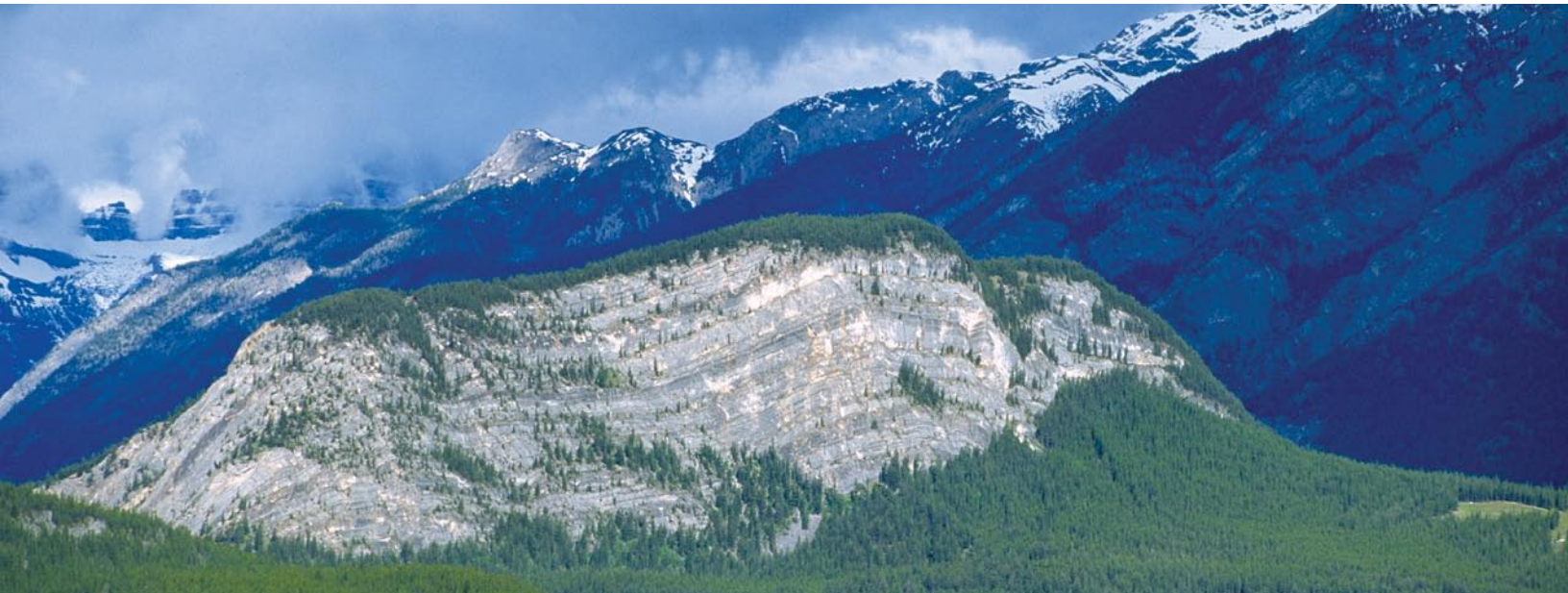
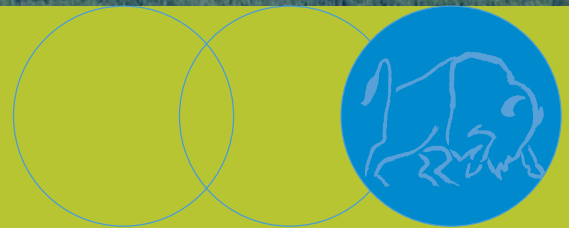


# Aboriginal Leadership and Management



## First Nations Leadership Development

by Dr. Jacqueline Ottmann, 2005



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### Aboriginal Leadership and Management

