

Working With Nations

A guide for technical partners

Working with Nations is not the same as working with a municipality or a private company. Nations have their own laws, governance structures, and decision-making processes. Respecting these is the foundation of a real partnership. This guide is for the technical side of the table: engineers, developers, cleantech founders, and consultants who want to do this work well.

BEFORE YOU REACH OUT

Preparation that matters

Do your homework

Learn the basics before making contact. Territory, governance, priorities, existing projects. Showing up without this signals you have not invested time in understanding who you are approaching.

You are entering a relationship, not a transaction

A proposal to work together is the beginning of a relationship that may last decades. The trust-building phase is not a delay. It is the most important part.

Check your assumptions about decision-making

Nation governance often involves council deliberation and community consultation. These timelines are not inefficiencies. Your project plan should account for them.

Be clear about what you are offering and what you want

Clear proposals about what the project involves, what the Nation would contribute, and what the Nation would receive. Vague offers to "explore opportunities" waste everyone's time.

RED FLAGS

- △ Approaching multiple Nations with the same generic pitch
- △ Treating engagement as a checkbox for ESG reporting
- △ Leading with what the Nation can do for your project
- △ Assuming one meeting constitutes consultation

DURING THE ENGAGEMENT

How to show up well

Let the Nation set the pace

First conversations should be about listening, not presenting. Your solution may not be the right fit. Learning that early preserves the relationship.

Communicate in plain language

If you cannot explain your technology and proposal without jargon, you are not ready for the conversation.

Be transparent about costs, risks, and limitations

Nothing erodes trust faster than discovering a partner downplayed risks or inflated projections.

Respect governance and protocol

Ask how the Nation prefers to be engaged and follow that guidance. Do not go around established processes to speed things up.

Keep your commitments, especially the small ones

If you say you will send a document by Friday, send it by Friday. Small commitments are how trust is built and tested.

On community engagement

If the project involves community engagement, the Nation should lead or co-lead that process. Your role is to provide information, answer questions, and support the design the Nation determines is appropriate.

DATA SOVEREIGNTY

Respecting data rights

Data generated during a project does not automatically belong to the technical partner. The Nation should own project data, control how it is used, and have possession of it.

Your IP vs. their data

Your proprietary technology remains yours. The data generated by their project, on their land, about their resources, belongs to them. Draw this line clearly and early.

RED FLAGS

- ⚠ Contracts giving the partner ownership of project data
- ⚠ Platforms that lock Nations in to access their own information
- ⚠ Refusal to provide raw data exports
- ⚠ Vague data rights language

STRUCTURING THE PARTNERSHIP

Agreements that last

Element	What good looks like	What to avoid
Scope	Specific deliverables and responsibilities for both parties	Open-ended scope that expands without renegotiation
Data ownership	Nation owns all project data with full export rights	Partner retains data ownership
Decision authority	Nation authority over community-impacting decisions	All decisions default to the partner
Knowledge transfer	Written training plan with timelines	Vague training commitment
Exit provisions	Defined process with data handover	Lock-in clauses or no exit provisions
Disputes	Mutually agreed process with Indigenous mediation options	Defaults to partner’s home jurisdiction

THE LONG VIEW

Beyond the first project

The best partnerships do not end when the first project is commissioned. They evolve into long-term relationships where the technical partner becomes a trusted resource for future initiatives. This happens because the partner treated the relationship with the same seriousness as the technology, followed through on every commitment, and prioritized the Nation’s interests alongside their own.

Reputation travels fast in Indigenous communities. A partner that causes harm in one Nation will find it very difficult to build trust in another. The companies that do this work well find that one successful project leads to referrals, expanded scope, and doors opening across the country.

Working with Unify Partners
We sit between Nations and technical partners to help structure partnerships well from the start. If you want to get the relationship right, reach out at unifypartners.ca.