

Impact Summary

Indigenous Women's Leadership Change Lab

Where It Started & How It Evolved

The Indigenous Women's Leadership (IWL) Change Lab began in the winter of 2022, as Indigenous women across Righting Relations (RR) were focusing deeper into leadership and finding more ways to connect with others across hubs. The Change Lab began with a Wabanaki focus, as members were from the East Hub/Women of First Light. But these members worked intentionally to welcome new members into the group and expand the breadth of experience and teachings that was brought into the circle. One member from the Central Hub and one from the West Hub joined the Change Lab and wonderful exchanges ensued.

The group explored the similarities and differences in their experiences, from struggles to celebrations, and different work taking place in communities across the country. Learning to have a safe space across Indigenous cultures has been central for this group. Regular meetings increased comfort levels between members, so that they could share and create a safe place for each other to be heard. They found common interests, chose themes to share the knowledge that existed within the group, and had thorough conversations about topics such as:

- Leadership for women vs. wider society
- Language revitalization
- Sacredness of women
- Guided teachings
- Legends/experiences regarding GBV
- Resilience
- Skill sets
- Storytelling

The IWL Change Lab coordinator helped keep the project moving. She reflected:

"Out of every meeting we had, there was always something growing from each meeting to the next. We learned a lot from listening and re-listening to what we've talked about."

Impact

The group developed important inclusion for Grandmothers – they defined Grandmothers as knowledge keepers, regardless of sex, gender, or biology. This was an important and intentional way to demonstrate how not to engage in lateral violence and to lift each other up.

The storytelling in the group was identified as a beautiful gift for all involved. Exploring songs from childhood and other cultural practices and stories were also considered a spiritual well for many members. These were eventually turned into *Drops of Wisdom*, which are stories and teachings from members, that were video recorded and are available for all to view on YouTube. Many people were engaged in putting together the Drops of Wisdom, and they are having continued reach to a large viewership, particularly the teachings around resilience and inclusiveness.

For others who did not grow up with their Indigenous culture, hearing teachings and the stories of people growing up in their culture brought a different kind of connection. Though some members had different upbringings and/or were disconnected from their families, they still felt they were able to contribute to the group through conversations about different languages and experiences. For example, a 60s Scoop circle was started to share stories from that experience.

The leadership that came out of the Change Lab was tangible. Members identified that they became pioneers for decolonization. With the support they have for each other, members feel empowered, are taking leadership, and doing activities in a decolonized way. One member started workshops on peaked caps, others started a workshop on language, others took risks that they hadn't taken before, knowing that people had their backs.

"I learned how to be even more empowering to other women. There are so many things that we all hold on to - we do doubt and underestimate ourselves - but I know who I am and am proud. I realized my own strengths that I didn't know I had."

Learnings

Women of First Light (WOFL) had built a beautiful way of being together, and hoped to influence others across the region and country. Their approach, based on the seven sacred teachings, was to listen, be respectful, and ensure that everyone has the space to speak without judgement and without lateral violence.

When they invited other women into the circle, all respected how to be together, and collectively came to consensus on how to move together. There was no hierarchy in the group, as a collective process was innate in most members. The power in collectively shaping the work was seen as a strong and reinforced entity, rather than a structure with a leader that can easily be toppled.

Trusting the organic process was important, as learnings emerged organically and were empowering to members. Through this organic process - like tree roots that are connecting to each other and supporting each other - learnings were able to grow and flourish.

“What has been modeled is unconditional, positive regard - it’s the secret sauce that you can keep adding to the recipe. I show up at these because there is something special. I’ve realized that my presence is as special to others as theirs is to me.”

Longer-term funding is critical. Relationships, trust, and safety take time to build. And collective work requires these strong foundations. The multi-year funding from WAGE has been important in facilitating the gathering of knowledge holders who are not always respected and honoured. However, continuation of the work that has been built is important, and requires resources to continue.

Where to Now?

Members want to continue with the group, even through there are not dedicated resources to keep it going. This shows the impact of the group on members who continue to value the space where they can learn and share with each other. The hope is that an in-person meeting can happen eventually, to further solidify the bonds that members have build.

The IWL Change Lab hope to bring other women into the circle, especially from across the RR network. Members identify that there is so much to learn from and be inspired by in the diverse cultures and teachings across the country. More interactions between members from East to West is seen as an essential way to build leadership, friendship, and community strength.

“The value that our voice is actually being listened to, our support for each other - shows the potential we have for greater things, for our children, for ourselves.”

Bringing younger women into the group is also a priority for IWL. They hope to hear young voices to better understand what struggles they face, what leadership means to them, and what they need to be supported to continue this work. A youth-elder gathering that was held in the East Hub was profound for a lot of people and can serve as a model for engaging people cross-generationally. Connecting to youth through the land (e.g. through the buffalo harvest in Regina) has also been a successful way to take care of home and health.

Indigenous Women’s Leadership is being integrated into much work across Righting Relations. The Weaving Wellness Project in particular, has been focusing on building healthy communities, exploring leadership models, and encouraging women to nurture this work across their communities.