

oikos Global Case Writing Competition 2009 Corporate Sustainability Track

1st Place

Michelin's Strategic Partnership with Indigenous People

Pamela Sloan and David Oliver
HEC Montreal, Canada

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Part A: The Basis for Partnership

In June 2004, Jim Morrison, Human Resources Manager of Michelin's Bridgewater Plant, was reflecting on the Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI) Partnership Agreement that the company signed the previous November. He had a nagging feeling that there was little progress in increasing the representation of Aboriginal peoples at Michelin, and wondered why it was so difficult to get results.

At the same time, he wondered about the Advisory Council that was one of the key aspects of the agreed partnership process. Was it really necessary? Wouldn't it be easier and more effective for the company to work directly with the partner organizations, rather than set up this council? How would it work – and what would be its added-value?

Background on Michelin

In 2007, Michelin was the second-largest producer of tires in the world, with a 19% market share and 71 factories located in 19 countries around the world. Although the company traced its origins to the late 19th century, it gained significant prominence and size in the post-WWII period, when it participated in the reconstruction of France's devastated infrastructure. Inventor of the radial tire, Michelin produced tires for cars, trucks, motorcycles, earthmovers, and aircraft, as well as its famous maps and guidebooks. It was estimated that the Clermont-Ferrand-based company produced 190 million tires and 15 million maps and guides in 2007.

In 1971, Michelin Canada opened its first factory in Nova Scotia at Granton. The company subsequently added two more plants in Nova Scotia in Bridgewater and Waterville, becoming the fourth largest employer in the province. The company's culture focused on excellence, innovation, long term employment arrangements and commitment to local communities. Each new employee, no matter what position in the company, learned how to make a tire. The company's workforce was not unionized, but Michelin made significant investments in its employees, and most stayed at the company for their whole careers – often up to 30 years. Senior managers displayed openness and concern for individual employees. George Sutherland, General Counsel for Michelin Canada, recalled a visit by then-CEO Edouard Michelin that reflected this corporate culture:

Edouard Michelin remembered people's names. When he visited one of our plants in Nova Scotia, he met an employee whose child had an illness. When he came back a few years later, he met this same employee and asked about the illness.

Michelin's organizational culture is reflected in five core values which guided decision making. These included:

- Respect for customers
- Respect for people
- Respect for shareholders
- Respect for the environment
- Respect for the facts

This last core value – respect for the facts – was somewhat unusual for a major multinational company. But, as one of the company's managers explains, it worked well in practice:

People won't argue with facts usually. When you're presented with the facts it takes the personalities out of it and you can make a decision that's best for the organization, as opposed to one simply based on someone's persuasiveness.

Not publicly traded in North America and with a long-term management focus, Michelin was less constrained by quarterly results, and typically made decisions based on a long-term perspective, sometimes ranging as far ahead as 50-100 years. Consistent with its long-term approach and community commitment, Michelin was interested in corporate responsibility and sustainability. It had formulated a charter of corporate responsibility and considered the environmental impact of its work, such as the effect of rubber plantations on local populations, or the need to reduce CO₂ emissions of cars. In 1992, the company created the first "green tire" that significantly improved fuel economy and reduced CO₂ emissions by lowering rolling resistance without compromising other key tire performances. Additionally, a commitment to workforce diversity enabled the company to innovate and create value, a benefit clearly expressed by one of the company's human resource managers:

We are the innovative leader in our industry. Innovation comes from thinking differently and the best teams that we're going to be able to put together are going to be teams of people who all think differently and yet miraculously work really well together. And if we can bring in more and more diverse people into our population, not only will we be mirroring society around us but we'll be building a stronger team here. Ultimately that's going to reflect an advantage for this company.

Emerging Challenges

Beginning in the early 2000s, Michelin Canada began to notice a demographic challenge with potentially serious strategic implications for the company. Its employees were aging, and some 70% of Michelin's workforce was expected to retire over the coming decade. At the same time, the flow of new hires from the company's traditional labour sources was drying up. Declining birthrates combined with a net outflow of skilled workers from Nova Scotia to more economically prosperous regions such as Alberta and the United States meant that the company would have difficulty filling as many as 1000 newly open jobs over the years ahead.

