
ESTABLISHING AN INTERNAL ABORIGINAL EMPLOYEE NETWORK FOR SASKATCHEWAN BOARDS OF EDUCATION



 SASKATCHEWAN
School Boards
ASSOCIATION

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PURPOSE

A sense of belonging is essential to creating an environment that attracts and captures the human need to feel comfortable and secure. Developing the conditions to support the inclusion of Aboriginal employees within Saskatchewan school divisions – amongst the approximately 12,000 teachers and 8,000 support staff – may require some effort. Creating an Aboriginal Employee Network comprised of First Nations, Métis and Inuit employees can establish a favourable and supportive environment in a system where Aboriginal employees represent the minority. An Aboriginal (advisory) network can be one component of an overall Aboriginal strategy of the school division to recruit and retain qualified Aboriginal talent.





BENEFITS OF AN ABORIGINAL NETWORK

Aboriginal Employee Networks have proven successful within provincial crown corporations with numerous benefits to the employer and employee creating a win-win situation for both. The network establishes a framework for active participation of Aboriginal employees to influence positive developments within the organization and the individual.

Some of the benefits of an Aboriginal Employee Network include:

- Assists the employer through identifying discriminating practices and employment barriers that previously were not identified, and recommending solutions;
- Represents a support system and orientation mechanism for new Aboriginal employees;
- Opens opportunities for Aboriginal employees through mentorship, career-pathing and career advancement;
- Provides a forum for Aboriginal employees to share experiences and concerns that are relevant to them in the workplace;
- Creates a supportive environment with a sense of belonging and ties to other Aboriginal people within the school division thus reducing feelings of isolation;
- Supports the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal teachers and support staff through employees who are dedicated to the workplace. Members can provide important connections and the right contacts within the Aboriginal communities and institutions;
- Provides a forum for employees to make recommendations and influence school policy;
- Encourages professional development for Aboriginal employees and leadership opportunities through their involvement with the network. Aboriginal talent can be recognized through employees who take on leadership and coordinating roles. Planning, organizing and implementing activities are management skills that can be demonstrated through membership activities;
- Links the school division to the Aboriginal communities, resources, cultural activities and potential partnerships. The network team can bring a focus on specific activities that profile significant Aboriginal holidays, events and activities which may be worked into school activities and lesson plans;
- Establishes a two-way communications network throughout the school division between Aboriginal employees and school division management;
- Provides an internal First Nations and Métis cultural resource;
- Positive initiatives by the network can benefit Aboriginal students, as well through pride in their heritage and developing role models.

To establish an internal Aboriginal Employee Network, certain factors must be in place to ensure a fully functional and sustainable network.

SCHOOL BOARD AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

An internal Aboriginal Employee Network can succeed only if it is supported through the respective Boards of Education and senior administration. A formal board resolution will entrench the Aboriginal Employee Network as a critical base upon which to build best practices. The tone must be set at the top and flow throughout the school division to ensure acceptance and support for the network. The Aboriginal Employee Network should not be a stand-alone initiative but should be integrated into the fabric of the school division as an essential element to its success.



BUILDING A BUSINESS CASE

Researching and documenting the rationale in support of establishing an Aboriginal Employee Network and other special measures will provide the reasons as to why an Aboriginal strategy is necessary. Working towards a representative workforce where the working-age population of the broader community is represented throughout all occupational and classification levels in Saskatchewan school divisions does require great effort.

The focus is on the Aboriginal population due to the following:

- Saskatchewan has the second largest Aboriginal population per capita in Canada;
- The Aboriginal population is the fastest growing labour force in the province;
- Aboriginal people are significantly underrepresented in Saskatchewan school divisions labour force.

These factors along with the retiring baby-boomers exiting the school system over the next five to ten years indicates timely attention to working together in building an Aboriginal workforce through various means.

The business case is an important element in laying the groundwork for launching an internal Aboriginal Employee Network. The network may be one of many initiatives that school division can catalogue in their Aboriginal strategy document. The Aboriginal strategy is sanctioned by the respective Boards of Education, which should be monitored and reviewed on a quarterly basis.

UNION SUPPORT

Union support for an Aboriginal Employee Network is necessary in order for it to be successful. This support can be promoted through a “letter of support” from organizations of employers within their workplaces (i.e. CUPE, SEIU, SGEU, STF, Steelworkers, Deer Park Employees Association, etc).



STRUCTURE

Every network needs a champion. An individual should be given the responsibility and authority required to establish and coordinate the internal Aboriginal Employee Network activities. Ideally, this should be an Aboriginal person who has the passion, qualifications and leadership skills for the work required. This individual, a “Network Champion,” must have close working relations with the divisions’ Human Resources Unit. This provides the best environment to support a team effort in driving the network. The Network Champion should have reporting responsibilities directly to senior management or the respective Board of Education. This should be a position with influence to demonstrate the importance of the network and to ensure continued support.

