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The time for indigenous-corporate partnerships is now

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The presidency of Donald Trump and the reshaping of the United States' policies is creating many questions in Canada. Will Canada flourish or fare badly? How will our economy perform with major changes in direction by our biggest trade partner? All Canadians wonder whether they will be better off in a year's time or whether our economic relationship with the United States will meet new and unexpected challenges.

One solution to our ongoing economic uncertainty in Canada is to target, grow and amplify our partnerships between indigenous corporations and corporate Canada to accelerate employment, business and community investment.

The current situation for Canada's indigenous peoples is dismal. We struggle – Canada struggles – with dismal socio-economic statistics, including enduring poverty. Recently, the federal Auditor-General said Canada is “squandering” indigenous potential with its faulty systems. Past government policies created a dependency system that crippled our naturally entrepreneurial, innovative spirit and tenacity.

Last year, many Canadians watched the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report on the impacts of the residential schools. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau put forth a vision to restore the tarnished relationship with Canada's indigenous peoples. His resolve brought hope to many. One year in from the TRC report, what have Canada, industry and indigenous people done to create action? Some would argue nothing has been done. But that's a defeatist outlook.

Let's focus on what we can do and what we can offer by way of solutions to building prosperous partnerships. Indigenous Works was established in 1998 as the Aboriginal Human Resource Council. For nearly two decades, we have worked with the private sector to build human-resource strategies and inclusive workplaces. The Inclusion Continuum, a seven-stage roadmap to becoming an employer of choice for indigenous people, has been introduced to thousands of corporations and organizations globally.

Our new name reflects our expanded mandate to support the development of corporate-indigenous partnerships in Canada as we move into new industries, new technologies and innovation.

We are reaching out to companies and sectors that haven't been involved. Are indigenous people on your radar? Has your leadership put the opportunity for "indigenous partnership" on your agenda?

The majority of large companies are disengaged; they have no indigenous strategies and the indigenous opportunity is simply not visible. Consider this: Companies in the large-business segment employ 39 per cent, or 6.9 million Canadians (adjusted from 2011 Statistics Canada data). If 39 per cent of the indigenous labour force of 540,000 was employed by large companies, it would generate 210,402 indigenous careers.

Imagine gross domestic product growing by over \$200-billion over the next decade – our collective resolve could make this happen.

What can large companies do toward rebuilding Canada's relationship with its indigenous peoples? Here are five steps for corporate Canada to play its role in reconciliation. We call it the five steps to partnership prosperity:

- 1) Build the dialogue within your company. Corporate leaders, look at the TRC's Call to Action No. 92 to adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and resolve to educate your employees about indigenous issues.
- 2) Support education, training and skills development for indigenous communities that are long-term and transferrable. Concerted efforts are needed to grow opportunities for indigenous leadership and board opportunities.
- 3) Design and build constructive relationships between indigenous communities, industry and government. Employment, business and corporate social-responsibility partnerships are needed in a range of economic sectors.
- 4) Create economic partnership clusters as a way to achieve new scale and growth. Collaborative regional and national strategies will break down silos and result in stronger economic and social impacts.
- 5) Promote and support indigenous-equity participation and strategies supporting indigenous community control or ownership.

We invite you to have a conversation with your employees, management and board of directors about this five-step plan. We would like to know what ideas you come up with to execute these steps.

We are conducting a national baseline study to gauge the relationship between industry and Indigenous Economic Development Corporations. From the study, we will get numbers and

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definition on the relationship between corporate Canada and indigenous communities. We will develop tools and learning models to help create indigenous and non-indigenous partnerships.

We are working with inclusive leaders and partners such as GardaWorld, Willbros, Suncor and Goldcorp and entering new sectors with companies such as Rogers. We have welcomed several top Indigenous Economic Development Corporations into our Leadership Circle including Membertou in Nova Scotia, Cree Regional Economic Enterprises Co. in Quebec and Whitecap Development Corp. in Saskatchewan, to name a few. Our EDC membership generates more than \$1-billion in the economy; they are generating employment for all Canadians, averaging 40-per-cent to 60-per-cent employment of non-indigenous Canadians.

We need to get our indigenous partnership agenda moving forward more aggressively. We call on corporate Canada to work with us and for indigenous corporations and government to create partnerships for prosperity. We want to see authentic partnerships work better. I want to see people working together in every economic sector. I want to see a prosperous Canada for all. Let's make it work together. Visit us at indigenouworks.ca.