better understand and appreciate their impact, especially in cross-cultural contexts. Mainstream (white privileged and settler privileged) readers can gain an understanding of leadership from outside their cultural lens, by critically analyzing and reflecting on their own leadership norms. With enhanced critical self-reflection we can be more open to understanding and appreciating different leadership styles including those of Indigenous people.

Keywords: Indigenous leadership, Indigenous lens, critical self-reflection, cultural safety

1 Introduction

Mainstream organizations are currently hiring Indigenous leaders for their knowledge, skills, and for expertise, but measure Indigenous leaders by mainstream values, norms and behaviours. Advancing Indigenous wellness within Canada has been my lifelong commitment. I am an Indigenous woman belonging to the Nisga'a Nation on the northwest coast of British Columbia, living and working within Coast Salish territory in Victoria, Canada. As a decolonizing change agent I advocate for Indigenous peoples' inclusion in Canadian social, justice and health systems. Within the health sector I advocated for change to unexamined colonial practices that negatively

impact Indigenous people's wellness. Indigenous leadership approaches and processes involve a front loading of process, time and expense. This investment can lead to outstanding outcomes, but can feel counterintuitive for my mainstream colleagues. Similarly, Indigenous people have frustration with mainstream practices in many areas. My own experience was that while I was recruited for my Indigenous skills, knowledge and values, I was measured by mainstream leadership norms.

This article is intended for mainstream leaders who want to be inclusive and respectful leaders and allies to Indigenous people. My interest is to contribute to challenging leaders to decolonize leadership practices through critical self-reflection so that Canadians can appreciate and embrace Indigenous leadership styles.

Throughout my career I have been acutely aware of the different behavioural norms between Indigenous and mainstream leaders. My experiences are not unique; I have witnessed many of my Indigenous colleagues' frustrations with navigating mainstream leadership behaviours and norms. Of course, these behaviours are not unique to one race or culture. Starting with how meetings are conducted, through to innovation methods and decision making, to debriefing and reflection, I demonstrate how leadership approaches at each stage can deeply influence final outcomes. I provide examples in the table below, and elaborate with illustrations from my own experience living as a racialized Indigenous woman.

2 Participating in meetings

A common experience for Indigenous people is the lack of space to join in mainstream dialogue. I took part in group meetings over several years[1] where we brought dissimilar programs and agencies together to find ways to increase health access for underserved populations and to achieve health

1 For several years I participated in health committees where multiple agency leaders were tasked to find ways to reduce health inequities.

equity by finding innovative ways to collaborate across agencies and programs. Near the end of many meetings someone would say, *"Leslie, you've been so quiet. Do you have anything to add?"*

Actually, I had questions about process and issues we seem to have actively ignored. My participation devolved to uncomfortable silence, witnessing group dynamics that were difficult for me to navigate. I observed behaviours that were hierarchical, forceful, and positional. People were interrupting, talking over each other, and pulling rank. Meetings often defaulted to one or two leaders dominating. While health equity and inclusion was our intention, we didn't practice it ourselves. We feared losing power, funding or control, and this drove our pursuit of individual agendas that reinforced the status quo.

Indigenous conversation includes silence as a natural aspect of dialogue, a reflective moment between speakers when comments are appreciatively considered. These moments are rare in Canadian dialogue, leaving me fewer opportunities to speak. Others are faster to fill the silence. Culturally it is very rude for me to cut someone off or interrupt. Sometimes in response to the specific invitation to speak, I would point out how the decision we were about to land on wouldn't address our equity objective. I usually received this response, *'Oh, good point. However, in the interests of time (or budget or compromise), we need to move on.'*

In west coast Indigenous cultures we are trained to listen, read body language, to hear the unspoken words. Good speakers regularly include long pauses. Because we work at being diplomatic, relational and collaborative, shouting, bullying and being highly positional are unusual. We collectively and actively ignore negative behaviours resulting in social exclusion for the offender. This practice only works if the offender understands and accepts our norms. To be clear, colonization has impacted our culture: not everyone abides by these rules.

