



# INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT REPORT

## INTRODUCTION

The following report outlines an engagement process commissioned by the London Chamber of Commerce in October 2021 with the Indigenous community in London, Ontario. Consultants from Kiinew Kwe and Senomi Solutions Inc. developed an engagement strategy with Indigenous Elders, community leaders, business owners, and community members to provide guidance to action for the Chamber in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action for businesses and corporate organizations.

As a leader in the London community, the Chamber sought to act on its responsibility to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and provide a platform for its members to join in the collective efforts. The outcome was the development of an Indigenous Best Practices Guide informed by this engagement process to share with Chamber members in their pursuit of individual and collective responsibility to the TRC Calls to Action.

## PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT

Consultants engaged with Indigenous community members in three phases that informed the final outcomes.

**PHASE 1**      **Network & Relations Interviews**

**PHASE 2**      **Sharing Circle**

**PHASE 3**      **Referral Interviews**

**PHASE 4**      **Outcome Report and Toolkit**

First, one-on-one interviews were held with participants identified through connections and relations of the lead consultant Tia Kennedy of Kiinew Kwe, a member of Oneida Nation of the Thames. This initial consultation provided guidance to further engagement strategies and identifying individuals who needed to be consulted. The second phase of the engagement process included an evening sharing circle. Participants were invited to a three-hour dinner and discussion on various topics such as Land Acknowledgements, and TRC Calls to Action #57 and #92 specific to businesses and corporate organizations. The discussions provided indepth considerations for better practices. The third phase of engagement included additional one-on-one interviews with individuals who were unable to attend the workshop but were important to informing the process.



The next section provides a summary of the feedback we received from participants, and an analysis of the emerging themes and recommendations. Additionally, a toolkit of resources was developed to begin the London Chamber and its members on a path toward Reconciliation.

## WHAT WE HEARD

Participants shared that they feel there is a lack of understanding of Indigenous life. They believe that the false narratives shared amongst settlers about Indigenous peoples have done great harm to them because of the lack of understanding, perpetuating stereotypes, and intolerance toward them. Participants shared that settlers approach reconciliation in a very distinctive manner. It is hurried, result oriented (box-checking), transactional and fails to understand that the very first step is relationship and trust building - and that this can take TIME. There is also a very distressing tendency to not follow through on commitments and statements. Indigenous peoples are engaged, and they spend a lot of time providing feedback, but often nothing happens beyond the engagement process.

They believe settlers are missing out on what Indigenous communities can teach them by not seeking to educate themselves about Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Participants believe Indigenous knowledge can provide an alternative and more holistic approach to the way businesses and corporations operate. They believe that businesses do not understand the ongoing inequity toward Indigenous peoples such as the designation of land (e.g., reserves close to landfills or polluting industrial sites, continuous treaty violations by government entities on Indigenous lands, ongoing Indigenous land grab, etc.) and the false narrative of Indigenous peoples as a burden and “outsiders” that are perpetuated so that these inequities can happen. Participants shared that Indigenous peoples are not raised to think individually and so they have a lot to share on how businesses can do better in a collaborative and respectful way. The desire for engagement and relationship building with Indigenous businesses and communities must be a long-term commitment, and not just for optics.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Participants were asked what they thought about land acknowledgements and their use at events that have become so common. Participants shared that they are sometimes triggered by them because they are just empty words with no evidence of action following the acknowledgement of their presence on stolen land. Participants believe land acknowledgements should not only be a statement of the traditional owners of the land, but it should also include a demonstration of actionable commitment or evidence of how the individual or organization has made efforts toward reconciliation. They emphasized the need for a discussion of what people are doing about reconciliation to be included in the land acknowledgement – what action are they taking? It was suggested that instead of a Land Acknowledgement, organizations should consider bringing in someone to offer some teachings, and learnings. They feel Land Acknowledgements can be overused and lose their meaning and intent when they are used at almost every internal meeting.

Land Acknowledgements are only the beginning, and organizations need to move past the starting points and into meaningful engagement about Indigenous peoples, their culture and ways of being and knowing.

## CALLS TO ACTION

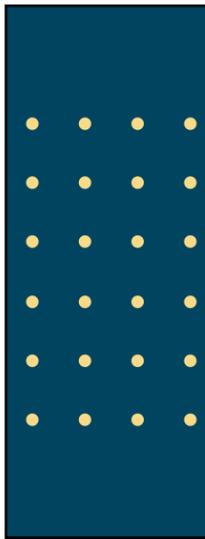
Participants shared that too often discussions of Indigenous cultural competency and TRC Calls to Action happen with staff or members of an organization who do not have the power to make decisions that lead to change. Participants believe there needs to be more demonstrative commitment from leadership and those who are in positions of power to lead reconciliation at their organization. They believe the impact of training and reconciliation efforts happen on the individual level but never make it to the systemic or structural level. Businesses need to review their organizational structure, their policies, rules and regulations and assess them for anti-Indigenous intent or impact.



