Red Fox Healthy Living Society:

Improving Employment Opportunities for Aboriginal Youth

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Abstract

This report was compiled by a group of six students from UBC's faculty of Kinesiology. Through the school, we were partnered with Red Fox Healthy Living Society to observe and participate in Active Play and other youth events for 8 weeks. Following this, at a monthly Youth Council meeting a group interview was conducted with three UBC students and six Red Fox youth leaders to add the voices and perspectives of the youth leaders to quantitative research and qualitative observations we compiled during our experience collaborating with Red Fox. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate that skills youth leaders gain through participation with Red Fox's many youth programs contribute to their employability and give Aboriginal youth opportunities to be active in their communities, serve as role models, and engage in positive health behaviours which will give additional advantages in today's competitive job market where too often Aboriginal applicants are barriered or ignored.

Introduction

Canada's aging population brings unique challenges to economic stability. As the proportion of individuals of working age (15-64) decreases, employment rates are projected to fall and the probability of labour shortages will increase (Department of Finance Canada, 2012). The Department of Finance (2012) suggested that investing in productivity and ensuring that a sufficient number of Canadians have sufficient skills to meet labour demands will help to moderate the impact of population aging on Canada's economy. One major area for improved employment rates is in under-represented groups of Canadians, such as those with little education, recent immigrants, Canadians with disabilities, older aged Canadians, and Aboriginal people (Department of Finance Canada, 2012). In 2001, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was 18.0%, nearly three times the national average of 6.5%, and although the job growth rates of Aboriginal groups is higher than non-Aboriginals (23% versus 11% from 2001 to 2005), there is still a significant disparity (Luffman & Sussman, 2007).

Although other cohorts of Canadian youth are decreasing in population, Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 30 have been identified as the fastest-growing population segment in Canada (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). In fact, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2012) believes that "they play a very important role in filling jobs left vacant when older workers retire". However, lower education levels and high incidence

of poor health are just a few of the barriers that prevent Aboriginal youth from fully participating in the labour force (Luffman & Sussman, 2007). Mental health is a significant concern; the leading cause of death in Aboriginals aged 10-44 is suicide and self-inflicted injury (Frohlich, Ross, & Richmond, 2006). Butterworth and colleagues (2011) found a significant interplay between employment and mental health, with mental health improving as individuals moved from unemployment to employment, and Frolich, Ross and Richmond (2006) asserted that programs to increase the employment of Aboriginal youth should be of utmost concern to moderate the inequalities in health outcomes.

Culturally-sensitive programs to increase education and facilitate the school-to-work transition are needed to increase the employability of Aboriginal youth. The proportion of the Aboriginal population with less than high school education is decreasing, while the number of Aboriginal people with a university education is increasing (Luffman & Sussman, 2007), which is has resulted in a decrease in unemployment. Furthermore, Marshall and colleagues (2013) found that

> "Aboriginal students who established ongoing supportive relationships with older family members, mentors, or community champions often reported that these connections were significant factors in helping them to make cross-cultural adjustments, learn new institutional systems and procedures, overcome challenges, acquire new skills, find suitable work, and develop new relationships." (p. 195)

For this reason, Marshall and colleagues (2013) suggested that providing positive role models and mentorship opportunities could be effective in improving the employment experiences of Aboriginal youth, and thus increasing their participation in the labour market.

Red Fox Background

Red Fox Healthy Living Society (2012a) was originally established as Red Fox Active Outreach in 2006 by Emma Sutherland. It was created at the request of Vancouver Park Board as an active outreach recreation and training program to increase the activity levels of Aboriginal and people living on low incomes in Vancouver. Red Fox began partnering with Vancouver Native Health Society (VNHS) and in 2011 had grown to be a community too large for the VNHS banner and became what is known today as the Red Fox Healthy Living Society (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012a).