My Indigenous socialization makes it difficult to participate in dialogue that is full of interruptions. I miss opportunities to influence outcomes. Indigenous approaches don't always work when applied within mainstream society. My ignoring dominating and interrupting colleagues doesn't work if they don't think or care that they have behaved badly. My culturally based tactic of ignoring bad behaviour was ineffective because my colleagues might not notice or care if they felt excluded by one person.

A colleague asked me for advice about an Indigenous colleague who was becoming less communicative with him. He spoke at length, asking me a series of questions he assured me I could answer later. After thirty minutes he finally stopped, waiting expectantly for my response. I diplomatically suggested an interactive dialogue, rather than his interrogation. While he understood, he never changed his approach.

I wanted to help him to learn to self-reflect in areas where he was blind to his own white privileged behaviours and assumptions. Instead, he kept dominating our conversations, so our relationship degenerated from mutual appreciation to indifference. Like my Indigenous colleague, I began to avoid him. In doing so, I missed an opportunity to influence a program he was developing. With the best of intentions, I and my Indigenous colleagues identified a particular patronizing and colonial tone within the product he developed. Neither he nor many of our mainstream colleagues seemed able to see it.

Indigenous leaders are constantly being required to interpret behaviours, theories, policies, practices and decisions by using both Indigenous and mainstream lenses. To be the only person in the group to view issues through multiple lenses is challenging. It is deeply frustrating when leaders commit to equity and addressing social determinants, but seek the 'easy wins' and 'low hanging fruit' which have little impact on Indigenous health outcomes. Indeed, it was a surprise for me to finally realize that the very leaders that taught me the concepts of health equity theory had no real understanding

of how to actually apply it meaningfully. I was usually the only person at the table with actual experiences of inequity.

Two Indigenous colleagues and I were invited to meet three mainstream leaders to discuss inequities. For the first half hour we listened to our colleagues quarrelling and interrupting each other. It was as if they forgot we were there. It was awkward for us to try to get into the conversation; we were embarrassed to have to cut someone off. After this meeting we practiced interrupting and developed a signal. We laughed at the utter ridiculousness of three highly educated professional Indigenous women having to practice interrupting.

At another meeting I became so frustrated with the nonstop talking that I lost my patience. I interrupted, called them on their behavior, describing them as bullying, controlling, arrogant and rude. I was experiencing what Mezirow (2000) describes as a *disorienting dilemma* where the crisis of my not being able to find space to speak had become so acute that I became very rude. My shocked colleagues reflected their meeting style was normal behaviour, and they thought my quietness meant I had nothing to say.

My role was to challenge the status quo. Achieving this within mainstream leadership styles was the unspoken preference. Speaking is highly valued in mainstream culture, while respectful listening is highly valued in my culture. The expectation for me to conform to mainstream leadership styles cost me personally and professionally. When making points at a meeting requires me to interrupt other speakers my body fills with shame. When my ideas are disregarded because status quo is easier and preferred, I fail in my role. If I impatiently resort to shouting, as a racialized Indigenous woman, I risk being stereotyped as an 'angry Indian'[2].

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2 The Provincial Health Services Authority's San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety training program identifies the 'Angry Indian' as a common stereotype held by mainstream Canadians. http://www.sanyas.ca (accessed May 5, 2016).

The health authority I worked at subscribed to and promoted specific performance measures. Our knowledge, skills and attitudes was measured within the LEADS[3] framework, a series of domains attributed to leadership capabilities. Within the domain of *Engaging Others*, health leaders are expected to communicate effectively by listening well and encouraging an open exchange of information and ideas using appropriate communication tools. Respectful listening as part of dialogue works only if it becomes a normative practice within the organization. Not all leaders need to practice this for it to be a norm, but it does have to be generally recognized that this is the way it should work.

Questioning and challenging the status quo is the LEADS competency within the domain of *System Transformation*[4], which was the primary purpose of my role. However, the system resisted and discouraged change. One executive described my advocacy for equitable services for Indigenous people as a can of worms better left unopened. Other leaders felt I was biased and needed to develop a 'neutral' approach. I knew I would have more career success within the organization if I took a mainstream approach. If I called out the agency's obvious white privilege bias, and bureaucratic foot dragging, I would not be considered a leadership team player.