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# First Nations Leadership Development

by Dr. Jacqueline Ottmann, University of Calgary

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As a First Nations educator I have a keen and vested interest in First Nations education. This interest is reflected in my doctoral research. In my investigation of the issues related to First Nations education (particularly the school graduation rate) I have come to understand that many issues are systemic. Overwhelmingly, many First Nations people are experiencing the symptoms of greater societal problems like poverty and oppression. For example, in Saskatoon and in Regina, 60% of First Nations people live in poverty (Saskatoon Communities for Children and Community – University Institute for Social Research, 2000 -

2001), and the situation is similar for on-reserve population. For this reason, I engaged in a study that expanded beyond the formal structured schooling of First Nations students to the in-depth exploration of literature focusing on theories of leadership and leadership development. First Nations leaders, like all leaders, directly and indirectly influence every aspect of their communities because they have a greater circle of influence (Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 2001; Maxwell, 1998).



**“We have probably been one of the most studied people on this earth, and we still have little real ability to implement our Treaties or create a better way of life for people in our communities.”**



The study that I conducted on First Nations leadership development comes at an interesting and vital time. Recently, there has been a concern and interest in First Nations people for reasons that include, but are not limited to: Treaty land entitlement and specific land claim monetary compensations, Aboriginal title decisions, residential school claims, and the general Aboriginal population increase. These issues and events increase the need for awareness and, more importantly, understanding. Likewise, interest in Aboriginal affairs has increased questioning and caution among Aboriginal leaders (Ottmann, 2005). One leader in my study expressed the frustration of many Aboriginal people:

We are not happy with the amount of studies on First Nations people. Many studies have been done on our people. Specifically, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was undertaken with very little, if no, implementation that could make a major difference or a change. We have probably been one of the most studied people on this earth, and we still have little real ability to implement our Treaties or create a better way of life for people in our communities. We are still dealing with the same situations and, if not, things are worsening because of the amount of births. The demands on programs and services are increasing without any real increase in those budgets. (2005, p. 140)

There is research fatigue and doubt as to the authenticity of initiatives that are generated for Aboriginal people without their input.

This is a new time, a new phase in our relationship. Miller (2000) identified four phases of 'Indian-White' relationships: 1) Mutually beneficial (relationship of trade); 2) Relationship of alliance (British-French wars); 3) 19th century relationship deterioration (First Nations people became irrelevant as settlers and railway need for land increased); 4) Emergence from irrelevance for First Nations people (no distinct relationship). Perhaps it is time that a mutually beneficial relationship is encouraged; one that is reciprocal.

Until recently, Canadian history and research has been written from a Western perspective (e.g. Stanley, 1992) without the First Nations voice. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) final report indicated the need for changing the implementation of Aboriginal research. The report stated:

In the past, research concerning Aboriginal peoples has usually been initiated outside the Aboriginal community and carried out by non-Aboriginal personnel. Aboriginal people have had almost no opportunity to correct misinformation or to challenge ethnocentric and racist interpretations. Consequently, the existing body of research, which normally provides a reference point for new research, must be open to reassessment. (p. 29)

This paper will provide insight into the frustrations, joys, values and beliefs of First Nations people through the reflections of their leaders in a study that was recently completed. However, before the findings on leadership and leadership development are presented, historical information is presented to encourage greater understanding of today's circumstances.

### Historical First Nations Leadership

Historical First Nations leadership practices differed from current First Nations leadership practices; as a result, it is important to understand historical and current

First Nations leadership and to identify the source of change in the general execution of leadership. Traditionally, First Nations leaders were not elected but "emerged from natural order and laws of nature as people who attracted followers" and traditional selection criteria (Irwin, 1992, p. 10). Malloch believed that "leaders emerged from among those who demonstrated exceptional skill and understanding grounded in their experience of life and the natural order" (as cited in Irwin, p. 10). Manuel and Posluns (1974) emphasized the importance of language and leadership entailing both the worldly and spiritual realm of existence:

It is the people who make or break a leader. If he is giving voice to their souls they endow him with that status; if he fails to speak their minds he is forced out; if he encircles the people with confused zeal by running after every concern but their own, he may be tolerated but never respected or admired. (p. 10)

Manuel and Posluns (1974) stressed that "a leader who stands no taller than the rest of his people stands in the centre of a circle and speaks the voice of the minds and souls he hears around him" (p. 10). Because of the all-encompassing influence, ability, role, and responsibilities of traditional leaders, Deloria and Lytle (as cited in Jules, 1999) noted, "Many non-Indians concluded that chiefs had some mystical, but absolute power over other members of the tribe" (p. 10). It is evident that traditional First Nations leadership required the leader to be aware of the visible and invisible forces, the earth and the cosmos.

Begay (1997) discovered that culture and language greatly influenced leadership. From his study, one can surmise that because of the diversity that language and traditions create amongst First Nations people throughout North America, First Nations leadership practices cannot be easily generalized. Begay compiled the titles used for leadership and their translation in relation to leadership roles and responsibilities from 15 different tribes. The findings presented different perspectives of leadership. The leadership roles and expectations ranged from (and can be compared to) authoritative, to transformational, to servant leadership. For instance, the Apache title for leader is Nantan, which is translated to *somebody who is boss, or somebody who tells you what to do*. Begay noted that it is important for the Apache leader to have the proper knowledge and traits to lead and oversee the people during particular activities such as hunting. Cornell and Kalt, (as cited in Begay, 1997) added that an Apache leader should be "convincing – able to exercise charismatic attraction – and to exhibit intelligence" (p. 44). Oratorical ability was, and still is, valued among the Apache people.

The titles and meanings introduced by Begay (1997) offer insight into the values of each tribe; values which are then reflected by the leader. The title given to First Nations leaders defines the role and expectations of leadership within their culture. Despite the differences in leadership roles, Begay (1997) managed to connect the definitions in the following five ways:

First, Native meanings of leader do not necessarily imply the accumulation of wealth (property and goods). Rather, there is an emphasis on position and role. Second, Native leadership terminology implies a proactive approach with the use of terms like "to direct" and "leads the people." Third, a Native leader works with the people, rather than commanding or having power over them. Fourth, there is the recognition that leadership has male and female aspects. Fifth, the religious and spiritual aspects of leadership are important. (pp. 43-44)

Begay also noted:

Cultural mandates are explicitly established through knowledge, skills, and abilities demanded of Native leaders. These leadership demands give insight into the tribe's political and social organization and institutional structure. And, since these definitions affect Native leadership identity, they have implications for how current Native leaders should be trained and suggested curriculum offerings. (p. 44)

Overall, culture and language play a major role in defining the expectations and roles of First Nations leadership, and since both culture and language have been significantly changed or, in some cases weakened, in the recent past with federally imposed legislation such as the Indian Act of 1876 (Government of Canada, 2003), historical First Nations leadership practices have too been changed to reflect the "foreign" legislation. It is important not to generalize First Nations leadership; however, it would be beneficial for a leader to understand the differences and commonalities in leadership among the various First Nations.

Cajete described historic Indigenous leadership as being "for the good of the people" and being intrinsically connected to the community (2000, p. 91). He wrote:

Individuals become intimately conditioned to the nature of "right" or successful relationship, and the integrity of each individual as found in the complete expression of community. This understanding of relationships in tribal communities traditionally formed the foundation for the development of extraordinary leaders. In Indigenous communities, individuals rose to positions of leadership based on their service to the people. Indeed, to be of service to one's people was a major goal of every adult member of a tribe. (p. 90)

Cajete continued:


Leadership in and of itself was never a goal of Indigenous education but rather a result of the way of living in community and striving toward being complete... reciprocity, support, benefit, purpose, and vision ... combined with an ingrained love for one's people and orientation to act for the good of the people formed the foundation for the expression and development of leaders. Leadership was a role that had to be earned and it was earned by achieving a level of integrity that was irreproachable. Ultimately, Indigenous leadership was about commitment to the nurturing of a healthy community and enriching the cultural tradition of one's own people. (p. 90)

Whatever the language connotation, according to Cajete (2000), historic Indigenous leadership was for and about the community. It was about a leader caring and loving the people in his or her community, and about leaders using their imaginations and creativity to gather and move the people "together to find their life" (p. 90).

