

# Aboriginal Governance and Leadership: Volunteers in the Friendship Centres of Canada

**Report**

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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# Aboriginal Governance and Leadership: Volunteers in the Friendship Centres of Canada

## 1. A national study on governance and leadership

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### Introduction

Our report presents the findings of a one-year, national study of the leadership of the boards of directors of Canada's 117 Aboriginal Friendship Centres. They are Aboriginal-governed, nonprofit organizations serving Aboriginal people who are "off-reserve" and living in urban settings. We explored whether the boards of these Centres used any Aboriginal forms of leadership and governance.<sup>1</sup> Decision-making and leadership in traditionally based Aboriginal communities are different from that in mainstream Canadian society. But little is known about Aboriginal leadership and how modern Aboriginal leaders transpose their leadership and governance styles to nonprofit organizations in urban settings. Our study offers groundbreaking research in this area.

### Research objectives

We attempted to identify "best or most promising practices" in governance and leadership by boards of directors and experienced volunteer leaders in Aboriginal friendship Centres. Our focus was not

"problem centred" but on what practices actually work in successful Friendship Centres across Canada. What characterizes an efficient and effective friendship's board and how does it incorporate Aboriginal culture? We tried to develop a profile of board members and of the kinds of decisions they make, and to understand how boards function. We also wanted to identify the role of Aboriginal culture in decision-making and governance.

### Relevance of the research

Our research is relevant and important in terms of supporting the empowerment and social inclusion of Aboriginal people in Canada. Federal policies towards Aboriginal and First Nations groups have changed and now, it is accepted that the right to Aboriginal self-government is enshrined in the *Canadian Constitution Act, 1982*, (Section 35) (Morse, 1999). Consequently, support for self-government has become a priority for federal and provincial governments.

To achieve this objective, federal government is attempting to build skills and capacity in Aboriginal leadership to self-govern their communities and territories. But, many Aboriginal people have different styles of leadership and decision making from leaders in Canadian government and its institutions. This is reflected in "social movement" that has been quietly taking place, virtually ignored, for more than 50 years by mainstream Canadian society.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report, "Aboriginal peoples" is used to refer to all individuals who identify with being of Aboriginal ancestry; these individuals may be of mixed ancestry. "Aboriginal peoples" includes status, non-status, Inuit, and Metis persons. "First Nations" refers only to individuals who are status Indians as defined by the Indian Act (1876).

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In response to the increasing urbanization of Aboriginal people, members of their communities created Friendship Centres to assist in the adjustment from reserve to urban life. In these Centres, Aboriginal people have been living their culture in the modern urban context with little interference from outside. Last year these Centres provided over 900 programs reaching over 757,000 persons. Youth programs and services comprise 17% of these programs and are of considerable interest in developing “the leaders of tomorrow.” Friendship Centres offer the promise of greater self-government for off-reserve and urban Aboriginal peoples. The Centres are unique in that they cross Aboriginal groups and politics involving various First Nations (Status Indians), Metis, Inuit, and others with Aboriginal ancestry<sup>2</sup>. Leaders at the National Association of Friendship Centres see an increasing role for their Centres in the governance and service provision of education, health, and social programs for off reserve Aboriginal peoples.

Our study explores whether successful Aboriginal-led nonprofit organizations such as these Friendship Centres apply traditional cultural practices as part of their approach to governance and leadership, and if they do, what practices they employ. From our study, the National Association is hoping to build training and educational resources for its boards to aid their development and growth.

## The National Association of Friendship Centres

Today there are 117 Centres and seven provincial and territorial associations (PTAs) that are affiliated with the National Friendship Centres in Canada (NAFC). The NAFC was established in 1972 to represent the growing number of Friendship Centres and facilitate the federal government’s involvement. The NAFC receives a federal grant that it distributes to 99 core-funded Centres. Centres also receive additional funds from a variety of public and private sources. For example, they might receive funding for recreational and cultural programs from Heritage Canada or provincial lottery programs. They might receive funds for pre-school education from the federal Human Resources Canada or provincial child development departments. Each Centre operates as a nonprofit organization incorporated under the legislation of its home province. Each has a volunteer board of directors composed of community leaders, mostly with Aboriginal ancestry.

### ***The primary objectives of the NAFC are:***

- to act as a central unifying body for the Friendship Centre movement;
- to promote and advocate the concerns of Aboriginal peoples; and
- to represent the needs of local Friendship Centres across the country to the federal government and to the public in general.

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<sup>2</sup> Definitions for these different Aboriginal peoples are given at the Assembly of First Nations’ website [www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=437](http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=437) (Last retrieved July 27, 2005).

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### **The mission of the NAFC is:**

*“To improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian Society; and which respect and strengthen the increasing emphasis on Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.”<sup>3</sup>*

The NAFC is a nonprofit organization governed by a voluntary board of directors composed of 11 regional representatives and a youth representative who acts as the liaison with the Aboriginal Youth Council. There is a five-member executive committee, composed of the president of the board, the vice-president, the secretary, the treasurer, and a member representing youth.

Part of the NAFC governance structure includes a senate made up of nine individuals. According to the NAFC’s constitution, *“Senators are individuals who are recognized for representing a set of values which reflect past developments of the Friendship Centre Movement while allowing the current leadership and membership the right to define their own direction.”<sup>4</sup>*

Senators participate in the meetings of the board of directors to provide guidance, advice, and to respond to contentious policy issues. If a resolution panel is established for dealing with contentious issues, it consists of a minimum of two senate members, a youth representative, and an elder.

### **The NAFC provides three important services:**

- Monitoring of the activities and programs of various federal government departments that have a mandate to provide funding or services to urban Aboriginal people.
- Acting as a central communications body and facilitating external liaisons for both the Friendship Centres and the PTAs.
- Serving the community in three main program areas: national programs, policy and communications, and personnel and finance.

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<sup>3</sup> Mission statement last retrieved July 26, 2005 from the National Association of Friendship Centres website: <http://www.nafc-aboriginal.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the senate of the NAFC, last retrieved July 26, 2005 from the NAFC website: <http://www.nafc.ca/pages/Senate.htm>

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## 2. National survey of board performance

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### Introduction to the survey

As part of our research, we wanted to develop a national overview of the governance practices of Friendship Centres. One source of information for this might have been the files of the National Association of Friendship Centres in Ottawa. However, many board members from across the country were planning to participate in the annual general meeting (AGM) of the National Association of Friendship Centres from July 6 to 10, 2004, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This provided us with an opportunity to survey board members from many Centres across Canada. So two researchers travelled to the conference to collect national information from the board members of Friendship Centres attending the meeting.

### Measuring board performance of nonprofit organizations: conceptual framework

Researchers Jackson and Holland (1998) published two articles relating to their study of board performance. They noted, “*effective boards require a range of competencies in governance, especially in planning, setting strategic goals, and monitoring organizational performance*” (p. 121). Board volunteers offer a variety of business and professional skills with a spirit of altruism. However, many boards lack a framework in which they can work to achieve the goals and values expressed in the agency’s mission statement, and many fail to set priorities and monitor performance. Jackson and Holland believed that improving board performance would lead to improved efficiencies and effectiveness of nonprofit organizations.

