



GIMIWAN



A VISION2030 PROGRAM

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Case Study 2: The Learning by Doing Model

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Background

This case study details a wildlife management initiative between an ENGO and several First Nations communities. The ENGO is a science-driven organization and its key areas of focus include investigating conservation issues and opportunities, sharing evidence with key decision makers, and public advocacy and outreach.

The wildlife management project was initiated by Indigenous leaders who wanted to learn more about the species in their territories and end a harmful hunting practice that was taking place. While the project started with one community, it grew to include several nations.

The ENGO was invited to support the work due to their scientific expertise, a few years after the project was initiated. When interviewed, the ENGO representative noted that they had pre-existing relationships with community leaders and had spent considerable time in the community before they were invited into this work. According to the interviewee, these relationships and experiences meant that themselves and their team members “had some understanding about how we ought to conduct ourselves, especially with the honour of an invitation to do work that [the nation] had started.” Moreover, to the interviewee, a key measure of success is that their ENGO was invited into relationship again by the community, when they were asked to work on another project.

The project was successful because it achieved the nations’ goal to end the harmful hunting practice in their territories. More broadly, the interviewee attributed the project’s success to its transformational change, which happened through the resurgence of Indigenous law. Rather than seeking support from colonial governments, the nations ended the hunting practice by asserting a tribal ban on the practice, asserting their jurisdiction over their lands. The interviewee emphasized the significance of transformational change to decolonization in the following statement, “that change came not through a sort of colonial western science management channel [...] but instead it arose because these nations declared their values and formalized them in Indigenous law.”

The interviewee and their team are currently wrapping up their contributions to this project, specifically, data collection work that they have done with the nations for over a decade. Notably, the original project has since spurred new decolonial projects, also related to environmental management. More on the success of this project and the ENGO’s approach to decolonization are described below.

The 'Learning by Doing Model'

A key point raised by the interviewee is that decolonization is best learned, and practiced, by being in community. Moreover, the interviewee noted that learning decolonization by being in community is more effective than learning decolonization through ENGO staff training and workshops: "[A] much more effective way to learn decolonized practice is by engaging in decolonizing work in which the rights holders are calling the shots and asking us to do things for them." The interviewee characterized this approach as the 'learning by doing model'.

To the interviewee, being in community means showing up beyond the focus of a specific project. While most of the project work takes place in community, ENGO staff can show up for community by attending cultural events and governance processes. For example, the interviewee and their team members have attended a science and culture camp led by the community. While their team contributes some scientific education to the camp, they mostly learn about the nation's culture. This illustrates how the ENGO practices decolonization by showing up to community in a respectful manner and by decentring itself.

Additionally, the interviewee indicated that ENGO staff can attend governance events where witnesses are beneficial. For instance, the interviewee described being invited to attend, and showing up as a witness to, a testimony given by Indigenous leaders against a proposed pipeline project. The interviewee suggested that through being in community, ENGO staff are the recipients of capacity building by community members, learning "how to conduct ourselves as productive citizens of those communities."

Being in community also means building strong relationships, grounded in kinship. Importantly, the interviewee noted that establishing good relations goes far beyond merely the project at hand to include doing service in a variety of ways for the communities they have built relationships with:

[S]howing up for communities to do good work, but also to do other things that are important to communities that underlie the relationships that bind us together. And being witnesses at cultural events or governance events, or going fishing, or deer hunting with community members, that sort of stuff, is part of how we like to do work together and that we have learned to do work together. Because that's a [confidential nation] way of doing work together.

That said, the interviewee expressed that the learning by doing model can be difficult to practice, particularly for ENGOs that are just starting on their decolonization journeys. For ENGOs that are beginning to engage in decolonization, they might need to begin more distanced from communities and first learn the fundamentals necessary to engage in decolonial work. Additionally, the interviewee noted that this model creates additional labour for communities. Yet, they suggested that this approach can be rewarding, stating, "it's given us a really rich experience and fuelled our interests and passion for doing things the right way."

Best Practices for Decolonial Work

In describing their organization's approach to work, the interviewee highlighted several best practices that ENGOs can apply when engaging in decolonial projects. First, the interviewee indicated that their organization strives to avoid overpromising, but ensure they deliver, and even overdeliver, in their commitments to communities. They mentioned that, at times, ENGOs make promises to communities

that they do not deliver on once funds have been distributed, and even worse, do not show up once funds have run out. The interviewee suggested that these behaviours may be a consequence of decolonization becoming a buzzword that is linked to funding in the ENGO sector. Accordingly, the interviewee expressed that their organization is careful about what they promise to communities and emphasize not only delivering on their promises, but overdelivering on them. This is one approach ENGOs can take in order to build trusting relationships with communities.

Additionally, the interviewee emphasized centring Indigenous self-determination in their decolonial projects. They noted that in their work, they do not ask for anything from, or deliver anything to, the provincial government. Instead, their work starts from a place that recognizes and respects Indigenous self-determination. The interviewee emphasized these values in the following statement, “The province really is irrelevant given the fundamental place we start our work with: that the [community] are the rights holders of that territory and they should be the only ones making decisions about their landscapes and their wildlife.”

Respect for Indigenous self-determination also shows up in the way this ENGO approaches partnerships. In their partnerships, Indigenous leaders are the ones with decision-making power and the ENGO plays a supportive role, acting in service to the communities they work with. For example, when describing an instance where Indigenous leaders determined their values regarding a particular project, the interviewee described their organization’s role by stating, “that [direction] gave us as scientists and statisticians our marching orders to deliver the numbers that their cultural governance had requested.” This approach challenges conventional partnership models within the sector where ENGOs typically hold the power. By focusing on how they can act in service to communities, ENGOs can begin to redistribute their power.

Learnings

In terms of key learnings from their decolonial work, the interviewee suggested that ENGO staff should be mindful about the ways they conduct themselves in community. Specifically, their conduct should reflect a desire to build long-term relationships. To build long-lasting and meaningful relationships, it is necessary for ENGOs to show up for community beyond the focus of a specific project. The interviewee described their approach to conducting themselves in decolonial work by stating, “imagine that you want to conduct yourselves so well that you will be invited, and maybe even expected, to be in that community forever. So, it’s not drive-thru work that’s connected to a pot of money.”

Additionally, when asked what they would like to share with others in the ENGO sector, the interviewee stated, “if you do it right, it feels really good,” suggesting an emotional connection to the work. Moreover, the interviewee expressed that, when done well, the work can be personally enriching: “[Y]our personal life will be enriched if you do things well. Because if you do, you’ll be embraced by communities that are, in our experience, incredibly generous with their time and knowledge and humour and seafood and experience.”

Key Takeaways:

- The interviewee identified a ‘learning by doing model’ as a best practice for how ENGOs can approach decolonization.
- In this case study, the learning by doing model is applied to a project in which an ENGO

supported several First Nations to end a harmful hunting practice in their communities.

- Importantly, this project challenges conventional models of partnerships between ENGOs and Indigenous communities. Here, Indigenous leaders call the shots, while the ENGO acts in service to communities by delivering on their needs.
- The learning by doing model emphasizes practicing decolonization by being in community. This can include showing up to cultural and governance events, building relationships outside the scope of a project, acting in service to community, and centring community interests and leadership.