Michelin plants in Nova Scotia were surrounded by Aboriginal communities. In contrast to the non-Aboriginal components of the Nova Scotia workforce, the Aboriginal population was growing at a rapid rate, although also experiencing higher than average rates of unemployment. While the company counted several very successful Aboriginal employees in its workforce, the overall representation of Aboriginal people in Michelin's workforce was very low. When Jim Morrison took over as the manager of Human Resources at the Bridgewater plant in mid-2000, he initiated new efforts to hire local Aboriginal people, although results had been disappointing.

The contrast between the challenges facing Michelin and the Aboriginal communities of Nova Scotia could scarcely be more striking. Each had complementary workforce challenges but neither had extensive knowledge of the other, a situation described by Manson Gloade – the regional coordinator for the federal Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative:

They were two ships passing in the night. People can't find work here, Michelin can't find workers there. Clearly we were all missing something.

Long-Standing Difficulties

Initial efforts to increase the employment of Aboriginal people at Michelin ran up against a number of longstanding difficulties, many related to education and skills. As with most manufacturing operations, technological advances meant that tire production required increasingly higher levels of employee literacy and numeracy. Michelin had introduced a Workplace Skills Inventory (WSI) on which all job applicants required a score of at least 85% in order to be considered for employment. The company had experienced increasing difficulty in finding applicants who could achieve the requisite scores, as Jim explained:

The Workplace Skills Inventory is an entry level assessment [...] it's a Grade 8 level test based on workplace situations we've developed with the help of the Department of Education. It's basic numeracy, literacy, reading, writing, comprehension and math. Appallingly, only 69% of the people who've gone through our test pass it, and most of these people are high school graduates! Among Aboriginal people, only 34% were passing.

Other difficulties were more subtle but no less important. The plant itself, as described by Valerie Whynot – who was working with the Native Council of Nova Scotia and the Aboriginal Peoples Training and Employment Commission (APTEC) – appeared forbidding to many Aboriginal applicants.

You have to realize that you drive by the plant, there's a fence, a gatehouse, and mirrors. You can't do this. You can't do that. That's very intimidating. [...] Not only is Michelin a non-Aboriginal world, but it's a world of its own inside those gates and cement walls.

Job applications had to be picked up at the plant and then submitted in person. Gerald Toney, a former chief of the Annapolis Valley First Nation and now Executive Director of the Mi'kmaq Employment/Training Secretariat (METS) recalled the situation.

Michelin is an attractive place. The wages are really good, and people find out about it and would like to work there. Fifteen years ago, Michelin would put on a recruiting drive every now and then and they'd bring Michelin applications, and part of my job was to distribute these applications. We'd put them out front and people would take 10 or 20 of them and go out and sell them. When I went for a coffee or dinner I'd see people saying "hey you want to buy a Michelin application for \$5" – that kind of stuff.

The perception of being closed and inaccessible was heightened by Michelin's past reputation for secrecy. One of the senior managers explains why this has been the case.

Some people call us a secretive company. I prefer to think of us as a "shy" company. We've become more open in the past five years than we were previously, but still we are selective and protect our confidential business information. We are in an extremely competitive industry.

Some of the problems in increasing Aboriginal workforce participation also extended beyond Michelin. Prior work experience was an important hiring criterion, but many Aboriginal people had found it hard to gain such experience. Louis-Joe Bernard, an economic development officer for the Union of Nova Scotia Indians, described the situation in stark terms:

Racism exists today in Nova Scotia and it's very hard to get into the mainstream labour force because of your skin colour and the way you speak. You're pre-judged right away. We have to lower the barriers, and the person who is sitting down on the other side has to understand that too.

Gerald Toney echoed a similar view.

Toronto was my home base. I went there when I was 17 years old because of what I'd faced here in Nova Scotia. "We don't hire Indians", you know. Boy that hurt.

Lack of knowledge about Aboriginal peoples, myths and stereotypes had created resentments that, as one observer described, flared up regularly in local communities.

There's a real resentment of Aboriginal people having hunting and fishing rights others don't have – a view that they get all kinds of tax breaks. Some of this is accurate but much is not. But the myths are all alive and well.