Jackson and Holland isolated six general dimensions of board competency, which they argue are essential for effective governance (1998, p. 122-3). We added a seventh, Aboriginal values. These seven dimensions are described below:

- **Contextual:** The board understands and takes into account the culture, norms, and values of the organization it governs.
- **Educational:** The board takes the necessary steps to ensure that its members are well informed about the organization and the professions working in it and about the board’s own roles, responsibilities, and performance.
- **Interpersonal:** The board nurtures the development of its members as a group, attends to the board’s collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness and teamwork.
- **Analytical:** The board recognizes complexities and subtleties in the issues it faces and draws on multiple perspectives to dissect complex problems and to synthesize appropriate responses.
- **Political:** The board accepts as one of its primary responsibilities the development and maintenance of healthy two-way communications and positive relationships with key constituencies.
- **Shapes Direction / Strategic:** The board envisions and shapes institutional direction and helps to ensure a strategic approach to the organization’s future.



- **Aboriginal Values:** The board practices Aboriginal values such as a holistic understanding of the world, an egalitarian perspective, a belief that leadership is diffused and voluntary, a tolerance of individual members, an emphasis on collective versus individual needs, an avoidance of conflict, a culture of sharing and reciprocal social obligations, and internal methods for controlling behaviour through subtle sanctions such as rewards and punishments.

## Research methods

We designed a self-administered questionnaire of 40 statements related to these seven dimensions. The statements relating to a particular dimension were dispersed throughout the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement using a four-point Likert Scale (The four responses we allowed were “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”; “don’t know” was not offered as a choice, forcing respondents to either respond or skip a statement).<sup>5</sup> Through statistical testing, Holland and Jackson (1998) found that the questions for each dimension had an internal consistency (reliability) and internal validity. In other words, the researchers were confident that the questionnaire was consistent and after repeated applications, they found the same results with the same population and that it was accurately measuring the six dimensions.

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<sup>5</sup> The Likert scale is a type of response format used in surveys developed by Rensis Likert. The scale has responses on a continuum and the categories of responses are usually “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” However, the number and type of categories can be either increased or decreased as needed.

Over 300 individuals were present for the NAFC’s annual general meeting, including volunteer board members representing the various Friendship Centres and the NAFC board of directors. The conference chair introduced our two researchers. This helped to assure conference participants that our study was based in the NAFC and that its findings would be used to help boards improve their governance practices. During breaks and between conference sessions, 75 board members were invited to complete the questionnaire. A researcher was available to answer questions and offer help with the form. Upon completion of the questionnaire, respondents were given a 10-dollar gift certificate for Tim Horton’s restaurants as a token of appreciation. These small gifts were highly appreciated, and soon the conference members were seeking out the “*Tim Horton’s Ladies*” who were conducting the study. The experience was positive and data was efficiently and effectively collected.

## Research participants

Of the 75 respondents to the questionnaire, 96% were Aboriginal (48% were Metis, 46% were First Nations, and 2% were Inuit) and nearly two thirds (64%) were between the ages of 40 and 64 (see Table 1, p. 6). These volunteers were mature individuals who brought a wealth of life history and experience to the boards on which they served. Seven of the respondents (9%) were youth (i.e., under the age of 25), and another 7 (9%) were seniors (aged 65 or older). Just over half (57%) were women; the rest (43%) were men. This indicates that women play an active role in the leadership of Friendship Centres. Two thirds of respondents (66%) had post-secondary education, and most were active in the workforce (67% were employed full time and 9% were employed part-time). Five respondents were students under

the age of 25. Ten respondents were retired. Fifteen respondents (20%) had been on their boards over 10 years; 34 (45%) had been on their boards for between two and five years.

Our sample of 75 board members was not completely representative of the 1,200 members who serve on the boards of Canada’s 117 Friendship Centres. Usually the older and more experienced board members represent their agencies at the AGM and the newer and less experienced board members are less likely to attend. So, our survey participants were really key informants, i.e., people who possess special knowledge on our subject of interest, i.e., board performance.

## Survey findings

Of the 75 respondents to the survey, between 96% and 98% responded to each statement, indicating that they seemed comfortable with the questions. They did not avoid answering any questions.

Overall, respondents rated their boards very highly in all dimensions particularly with regard to the *Contextual* and *Aboriginal* dimensions (see Table 2, p. 7). Responses relating to the *Contextual* dimension show how much respondents agree or not that their board understands and takes into account the culture, norms, and values of the organization it governs. More than three quarters of respondents (76%) agreed that their boards did perform well in this respect (which broke down into 40% agreeing

**Table 1: Profile of respondents to the questionnaire survey**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>			
	43 (57%)	32 (43%)			
<b>Education</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Post Secondary</b>	<b>Other</b>		
	21 (29%)	48 (66%)	4 (5%)		
<b>Age</b>	<b>Under 25</b>	<b>25 - 39</b>	<b>40 - 64</b>	<b>65 +</b>	
	7 (9%)	13 (18%)	47 (64%)	7 (9%)	
<b>Years of Service on Board</b>	<b>Under 2 Yrs.</b>	<b>2 - 5 Yrs.</b>	<b>6 - 10 Yrs.</b>	<b>10 + Yrs.</b>	
	13 (17%)	34 (45%)	13 (17%)	15 (20%)	
<b>Employment</b>	<b>Full Time</b>	<b>Part Time</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>At Home / Unemployed</b>	<b>Retired</b>
	46 (67%)	6 (9%)	5 (7%)	2 (3%)	10 (14%)

strongly; 36% agreeing). With regard to the *Aboriginal* dimension, an even higher percentage of respondents (84%) agreed that their boards preformed well (35% agreeing strongly; 49% agreeing).

The *Interpersonal* dimension also drew high levels of agreement. Most respondents (84%) agreed that their board nurtured the development of its members as a group, attended to the board’s collective welfare, and fostered a sense of cohesiveness and teamwork (30% agreeing strongly; 54% agreeing).

Ratings for the other four dimensions were also high (68% for *strategic*; 76% for *educational*; 72% for *analytical*; and 66% for *political*).

The positive response to the *strategic* dimension shows that respondents believe their board effectively plans for the future of their organization. The positive response to the *educational* dimension shows that respondents believe their board takes the necessary steps to ensure members are well informed about the organization and the board’s own roles, responsibilities, and performance. The positive response to the *analytical* dimension indicates that respondents believe their board recognizes the complexities and subtleties in the issues it faces, and draws on multiple perspectives to handle these complex problems. Finally, the positive response to the *political* dimension indicates that respondents believe that their board effectively develops and maintains healthy relationships and communications with the Centre’s key constituencies and partners.

**Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of all responses by category**

Dimension	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Contextual</i>	176 (40%)	160 (36%)	81 (18%)	25 (6%)
<i>Educational</i>	95 (26%)	180 (50%)	67 (18%)	20 (5%)
<i>Interpersonal</i>	110 (30%)	198 (54%)	45 (12%)	12 (3%)
<i>Analytical</i>	109 (25%)	204 (47%)	94 (22%)	27 (6%)
<i>Political</i>	84 (23%)	157 (43%)	97 (27%)	26 (7%)
<i>Strategic</i>	111 (25%)	190 (43%)	102 (23%)	36 (8%)
<i>Aboriginal</i>	176 (35%)	248 (49%)	73 (14%)	9 (2%)

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## Conclusions on the questionnaire survey

Because the results were so positive for all dimensions, we did not do detailed statistical analysis of the survey. It is clear that respondents overwhelmingly thought highly of their boards' ability to govern effectively. This may be partly explained by a number of factors. First, all of the respondents were board members who had been selected to attend the NAFC's national conference and all were representing their respective boards. It is unlikely that they would have attended the conference if they held strongly negative views of their board. Second, the national conference environment was exciting and positive, and conference delegates were far removed from past conflicts. The atmosphere of the conference was energetic with enthusiastic support for the NAFC and the Friendship Centre movement. This was all conducive to a positive frame of mind.

Despite these limitations, participants clearly held a positive perspective of their boards and seemed satisfied with how Aboriginal values were interpreted in their agencies. For future research, we should expand the survey to include past board members and members who were not attending the conference. This would enable us to verify the results from our current survey.

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## 3. Findings from site visits to four Friendship Centres

### Overview

This section represents the heart of the research project and offers its most interesting and informative findings. We present and analyse information from in-depth interviews of leaders from each of the four Friendship Centres in Whitehorse, Victoria, Thunder Bay and Halifax. Our discussion is about more than "best practices"; it is a comparative description of the four Centres and the processes they employ to deliver services to their respective communities. These processes and practices were identified by the members of each board as contributing to its success. These practices are what they personally define or identify as "best practices".<sup>6</sup>

Each of the Centres is an incorporated nonprofit organization and must comply with the regulations of their provincial legislation. Hence, they operate as most other nonprofit organizations, Aboriginal or not. They hold annual general meetings; the membership elects a board of directors; minutes are taken and motions are moved. The participants in this study wanted to impress upon the researcher their knowledge and competent skills in running a sizable nonprofit organization in a modern and complex society. We present their stories and insights that they wish to impart to others. They willingly shared their wisdom. In the section, "Aboriginal practices and principles", they tell us the unique ways they have integrated their Aboriginal values and practices in the every operation of their Centres.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that "best practices" does not mean that these practices are the only approach to good governance. Each board has to contend with different social, political, and economic circumstances so a "best practice" for one board may not necessarily be applicable to another. Perhaps a better term would be "promising practice." That is a practice, which might be generally useful or may need to be modified depending on the local context of a friendship centre.

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## Introduction to in-depth interview study

The executive and staff of the National Association of Friendship Centres selected four Centres for participation in our study. Their selection was based upon the quality of the organization and strong board performance. Each Centre has a long-standing record of competent management and board leadership and has skilled and knowledgeable staff members. Each Centre offers a variety of programs and so are complex and significant sized service organizations. Finally, each Centre is in a different Canadian location so the study is national in scope. They are: the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre in Whitehorse, Yukon, the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, British Columbia, Thunder Bay Friendship Centre, Ontario and the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre in Halifax, NS. We conducted eleven in-depth interviews of 30 – 45 minutes with a sample of board members from each Centre and one individual is a member of the NAFC board of directors.

We established a relationship with a community researcher at each Centre who was knowledgeable about the organization and its leadership. These researchers were normally administrative staff and knew suitable board members for us to interview when we visited the Centre. The community researchers created a *convenience sample of key informants*; meaning that informed and knowledgeable research participants were selected. In social research, these procedures are accepted practices that ensure efficiency and effectiveness in resource allocation. Travel is expensive and the study could not afford unnecessary or unproductive interviews.

Because of their special knowledge, these community researchers were invaluable in providing “insider perspectives” and legitimacy for the outside researcher. This is critical in creating a trusting environment and opened the door to frank and honest research interviews. The community researcher met individually with each participant and asked 32 interview questions relating to five broad areas of board governance and leadership. Most interviews were conducted at a Friendship Centre or in a coffee shop; two were conducted over the phone. All face-to-face interviews were tape-recorded.

Seven of the interviewees were men and four were women (see Table 3, p. 10). Six were between the ages of 25 and 39 years and five were between the ages of 40 and 64. The researcher asked the participants the age category they were in rather than a specific age because some people were reluctant to state their precise age. In Table 3 (p. 10), we do list some that offered a specific age. All eleven had completed high school; seven had completed post-secondary education. Ten were employed full time and one had recently retired. They came from seven different First Nations.

### 1. Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon

In January 1961, plans were announced to build a meeting centre for Indians in Whitehorse. Funding for what was to become the Skookum Jim Memorial Hall came out of the estate of Skookum Jim Mason, one of the co-discoverers of gold in the Klondike. In his will, he established a trust fund to be “*devoted towards furnishing medical attendance, supplying necessities and comforts to Indians in the Yukon Territory, and towards assisting needy and deserving Indians in the said Territory in any way or manner said trustees may*

**Table 3: Personal profile of in-depth interview participants**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Ancestry</b>	<b>Yrs. of Board Service</b>
<i>Male</i>	49	High school	Full time	Ojibway	17
<i>Male</i>	32	Post secondary	Full time – Power engineer	Ojibway	1
<i>Female</i>	57	High school and some community college	Recently retired – Director of Service Commission	Klinket	15
<i>Female</i>	Almost 40	2 post-secondary degrees	Full-time – Lawyer	Taigish / Klinket	2 1/2
<i>Male</i>	49	Masters degree in Library and Information Science	Full time – Family and Children’s Services	Metis	9
<i>Male</i>	38	High school	Full time – Journeyman / Carpenter	Cree	5
<i>Female</i>	40 – 64 category	Post secondary	Full time – Executive Director	First Nation – Whitehorse	1 1/2
<i>Male</i>	34	High school	Full time – Economic Development	Coastal Salish	1
<i>Male</i>	40 – 64 category	Post secondary degree in Economics	Full time – 2 jobs	Mi’ kmaq	5
<i>Male</i>	25 – 39 category	Post secondary degree – working on Master’s thesis	Full time – Government	Malaseet	1
<i>Female</i>	25 – 39 category	Post secondary	Full time – Lawyer	Malaseet	1

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*deem best*” (from an unpublished history paper of “Skookum Jim”).

Today the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre is a vibrant organization that is strongly rooted in its vision of responding to the needs of the community. With a staff of thirteen, and strong participation by volunteers and elders, the Centre offers programs in recreation, pre-natal nutrition, traditional parenting, and student training and financial services. It also runs an Urban Multipurpose Aboriginal Youth Centre (UMAYC) and a First Nations youth diversion program (an early intervention program for First Nations youth in conflict with the law and their families). During the 2003-2004 fiscal year, the Centre received funding of nearly \$1.6 million and ended the year with a surplus of \$87,000. Over the years the Centre has served as the creative spark for 14 other programs and organizations, all of which subsequently became independent of the Centre.

## **2. Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC), Victoria, B.C.**

The VNFC is a dynamic organization with an executive director and a staff of between 38 and 42 who provide services to urban Aboriginal people in the greater Victoria area. Daily, between 250 and 300 individuals use VNFC’s services, which include 30 programs (e.g., covering health and social services, cultural and community activities, career and employment, and youth). For the fiscal year 2003 – 2004, the annual budget was approximately \$2.5 million, with a payroll of \$1.3 million. Although funding comes from a variety of sources, the main funders are the provincial and federal governments.