Red Fox Healthy Living Society is a registered non-profit society that offers recreation, cultural and food security programming to foster fitness, healthy eating, social responsibility and sense of community among Aboriginals, inner city youth, children, families, and people with disabilities in Vancouver (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012b). Red Fox provides employment training for Aboriginal youth and youth with disabilities through team building activities, life skills coaching, work experience and leadership training. Red Fox leadership training prepares participants for employment in a wide variety of fields, including but not limited to childcare, recreation, social services, and work relating to Aboriginal culture (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012b).

"Red Fox Active Play" is one of the organization's most successful programs, most notably because it serves both children and youth. Youth engaged in the Red Fox Recreation Employment Skills program lead the Active Play program for children at elementary schools and community centres. The youth lead children in active games, circus arts, sports, and serve as positive community role models. Youth leaders gain practical leadership skills while encouraging healthy active living among inner-city children. The children who participate in Active Play are taught physical literacy skills in an environment that is designed to be accessible, fun, and challenging to foster intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012c).

Red Fox is unique in that it embodies the traditional Aboriginal message from the Medicine Wheel, which fosters balance in the four areas of life: physical, mental, emotional, and cultural. The four areas of life are all key factors that Red Fox has incorporated into its programs since 2006 (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2009).

Since Red Fox's inception in 2006, the organization continues to grow and has become an integral part of the Lower Mainland community because of the many people that it has served. Red Fox holds various programs at schools, parks, special events and at community centres to encourage families and communities to be active together. Red Fox is currently active in ten community centres and schools in Vancouver; these programs provide ongoing support for the thousands of Aboriginal and inner city children and youth that they have connected with. Red Fox youth leaders continue to help children and families to be more physically active, eat healthy food, and share Aboriginal traditions (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012c). Red Fox plans to

expand its programing in the near future and aims to increases accessibility to community-focused services and healthy living programs (Red Fox Healthy Living Society, 2012a).

Leadership

"A *leader* is an individual who exercises leadership, someone who leads others for the purpose of bringing about change. *Leadership* is the *process* by which a leader promotes change, and generally includes the actions taken by the leader in conjunction with those being led, as well as the existing situation." (Stippler et al., 2011, p. 11)

Several theories provide the background and foundation of the modern definition of leadership. Some, such as the Great Man and trait theories, imply that leadership qualities are innate and that leaders are born and not made. Skills theory, however, suggests that rather than having innate characteristics, leadership skills are learned, nurtured, and practiced. Skills theory closely aligns with more current research that suggests that successful leadership is produced through interaction and relationships between leaders and followers. Style Theory accounts for the importance of interplay between task behaviors (i.e. providing structure, defining roles and achieving goals) and relationship behaviors (i.e. facilitating group morale and cohesion between and amongst each other and in the situation or task needed to be performed). Situational Leadership Theory includes the argument "…different situations call for different kinds of leadership and […] successful leaders adapt their behaviors to [these situations]." (Stippler et al., 2011, p. 21). The Path-Goal Theory asserts that in order to be successful, all a leader must do is to motivate others. Regardless of the differences in and among these proven, historic theories, it is important to consider that there is more than one way a leader is created and defined; a successful leader may need possess a dynamic mix of leadership qualities in order to thrive in changing environments.

It is essential that a leader be able to look at the whole of a situation instead of a situation comprised of separate entities of facts, experiences, desires and aims. A leader must be able to organize a group (no matter how diverse) to promote the best functioning team, utilizing each individual's strength to serve a common purpose. This creates a 'group power' instead of a 'singular power'. This ability to create power amongst the group achieves control; control of a situation is the essence of successful group functioning. A leader must also have wisdom and judgment and use it wisely dependant on the situation. The leader must be bold to admit new

strategies in dynamic situations and let go of old, comfortable ways of functioning if the situation calls for it. A leader must have insight into the future and anticipate rather than assume. (Kellerman, 2010)