The Seeds of Partnership

In late 2001, Jim contacted Valerie Whynot. She was a natural person to turn to, as her work at APTEC involved providing training and employment services to Aboriginal people living off-reserve in Nova Scotia. Valerie offered to send Jim some résumés of potential job candidates. But her offer received a surprising response – Jim wasn't looking for résumés. Jim explained:

I think I shocked her by saying this wasn't what I wanted. You know, they were pretty good résumés and it may have resulted in employment for a few people. And when I said no, we're looking for something longer term and more proactive, Valerie was wise and gracious enough to say, "I'll humour this guy and think about what we can do here". When she phoned me back and said I should talk to Manson Gloade, I could sense that there was excitement in her voice, that she was recognizing this might be something different.

As Coordinator for the federal government's Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI) in Atlantic Canada, a key part of Manson Gloade's job was to build awareness, capacity and partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in order to increase Aboriginal participation in the workforce. Unlike a traditional Aboriginal employment program, AWPI was a broader initiative aimed at breaking down barriers and increasing recruitment, retention and advancement opportunities for Aboriginal peoples in workplaces across Canada. Many in the Aboriginal community saw AWPI as a vehicle for initiating important changes in the mainstream labour force, as an influential member of the Aboriginal community described.

AWPI is trying to make our workforce more inclusive. They're trying to meet with employers to see if they will take on the responsibility of making sure their workplace was ready for First Nations participation and involvement. Michelin is a prime example. At Michelin, it has always been the grandfather, to the father, to the son. Which isn't a bad thing, but we need to have *our* grandfather, to *our* father, to *our* son within the Aboriginal communities in there, to get them involved young and see what it's like.

Jim quickly called Manson, who expressed immediate interest, and Jim arranged for Manson to tour the plant. Jim recalled this memorable occasion:

Manson was absolutely wonderful. He was interested, listened, asked questions, loved the technology, picked things up, and immediately started seeing what the barriers might be and why it would be difficult. But he also saw the opportunities. He said his people could do great in this company. I was ecstatic.

Manson introduced Jim to Greg Mazur, who had set up similar partnerships in British Columbia and to Wayne Mackenzie, who had pioneered partnerships in Saskatchewan. Both were working with the federal government at the national headquarters of AWPI. They met for the first time at the Bridgewater plant in December 2002. Jim became more convinced of the value of the AWPI partnership approach and arranged for the AWPI team to meet with Michelin's senior management team in early 2003. Some of Michelin managers attending the meeting were not sure what would be involved – but came to understand its purposes, as Andrew Mutch, Personnel Manager for the Waterville plant, recalled:

I remember entering the meeting thinking it would be about employment equity. I thought we would have to employ some people who may not necessarily have the needed skills. But when Wayne gave us his presentation, it was very clear that he didn't want that at all. He wanted the Aboriginal people to have a level playing field so that they could compete head to head and earn the jobs and earn the respect of the people with whom they would be working. They didn't want a handout. They just wanted information that would allow them to develop the skills required to meet the job requirements. I walked out thinking, "Wow, what an idea, what a concept, what pride and respect he's demonstrating for his people." Rather than looking for a handout he's looking for a handshake.

Another senior Michelin manager recalled the same meeting:

What impressed me most about Wayne was his frankness. I think that really opened a lot of people's eyes. I remember him talking about the reserves and he said "all I hear about is how people on reserves get all these breaks. If it's so good, how come nobody wants to live there?"

Following Wayne's presentation, Michelin's management committee decided that the AWPI partnership approach fit with the company's needs and culture. Senior management gave the partnership proposal its strong support. But Jim was in for a surprise when he returned to the plant and met with supervisors. He discovered that it might be more difficult to move forward than he had anticipated:

The acceptance of diversity is limited with some of the people on the shop floor, but I didn't realize that it was also true for some of our supervisors. So when I first came back

and did my weekly meeting, and said we're going to do this partnership and went on and on about how great it was, I noticed that there was a really muted reaction. The next day I got a ton of feedback from some department leaders who had been very supportive all the way through, but said "Jim, you need to know that you've got some people who are pretty disaffected, and they don't agree with the direction we're going". I was shocked and angry. And so at the next meeting I lectured them, which just generated a lot of resistance and did no good at all. My boss came back and said "Jim, you need to get off the white horse and maybe approach things with a bit more empathy to their frame of reference". Don't expect that just because we're doing this wonderful work that everybody is automatically on board. So, I stepped way back and thought what am I doing wrong? How can this not be registering with them the same way it's registering with me? So I started asking a lot more questions than I had before.