The broad mandate and governance structure of the network may be defined by the school division in conjunction with the Network Champion. The ongoing work of setting up the network will be to identify network members willing to serve on the leadership or executive team depending upon the size and composition of the school division. The Network Champion works with the leadership team who have specific roles and responsibilities with direct links to the membership.

The Network Champion may become part of a larger Aboriginal working group comprised of network representatives from the other school divisions across the province. This broader structure may be a mechanism to share best practices, information and expand network activities. The Aboriginal Government Employees Network (www.agen.sk.ca) is an example of a larger provincial network dedicated to promoting a supportive environment for Aboriginal employees within the public sector workplace and raising awareness on Aboriginal issues.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

A communications strategy is required to successfully launch the Aboriginal Employees Network, as a component of an overall divisional Aboriginal Strategy. Explaining the strategy and benefits of the network should be communicated among all stakeholders, building support and commitment. This is a critical role of the Network Champion. Launching the network can be linked to activities such as National Aboriginal Day or other cultural events, broadening the significance for staff and students alike.

Make it attractive to become part of this team. Identify and market the benefits of belonging to the network. Special recruitment days can be planned to encourage new employees to sign up. First Nations and Métis employees must play an active role in establishing and growing the network.

VOLUNTARY SELF-DECLARATION

A system for employees to voluntarily self-declare as an Aboriginal person – that is either as First Nations, Inuit or Métis – is essential. The school division can use this information in building a business case, identifying the current percentage of Aboriginal employees in comparison to total divisional employees. The Aboriginal percentage can be further compared to the provincial Aboriginal total population from the 2006 Census – 14.9 percent. Statistics can clearly show that innovative action is required to increase the Aboriginal workforce representation.

The self-identified Aboriginal employees listing is the mechanism through which to begin building the network. All Aboriginal employees are eligible to become members of the network but membership is voluntary. Individuals have the option of indicating their involvement with the network through formal means, such as a consent form upon hiring. Consent provides the means to communicate with the Aboriginal employee and inform them of network events, information or feedback. Respect for the confidentiality of the individual is of utmost importance.

For employees who believe that self-declaration is an important part of this, then we should ensure that legislation supports the collection of this data. The present Human Rights Commission Code does not allow the collection of this data.





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Internal Aboriginal Employee Networks, specific to each school division, would work well given the large geographical areas covered by school divisions throughout the province.

Focus groups are an excellent mechanism to facilitate discussion in setting up the network. A one or two day session with division Aboriginal employees and human resource support can set the ground work and identify the building blocks for the network. A working group can be established to work with the Network Champion on developing the mission, vision and values statement, and draft Terms of Reference that explain how the Aboriginal Employee Network will operate. These draft documents are brought back to the membership for input and approval at a later date.

Network leaders or executive members required to manage network activities can be done on a volunteer or election basis. These individuals work closely with the Network Champion who coordinates activities, ensures administrative support, disseminates information and is the central communication link for network members.

Success factors that may contribute to the effectiveness of a network include adopting Aboriginal cultural concepts such as talking circles, use of elders, collective decision-making, holistic approaches, sharing and respect.

Annual General Meetings are important events in bringing the Aboriginal employees together for a common purpose. This group connectivity is important to sustaining the network. It can be an opportunity for employee professional development as identified by the members, updates on the networks activities, governance and direction for future events.

Growing the network can result in actively seeking out opportunities to engage in charitable events to help the community while encouraging a spirit of volunteerism among members.

CONNECTIVITY

An internal intranet is a mechanism to keep in contact with members and facilitate discussions. The network champion can share important information such as upcoming workshops or training opportunities, best practices, or Aboriginal news and cultural events. This practice makes members feel united and promotes cohesiveness. Unified group connectivity can also be conducted through conference calls, workshops and group activities.

The network can provide meaning, encouragement, support, and a sense of belonging and professional purpose. Welcoming new Aboriginal employees by telephone, letter or email and inviting them to join the network are other good practices.

RESOURCES

The network should be made a priority for the school division with proper resources identified to support it in carrying out the work that is required to establish and sustain it. An annual budget should be assigned to adequately support the work of the network.

Challenges experienced by some networks find that members are faced with both work and network commitments, which place added constraints on their time. Senior administrators must recognize the importance of network activities and allow time for employees to fulfill network obligations. This investment of time can result in more dedicated and content employees, which in turn will assist with employee retention.



CONCLUSION



Aboriginal networks have proven successful within a number of organizations and have established processes for others to follow.

SaskTel Aboriginal Employee Network (SAEN) is a voluntary network of SaskTel employees who are helping to foster a corporate culture and a representative workforce that reflects Saskatchewan's Aboriginal population. SAEN works on cultural awareness and projects such as E-Connect, which supports new Aboriginal employees as they integrate into the organization.

Saskatchewan Government Insurance has the internal Aboriginal Advisory Network (AAN), a supportive network for Aboriginal employees that aims to increase the understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture and issues.

In conclusion, the message is clear: To retain talented Aboriginal employees, organizations must be willing to fully embrace their culture, so that workers can exist in an environment where they feel connected to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees.



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