The VNFC has been in existence for 35 years and has grown to be one of the largest service providers in the Victoria area. The Centre has experienced many changes during its history, including severe cutbacks in funding from the government and changes in leadership. One employee who has been with the Centre for the last 14 years has worked under eight different executive directors.

The task of running a Centre like VNFC is complex. With a large staff and many clients come multiple perspectives about what should be done and how it should be done. Although the Centre believes that it is able to meet the many needs of its constituency, it is often challenged by lack of funds or by limitations placed on it by the major funding agencies.

## **3. Thunder Bay Friendship Centre, Thunder Bay, Ontario<sup>7</sup>**

This Centre provides a wide variety of support services to Native people residing in, migrating to, or traveling through the City of Thunder Bay, with emphasis on preserving and enhancing Native culture. Programs involve recreation and social activities. There are also special projects such as the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Program that provide assistance, food and clothing for families and the Aboriginal Family Support Program.

## **4. Mi’kmaq Native Friendship Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia.**

For over thirty-one years the Mi’kmaq Friendship Centre has been part of the Halifax community. It has grown from a three-person operation to an organization with a staff of 46 with 57 active volunteers, a budget just under \$2.3 million and

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<sup>7</sup> The information on this friendship centre and that of Halifax are brief because there was not enough time and funds to complete the study.

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a payroll of \$909,000. The Centre operates 21 programs, including a Native Employment Assistance program, the Kitpu Youth Centre, the UMAC Regional Desk, the Mi'kmaq Child Development Centre, an adult learning program, and the Mainline Needle Exchange / Direction 180 program.

## Summary of governance practices

This section covers 12 topics pertaining to board governance. These are:

- selection and structure,
- composition,
- meetings and procedures,
- decisions and decision-making processes,
- the role of leadership,
- management structure,
- vision,
- strategic planning,
- communication,
- Aboriginal practices and principles,
- board training, and
- board commitment and benefits.

Under Aboriginal practices and principles, the following are explored:

- holistic world-view,
- importance of community,
- Aboriginal leadership practices,
- Aboriginal governance practices,
- traditional spiritual practices, and
- cultural tensions in decision-making.

At the end of the discussion of each topic, there is a short summary statement in italics that highlights the key concerns of the preceding discussion. Some of these statements are recommendations; most are not

specific to Aboriginal leadership but suggestions for other Centres concerning governance and leadership issues. These summaries are the points and concerns that the key informants emphasized as relevant and important. Some are “best or promising practices” and others are issues of concern about which board members of other Centres should be sensitive.

### 1. Board selection and structure

All of the Friendship Centres follow a standard procedure of nominating candidates for board member positions prior to their AGM. Most board members are elected. Some are appointed. Candidates for election must be “a member in good standing” with the organization. Elections are held at the AGM. After board members have been elected, the board meets to elect executive officers for the year. The executive consists of the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and, in some Centres, the past-president. At all four Centres visited, the executive meets between board meetings.

The boards of these Centres are similar in size, having 12 to 14 members. Each has created a position for a youth board member; each places a high value on the role of youth. Where the boards differ is in the length of term for directors and the constituency represented by appointed board members.

In Halifax, the board members are elected annually for a one-year term but normally serve for 2 or 3 terms. In Whitehorse, they serve two-year terms. In Victoria board members are elected for three-year terms. Each Centre has the possibility of electing new people to the board and re-electing incumbents. This allows for new perspectives while ensuring a measure of continuity.



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Some board members are appointed to ensure that the board reflects the unique context of its Centre. For example, the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre makes one board position available to a member of the Skookum Jim family, recognizing the ongoing role that Skookum Jim's vision and estate has in the work of the Friendship Centre. It also appoints two elders in recognition of the importance that its constituency places on traditional cultural values and the contribution that elders make to strengthen community life.

The Victoria Native Centre has two positions on its board for representatives of the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations. This is because, although the Centre is located in downtown Victoria, it is housed and works on land that traditionally belonged to the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations.

The Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre appoints five board members in order to meet three of the objectives in its constitution and bylaws. These objectives speak of working in harmony with, supporting and assisting, and co-coordinating efforts with other organizations in order to help people of Aboriginal descent. The nominating committee names five supporting Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal agencies that relate to the Centre (such as family services, parent resource Centre) and the elected board approves an appointed representative from each of these agencies. The list of agencies represented on the board may change from year to year, depending upon the agency's involvement with the Centre.

### **Summary statement**

- **Most board members are elected; some are appointed.**
- **Elected members include a mix of new people and individuals who have a longer history and knowledge of the Friendship Centre.**
- **The board selects an executive from the elected board members.**
- **The appointed members reflect the unique context and purpose of the local Friendship Centre.**

### **2. Board composition**

Interviews with board members at each of the four Centres reveal that it is not enough merely to fill positions. Board members must have skills and qualities that can contribute to maintaining and improving board governance.

Boards make a variety of decisions related to personnel, policies, finances, and programming. It is therefore helpful to have board members who are familiar with those areas of decision-making and who bring wisdom, knowledge, skills, and networks of resources to the board.

Two board members stated that their board were being more proactive in identifying the kind of skills and expertise they needed and were actively searching for individuals with those attributes. In one case, the board agreed that it needed additional financial expertise. During the year, it identified someone with that expertise and waived the constitutional timeline for electing this person in order to bring her on immediately. Another board agreed that a nominating committee that recruits potential board members before the AGM could strengthen the

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board and give greater assurance that all positions are filled.

In summary, the research participants reported that, in order to make decisions that are in the best interests of the community, boards need individuals who:

- come from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., personnel management and administration, financial, social services, legal, etc.);
- are open minded and visionary;
- have a strong knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues;
- are respected in the community;
- have knowledge of how the various levels of government operate;
- have a vision of self-reliance and self-determination; and
- are concerned about the welfare of the Friendship Centre community rather than about personal gain.

In each of the Friendship Centres, the board is made up of men and women. Women are in the majority on the boards in Whitehorse, Victoria, and Halifax, whereas men are in the majority in Thunder Bay. There is no difference in the roles and responsibilities of men and women (see Table 4, p. 15).

## **Summary statement**

*Boards that govern well:*

- **are made up of a variety of people who bring a diversity of knowledge, skills and wisdom from their workplace and life experience; and**
- **collectively use their diverse knowledge and network of resources to make governance decisions that are in the best interests of the organization.**

## **3. Meetings and procedures**

The boards of all four Centres meet either monthly or bi-monthly at their centre facility and take the summer off. One board member commented that this routine contributes to strong board decision-making. The VNFC has a standing meeting time at 6:00 p.m. on the last Tuesday of the month. The other Centres did not seem to have a certain day of the month designated but plan meeting dates according to need and board members' schedules.

The gathering of the board is more than just a time to "take care of business." At VNFC, board members come to meetings directly from work and so the Centre provides them with a casual meal prior to their meeting so they can relax and visit. Before its AGM, the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre served a salmon supper; the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre served seafood chowder. Serving meals is one way for these Centres to show board members that their contribution is appreciated, and the social time is an important opportunity for forming friendships and strengthening the collegiality of the board.

