What Factors Contribute to Success in Aboriginal Programs?

It is important to keep in mind that there is no single best approach. Success arises from the interaction of many factors. What works in one situation may not necessarily transfer to success in other circumstances. Companies must determine what types of programs are appropriate in their situation and take a flexible approach to the design and implementation of their own Aboriginal programs and practices.

Nevertheless there are some overall factors that contribute to success. They include:

- **Relationships are critical.** Long-term relationships with Aboriginal communities are the key to developing trust and understanding.

- **The level of corporate commitment to Aboriginal relations and how this commitment is communicated throughout the organization.** A respectful culture is more likely to develop the relationships necessary for constructive engagement and communication. Senior management must lead Aboriginal corporate policy, and staff at every level must understand what is expected of them in creating a welcoming environment for Aboriginal employees and businesses.

- **Early engagement and consultation.** It is very important to engage the Aboriginal community at an early stage. This is necessary to build trust and lay the foundation for a solid relationship. Early engagement also allows opportunity to explore the expectations of the Aboriginal community and to clarify what opportunities the relationship can and cannot deliver.

- **The capacity and willingness of the Aboriginal community.** Programs and practices that work with one Aboriginal community may not be transferable to others because of differences in culture, capacity to engage and political direction. At the very least, the community must be receptive to engagement. Successful workforce and business development initiatives also depend on level of education, pre-employment skills and the overall wellness of a community.

- **Sufficient time and flexibility.** Successful Aboriginal relationships don't happen overnight. It is important to build in enough time to make a relationship work, and enough flexibility so that programs can be easily modified as experience is gained and conditions change.

Ultimately, success in Aboriginal programs is incremental. Programs cannot be evaluated on a strict success/failure measure. Companies must start with small, manageable projects that help build community capacity and develop a relationship of trust from the outset. The quality of the relationship is key. Everything builds upon that base.

The ACR project also identified a number of additional factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal programs but are more specific to each of the five program framework areas. They can be used by companies as a checklist and are described below.

Corporate policy success factors

Specific factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal corporate policy include the following:

- **Success in Aboriginal relations requires a clear commitment in corporate policies reinforced by senior management and driven by explicit goals, targets and timetables.** This often requires a champion at the executive level -- even the CEO -- to ensure that the message gets through to all levels of the organization. Managers, front-line staff and consultants need to be held accountable for results and rewarded for performance.

- **Make the business case for building Aboriginal relationships.** Unless a company can make a direct linkage to its core business needs, programs are unlikely to be sustainable. Examples of a business case include reduced uncertainty on resource access and management, reduced potential for costly interventions in regulatory approval processes for projects, a stable local workforce, new market opportunities, and better customer service.

- **Success in Aboriginal programs needs to be measured as incremental gains rather than success or failure.** Start with small, manageable projects or steps that help build community capacity and develop a relationship of trust between the company and the Aboriginal community from the outset.

- **Understand the long-term ramifications and complexities of signing agreements and acceding to demands that result from a lack of upfront consultation or relationship building.** It is important to take measured decisions when the pressures and demands become intense because the precedents they may be setting can have long-term consequences for the company and the resource industry. The interface between Aboriginal communities and the resource sector is complex and requires time and effort.

- **Seek out and develop either internal or external expertise related to Aboriginal engagement.** Such expertise will prove invaluable in understanding local Aboriginal practices or protocols.

- **Companies need to find ways to improve the continuity of Aboriginal relations staff in dealing with Aboriginal communities.** It is characterized today by high turnover and burn-out rates and low recognition. This is a destabilizing factor in working with communities and trying to build long-term relationships.

Workforce development success factors

The following factors were specifically identified by the ACR project as important to the success of Aboriginal workforce development programs:

- **In recruiting Aboriginal candidates for training and employment opportunities, broaden the recruiting pool rather than relax standards.** Support pre-employment and educational upgrading as strategies to improve pre-recruitment qualifications. Bursaries, academic and cultural supports, and relevant

temporary work experience all provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to succeed in education, pre-employment and training programs.