I began to think about Paulo Freire's (1970, p.54) comment, *"The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption."* I understood I might be more effective and culturally safer if I was pushing for change from the safety of an Indigenous organization.

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3 The health authority subscribed to and promoted specific performance measures. My leadership was measured within the framework: LEADS in a Caring Environment Capabilities Framework http://www.phsa.ca/medical-staff/Documents/CMA%20Leadership2014%20 Catalogue.pdf (accessed March 26, 2016).

4 Ibid.

3 Innovation Program Development Process

My team started building a decolonizing anti-racism training program to address the high suicide rate of Indigenous youth. This program would tell the missing story of Canada's colonization of Indigenous peoples so Indigenous youth would know why they experience racism, poverty and exclusion. We wanted youth to focus their acute colonial trauma and sense of hopelessness on constructive anger and outrage. We mentored youth to be able to contribute to and eventually lead in program innovation. Mentoring took time but would ultimately increase program relevancy for the youth that needed this program.

The mainstream health authority offered no services to stem the high rates of Indigenous youth suicide so this project became a key deliverable. Public expectation and accountability was increased. Instead of our plan to slowly develop it, the project now had to be completed within the year. To ensure this timeline, another relevant department was ordered to assist my team with project design, development, and funding. With no Indigenous staff, nor apparent experience working with Indigenous people, the department joined us. They bullied, diminished, dismissed and ignored our Indigenous expertise. Their team barely disguised their contempt for my team, including our elder advisor who had done his best to help them understand the issues Indigenous youth were facing. The deadlines were paramount. We could see they had no knowledge of Indigenous youth. Duran and Duran (1995) aptly describe the frustration my team experienced; the western tools and ideologies oppressing Indigenous youth and resulting in suicide epidemics were the very tools and ideologies being used to try to solve the problem.

My team found these behaviours offensive. Their objections and suggestions were being ignored, and they became increasingly silent at meetings. The contributions of the few Indigenous youth on the project were minimized or dismissed. When I challenged their team leader there was only one response, *"We need to get this project done by the deadline"*. Our partners were arrogantly moving straight to solution without knowing the issues

and challenges. Since there was no safety in debriefing with our partners, we spent hours debriefing after meetings. My team was stressed, angry, and looking for work elsewhere. This project aggressively reinforced the very problem of Indigenous youth powerlessness and hopelessness that it was intended to address.

The project was measured for the outcome of getting it done on time. Their leadership was measured by and rewarded for meeting this deadline. Quality and appropriateness were not measured. The rushed and poor-quality project failed the pilot test with Indigenous youth. My team quietly spent the next two years deconstructing and rebuilding the project in full collaboration with Indigenous youth.

Table 1 provides recommendations for how mainstream leaders can transform their practices to attain higher quality results by adopting Indigenous leadership approaches that work. Investing in a process that sets the stage and tone for going forward with projects can seem unwieldy and time-consuming, but the enhanced outcomes are well worth the investment.

Table 1: Mainstream leaders adopting Indigenous approaches

Participating in Meetings	
Indigenous approaches	**Change Mainstream Approaches in this way**
Meetings begin with a group centering itself in relation to the great spirit through prayer or chant. An elder focuses participants on a common goal.	Assume everyone needs reminding at every meeting about the greater intention - the bigger picture. The leader reminds members of inclusive and equitable rules of engagement.

Introductions locate one's relationship to the land and to Indigeneity. We leave our rank and credentials out so others are not influenced by them.	Enable relational engagement so participants can get past intimidating organizational hierarchy. Ask participants to leave their credentials and titles out in order to enhance innovation and problem solving.
Listening is highly valued and a sign of respect and wisdom. Appreciatively let statements and ideas land. When sharing expertise, be sure it is what the group is looking for. Only offer more if you are invited to do so.	Set a tone for engaged listening. Set an expectation for appreciation and reflection, rather than competitiveness. Don't use status or power to take up space. Be sure your expertise is welcome and applicable.
Reflection Agenda – Are we still on track? Are these the right questions and issues to be asked and addressed?	Review/revise action agenda with regular critical analysis and self-reflection, i.e., Is my white or settler privileged lens inhibiting an equity analysis? What is the future cost if this action is not the right action?
Innovation Program Development Process	
Idea generating is a cooperative process within a safe, creative environment.	Involve and be inclusive of people from end users to leaders.
Program development processes are circular, and driven by group consensus, quality, time and budget. Circle back to ensure we are on track.	Let go of linear and hierarchical thinking to enable innovation. Let alternative ideas flourish. Ask the group if the process is on track.
There is collective responsibility for success but the leader takes responsibility for failure. It is safe to examine and learn from failure.	Transparently revisit a decision to see if it still holds value. Accepting and learning from failure earlier will cost less than paying later.