Although the board structure is formal, one board member described the interactions among individuals, as "*less formal – people are friendly and laid back.*"

**Table 4: Board structure in the four Friendship Centres**

Centre	Tot. Number of Board Members	Number of Elected Board Members	Number of Appointed Board Members	Male / Female	Youth
<i>Whitehorse</i>	14	11	2 Elders – non-voting, 1 rep. from Skookum Jim family	Elected – 2 / 6 2 female Elders	1 – Vacant
<i>Victoria</i>	14	11	1 rep. from Esquimalt F.N., 1 rep. from Songhees First Nation	Elected – 4 / 7 F.N. positions vacant	1 – Vacant
<i>Thunder Bay</i>	9		Elders	7 / 2	1
<i>Halifax</i>	15	10 elected yearly	5 reps. from related agencies	Elected – 4 / 6	1

Board members from a number of Centres stated that “we know each other,” “we are friends” and “among peers” and that this contributes to a relaxed yet productive working atmosphere.

**Summary statement**

*Boards that govern well:*

- **establish a pattern for meeting regularly that ensures the needs of the organization are addressed but is also respectful of the availability of individual board members;**
- **develop a meeting format that allows for continuity and accountability; and**
- **allow time for board members to get to know each other, enjoy being together and so improve their willingness to work together.**

**4. Decisions and the decision-making process**

Boards of Friendship Centres make decisions about:

- programs (e.g., initiating and approving new programs, setting direction and guidelines for programs, and problem solving with existing programs);
- finances (e.g., approving the budget, reviewing contribution agreements, developing sound accounting practices, looking for funding, etc.);
- personnel (e.g., assisting in the hiring of staff and giving guidance to the executive director without micro managing);
- policy development (e.g., identifying the need for specific policies, developing policies); and
- community involvement (e.g., being involved in broader Aboriginal issues that affect First Nations).

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Each of the four Centres uses Robert's Rules of Order for decision-making; motions are made and seconded, and votes are taken following discussion.<sup>8</sup>

The following is a summary of comments made by board members about the decision-making process and observations made by the community researcher:

Sometimes board members receive an e-mail or report ahead of time alerting them to an issue and providing background information so that they can come to the meeting prepared for the discussion. At other times, an issue is simply presented at the meeting. When a decision is needed about specific programming, the executive director may invite a staff person to make a presentation to the board.

After an issue has been raised or a request has been received, the board reflects on what direction, if any, is provided by the organization's constitution and bylaws, policies, or mandate. Questions are asked of the person presenting the issue/concern and of other board members. Although some board members expressed concern that this process does not reflect traditional Aboriginal ways of decision-making (i.e., consensus building, informal and non-bureaucratic), many agreed that this format works because it allows ample time for discussion, for hearing everyone's voice, and for achieving consensus.

One board member was initially quite surprised at how formal the decision-making process was. After being on the board for one year, he now plans to propose a practice that he has used in other settings: everyone sits in a circle and, after an agenda item is discussed but before discussion is closed, everyone in the circle is asked to comment.

Another board member said that on his board he is willing to go out on a limb and ask "dumb" questions on issues under discussion. He does this to ensure that all board members understand the full implication of decisions in terms of their impact on the lives of staff or clients.

At a board meeting of another Friendship Centre, one board member played "Devil's Advocate," presenting positions that seemed contrary to what others were saying. In a follow-up conversation, a staff person commented that this individual often "disagrees" in order to help the group look at the larger implications of decisions they are making.

After an issue has been thoroughly discussed, the board may:

- agree by consensus and make a decision or recommendation;
- defer a decision to a later date so that they can receive more information and input; or,
- assign a sub-committee to do further study, work out the details, and return to the board with a recommendation.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert's Rules of Order is a handbook of parliamentary procedure that is often used to conduct formal meetings within any organization. The rules in this book were designed for use primarily by bodies other than national and state legislative assemblies. In 1876, General Henry Martyn Robert (U.S. Army) first published the procedures and they are loosely modeled after those used in the United States House of Representatives. Rules of Order are available at the website: [www.constitution.org/rror/rror--00.htm](http://www.constitution.org/rror/rror--00.htm) (Last retrieved July 27, 2005)

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Once a decision has been made, the work is assigned to the appropriate subcommittee unless it is program- or staff-related, in which case the executive director is responsible for ensuring that staff implement the decision.

Board members at each of the Centres reported that they had no formal process for evaluation, but that some evaluation nevertheless occurs. For example, a board may:

- reflect on and evaluate decisions if it receives feedback from the community;
- evaluate programs from a financial perspective;
- take time to reflect on recent decisions when looking at the business arising from the minutes at regular board meetings and evaluate whether they could have responded differently;
- take time at the end of the year to reflect on what has and hasn't been accomplished; and
- do evaluations as part of strategic planning.

**Summary statement:**

*Good decision-making is a process that involves:*

- **clear presentation of an issue, concern, or new idea with appropriate background information;**
- **discussion of the issue in light of the mandate, goals, and policy of the Friendship Centre;**
- **thorough discussion, ensuring that each board member has input;**
- **discussion of opposing or alternative perspectives in order to develop a fuller appreciation of the decision being made;**

- **being accountable and transparent to the Centre members; and**
- **a plan for implementing and evaluating the decision.**

### **5. Role of leadership**

There is no single pathway to excellence for nonprofit organizations, but high-performance organizations typically reveal strength in four areas: 1) external relations with other groups, 2) internal functioning, 3) leadership, and 4) internal systems management. Of these four areas, leadership is the most important (Light, 2002). This study allowed us to observe leadership (i.e., the executive director and the board) in action.

#### **Role of the executive director**

The Executive Director brings his or her personality and style to the position, but all share common leadership qualities. These include:

- a clear sense of where the organization needs to go;
- the ability to work hard, juggle many demands, but still “hang loose”;
- decisiveness;
- the ability to work well with staff (e.g., to develop clear expectations and high standards for staff, to empower staff to take responsibility and initiative for their work, to affirm the positive work of staff in a variety of settings, to be respected by the staff); and
- the ability to develop and cultivate good external relationships and networks with other agencies (e.g., to advocate for the organization and be assertive in identifying its needs and what it has to offer when looking for funds; to work to ensure that

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the organization is respected by its constituency and the larger community).

The constitution and bylaws of the VFNC state that the executive director “*shall be responsible for the general direction of the affairs and operations of the VNFC...and...be responsible to the Board for his own administrative conduct.*” The Mi’kmaq Native Friendship Centre states that its executive director “*shall be responsible for directing all staff*” and for making recommendations concerning staff to the board of directors.

All board members whom we interviewed had a working knowledge of their executive director’s work and reported that the executive director’s role was:

- to give overall leadership and direction to the Centre and to manage its employees, programs, and finances;
- to report to the board on his or her work and the work of the staff;
- to implement board decisions; and
- in conjunction with the board, to represent the organization in the community at large.

One board member used the image of an hourglass to describe the executive director’s role: concerns of the staff are funnelled through the executive director to the board, and communications and decisions from the board are funnelled through the executive director to the staff.

