



LEARNING LIBRARY

Building Your Project Team

Roles, governance, and decision-making for Nation-led projects

The most technically sound, well-funded project will stall if the team behind it is not clear on roles, authority, and process. Getting team structure right is not about creating bureaucracy. It is about ensuring everyone knows what they are responsible for and how decisions get made.

CORE ROLES

Who you need and why

Not every project needs every role. Smaller projects may combine several into one person. The key is that every function is covered.

Role	Responsibility	Key question they answer
Project champion	Senior leader who advocates within governance structures	Does this project have the backing it needs?
Project coordinator	Day-to-day manager keeping the project on track	What needs to happen this week?
Governance lead	Ensures the project operates within the Nation's framework	Are we making decisions the right way?
Community liaison	Connects the project to the broader community	Does the community understand and support this?
Technical advisor	Specialized knowledge on technology and design (often external)	Is the technical approach sound?
Financial lead	Budgets, funding applications, financial reporting	Do we have the resources we need?
Legal advisor	Reviews agreements, protects the Nation's interests (often external)	Are we protected in what we're agreeing to?

On external roles
 Technical, legal, and financial advisors may be external. The critical thing is they report to the Nation's project team, not the other way around. The Nation sets direction. External experts provide specialized knowledge.

GOVERNANCE

How decisions get made

Define three levels of decision-making so not everything escalates to the top, and major decisions are not made without proper authority.

Level	Who	Decides on	Examples
Strategic	Council or designated authority	Major commitments and direction	Approving partnerships, committing resources
Project	Coordinator and governance lead	Implementation within approved scope	Selecting contractors, adjusting timelines
Operational	Coordinator and team	Day-to-day execution	Scheduling, site visits, deliverables

The project coordinator should provide regular updates to leadership. Monthly written updates and quarterly briefings are a common baseline. Information should flow both directions.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Growing your team over time

Start with what you have

One person available to coordinate? Start there. Define their role, support them with external advisors, and build capacity over time.

Use the project as a training ground

Procurement teaches financial management. Community engagement builds facilitation skills. Working alongside technical advisors transfers specialized knowledge.

Plan for transitions

Document processes and decisions as you go. Ensure at least two people understand any critical function.

Include youth and emerging leaders

Even in supporting roles, the experience they gain becomes institutional knowledge for future projects.

COMMON MISTAKES

What to watch for

No clear project lead

Without someone accountable for progress, tasks fall through the cracks.

Governance gaps

Too much council involvement slows the project. Too little creates governance issues. Define decision authority at the start.

Over-reliance on external partners

External advisors should support the Nation's team, not replace it. Define external roles as transition arrangements.

Not budgeting for the team

Coordinator salaries, travel, training, and admin are real project expenses. Include them in funding applications.

READINESS CHECKLIST

Is your team ready?

- Project champion identified with authority to advocate
- Coordinator assigned with defined responsibilities and adequate time
- Governance roles defined, including which decisions require council approval
- Community engagement plan with designated liaison
- External advisors identified or engaged
- Reporting and information flow between team and leadership defined
- Decision-making authority documented at all three levels
- Budget includes funding for team roles and capacity building
- Key processes and decisions being documented
- Plan for knowledge transfer if team members change

Working with Unify Partners

We help Nations build project teams right-sized for the work ahead. Whether you need help with governance structures, finding advisors, or building internal capacity, reach out at unifypartners.ca.