The company also became concerned about how the *local* Aboriginal leaders in Nova Scotia would respond to the partnership proposal, which was after all based on a federal government initiative. Jim and George decided to meet with Judith Sullivan-Corney, the Deputy Minister of Aboriginal Affairs in the Nova Scotia government, to explore ideas in this regard. She told them that they would have to steer their way carefully through the issue as Michelin did not necessarily have a positive reputation among local Aboriginal communities, but that it could be done. She also cautioned against relying on the federal government, instead, urging Michelin to forge its own relationships and earn the trust of local Aboriginal people. Judith recalled the meeting:

Jim, George and I met originally and one of the really smart things that they did was to ask the questions, like who should we be talking to, being very careful and inclusive in their approach early on. And so they came to us for that kind of advice.

Judith recommended some initial contact people at the local level. When Jim and George did meet with local Aboriginal leaders, they sensed scepticism. George remembered:

Looking back, meeting people at the local level was critical. Many people were cautious. I don't think they fully trusted the feds, the provincial government or us probably due to broken promises and disappointments in the past. It was clear that some chiefs would need to be convinced, and Michelin would need to prove its credibility.

In working to build interest among the local Aboriginal communities, Jim stressed Michelin's interests:

Part of what helped in my first conversation with the Union of Nova Scotia Indians and the Confederacy was when I said we weren't interested in funding and it was not about money. I said: "This is about careers." The conversation seemed to change after that.

And Manson Gloade continued to work his networks in Aboriginal communities:

I had to sell the partnership internally. I got the local employment officers on board before approaching the Chiefs. I wanted to create pressure from lower down, where I had grassroots contacts.

Their combined efforts started to pay off, as the potential partners began to understand Michelin and its intentions. Gerald Toney explained:

People were sceptical. Such a big company; what are they after? Usually, when you're called on to be on a committee or something, you wonder, what do I have to do, or what can I bring to the table. But here it was a real genuine feeling that they weren't "after" anything from us.

Work began on a draft partnership document, which led to the preparation of a formal agreement in March 2003.

The Partnership Agreement

On November 23, 2003, a formal partnership agreement was signed between representatives of Michelin North America, The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, The Union of Nova Scotia Indians, the Government of Canada, and the Province of Nova Scotia. It was a simple document, that outlined the principles that would govern the relationship – fairness and the value of a diverse workforce; consistency of approach; mutual respect and dignity; open communication; and trust.

Five broad goals were defined, namely to:

- Facilitate constructive cultural relations;
- Enhance linkages to the Aboriginal labour force;
- Promote employment, retention and career development opportunities for Aboriginal people;
- Identify potential business development initiatives designed to meet Aboriginal community priorities, including employment, and Michelin's needs;
- *Develop an action plan indicating both short and long-term strategies.*

The partners decided to have a formal signing ceremony covered by the media to mark the significance of the agreement. For many at Michelin, the signing was an important event. One of the managers put it this way.

We don't sign things lightly in this organization so this really spoke volumes to me. We said: "Look, we're taking this extremely seriously, and we're prepared to back it up by putting our name on the line."

Louis-Joe Bernard was the only person in attendance from the Union of Nova Scotia Indians – one of the signatories to the agreement. He had not originally been designated to sign, but he recalled how he found himself taking on that responsibility:

Out of curiosity, I decided to attend the signing ceremony between AWPI and Michelin Tire International. Since none of the Chiefs were present and I was the only one there representing the Union of Nova Scotia Indians, it felt kind of odd. So they asked me if I wanted to represent the Union. I said "if I can, I would, no problem". I'm very shy, but at the same time I wanted to be part of it. Because, if a person is good enough to stand beside you and attack an ongoing problem or address an ongoing problem, you want to take his hand and really, really thank him for it. Thank him for taking that initiative,

because a lot of people wouldn't and Michelin is one of the few that held out their hand and tried to change things.