### The Indian Act

It is vital to identify and describe the drastic change in First Nations leadership to thoroughly capture the essence of current First Nations leadership. A defining moment, in a negative sense, for First Nations people and their leadership was the implementation of the Indian Act. The Indian Act of 1876 (Government of Canada, 2003), which was legislated by the federal government of Canada, changed the lives of First Nations people because all-encompassing limitations and regulations were imposed. The British North America Act of 1867 stated that "Indians and lands reserved for Indians" (Isaac, 1995, p. 170) was the responsibility of the federal government. This broad statute led to the jurisdictional "administrative mechanism" (Carr-Stewart, 2003) called the Indian Act. The Indian Act begins with defining the federal government's responsibilities. For example, it defines "band" as a "body of Indians: a) for whose use and benefit in common, lands, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, have been set apart before, on or after September 4, 1951; b) for whose use and benefit in common, moneys are held by Her Majesty, or; c) declared by the Governor in Council to be a band for the purposes of this Act" (Government of Canada, 2003). An Indian is simply "a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian" (Government of Canada, 2003). With the implementation of the Indian Act, Canada's federal government literally became the guardians of the affairs of "Indians" in their entirety.

Historically First Nations governance and leadership was changed as a result of the Indian Act. In the beginning of the document, the "elector" is defined as a person who is "registered on a Band List, is of the full age of eighteen years, and is not disqualified from voting at band elections"



**"It is the people who make or break a leader."**



(Government of Canada, 2003). Later, in Section 74 (1), the Act declared, “Whenever he deems it advisable for the good government of a band, the Minister may declare by order that after a day to be named therein the council of the band, consisting of a chief and councilors, shall be selected by elections to be held in accordance with this.” Subsection (2) states, “Unless otherwise ordered by the Minister, the council of a band in respect of which an order has been made under the subsection (1) shall consist of one chief, and one councilor for every 100 members of the band, but the number of councilors shall not be less than two nor more than twelve and no band shall have more than one chief.” Subsection 78 (1) limits chief and council terms to two years. The Act continued by describing the detailed nature of the election process and the powers of the chief and council in office. The Indian Act (Government of Canada, 2003) was created without the involvement or consultation of First Nations people, hence, the foreign nature of the document for First Nations people.

It is clear that historical First Nations governance or leadership was not taken into consideration when The Indian Act was devised. The elections that were suddenly held every two years in close-knit communities would have been a drastic change in First Nations communities that had hereditary Chiefs. The implementation of a foreign election system described in the Indian Act of 1876 would have contributed to the confusion and division that communities and families were experiencing because of the overwhelming changes of the time. The Indian Act continues to influence and regulate the lives of First Nations people 128 years later, but change is in ‘the air’ as First Nations people are increasingly insisting on participating in the legislative decisions that determine their destiny. More and more, First Nations leaders are questioning the limitations of legislations, and many are refusing to be “Indian Act leaders” (Ottmann, 2005) but choosing to discover the essence and power of leading as a First Nations person in a postmodern world.

### First Nations Leadership Perceptions

The guiding research question was, “What is the nature of First Nations leadership?” Although the participants came from diverse backgrounds (language, location, education, circumstances and experiences) commonalities emerged in their answers. Perhaps it was because they shared work, role, and responsibility pressures and societal experiences of First Nations people were similar.