### ***Role of board leadership***

Board members were very clear in understanding that the role of the board is to ensure that the direction and the vision of the Centre are carried out. This means:

- giving direction to the executive director and, through the executive director to staff, overseeing personnel, programs, and new initiatives;
- ensuring that funding is in place and being responsible for financial decisions and good accounting practices;
- developing policies that contribute to well-managed programs and healthy staff and community relationships;
- ensuring that the organization is involved in the larger community and the broader Aboriginal issues that affect all First Nations;
- providing services in agreement with the NAFC; and
- ensuring that these decisions are made and carried out in a transparent manner.

The VNFC recognized at one point that board meetings were becoming too long and the agenda could not be finished in one evening because there were so many lengthy discussions over specific issues and decisions. It decided to establish sub-committees that would meet between regular board meetings, work through the details of an issue or decision, and then report to the board. This still allows for discussion and final approval by the board. Table 5 (p. 19) lists the Centres, their sub-committees and composition of the committees

**Table 5: Board Sub Committees and Composition**

Centre	Sub Committees	Committee Composition
<i>Whitehorse</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finance, personnel, and resolutions</li> <li>• Recreation</li> <li>• Elders</li> <li>• Capital management</li> <li>• Traditional parenting</li> <li>• Dept. of training</li> <li>• Justice</li> <li>• Skookum Jim Trust Fund</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Director</li> <li>• Board members volunteer to sit on these committees along with staff members</li> </ul>
<i>Victoria</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finance and development</li> <li>• Personnel and training</li> <li>• Constitution and bylaws</li> <li>• Nominating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Director</li> <li>• 3 board members, 3 staff members</li> </ul>
<i>Thunder Bay</i>		
<i>Halifax</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel and finance</li> <li>• Events committee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Director</li> </ul>

## 6. Management structure

Following are examples of management structures of two of the Friendship Centres:

### **Victoria Native Friendship Centre**

In the past, the Centre was run from the top, with the executive director and the finance officer (staff member) controlling all major decisions with little participation from other board members or staff. These two individuals held the power; very little trickled down to the rest of the organization. The Centre has since developed a more inclusive

management approach by creating a management team of both board and staff members, much like an “executive committee.” There is a team leader and key individuals from the Centre’s various program areas. The team plans and sets direction for the various programs together with the executive and the program directors, and with input from the board (board members are encouraged to attend staff meetings). Such a collaborative approach has led to increased ownership of, and responsibility for the programs by all members of the Centre from board to staff members.

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VNFC's finance committee is a good example of team management. It is made up of the executive director and financial officer (both staff), the president of the board, the treasurer, and other board members. It meets monthly to review the finances and make recommendations to the board. The finance officer explains the budget and highlights the issues each month, but the board makes the final decision to approve the finances.

### **Skookum Jim Friendship Centre**

At one point the board was micro-managing the work of the staff, the programs, and the budget. Program managers had no responsibility for developing and monitoring the budgets for their programs. Then, a new auditor recommended changes that would involve program managers more closely in budget development. The executive director, along with the financial officer and the board, now work with program managers in making decisions about their programs and budgets, and in securing funds. Program managers are given professional development opportunities that equip them to manage and monitor their budgets, supervise their staff, and maximize their potential. This has led to new creative energy and inter-department partnerships. For example, the staffs of the UMAC, Traditional Parenting, and Recreation programs, which are all youth-oriented, now work together to provide the best possible supports and services for youth. The board no longer micro-manages staff but instead focuses on new initiatives to fulfill the vision of the Centre and receive program or staff reports and personnel reviews through the executive director.

At the Centre's AGM, the president of the board commented that the management changes have

strengthened the team, creating better relations between staff and board, and improved financial controls, leading to a \$87,000 surplus.

### **Summary statement:**

*Boards that govern well develop a team management approach that:*

- **encourages program managers and staff to take ownership of their programs by setting direction, planning, and initiating new ideas;**
- **equips program managers and their staff to establish, monitor, and seek funds for their budget; and**
- **makes clear the roles and relationship of staff, the executive director, and the board within the management structure.**

## **7. Planning**

Planning is a complex process, and board members said it is one of their most challenging responsibilities. It takes time, and scheduling can be difficult when staff and volunteer board members are preoccupied with the more immediate demands of the organization and its many other commitments. One board member reported that although planning occurred at his Centre in the past, the recent focus has been on solving problems rather than looking at the future.

Planning can be challenging when funding happens on a yearly basis and when funding within one program is from a variety of sources, some of which may not be available the next year. Centres that receive their core funding from the NAFC can also apply for additional funds from government for specific programs such as prenatal programs, diversion programs, UMAC, traditional parenting programs, and recreation programs. Funding comes with terms



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of agreement that ensure that the funds are used only for designated programs.

### ***Victoria Native Friendship Centre***

Like many organizations the VNFC felt like it was always one step behind or just barely keeping ahead of the many demands on its staff and programs. Two questions were raised: Is there a better way to plan instead of just reacting or responding to demands? And, how did our people traditionally respond to the demands in their environment and prepare for the unexpected?

The Centre recognized that although its clientele was diverse, they all shared a traditional, seasonal work or rest rhythm that could be used for their planning of the Centre's programs and future goals. A key component in developing a suitable long-term planning process was recognition that all Aboriginal groups are traditionally connected to the land. Fall was traditionally a time of action and preparing for the winter. Winter was the Potlatch season, a time of celebrating and of naming children. Spring, with its new life, was a season of renewal and preparation. Summer was a time of leisure, socializing, and enjoying the outdoors. This traditional rhythm had a balance of more intense work times (spring and fall) and more relaxed times (summer and winter).

Based on this traditional rhythm, the VNFC developed a seasonal evaluation timeline. Spring is now the time to get proposals ready at the Centre. Summer is a time of leisure, when people take holidays and the work slows down. Fall is action time when the proposals and plans are implemented. Winter is a time when the Centre acknowledges sponsors, its community partners, volunteers and Board members

with suppers and luncheons. This timeline removes the anxiety of always being on the go; there are periods of intense work but there are also more relaxed times. The planning begins with the executive director and board of directors setting a one-year and five-year plan for the Centre. The plan is then fleshed out with the management team and key staff over a number of meetings in order for maximum input and "buy-in."

### ***Skookum Jim Friendship Centre***

A process for planning has been initiated where the board and staff meet every one or two years with the help of a facilitator. The purpose is to look at where the Centre is at, where the Centre is going, and to set a future vision for the organization. Such strategic planning has addressed issues of improving relationships internally in the Centre and improving productivity, programs and services.

#### ***Summary statement:***

- **Boards that govern well recognize that planning is important but difficult work that gives direction not only to what will be accomplished but how it will be accomplished.**

### ***8. Aboriginal practices and principles***

Friendship Centres have their feet in two worlds: the world of Aboriginal culture with their values and traditional ways and the non-Aboriginal world that does not always understand or appreciate these values and traditional ways. To function effectively, Centres must bridge these worlds.

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## **Aboriginal world view**

The Aboriginal worldview includes *respect for people in all stages of life*. This is reflected in board governance by ensuring that the organization draws on the wisdom of elders. At the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, this means having two honorary elders on the board who observe how the board operates and comment on what they have seen. According to one board member, *“They can be quite blunt and are not afraid to say that they think the Board is wrong.”* The board also looks to elders for input on hard decisions. During difficult discussions, the elders may pray to help people refocus on the “big picture.” Another board member stated that by sharing their wisdom, *“the Elders give us the tools we need to make decisions.”* Although the SJFC board is the only one of the four in this study that has a designated role for elders, the other boards said that an elder may be elected a board position and that individuals on the board may seek the advice of an elder on specific issues.