- **Integrate training and employment opportunities.** It sends the wrong message to the individual and back to the community if an Aboriginal person cannot find or retain work after training. A potential strategy is for employers to work together on a regional basis to coordinate training opportunities with future employment requirements.

- **Implement Aboriginal awareness and diversity training sessions at all levels — senior management to front-line staff.** The purpose is to create a more welcoming environment for Aboriginal employees. There is a tendency for managers to overestimate the comfort level of Aboriginal employees in the workplace. Involve Aboriginal communities in the design and delivery of cross-cultural training programs.

- **Establish formal mentoring programs for Aboriginal people wanting to advance their careers or participate in on-the-job training opportunities.** Provide rewards and recognition to employees willing to provide mentoring support. Informal mentoring and support systems are often absent for Aboriginal employees as low representation rates and lack of role models make it difficult for these to develop on their own.

- **Encourage networks of Aboriginal employees to meet and share experience and mutual support.** Allow the network groups to take an advocacy role to implement change and to provide input into recruitment and training programs for Aboriginal people. Network and other support groups help Aboriginal employees adapt to new working environments, and improve the ability of the company to recruit and retain qualified Aboriginal people.

- **In recruiting Aboriginal employees for work away from home, ensure there are other members on the crew from the same Aboriginal support group.** This helps to provide a support network and creates peer pressure to do a good job and not to quit. Additional training should also be provided on their job roles, i.e., it is important they know what their job is and what others are doing on the crew. This reduces the feeling of being overwhelmed and not fitting in because they don't understand their role.

- **Offer Aboriginal communities, in particular the elders, a role in recruitment of Aboriginal employees and involvement in the creation and monitoring of programs for Aboriginal employees.** This also helps the Aboriginal community to understand the expectations and requirements. Encourage managers and supervisors to build links to local communities to provide guidance and support on management of Aboriginal staff.

- **Reach out to Aboriginal students while they are still in school giving them the time and information necessary to make informed choices about their education and career directions.** This includes providing information, role models, work experience and educational experiences for school students.

Business development success factors

The success of Aboriginal business development programs was often found to be dependent on the following factors:

- **Plan for Aboriginal business participation by matching business opportunities with Aboriginal business capabilities.** Communicate business opportunities and project requirements in a timely and effective manner that will allow them to prepare. Ensure that the business relationship process is technically and financially viable.

- **Ensure that the Aboriginal or Aboriginal/corporate venture has adequate management capacity in place.** This is the most common and underestimated factor in the success or failure of business ventures. The industry partner has a crucial role to play in assisting the Aboriginal partner to develop the management skills necessary to succeed. Some companies have seconded staff to the new venture for a transition period during which the internal management capacity is developed. Other support has included mentoring and training of potential management talent. Even after a venture has operated for a period of time, follow-up (aftercare) is important to ensure that the situation continues to progress.

- **Use procurement as a tool to provide opportunities for Aboriginal suppliers.** However, it should be linked with mentoring and skills development to strengthen business capabilities and enable the Aboriginal business to compete successfully for contracts. Support should be finite (two years) and have a requirement to diversify its customer base. After a defined time period, the business should be weaned from the procurement strategy and compete on an equal footing with other suppliers.

- **In structuring business arrangements with Aboriginal communities, corporate governance needs to follow clear principles which are defined at the outset.** These should address considerations such as management structure and reporting, financial obligations (cash calls, equity maintenance), use and distribution of earnings, training and succession planning, performance benchmarks and representation on the board of directors. Avoid perceptions of something for nothing.

- **Invest in strengthening the business capacity of the Aboriginal community.** Such support can help the community identify and assess business opportunities that result from industrial development in the region, and will make the community a better business partner. Some strategies include mentoring local economic development expertise, partnering with the community to explore potential opportunities, and engaging the leadership in how to position the community to pursue opportunities.