The goodwill was evident during the ceremony. One observer recalled a memorable moment:

The signing was, in itself, interesting. One of the Chiefs said: "We signed a friendship agreement with the French over 300 years ago and it's finally paying off".

Early Days

By January 2004, however, Michelin was beginning to hear that its partners were discouraged. Local Aboriginal people did not understand how to apply for jobs, and continued to find it tough to get into Michelin. Some saw the signing ceremony as a "big splash" with little substance. The vast majority of job applications from Aboriginal people continued to be screened out due to high failure rates on the Workplace Skills Inventory test. In early 2004, Jim decided to hold a workshop to explain Michelin's recruiting process. Manson Gloade was there, and he recalled hostility in the audience during the presentation:

At times, Michelin was the lightning rod for 200-300 years of mistrust. Not directly related to them, but there was mistrust. You have to admire Michelin for standing up there and taking it on the chin for something that wasn't their fault. The local groups told me that Michelin had to earn their credibility.

The employment officers from every single reserve in Nova Scotia attended the session, along with Valerie from the Native Council. Michelin talked about its literacy testing and gave the group sample tests. They also did a mock behavioural interview – a commonly used technique – and explained how candidates were scored from 1-5 based on their answers to "real life" questions. The top two evaluation criteria were "relevancy" (i.e., job-related) and "recency" (within last year). To get a four, a candidate had to be able to provide a relevant or recent example. To score a five, the example needed to be both relevant and recent. It was impossible to get a four or five without a relevant or recent example. Someone wrote on the board "a person has a better chance of success if they have prior experience". Jim recalled how an Aboriginal former math teacher pointed out how these criteria served as an inadvertent barrier to the employment of Aboriginal people:

You've just ruled out most of our people, because many of them have not worked in the past year. Some have worked odd jobs here and there, but it's not uncommon to go 18 months without a job. And so they may be doing great volunteer work somewhere and be wonderful people that you could hire, but you're asking them in a behavioural interview to give you a job-recent example from the past year, they can't. So they will give you an example that's not work-related, but the best they can get is 3 out of 5, which is 60%, which won't pass the interview.

For the people at Michelin – including George Sutherland – this was an eye-opener.

Nobody had noticed this before as a barrier. A fresh set of eyes spotted something significant. Michelin people were surprised. We changed our practice within two weeks.

Other aspects of the implementation of the agreement also began to raise concerns and questions internally. AWPI had provided Michelin (and other organizations undertaking partnership initiatives) with a booklet entitled *A Practical Guide to Implementing Aboriginal Employment Partnerships*. The Guide outlined in detail the roles, responsibilities and actions that would be necessary for each of the partners to undertake in order to ensure the success of the partnership.

For employers, there was a lengthy list of responsibilities: undertake a workforce review, employment systems review and procurement review to identify barriers and opportunities; take steps to remove barriers; prepare the workplace for qualified Aboriginal employees; communicate information on the types of skills and qualifications the organization needs to Aboriginal communities and training organizations; take proactive measures to improve Aboriginal recruitment, retention and advancement in the workplace; inform Aboriginal community organizations and businesses about goods and services needed; and assist Aboriginal suppliers to capture contracting opportunities.

Jim was committed to using the AWPI partnership process – but there were some issues that were troubling for him and for the company, one of which involved sharing the trend results of the Workplace Skills Inventory with the Department of Education.

It carries a lot more weight if you take the numbers and say “we’ve been tracking and here’s what we see”. Then you can’t deny it, or say that it’s just Michelin’s impression. You have to say “holy smokes, these numbers are not good, something is going on here”. But in releasing these numbers, it also reflects on the individuals who wrote that test. We never give information on individual test scores. I don’t even see the information myself. We have it administered through a person who used to be with the community college. All she tells us is pass or fail. We don’t want the supervisor to know the score, just to know that their new employee passed the test. And we live in small communities, so you have to be careful with that kind of information.

