

## EXPERTS TALK

# How Proactive Indigenous Community Engagement Leads to Better Outcomes in Canada



Jeremiah Pariag

HDR Indigenous Engagement Lead [Jeremiah Pariag](#) has extensive experience cultivating relationships with underserved communities during the planning, design and construction of major infrastructure projects. Additionally, he is an Instructor at Western University, where he teaches an environmental management course with an emphasis on Indigenous engagement.

In this interview, he discusses the importance of engaging with Indigenous communities during the early planning stages to build trust from the start. He also explains the need for and benefits of Indigenous community involvement on critical infrastructure projects and how developing positive working relationships can benefit future projects.

## Effective Communication and Indigenous Outreach Strategies on Canadian Infrastructure Projects

When transportation agencies in Canada plan and design critical infrastructure systems, it's vital for project owners to consult with the public and stakeholders who may be impacted. Though many agencies have an established public and stakeholder outreach process, traditional engagement strategies don't always adequately identify the needs or address the concerns of Indigenous communities. Indigenous concerns related to traditional lands and treaty rights differ from general concerns, such as impacts on community character and construction-related effects. To effectively engage Indigenous communities, a more intentional and customized outreach strategy is necessary. It's important to understand that in Canada, the level of engagement with Indigenous communities is often determined by the agency or proponent. Therefore, teams need to be prepared to develop their own engagement protocols that are customized to their specific projects or organization.

### **Q. Why is it important to look beyond traditional engagement strategies to seek input from Indigenous communities on critical infrastructure projects?**

**A.** What we're seeing now is a direct link between project viability and Indigenous participation on projects in Canada. We've seen this in some infrastructure sectors for quite some time. Indigenous involvement on mining and energy projects has been common for several years, and recently we've seen Indigenous participation programs become more established on transit projects.

Historically, many mining and energy projects took place in less developed areas, so it was easier for government agencies and developers to recognize Indigenous perspectives due to the proximity of those projects to Indigenous communities.



However, we're now seeing a shift toward greater Indigenous engagement in urban areas. This shift reflects the increased role and strength of Indigenous communities in engagement processes when building comprehensive support is critical. What we've learned from these other industries is relevant to transit projects as well - if owners and project leaders don't put in the work to properly engage Indigenous communities, projects can face many hurdles.

In Canada, the government requires public agencies and private proponents to engage or consult with Indigenous communities who might be adversely impacted by, or have an interest in, a project. These impacts could be through the disruption of fishing, hunting and harvesting activities, or through disturbances to cultural and archaeological resources. While unconditional consent is usually not required, the preference of the government is for agencies to meaningfully engage Indigenous communities.

Public awareness and opinion are evolving as well, adding pressure to engage with and accommodate rightsholders. Media coverage has become more attentive to Indigenous communities, especially due to past Indigenous-related inequities and the recent and ongoing mainstream discourse related to atrocities at former residential schools in Canada. As a result, project proponents are recognizing they must be more proactive in their engagement efforts prior to proceeding with infrastructure development.

**Q. How do you initiate conversations with Indigenous communities to lay a foundation for building trust and support for ongoing engagement?**

**A.** It's difficult to effectively work with Indigenous communities without first having a relationship that's built on a foundation of trust. Building this trust requires early and ongoing engagement and a deep commitment to understanding and respecting Indigenous knowledge and practices.

What I've found to be effective is taking the time before a project begins to identify the general geographic area of the planned infrastructure and determine which Indigenous communities might be impacted. There are usually governmental resources that can help. Next, I recommend meeting with leaders and representatives from each of those communities to develop personal relationships and better understand their key challenges and priorities.

An early understanding of the needs and concerns of each Indigenous community allows owners to make needed design or construction phasing adjustments before they prompt costly work stoppages.

Clear, consistent communication channels and the inclusion of community members in the decision-making processes have proven effective on many of my infrastructure projects. This inclusion fosters a sense of mutual ownership and respect, which is vital for successful project delivery.



*Indigenous communities conducted archaeological investigations at the site of Canada's first parliament building in Toronto during an early phase of the Ontario Line.*

To ensure that trust extends beyond the current project, it is crucial to document and honor any commitments made. Continual engagement with the community after one project's completion provides long-term benefits and facilitates mutual learning, strengthening the relationship for future initiatives.

Moreover, both Indigenous engagement practitioners and proponents must recognize that the outcomes of current projects — positive and negative — will influence future engagements. Approaching each project as one part of a long-term relationship with Indigenous communities positions all parties for continued success.

**Q. What is most important when choosing a partner to support Indigenous engagement on infrastructure projects?**

- A.** Choosing the right partners is crucial for any project, especially when working directly with Indigenous communities. It's vital to be aware of the history and track record of potential partners in terms of their experience and success with Indigenous communities.