Table 1 presents the most common responses to specific categories. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated that family was the major means of encouragement and inspiration. Family members mentioned were spouses, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Next, Elders and community members provided additional moral support and encouragement. In terms of inspiration, other First Nations leaders were sources of inspiration. These leaders were often seen and heard at gatherings and meetings by the participants over time. Elders, or grandparents, also inspired many of the leaders through words of wisdom and leadership actions.

**Table 1: First Nations Leadership Responses**

#### First Nation Leadership Responses

<b>Encouragement</b>	Family	Elders	Community
<b>Inspiration</b>	Family	Leaders	Elders
<b>Motivation</b>	Reluctant	Cause	Rep./Voice/ Improve Conditions
<b>Frustrations</b>	Socio-economic Conditions	Indian Affairs Funding; Resources	Recognition
<b>Challenges</b>	Education	Society	Diversity
<b>Strength</b>	Spouse/Family	Spirituality	People
<b>Success</b>	Unity	Engagement	Accomplishments
<b>Differences</b>	Availability	Collective	Spirituality
<b>New Standards</b>	Value-Behaviour	Policy Org. Structure	Engagement Empowerment

The participants expressed a general reluctance to take a leadership role, but they were often encouraged by others to lead. Most of the participants had a specific cause that they supported and promoted. Awareness and prevention of causes like fetal alcohol syndrome, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, child prostitution, and poverty were believed to be barriers to individual and community growth among First Nations people. In addition, some leaders felt that it was important to increase and insist on increased representation of First Nations people in society with the goal improving overall social and economic conditions.

There were many frustrations for these leaders. The most common was the low socio-economic conditions that many First Nations people experienced. All the leaders spent some time explaining the untrusting relationship that First Nations organizations had with the Department of Indian Affairs. Many felt that Indian Affairs established a ‘glass ceiling’ where relationship, collaboration, and First Nations growth and initiatives could only go so far before the federal government discouraged them. Resources and funding restrictions and limitations were a constant source of worry for the leaders. Some of the interviewees stated that the cycle of poverty, among other things, would continue because of the perpetual funding restraints that limited leadership capacity.

Education, in its many forms and levels, appeared to be the greatest challenge for these leaders. There was a general desire to increase academic achievement among First Nations students of all ages, and a desire to instill a curriculum that includes accurate First Nations content. Education was perceived as a liberator to both First Nations people and the general public. Changing the negative perceptions and actions of society appeared to be a challenge for many leaders.

There were many examples of initiatives to improve education, partnerships, and relationships that were made with the hope of changing misconceptions and racism. Finally, diversity among First Nations people was mentioned as a challenge. First Nations people are diverse in language, worldviews, values, and beliefs. Because of this, finding unity and common ground within diversity proved to be exigent for some leaders.

In this study, First Nations leaders gained strength primarily from their family. All indicated that spiritual beliefs and spiritual expression also provided internal strength to endure the challenges of a physically and emotionally demanding position. Finally, the people were a source of strength for the leaders, and all the leaders felt responsible, obligated, and accountable to the people.

Generally, leaders indicated that successes were 'fewer and far between' and required a lot of persistence and hard work, but when successes occurred they were wonderful. Community and overall unity of First Nations people were mentioned as notable successes. These are times when leaders and membership, or leaders in collaboration with a group achieved a goal. Observing youth, individuals, and groups engaged and in collaboration to reach a goal or promote a cause, and seeing individuals and communities accomplish personal and professional goals was satisfying for many of the participants. Overall, the participants rarely identified personal "I" successes, but rather listed "we" successes.

There were significantly more differences than similarities between First Nations and Western leadership mentioned. The leaders indicated that the major difference was accessibility and visibility. Basically, these First Nations leaders made themselves available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year from their office, home, and through their cell phone, which many did not turn off. Further, the collective and spiritual orientation of First Nations people was perceived as a key difference. These differences signify an overall cultural difference between First Nations and Western leadership.