Participants discussed the challenges that foreign investment and partnerships pose to Indigenous communities and business practices of non-Indigenous organizations. They would like the Chamber to use their platform to advocate and ensure Indigenous communities and businesses are not negatively impacted by these partnerships. Participants believe organizations and leaders that are not based in Canada have no knowledge of Indigenous peoples and their history. They don't know about residential schools, and they don't know or understand generational trauma Indigenous peoples hold, or the multigenerational belief systems Indigenous peoples hold.

Participants believe the Chamber has a responsibility to be agents of change and advocate for respect of Indigenous peoples and their rights. There is already a lack of generational wealth because of not having land due to land grab, and this needs to be acknowledged and considered when organizations embark on development and policy changes. The process that has contributed to this is complex and is easily dismissed by settlers. Indigenous land was stolen, the homes which Indigenous people live in on the reserves are not owned. Therefore, they cannot develop assets the way settlers can and pass generational wealth down to their children. It puts them at a disadvantage in the capitalist system they are forced to navigate that has set them up for failure in it.

Indigenous members shared that they were previously told they did not qualify to be Chamber members. There was no recognition or acknowledgement of First Nations communities' connection to the London business sector, and First Nations businesses were intentionally excluded for a long time. Participants feel the Chamber needs to make a statement of how the organization has historically excluded and intentionally kept out Indigenous businesses and they need to recognize and heal the harm that was done. Chambers of Commerce, as other settler organizations and structures, were deliberately set up to exclude Indigenous peoples from participating in the settler economy. Therefore, Chambers of Commerce have a significant role in this aspect of reconciliation by taking steps to assist Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs in gaining access to the broader economy.



Despite these barriers, participants shared that Indigenous businesses are innovating, growing, and learning together. They want to be able to develop and expand, and they believe the Chamber can support Indigenous businesses to do this as an action toward reconciliation. Businesses are always taking from Indigenous communities, never giving back to them. For example, studies have found that 60-70% of Indigenous income was spent outside the community (known as economic leakage), yet businesses are rarely investing back or buying locally from Indigenous vendors and businesses. There are many ways the Chamber and its members can support Indigenous businesses, especially by providing opportunities to support with capital.

Participants shared that when supporting Indigenous businesses, members must consider how they can make the Indigenous business owner stronger and make them better – but on their (Indigenous) terms and respecting Indigenous ways of support and relationship building through the process. They believe the London Chamber needs to focus on advocating with the City of London to ensure that the municipality protects Indigenous sovereignty, rights, and is playing an active role in ensuring there is a prosperous future for Indigenous peoples. Participants feel that the legal sector in particular can provide a range of advice and assistance. Including advice on how to set up and run businesses in the First Nation communities. For Indigenous businesses, the legal system can feel like it is always trying to undermine Indigenous rights.

Participants believe there is a narrative of Indigenous community businesses that needs to be debunked amongst non-Indigenous business circles: for example, tell the story of where tax exemption comes from and how it is actually applied. Participants feel there is something deeper here that needs to be addressed and businesses need to be educated about it. Relationships are key and humility and a commitment to unlearning and then learning from communities is crucial to the process of reconciliation.



## INDIGENOUS ADVISORY COUNCIL

Participants believe an Indigenous Advisory Council would be a good way to sustain relationships with Indigenous businesses and communities. The Council can help the Chamber and its members find ways to prioritize Indigenous businesses and communities through capital investment, networking, training, amplification, facilities, advocacy and funding. Participants shared that they appreciate this idea because it aligns with teachings of putting minds together as one. They emphasized the Council must be Indigenous led and have adequate power to influence decision-making with the Board and Chamber leadership.



The Chamber leadership must be willing to listen and be guided by the Council, and not seek to control the Council and the outcomes from engagement with them. Participants suggest that Economic Development Officers from each of the three First Nation communities in London should be on the Advisory Council, as they would have the experience and community connections to support the work effectively. Taking an inclusive advocacy approach, the Chamber should take an active role in supporting all Indigenous advocacy on matters related to indigenous business - such as tax reform, land ownership, etc. This would include other issues as well, such as homelessness, affordable housing, addiction, etc. The Chamber needs to stand up for issues that are of importance to Indigenous peoples and use their power through resources and means.