**Youth** representation is also important. Each of the four Centres we visited has a position on the board for a youth representative, but at the time of the site visits, Halifax was the only Centre that actually had someone in that position. However, youth programming is a major part of the work of each Centre and all provide opportunities for youth leadership. For example, at the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, there is a person, between the ages of 18 and 24, on staff in each program area.

Seeing **individuals holistically** is part of the traditional Aboriginal worldview. Although individuals who come to the Centre may have a specific need in one area, they are not treated as numbers to be

pushed through the system but as emotional, spiritual, and physical beings. Even after their “need” has been addressed, they are still welcome to participate in the Friendship Centre community. One board member stated that this Aboriginal understanding empowers individuals who may have fallen between the cracks in other organizations. Since members view people in an inclusive and holistic manner, this Aboriginal practice is empowering. However, at times this emphasis on the total individual created tensions with funding agencies providing money to address a specific concern or need. They do not see the reason for an individual to remain in a program once his or her need has been addressed.

At the **board level**, understanding individuals holistically means respecting and recognizing that board members are volunteering their time and have other commitments outside of the board. Board members are expected to attend meetings regularly, but if a family need prevents attendance and the board is duly informed, that is respected and accepted.

## **Importance of community**

Board members reported a strong sense of community on their boards and in their Friendship Centres. Building this sense of community happens in a number of ways:

- Meals at the Centre provide an opportunity for board members to interact informally with each other and with employees, clients and members of the Centre.
- Centres hold recognition suppers to acknowledge and thank board members, volunteers, staff, and elders for their contribution.

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- The contribution of individuals is recognized with gifts and awards.

### ***Selection of Aboriginal leaders***

One board member said, *“Traditionally leaders were chosen from within the clan but even when family members were chosen the emphasis was always on choosing individuals because of their skills and their concern for the community.”* Two Friendship Centres said that in the recent past, this led to nepotism and did not serve the organization well.

Board members consistently said that there is nothing Aboriginal about their process for identifying leaders. However, upon reflection, several board members said that although there is nothing Aboriginal about the formal process, they try to find individuals who are respected in the community and who have a strong knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues. One board member said that identifying a person’s Aboriginal culture and language awareness is important when interviewing and hiring staff.

### ***Aboriginal governance practices***

At all four Centres, board members identified consensus as an Aboriginal practice that contributes to sound decision-making. It is important that everyone is given an opportunity to speak before a decision is made. Coming to consensus means not only hearing what people are saying, but also considering people’s feelings and respecting their perspectives. Members of the board at two Centres said that although they may have heated discussions, but when the meeting ends, *“We are still able to go out for coffee or drive home together as friends”* and *“we try our best to make sure that no one goes away [feeling] isolated.”*

### ***Traditional spiritual practices***

Some Centres have staff and clients who come from diverse Aboriginal backgrounds while other Centres may reflect mainly one predominant group. Different groups have different traditions and symbols. Centres that have respectfully incorporated traditions into their meetings report that these are powerful tools that enhance the work of their board. These traditions may include:

- beginning and ending meetings with a prayer, sometimes with everyone standing and holding hands;
- smudging at the beginning of meetings and making an offering of Sweet Grass when there are difficult decisions to make; and<sup>9</sup>
- passing a scared feather or other object (talking stick or stone) when speaking.

### ***Cultural tensions and frustrations***

One board member stated that all of his Centre’s programs have a traditional perspective and that all decisions must uphold traditional values. In order to accomplish this, the board and staff must communicate and cooperate.

Board members reported that there is tension between Friendship Centres and government agencies and departments. Sometimes government funds come with complicated and bureaucratic strings attached that do not give Friendship Centres the flexibility they need to develop and provide culturally appropriate service. The funding agencies do not

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<sup>9</sup> A “smudge”, refers to the smoke that is used to cleanse us. It removes negativity or “bad spirits” that might be around us. According to Aboriginal tradition, a person must smudge before taking part in a sacred ceremony. Otherwise they may bring these spirits with them into the ceremony.

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always appreciate the cultural context, which results in conflicts and tensions. For example, the funding source may allocate funds for educational upgrading for single parents but the young mothers really need education about parenting or assistance with childcare so that they can participate in the program. One board member wondered whether this tension is compounded by limited budgets, which make it difficult for overworked staff to meet funders' deadlines.

Although the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre faces these tensions, it is fortunate that the political dynamics in the Yukon are quite different from those in other jurisdictions. The Yukon has 14 First Nations, some of which are self-governing First Nations that have completed land claims. The active presence of Aboriginal peoples in the Yukon helps influence peoples' awareness of Aboriginal people and their culture. There is a difference in the ways and means Aboriginal people select their priorities, objectives and implement their programs.

Tensions can also arise from the variety of Aboriginal cultures among employees, clients, and community members. According to one board member, "*We try and resolve them through respect for our neighbour.*"

**Summary statement:**

*Incorporating Aboriginal principles and practices is an essential part of being an urban Aboriginal nonprofit organization; however, it can mean different things to different agencies depending upon the local community. Some essentials include:*

- **holding an Aboriginal worldview that values the contribution of all people, involves youth representation, respects elders and views people holistically;**

- **maintaining traditional spiritual practices and traditions relevant to the local community;**
- **recognizes and attempts to ameliorate cultural tensions and conflicts; and**
- **uses traditional practices in leadership selection and decision making.**

## 9. Board training

Only the board members from two of the Centres reported that they provide an orientation to new members. These members listed the following practices and resources that enhance board effectiveness:

- orientation to their roles and responsibilities as board members by a resource person or consultant;
- orientation to the programs of the Centre, given by staff members over a number of board meetings;
- reflection on the collective strengths and weaknesses of the current board, with the help of a consultant;
- copies of the Centre's constitution, bylaws, and policy manual;
- understanding the history of the Centre;
- making use of board orientation provided by other organizations (e.g., the Volunteer Bureau in Whitehorse);
- an orientation manual; and
- on going training in specific areas such as financial planning, staff development and hiring practices to equip the board for responsible decision-making.

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**Summary statement:**

**Boards that govern well recognize that board orientation and training provides a foundation for informed governance and decision-making.**

**10. Board commitment and benefits**

Board members commented repeatedly that they served on the board of directors of their Centre because they believed in and wanted to be part of an organization that delivers programs and activities that help to make a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal people. Many also believed that serving on a board is the best way to make sure that the needs of the community are met.