Having the ability to motivate others is also one of the key characteristics of a successful leader. In order to stimulate others to follow, a sense of responsibility and dependence should be placed on the followers. The vision and goals need to be defined and agreed upon not just by the leader but the group as a whole. It is important for everyone to be involved in goal-creation through open-mindedness and open-communication in order to evoke purpose and responsibility. Once the vision is decided upon, role-definition must be defined and encouraged through constructive feedback, recognition and appraisal. Personal growth, learning and adapting within the team should be a result of the leader's ability to motivate successfully. (Stippler et al., 2011)

A leader's emotional stability and self-awareness has significant impact on their efficiency and reliability in leadership roles. The individual must be perceived as approachable by all followers, which means he or she must be agreeable, conscientious, extroverted, open-minded, and social as well as emotionally intelligent. Qualities such as being caring, honest, understanding, dedicated and kind are also essential to the creation of a safe group atmosphere. Kouzes and Posner's research reveals the components of a successful, emotionally-stable leader: becoming a role model by remaining true to his/her self and personal values; inspiring others of their vision and achieving goals; challenging the norm; enabling others to be involved; and encouraging followers with praise, reward and appreciation (Kellerman, 2010; Stippler et al., 2011).

A leader's behavior must be considered as well. The leader must be confident in his/her ability to lead a group to a specific goal and emit hope and optimism onto the followers. Psychological resilience is one of the most critical behaviors that a leader must have: the ability to respond constructively to stress and to recover from conflict or changing circumstances. This reveals strength, confidence and determination: qualities that tend to build up and encourage the followers to do the same. This created atmosphere keeps the group as a whole resilient and much more able to avoid feelings of desperation, anxiety and ill-confidence that could negatively affect or even destroy group-functioning. (Stippler et al., 2011)

More current research suggests that solely knowing yourself deeply (strengths, weaknesses as well as personality, passions and interests) is what makes a good leader. A strong

leader is able to listen to their inner voice and trust their instinct. From this, a leader will be better able to time-manage, prioritize, know where and how to mobilize his/her strengths as well as their followers' strengths, and recognize weaknesses and areas that need improvement. (Stippler et al., 2011)

The most important aspect of leadership discussed in current research is in the interplay between follower and leader. A leader's overall mission is to enable his/her followers to take initiative and accept responsibility for their input to a vision or task. The best leaders try to train their followers to become leaders themselves through effective communication, conflict management, and relational, introspective, and self-reflective abilities while retaining authenticity (Stippler et al., 2011).

While understanding the purposes and characteristics of a successful leader and after shadowing Red Fox and its program, it is apparent that the Aboriginal youth leaders we worked with have a strong understanding of what it means to foster positive, encouraging environments for the children who participate in Red Fox Active Play. They have a clear understanding of taking charge of situations and engaging children in active play, and build special relationships with children through playing games and using special equipment to teach physical literacy skills. It is evident through these qualitative observations that they have developed and enhanced their leadership skills through their continued involvement and service with Red Fox.

Our interview process affirmed what we found in our qualitative Active Play observations: Red Fox facilitated an environment that created leadership qualities discussed in literature and research. The youth leaders explained how Red Fox had given them a chance to become a role model and the opportunity to see the positive impacts they had on children's lives. Some of the youth who had been shy before admitted that through their participation with Red Fox they have become more extroverted and open to others, increasing their self-confidence and perception of self-worth. They stated not only their increased confidence, but also positive effects in their morale, character and personality. Through their continued involvement with the program, they started to work towards Red Fox's vision by understanding more of who they were, their strengths and weaknesses, and who they wanted to grow to become in the future. As leaders, the Red Fox youth indicated how they are able to create a positive, educational and fun environment by providing opportunities for participants' growth, development, independence and success in social, motor and mental skills. They also discovered the interplay of these skills,

noting the ongoing transfer of knowledge between child and leader. The leaders admitted that they were in a process with the children: learning, growing and adapting with every session. They stated that this process really created an understanding of their own wants, desires and purposes in life. The youth have noticed positive changes in themselves and their relationships with their environment, and they continue to make positive differences in both their lives and those of others around them.