Participants believe that the Advisory Council could provide a reciprocal relationship on the following:

### INDIGENOUS KNOWING

### NON-INDIGENOUS KNOWING

Taxes and education opportunities on how to run Indigenous businesses	How to navigate colonial systems while maintaining Indigenous ways of doing business
Depreciation of land on reserve	Climate and land justice work that can support advocacy and preservation of land
Creating wealth	Find a balance from over development and not respecting the land

## GENERAL FEEDBACK

**Engagement with the Chamber:** Participants shared that Indigenous business members have attended the business after five events but were not getting any referrals out of it. Organizations in attendance did not take an interest in them and what they were offering, and they felt the return on investment to participate was not worth it for them.

**Indigenous employee support:** Representatives of organizations in attendance shared that they offer support services for Indigenous employees and can facilitate any employment challenges on behalf of the employer. They also have access to funded support services for Indigenous employees that can help with professional development and employment sustainability such as wage subsidies, bus tickets, technology support, and many other resources for Indigenous employees. Participants encouraged employers to hire more than one Indigenous employee and create a community of support within the workplace.

Participants believe that employers need to have more understanding of cultural humility and openness to different lived experiences, especially with Indigenous employees. Understanding privilege, and the power that comes with the kind of privilege afforded to settlers, but not Indigenous peoples is an important aspect of this sensitivity. There are cultural practices and ways of being for Indigenous employees that need to be accommodated. These may include participating in cultural ceremonies and events like Indigenous solidarity day and understanding that Indigenous employees may be living in multi-generational households and may have caregiving obligations for elderly relatives or young family members and may require accommodations to do so. Employers need to be flexible and provide remote working options when they can, also ensuring employees are supported with adequate technology and internet.

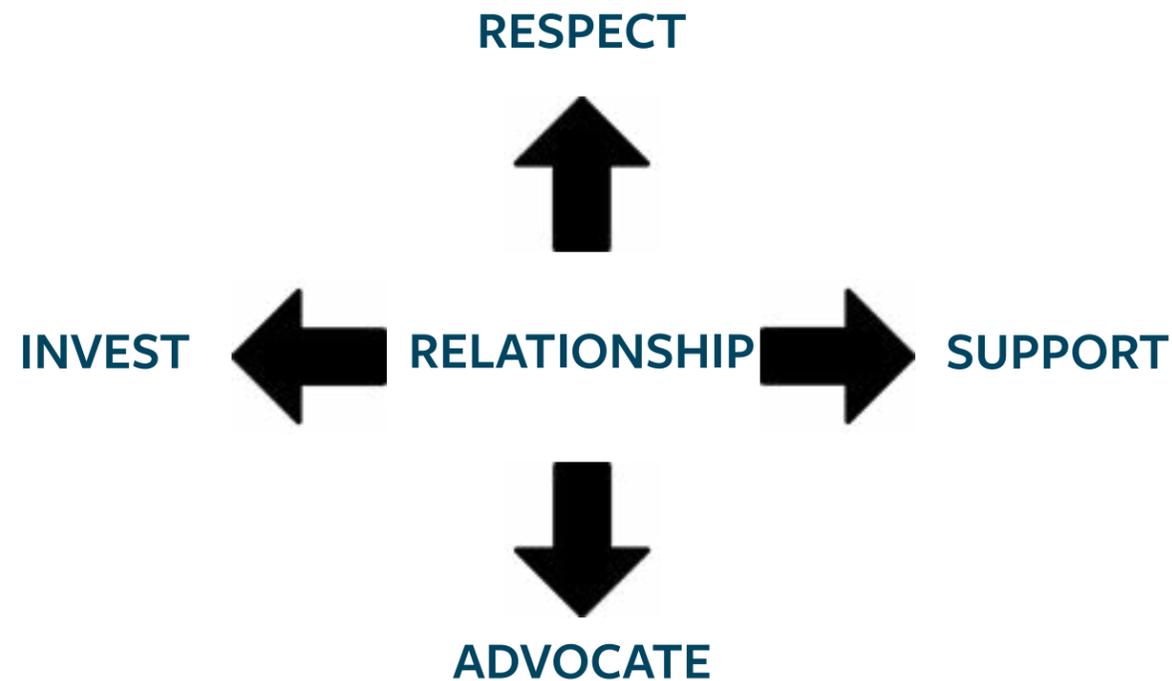
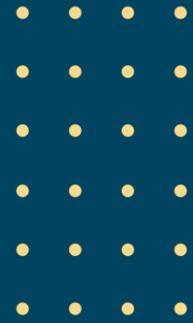
**Youth mentorship:** Participants suggested Chamber members can offer collaborative mentorship opportunities for Indigenous youth.