Many consulting and communications firms, unfortunately, do not have a strong track record of effective collaboration with Indigenous communities, and partnering with such firms can jeopardize project delivery and the trust-building process.

One practical strategy is for infrastructure owners to actively involve Indigenous communities in the selection of partners. Before finalizing any decisions about bringing on a partner consulting firm, reach out to the Indigenous communities affected by the project and ask for their feedback on their past experiences with the potential partner. If the feedback is positive, it's likely that you've found a suitable partner. However, if the feedback is negative, it may be prudent to reconsider your options. This approach not only ensures that you are making an informed choice but also a first step in demonstrating respect and a commitment to genuine collaboration with the communities involved.

**Q. How do early and ongoing discussions with Indigenous communities impact an agency's project budget and schedule?**

- A.** For transportation asset owners, every single day of a project schedule matters. Early engagement with Indigenous communities does require an initial financial investment, but this investment can reduce negative press and improve public opinion. It can lead to smoother project delivery and reduce the risk of extended timelines and cost overruns due to project redesigns.

When building longer term relationships, it's also important for a project owner to be aware of any changes to the governance structure of Indigenous communities. A new chief and council are elected every few years. Meeting with and developing relationships with these new community leaders, even past the planning phase, can help keep project needs aligned with potential changes that come with their priorities and preferences.

**Q. Looking to the future, what can infrastructure agencies expect when it comes to Indigenous community participation in projects?**

**A.** Achieving buy-in from Indigenous communities for infrastructure changes or improvements will only become more important. The prominent role of Indigenous communities may lead to these communities having a more vested financial interest in transportation projects.

I wouldn't be surprised to see representatives from Indigenous communities taking a governance or oversight role on project committees. Technical advisory committees and community advisory committees have been a core element of infrastructure projects for years, and as reconciliation becomes a reality for many agencies, governance roles such as Indigenous advisory committees are on the horizon.

It's not widespread yet, but I've started to see this in Canada in many unofficial capacities, especially on projects where there are significant environmental or archaeological concerns.

Finally, we will likely see increasing involvement and close review of projects from Indigenous communities in general. They recognize that the impact of an infrastructure project extends far beyond its completion. This includes not only the immediate infrastructure but also the resulting developments such as new housing, expanded water services, enhanced power transmission infrastructure and additional roadways. Indigenous communities are increasingly keen to ensure that these projects not only respect their traditional lands but also bring tangible benefits to their communities.

*Indigenous communities conducted archaeological investigations at the site of Canada's first parliament building in Toronto during an early phase of the Ontario Line.*





**Q. Describe your career journey in Indigenous community engagement.**

**A.** My first job in consulting was delivering the engagement processes for public and stakeholder programs on environmental projects, mainly in the energy, mining and water sectors. That work enabled me to build strong relationships with Indigenous communities across Canada.

As time went by, the public and media started to become more vocal about Indigenous-related inequities and, following the mainstream dialogue about the atrocities uncovered at residential schools, there was a marked change in how proponents approached Indigenous engagement. Almost overnight, there was a shift toward empowering Indigenous communities on all projects across all industries, and this empowerment will only continue to build.

As I happened to be working in the consultation and engagement field, and that field was most closely involved with Indigenous participation when these shifts were taking place, the infrastructure projects I worked on provided me with the opportunity to build on my existing relationships and develop close, lifelong bonds with Indigenous community leaders. This has led to Indigenous engagement becoming a focal point of my career.

**Q. What advice do you have for others interested in Indigenous community outreach and engagement?**

**A.** First, understand that Indigenous communities are not homogenous. Every Indigenous community has their own unique preferences for engagement, as well as their own distinct priorities. Therefore, it is essential to remember that engaging communities begins with a willingness to listen and learn. For example, on a single project, one community might have ecological concerns, another about language preservation while another is troubled with water quality or economic funding of their community. It's important to understand each of the communities impacted and how a project can work within the scope of their needs.

Next, keep in mind that you cannot build a strong relationship with an Indigenous community overnight. Approach your engagement with patience, honesty, and genuine respect and understand that effective Indigenous engagement leads to better relationships and better projects.

And lastly, it's essential to remember that taking shortcuts when it comes to engaging with Indigenous communities does more harm than good. If mistakes are made along the way, relationships can be ruined, significant reputational harm might occur, or projects could be put at risk. It's always better to put in the time that it truly takes to deliver Indigenous engagement well.

*Experts Talk is an interview series with technical leaders from across our Transportation program. Each interview illuminates a different aspect of transportation infrastructure planning, design and delivery. Contact [HDRTransportation@hdrinc.com](mailto:HDRTransportation@hdrinc.com) for more information. Visit [www.hdrinc.com/insights](http://www.hdrinc.com/insights) regularly to gain insights from specialized experts and thought leaders behind our award-winning, full service consulting practice.*