Employment

Because of the changing demographics of Canada's population and workforce, it is important to be mindful of qualities that allow individuals to remain competitive in the job market. A survey of over 600 various corporations assessed what comprises a good employee and ranked the importance of various qualities, including communication, teamwork, empowerment, openness to change, and problem solving (Rubach, 1995). Of these, good communication skills and customer orientation were unanimously selected as the two qualities most conducive to top-quality work from an employee (Rubach, 1995). Both of these skills are integral to Red Fox programs, as the youth leaders are continuously having to communicate with children participating in Active Play, as well as their caregivers and the other Red Fox youth leaders. Youth leaders help children perform activities or use new equipment with proper form and technique, helping them achieve the goals and objectives of the task at hand efficiently while having fun and keeping activities new and engaging.

A separate study identified three different types of employees a business can hire: a necessity, a commoner, and a parasite (Kim, Smith, Sikula, & Anderson, 2011). Necessities are undoubtedly what every company hopes to employee, described as being hard-working, reliable, friendly, motivated, knowledgeable, and good communicators (Kim et al., 2011). These individuals are the "social glue" which holds all other employees together by consistently striving to achieve the group's goal, sometimes going unrecognized for their efforts (Kim et al., 2011). Through our collective observation, we found many of the Red Fox youth leaders, especially the older youth leaders with more experience with the program, to be "necessity"-type employees. The amount of care and effort given to their work, most notably with the Active Play sessions, was unprecedented; the youth leaders know and care for all of the children who participate, have extensive knowledge of the equipment they use and how to maintain it, and

have the ability to settle conflicts that arise between children participating with patience and expertise. Red Fox's programs offer the opportunity for youth -- some of whom were or still are facing conflict and struggle in other areas of their lives – to better their relationship with their social environment and develop skills that will allow them to present themselves to employers with not only adequate qualifications and skills sets, but with enduring character traits that will be advantageous in the workforce.

Barriers

Canada is known around the world as a multicultural nation and is unique in its pursuit towards inclusivity and acceptance of its diverse and multiracial population (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). This uniqueness is mandated at the government level: in the introductory address to the 2010 Annual Report for the Employment Equity Act, Lisa Raitt, Minister of Labour, states, "Ensuring the Canadian labour force is reflective of our country's population is the right thing to do" (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). The Employment Equity Act was created in 1986 (amended in 1995) to "achieve" workplace equality for Canadians experiencing employment disadvantages. Four specific groups are targeted: women, people with disabilities, visible minorities, and this report's group of focus, Aboriginal peoples (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010).

Much has been published regarding employment barriers and disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal peoples. Many government initiatives have been implemented in attempt to change this and foster equitable work environments for all Canadians. For example, Strategic Direction for Employment Equity 2010 – 2013 recruits and employs Aboriginal youth through the Aboriginal Student Employment Program (ASEP), and the Aboriginal Tax Officer Apprenticeship Program (ATOAP) (Canada Revenue Agency, 2011) recruits employees and educates employers regarding issues and challenges faced by Aboriginal people (Canada Revenue Agency, 2011). The Aboriginal Training for Employment Program (ATEP) began in May 2010 as an effort to help individuals overcome employment barriers through teaching skills and offering opportunties for specific certifications (Port Alberni Friendship Center, 2011). The Canadian Government Skills Link Program funds organizations seeking to eliminate youth employment barriers, identifying those of Aboriginal descent as a target group (Service Canada, 2012). The Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI) was formed "to facilitate the

process of equitable participation of Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian workforce" (Grande Prairie Regional College, 2005).