Modesty is valued. The leader ensures credit is distributed to the team. The leader makes 'we' statements about the innovation. Leaders nominate junior staff for awards.	Place credit for innovation with the entire team. Nominate your team for an award; don't expect them to nominate you.
Debriefing and Reflecting	
Debriefing is a mutually accountable non-hierarchical learning process. All team members openly check their experiences. It is a process of reflectively unravelling complexity.	Enable appreciative debriefing with time and space for complexity to unfold. Ensure examination of all sides of an issue.
Leadership sets a tone of safety by being first to genuinely reflect on a mistake.	Be humble. Be the first to reflectively learn from what hasn't worked.
It takes time to fully understand what has happened. Periodically peeling back another layer helps to unfold new insights.	Come back and process again. Actively dwelling on the past can provide valuable insight.

4 Debriefing and Reflecting Process

An Indigenous leadership value is modesty. For example, in debriefing and reflecting, I credit my team for success and expose my mistakes. The team critically reflects on both success and failure, knowing it is safe to learn and grow from both.

My experiences in mainstream leadership are such that I am expected to reflect privately on failure and only report my success. I might have a confidential conversation with my boss about my mistake – off the record if my boss wanted to protect or promote me. In order to receive an annual raise based on an exceptional performance review we would need to agree on my

success in every measureable area, all of the time, throughout the year[5]. An admitted mistake or deficiency would correlate to a reduced raise or none at all. This process does not engender humility, critical self-reflection, learning or growth from mistakes. Clearly, leaders regularly game this system to get their annual raise. Yet wouldn't most of us agree that our wisdom comes far more from learning from our failures than from our successes?

5 Conclusion

While hiring Indigenous leaders to advance mainstream system transformation is laudable it can be a hypocritical action. For Indigenous leaders, navigating the current ill-fitting and unexamined mainstream culture remains difficult, a set-up for failure at worst and status quo at best.

From small project failures like the youth project I described to avoiding a diversity approach in recruiting health leadership, mainstream leadership often ignores the signs of prospective failures and missed opportunities for success. The costs are substantial when leaders are not self-reflective. Leaders repeat the mistake of relentlessly moving a program forward without regularly reflecting on whether it is on target in terms of relevancy, appropriateness and quality, as well as budget and timeline.

My Indigenous colleagues remind me change happens slowly. Old outdated, institutional and colonial approaches towards Indigenous people are no longer acceptable. Most Indigenous leaders need to be able to navigate both mainstream and Indigenous systems. We are required to know both, and in doing so, we learn to apply other lenses, including gender and equity. Given Canada's current commitment to decolonization and reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians, developing Indigenous style leadership skills

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5 Within the health sector my leadership (knowledge, skills and attitudes) was measured within the LEADS in a Caring Environment Capabilities Framework http://www.phsa.ca/medical-staff/Documents/CMA%20Leadership2014%20Catalogue.pdf (accessed March 3, 2016).

and ability to critically reflect on discussions and decisions through multiple lenses is a strength all leaders should develop. Expecting Indigenous and marginalized groups to do all the equity and culturally inclusive analysis for mainstream leaders (and watching mainstream leaders dismiss it because it is too difficult to implement) is a characteristic of the outdated colonial ideology that has been holding back Canada's progress.

I meet and work with Canadians committed to decolonization and reconciliation, who want to know how to be better allies with Indigenous people. I'm asked to explain my culture to them so they can better understand me. In response I ask these leaders to critically reflect on their own assumptions, habits and traditions so they can better understand themselves.

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