These leaders wanted to set new standards of leadership. As a result, they were committed to personal and professional development. Essentially, they strived to 'walk the talk' and to reflect their behaviour with their values. In addition, they wanted to create organizational structure and policies for succeeding leadership. To ensure that policies of accountability became the foundations of growth for future leaders, the leaders involved membership in

the process. All of the leaders wanted to help in empowering and engaging First Nations people in the policy and legislative process and usually gave membership the final decision on major initiatives.

Overall, the nature of First Nations leadership in Saskatchewan, as indicated by the participants, was diverse because of differences in regional needs, language, and worldview of each linguistic group. However, First Nations leadership was connected through common roles and responsibilities attributed to being a Chief. First Nations leadership was commonly affected by unilateral legislated relationships with Indian Affairs and common socio-economic conditions of First Nations people. First Nations leadership was significantly influenced and essentially defined by First Nations history, worldviews, and culture. Furthermore, a tension was identified between First Nations people and Western organizational cultures. The hope of the leaders in this study was to improve overall socio-economic conditions of First Nations people, to encourage greater representation and engagement, and to leave the position with leadership standards and policies that were people-generated. This study confirmed that First Nations leadership was physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding. Consequently, these leaders relied on their personal spiritual beliefs, family, and community support for strength.

### First Nations Leadership Development

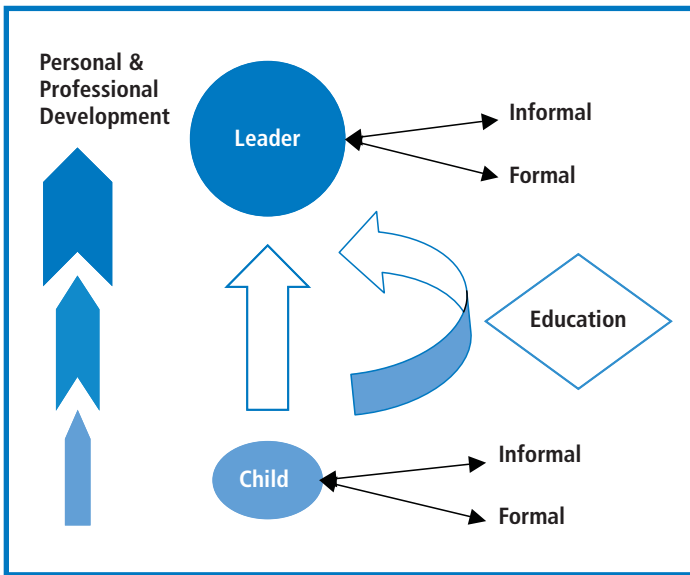
Figure 1 depicts a pictorial description of the leadership development for the leaders in this study. For these leaders, leadership development began in childhood through informal and formal means. As children, these leaders observed and listened while leadership actions and events were happening. Situations like these constituted informal, unpredictable, and unstructured learning. Childhood formal leadership development happened when an Elder or adult took the responsibility to mentor and teach a child about life and specific leadership skills and lessons.



**“...child, family, and community development is as important as adult-positional related leadership development.”**



Figure 1: First Nations Leadership Development Model



Personal leadership awareness, on the other hand, did not usually happen until adulthood. The majority of the leaders had post-secondary degrees before they became leaders. This education was perceived as an asset because it strengthened and increased leadership capacity, and it expanded experiences, knowledge, and skill base in a Western context. Significant personal and professional leadership development for all of the leaders began after they obtained the position of Chief. They all felt it was a necessary aspect of a position that serves people. Some leaders took training and counseling to strengthen their personal well-being, and some attended formal leadership development programs. Informal leadership opportunities included interaction and dialogue with other First Nations leaders, Elders, and professionals.