With these programs and others like them, one might ask why would it be beneficial to provide funding for a program like Red Fox? The answer is very simple and straightforward. Red Fox is a working and proven stepping-stone for Aboriginal youth to gain experience in leadership, to develop self-confidence, to establish networks and gain information about education and other government programs, and to prepare for future endeavors both in the workforce and in other aspects of their lives. To develop this more fully, we will first identify some barriers to full and equal participation in the employment arena that are faced by Aboriginal youth, and then explore how Red Fox provides the tools they need to develop skills that can bring them success.

Barriers to employment exist on both sides of the equation: both employers and Aboriginal job applicants approach the relationship with their own set of hindrances to a successful experience. From the perspective of the employer, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2005) classify barriers to employment into two categories: systemic and attitudinal. Systemic barriers include issues on the side of the employer where human resource practices prevent Aboriginal people from participating, and include things like assessment and pre-screening tools that are not culturally sensitive as well as non-inclusive dispute resolution systems (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2005). Attitudinal barriers describe misconceptions that employers have of Aboriginal people due to stereotypes and lack of knowledge. It is important for employers to address barriers from both these categories in order to develop "strategies and initiatives to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in the Canadian workforce" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2005).

On the other side of the equation, Aboriginal youth or young adults seeking access to the work force often must overcome multiple barriers that affect their perceived and actual employability (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). Historically Aboriginal people have experienced discrimination and racial prejudice as a result of European settlers' influence in Canada (Center for Social Justice, 2011). Cycles of neglect and abuse have been commonplace in Aboriginal communities, dating back generations to the days of residential schooling where this cruelty is thought to have begun (Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, & Miller, 2005). Not surprisingly, many Aboriginal people, "...viewed the white people with distrust, anger,

resentment and fear. Many Aboriginal people had no hope of attaining any kind of employment, so long as beliefs that Aboriginal people were inferior prevailed in society" (Center for Social Justice, 2011). These feelings of mutual animosity, misconceptions, stereotypes, and lack of trust have led to racial discrimination and issues of self-worth that act as barriers to Aboriginal employment (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2005; British Columbia Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, 2009; Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, 2011; United Way, 2012).

In conjunction with historic barriers, the Aboriginal population faces higher levels of alcohol and drug abuse (Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates, 2010). Studies report that experimentation with alcohol often begins at a significantly younger age in the Aboriginal community when compared to non-Aboriginal Canadian youth (Marshall, 2011). In addition to addictions associated with substance abuse, Aboriginal youth have the highest rates of suicide in the country – it is nearly three times the national average (Gideon, Gray, Nichols, & Phat, 2008; Wieman, 2006). Aboriginal youth are often faced with emotional ill-health that both causes and stems from substance abuse, such as depression and low self-esteem, which serve as further barriers to employment opportunities (Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, 2005).

Many Aboriginal youth approach the job market bringing with them the effects of their cultural upbringing and home life. Feelings of disconnect stemming from difficulties identifying with Aboriginal culture and contemporary westernized culture at the same time (Castellano, 2008; Howard, 2010). Urban Aboriginal families may incorporate parenting styles that are different from non-Aboriginal family norms, and the "non-interference" style of many Aboriginal parents that emphasizes their child's independence and decision making can result in lack of understanding by employers with little cultural knowledge (Alberta Chambers of Commerce, 2009; Castellano, 2008; Howard, 2010). Some Aboriginal youth face additional barriers at home such as poverty, inadequate housing (including overcrowding), or issues relating to being placed in government care (Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates, 2010; Guimond & Cooke, 2008; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Though there is obviously considerable variation in the experiences of each individual, collectively Aboriginal youth today are not experiencing as much family consistency, emotional support and financial resources as

non-Aboriginal youth in Canada, which translates into less support for youth entering the job market.

Perhaps the area that presents most prominently in literature as an employment barrier is the decreased average level of education for Aboriginal youth and young adults. In the 2006 Census, 40% of Aboriginal youth ages 20 – 24 had not attained a high school diploma; if they lived on a reserve this number increased to 61% (Richmond & Smith, 2008). Low literacy rates, coupled with lack of education and career-specific skills training, have a direct relationship with the reduced access to employment opportunities faced by the Aboriginal population (British Columbia Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, 2009; Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, 2011; PTP ASEP Training Society, 2013; United Way, 2012).