Community relations success factors

A number of specific factors were identified by the ACR project that contribute to the success of Aboriginal community relations programs, including:

- **Relationships are critical.** Don't show up only when you want something. Build trust and confidence. This requires commitment from the organization to develop and sustain the relationship over time. It is important that expectations are managed and kept modest on both sides of the table. Also seek out engagement with different groups within the community so that if there is a change in local governance, a company does not have to start over.

- **Maintain relationships through the 'peaks and valleys' of your business.** Companies often see Aboriginal relations as a non-core aspect of their business and reduce the level of commitment when cash flows are tight. If this is perceived as withdrawing from or not meeting its expectations with an Aboriginal community, the results can be very damaging in terms of lost trust and confidence. And it will take a long time to repair. It is important that companies establish a sustainable level of commitment and engagement from the outset.

- **Assess where a community is at today before developing a relationship.** Some key criteria include the capacity, willingness and governance of the Aboriginal community. Based on this assessment, make a decision on whether to proceed, how to go about it and what should be done. Each community will be different and success will depend on recognizing these differences and responding in an appropriate way.

- **Develop community profiles because no two communities are alike and each requires a customized approach to involvement.** Understand language and dialect, family ties and allegiances, and who to focus your relationship on, e.g., the community, band/settlement council or treaty organization. Communicate clearly and often. Expectations should be set out on both sides from the outset. Provide and ask for feedback on a regular basis. The intent is to avoid surprises. Build participation by seeking out advice and input, and be respectful of the differences in values and culture. Celebrate the successes by involving the community.

- **Framework agreements or cooperation protocols may help strengthen relationships with Aboriginal communities and provide industry with a measure of stability and continuity for its operations.** These agreements can include measures to mitigate impacts, increase economic opportunities or enhance social development. Successful agreements are designed to ensure that relationships are mutually beneficial.

- **Many of the more successful Aboriginal programs work in partnership with other businesses, educational institutions, governments and non-government organizations that have an interest in Aboriginal issues.** Key criteria in selecting partner organizations include knowledge of the community, credibility with community members and other stakeholders, sound financial management and recognized community development skills.

Resource stewardship success factors

Specific factors that contribute to the success of resource stewardship programs include the following:

- **Early engagement, even before a decision is made on whether a project will proceed, is important to building trust, communication and a solid relationship with the Aboriginal community.** If the community has some understanding of the business of the company, the nature of the project, potential impacts on the community and potential opportunities, this can help to establish a basis for cooperation and reduce or eliminate possible objections to the project and costly interventions in the regulatory processes.

- **Develop an effective consultation process with Aboriginal communities as a means to mitigate risk and maximize opportunities for mutual benefit.** While industry has no legal obligation to consult, a company has much to gain by establishing a positive, cooperative relationship with affected Aboriginal communities and by collaborating to optimize economic benefits for all parties.

- **Encourage Aboriginal communities to take a leadership role in initiating traditional use studies.** These studies provide important information that helps industry plan operations and avoid or mitigate impacts associated with access to and development on traditional lands.

- **Encourage involvement of Aboriginal communities as partners in integrated resource management processes, and ecological, and fish and wildlife management studies.** Such involvement can provide unique knowledge to support management practices and is a very effective way to build constructive relationships.

- **Ensure that priorities for both Aboriginal communities and industry are identified and addressed through meaningful consultation processes.** Formal structures can be used to provide a focal point for action and, where possible, joint decision-making. In other cases, industry groups have collaborated with each other and with local Aboriginal communities to promote opportunities for people in the region. Do not assume that things you value are necessarily valuable to the community.

- **Community consultation must be carried out in a culturally appropriate manner.** Protocol is important to building respect and trust. Participatory methods should be used from the very start of the engagement process. Methods can include interviews, consultation programs and community meetings.