Over time, as Figure 1 shows, personal and professional development often became increasingly intentional and lead to greater maturity and personal, interpersonal and organizational capacity. Leadership development is a lifelong process of learning. It begins in childhood with numerous informal and formal lessons, and continues the rest of one's life. With this understanding, it is important to embrace and nurture First Nations children and provide them with experiences and knowledge that will cultivate their innate abilities and talents, improve self-confidence, and expand the boundaries of their world. In this context, child, family, and community development is as important as adult-positional related leadership development. The views of the participants in the study suggested that leadership does not happen in isolation. Overall, leadership development was more than a structured program. Personal and professional development is a lifelong process of expected and unexpected informal and formal learning opportunities. This research affirmed the importance of lifelong learning and the importance of including youth in leadership and mentorship programs.

The leaders participating in this study believed that First Nations leadership development should have a strong First Nations orientation. In other words, it should incorporate, but not be limited to, First Nations history, culture, traditions, worldview, values, and language. Next, a First Nations leadership development program should include the community. Many of the participants felt that individual leadership development is important but meaningless without overall community development. The belief was that individual development positively influenced and encouraged family and community development. Theoretically, effective positive personal and professional growth begins at an individual level and radiates outward into larger contexts.

Next, most of the participants recommended that a First Nations leadership development program should be a mobile group of expert facilitators sensitive to community needs. Although a First Nations leadership development incorporates more First Nations content, it should also include Western education, skills, and training. Most leaders believed that it was critical to be adept in a First Nations and Western context for optimal growth and achievement. Finally, a First Nations leadership development program should stress the importance of not only professional development but personal development. The consensus was that value-behaviour alignment for leaders only added to leadership credibility and support.

This investigation of First Nations leadership has provided invaluable insight into the values, beliefs, worldview, and philosophies that entail and ultimately constitute Indigenous leadership and leadership development. Studies that focus on Indigenous leadership development ultimately have significant implications for theory, research, fundamental, and practical applications for learning organizations.

### Conclusion

First Nations people no longer have the option to disengage and to allow their freedoms and basic human rights to be compromised. Gregg (2002) warned that if Canadians disengage from government, ethical consideration, liberty, and ultimately our democracy would be lost. To disengage is to give-up freedom. As this study indicated, First Nations leadership is taking charge and making significant accomplishments. A major accomplishment was the recognition of Aboriginal people in Canada's Constitution; section 35(1) of the 1982 Canadian Constitution states, "The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed" (Department of Justice Canada, 2005). First Nations leaders are insisting on forging relationships and partnerships based on equality. "[First Nations leadership] are a force to be reckoned" (Ottmann, 2005, p. 79).

Recently, an 11-year-old student wondered how Canada would have looked without foreign invasion. How would our history have looked if First Nations people had not shared their knowledge and resources with the newcomers? These questions reflect the desire of people who wish for a different historical outcome, a different relationship. We cannot change the past, but we can make decisions today that will positively influence the future. We can retreat into listening rather than forcefully and carelessly charging forward.

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### Dr. Jacqueline Ottmann

Dr. Jacqueline Ottmann is originally from Fishing Lake First Nation, a Saulteaux community in Saskatchewan. After years of elementary and secondary teaching in public, separate, and private systems in Saskatchewan and Alberta, she entered the graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan. She received a M.Ed. degree in 2000, after completing the thesis, *First Nations Leadership and Spirituality within the context of the royal commission on Aboriginal peoples: A Saskatchewan perspective*. Her doctoral study was titled, *First Nations leadership development within a Saskatchewan context*.

Dr. Ottmann has assisted in numerous school-effectiveness reviews throughout Saskatchewan, has presented at educational conferences in Canada and the US, and has written a chapter in the book, *Sharing our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling*. In November 2004, she joined the Faculty of Education in Calgary as Assistant Professor. Currently, she is conducting research on Aboriginal language and literacy in Alberta and assessment practices on Aboriginal children.

Her research interests include First Nations and Indigenous leadership and governance, First Nations leadership development, First Nations education, organizational culture, and change.