It is evident that barriers faced by Aboriginal people in Canada run deep into history, culture and family life. There is not a "quick fix" as is evidenced by the multiple government initiatives and programs that have been offered and implemented. A holistic approach must be taken to create equity and work environments inclusive to and understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture. Suggestions for ways to address the barriers to employment outlined in the literature include: implementing programs to nurture development of work-related skills (Community Futures Treaty Seven, 2012), reducing barriers such as "low levels of education and lack of opportunity....by offering access to training and certification in a broad spectrum of trades and then providing access to relevant jobs" (PTP ASEP Training Society, 2013), and perhaps most importantly realizing "the need for healing and empowerment...and the importance of encouraging role models to inspire future generations..."(British Columbia Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, 2009). There is understanding that "education is the key... [and that] by increasing students' self-esteem, cultural identity and confidence, urban Aboriginal youth will have greater opportunities to complete their education and get good jobs" (United Way, 2012).

Aboriginal youth and young adults are aware of these barriers. These topics are well identified and addressed among Aboriginal circles and youth are often willing to engage in discussions about how to overcome barriers like those previously outlined. This demographic contains individuals motivated to inspire change at the community level and nationally. It is important to create safe and comfortable environments for Aboriginal youth to exchange ideas and develop positive relationships that improve confidence and self-esteem (Chalifoux &

Johnson, 2003). Environments that offer support, encouragement, and skill development opportunities serve an important purpose both for individuals that take part in them and for entire societies that will benefit from the future endeavours of today's youth.

Conclusion

Red Fox Healthy Living Society offers programs for youth that contribute to the overall health of those involved and teaches valuable skills that will translate into youth leaders' future success in the workforce. Through involvement in Red Fox's many programs, youth are given the opportunity to learn and develop skills that will be favourably looked upon by potential employers, like experience in group environments, experience working in physical activity settings with children, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to teach skills to others. Cultural programs offered, like feasting, drumming, and the Medicine Wheel program, offer opportunities for youth to connect with and celebrate Aboriginal culture rather than feeling marginalized or 'othered' by their heritage. The social support system created through the sense of community fostered through Red Fox Society has helped improve youth leader's confidence and leadership skills while they get valuable work experience that will influence their future employability. Red Fox facilitates many hands-on programs that give the youth leaders access to mentorship, leadership, and educational knowledge, and the community environment brings greater access to other programs currently offered to benefit and support Aboriginal youth.

In a group interview setting, youth leaders shared their thoughts of their experiences with Red Fox and had some powerful, insightful points to make about the leadership and social supports Red Fox programs have facilitated. For example, one youth leader feels that through Red Fox she has "the chance to be a role model in the community...because I didn't know about my future direction, and getting into Red Fox has allowed me to get into all these projects and opportunities". This same youth leader said that "Red Fox helped cultivate the skills we had as individuals and realize our potential and what we can do to be active leaders and role models", and was supported by another youth leader who added that Red Fox was "a place to foster belonging and what we want to become". Though current government initiatives and employment plans for Aboriginal youth show promise in their vision for a more equitable employment environment in Canada's future, they do not adequately acknowledge the holistic nature of health that leads to youth that are supported and empowered in aspects relating to

physical, social, mental, and emotional health. Balanced, healthy lifestyles like those promoted through Red Fox's many programs for youth are necessary to not only improve statistics pertaining to employment, but to encourage development of valuable leadership skills that make the very best employees. We found it best to state our final remarks in the words of another youth leader, who admitted to struggling with confidence and shyness before her involvement: Red Fox programs have supported her in "learning how to speak, knowing a chance for the future and not going down the wrong road, and knowing that I have to choose the path myself".

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