The personal and extrinsic benefits that board members receive are closely linked to their ongoing commitment to their Friendship Centre. Here is how some board members expressed their feelings about serving on their board:

*“I am a bit pale-skinned, and growing up was rough in my First Nations community because of that. But at one point I became a human being, and I like to think I have some value and can now contribute to my community.”*

*“When I first came to this city, I wasn’t the most respected individual but now I feel like I’m at an age where I can contribute something. Being on the board makes me feel connected to the community.”*

*“Personally, I gain experience from being on the board and this, in turn, translates into opportunities for me in other areas.”*

*“I am very proud to be on this board. I have been able to mould some of the things that happened over the years in this Friendship Centre to make it an interesting, vibrant organization...I have been a volunteer forever and I enjoy doing it because it is a better place now than when I was growing up.”*

*“A board member was my very first Indian dance teacher. I danced in this basement... My life has been about community contribution. My accomplishments are not my own. I recognize they are a combination of collective interest in me as an individual and so this is one small but hopefully significant way I can give back to that which has been given to me...”*

*“Being on the board gives me the opportunity to stay involved in Aboriginal issues and participate in national Aboriginal concerns and promote Aboriginal culture... The Friendship Centre as it has evolved is like a family. You become close to the people you work with and volunteer with.”*

*“Some people have hobbies. My hobby is volunteering and helping people, either individually or as a group. I get gratification from seeing things done.”*

Many board members have a strong family or community identity with the Centre on whose board they serve. Some grew up attending the child and youth programs of the Centre and now, as adults, express their gratitude by participating on the board. Long-time board members have weathered with

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growing pains and crises of their Centres. They have learned from its problems and want to ensure the ongoing health of the organization; some, therefore, continue to be involved after 10, 20, or even 30 years of board service. Other, more recent, board members are involved because they are committed to improving life for Aboriginal people in cities and to passing on Aboriginal traditions and culture to their own children and to the next generation.

**Summary statement:**

*Commitment to the organization stems from:*

- **a positive association with the Centre;**
- **a strong belief that the organization benefits the Aboriginal community; and**
- **a belief that one has skills and abilities to contribute to addressing those needs.**

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## 4. Conclusions

As our study demonstrated, there are active, well-managed Aboriginal Friendship Centres operating in 117 cities and communities across Canada. These Centres provide a host of social, recreational and educational programs for Aboriginal peoples living in or passing through communities where these Centres are located. Some are large, complex organizations with budgets of over \$2 million. Their doors are open to all, regardless of Aboriginal ancestry. Each day, the staff and volunteers face a diverse range of social situations requiring great tact, skill and knowledge. Sadly, they encounter the ugliness of blatant racism and discrimination yet; they rise above these constraints offering acceptance and hope for their members. These Centres celebrate the rich traditional heritage of Aboriginal peoples, instil pride, and preserve Aboriginal values and culture.

The leadership of these organizations (i.e., their board of directors and senior management) continuously deal with insecure funding. They creatively tap every available resource “begging” for money from federal departments, provincial divisions, city governments, and private agencies and foundations. To be successful in obtaining such funds for their programs and having locally appropriate programs to meet the needs of their clients requires the Centre’s leaders to be effective in governance. Good leadership translates into efficient Centres that plan and run successful programs.

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In our study, we attempted to identify the “best or most promising practices” in governance based on information from four successful Friendship Centres. We wished to understand how their boards work and to what degree they incorporate Aboriginal culture and values in their operations.

We found that much of what the board members do is similar and applicable to all nonprofit organizations regardless of cultural background and is nothing unique to Aboriginal agencies. In this respect, it is interesting how the legislation regarding incorporation of “normal” business practices and decision-making have shaped Aboriginal organizations. In many ways, they face the same issues and ways of operating as any other organization.

However, a subtle but important difference does emerge and it is the respect given to Aboriginal ancestry, customs and values. Aboriginal people experience personal and systemic racism in their daily lives and finding an organization where their cultural heritage is valued and respected is inviting and comforting. Persons of First Nations or Aboriginal background want services and programs from other Aboriginal persons (Durst & Bluechardt, 2001; Durst, 1994). Much of the comfort comes from symbolic meanings such as posters, banners, paintings, and relationships with persons of similar background and experience. It is subjective. These subjective meanings and experiences are important and cannot be replicated by persons without this background. Much of what is unique is imbedded in the environment, subtle but felt by all and this sensitivity to Aboriginal values is carried over into the operations of the boards of these Friendship Centres.

Out of our exploration of the four Friendship Centres, we have summarised a set of recommendations for “promising practices” that other Friendship Centres might find valuable. We have based these recommendations on the insights given to us by the board members we interviewed. As we said earlier, although many of the recommendations may not seem different to approaches taken by any effective nonprofit board, there is a strong but subtle influence of traditional Aboriginal practices of working together for consensus.

## Recommendations

- Boards should be representative of a Friendship Centre’s constituency in order to reflect the local context and purpose of the Centre.
- Election of board members should be staggered in time so that there is overlap between old and new members. This allows for continuity in board operations between the outgoing board and the new one coming in.
- Boards should not only reflect the diversity of its constituency but also incorporate their diverse skills, knowledge, and wisdom. This will enable boards to govern more effectively by bringing multiple perspectives and experience to bear on the complex issues that they must address.
- Boards should provide orientation and training for new board members to help create a foundation for informed governance and decision-making.
- Timing of board meetings should be organized so that members can fit them in easily into their schedules.

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- Prior to the start of formal board meetings, members should meet informally over refreshments so that people are able to talk and exchange ideas in a relaxed atmosphere. This builds collegiality and friendships and a willingness to work together in the formal meeting to follow.
  - Meetings should have clear agendas, which are based on input from not only board members but also others among the Centre's constituency who feel there are important issues to address.
  - Presentation of issues should be clear and members should be provided with sufficient background information for them to make appropriate decisions regarding the issues of concern.
  - All board members should be allowed to speak on an issue if they so wish, so that multiple perspectives are aired and common agreements reached that take different viewpoints into account.
  - Boards should encourage collaborative decision-making that allows input and co-ownership over planning of a Centre's programs by program managers and their staff. This builds skills, capacity and enthusiasm in a Centre's staff to meet their program goals.
  - Boards should be transparent in their operations and clearly define the members roles and relationship with the rest of the staff in a Centre.
  - Boards should do strategic planning for the long-term operations of a Centre. In order to do effective visioning for the future, boards should allow input from a wide range of its constituent members and staff. This ensures that future goals and the actions to achieve them are appropriate and are supported broadly within the community a Centre serves.
  - Boards should attempt to incorporate Aboriginal approaches to governance and decision-making in terms of:
    - representation of interest groups in the community such as women, elders, youth;
    - ensuring incorporation of spiritual and other traditional practices relevant to the community that the Centre serves; and
    - utilizing traditional approaches to selection of leaders and group decision-making.

The challenge for boards is to create a framework for governance that enables them to work effectively with non-Aboriginal organizations and institutions and meet the diverse traditional needs of its members and staff in terms of planning and decision-making. The four Centres we visited in this study demonstrate that this is possible. However, it requires energetic and innovative boards that are sensitive to their local context but also have the skills and confidence to operate in a wider Canadian context.

The boards and staff of the Friendship Centres we visited demonstrated the ability to work effectively using a blend of traditional Aboriginal practices together with those used more widely in Canada. This is an impressive achievement by a group of dedicated, skilled, and hard working individuals.



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It has been a pleasure for us, the researchers to work with them. However, our study has only scratched the surface and more research needs to be done particularly on the relationship between culture and decision-making. Such research will enrich everyone's understanding of how to integrate different approaches to governance in order to create innovative and effective boards for Friendship Centres.

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