# INDIGENOUS BEST PRACTICES FOR BUSINESSES

# GUIDANCE FOR BUSINESSES TO RESPOND TO THE TRC

The following Indigenous best practices was informed through an engagement process with Indigenous businesses, Elders, and community members in London ON, on behalf of the London Chamber of Commerce. The Leadership and Board of the London Chamber sought to implement meaningful strategies in their response to the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action, and embarked on a process of listening, learning, and knowledge gathering. The best practices align with a central theme of relationship which is realized through actions that build **relationship** through four subthemes of **respect, advocate, invest, and support.**



Chambers of Commerce and member organizations need to conduct a thorough review of their organizational structure, including bylaws, policies, hiring practices and so forth. They need to embark on a process of decolonization that centers Indigenous inclusion and deprioritizes profit over people. The Strategic Plan needs to be examined to specifically ensure that the principles of Truth and Reconciliation, as well as Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) become part of the organizational ecosystem. Once in the Plan, the ideas set out in the section of the toolkit need to be embedded in the organization’s implementation plan.

A clear message from Indigenous peoples heard through our engagement was the need for the Chamber of Commerce to acknowledge the harms done in the past to Indigenous businesses through intentional exclusion and disregard, and to build relationships through trust and respect with Indigenous business communities. Through the commitment to a long-term journey of listening, unlearning, learning, and following the guidance of Indigenous Elders, community leaders, and business members, the Chamber of Commerce can begin the work of reconciliation.



# RESPECT

13

14

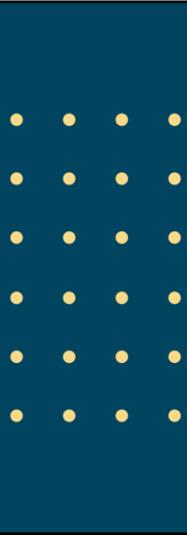
- The Chamber needs to share educational resources with members about Land Acknowledgements to ensure that they are not tokenistic. Instead of a scripted Land Acknowledgements, invite Elders or Knowledge Keepers to share stories and truth.
- The Chamber and members need to be flexible and adaptive to changing policy of “the way we’ve always done it” if they want to work respectfully with Indigenous businesses.
- The Chamber and member organizations can get involved in community programs that Indigenous organizations run.
- The Chamber and members need to be willing to get uncomfortable in the process of reconciliation by prioritizing Indigenous peoples - which will require them to sacrifice individual power and resources.
- Indigenous communities are tired of being asked to engage and then nothing happens. The Chamber and member organizations need to be sure they are fully committed to change before engaging in efforts of reconciliation.
- To really understand the communities the Chamber and members would like to work with, they must develop that foundational relationship built on mutual respect and trust by getting to know about the community. The Chamber and member organizations need to educate themselves on the Indigenous communities in the London region.

# INVEST

- The Chamber and member organizations should be encouraged to work with Indigenous organizations who offer recruitment and employment support for Indigenous employees. Members can hire from them knowing that the individual will be supported during employment.
- The Chamber and members should consider preferential procurement from Indigenous organizations and businesses where possible.
- The Chamber and members need to support Indigenous businesses and communities through donations to support Indigenous efforts or initiatives. The Chamber can share these opportunities with member organizations.

# SUPPORT

- The Chamber and member organizations can help Indigenous businesses thrive by partnering with these businesses.
- The Chamber should provide a platform for Indigenous businesses to showcase and share in goods and services in a locale such as Innovation Works.
- Members in the education sector can develop GED programming support tailored to Indigenous members.
- The Chamber and members can partner with member organizations who are doing the work of reconciliation such as Western University Indigenous Initiatives office, and sponsor or participate in initiatives and activities.
- The Chamber has many resources that it could offer to support Indigenous business needs. Through ongoing engagement and relationship, they can identify as shared by the Indigenous business or community and intentionally seek to meet the need and offer support.



## ADVOCATE

- The Chamber can facilitate education and training opportunities that member organizations can offer to Indigenous organizations and communities in the areas of business, entrepreneurship, GED equivalent, etc.
- The Chamber should advocate that internal/external contractors who work with Canadian organizations on economic development projects be educated about the Canadian context of Indigenous history, sovereignty, and rights. Member organizations need to ensure that economic development projects embed Reconciliation best practices that respect Indigenous autonomy, self-governance, self-determination, and preserve Indigenous culture.