Another issue was releasing information on the company’s future labour market demands. The AWPI partnership process called for an occupational survey to identify the different types of jobs that existed in the workplace, the number of positions in each occupational category, and the formal knowledge, skills and experience required for each position. This information formed the basis of the company’s recruitment and training strategy and – more importantly for the company’s partners – the areas where training and investment resources should be used. Without this information, the Aboriginal partners would have difficulty in making informed decisions about the best use of their training resources. For Michelin – the shy, secretive company – workforce projections were highly confidential and raised competitive concerns that remained unresolved internally in mid-2004.

Also unresolved at that time was what to do about the Advisory Council, a key part of the AWPI process. The envisaged role of the Council was to help the company develop an implementation plan – including operational goals and objectives as well as recommended processes and schedules. Jim – and his colleagues at Michelin – were not sure how this would work in practice, or how effective it would be. As a result, Jim had not yet decided how to act on this.

But, he was impatient for results, which were very slow in coming. In 2002, Michelin had received 20 applications from Aboriginal people, and hired one person. The following year, during the crafting of the partnership agreement, the number of applications doubled – but

there were still only two new hires. By mid-2004, it looked like there would be another doubling of applications – but there was still little progress in increasing the number of people hired. In the face of these disappointing results, Jim wondered if all these efforts could have been in vain. What should he do to move the implementation of the partnership forward?

Inspection Copy

Part B: The Partnership at Work

The first meeting of the newly constituted Michelin Advisory Council on Aboriginal Employment was held in Halifax in September 2004. Attending were a diverse group of people – some of whom knew each other well, others who had never met before. Expectations were running high among several participants in attendance.

The Advisory Council

Over the summer, Jim Morrison had decided to move forward with the formation of an Advisory Council. He invited all of the agreement's signatories to participate, as well as others he knew had a particular contribution to make. The composition of the Council was one of the first surprises for some of its members.

It was clear that Michelin was making a major commitment to both the Partnership and to the newly-created council. Aside from Jim Morrison and his HR counterparts from the other two Michelin plants, Michelin General Counsel George Sutherland would also attend the meeting. George's participation raised questions for some of the Aboriginal members of the new council, as one recalled:

Our treaties have oral histories with them, but these histories get ignored. If it is not written down, it is given less weight. So I was worried that if we got lawyers involved, it would get carved in stone. I wanted the partnership to be loose.

George knew what people were thinking, but he saw his role as a facilitator in the process – someone who could place issues in a broader context.

People wondered why I was on the committee. I brought a legal and broader perspective since I have knowledge from across all areas of the company.

The Aboriginal partners were also represented, but not by political leaders. Instead, non-political, front-line people participated, people who were highly-regarded in their communities and who could deliver results on the ground. They included Jim Hepworth, Director of Community Programs and Corporate Services with the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM);

Gerald Toney from the Mi'kmaq Employment/Training Secretariat (METS), and Valerie Whynot and Lee Paul from the Native Council of Nova Scotia and Louis-Joe Bernard, Economic Development Advisor with the Union of Nova Scotia Indians; Aboriginal Peoples Training and Employment Commission (APTEC). The Native Council and APTEC had not been signatories to the partnership – an omission quickly remedied by Valerie's participation on the Council. She explained some of the rationale for choosing these individuals:

It's not the elected leaders. It may not even be the managers. You want front line workers, people who know about their communities.

The government partners also attended. Representing the federal government was Manson Gloade, AWPI's regional coordinator, along with Greg Mazur and Wayne Mackenzie from AWPI headquarters in Ottawa. Judith Sullivan-Corney – Deputy Minister of Aboriginal

Affairs – represented the Nova Scotia government, while a consultant-expert in corporate Aboriginal relations rounded out the initial membership of the Advisory Council.

Setting the Agenda

The agenda for the first meeting was open-ended. It focused on sharing actions that Michelin had taken since the signing of the partnership agreement, as well as getting input from all members about the activities of their own organizations. The bulk of the meeting was dedicated to brainstorming problems and opportunities. The benefits of this approach were immediately evident, as George noted:

At the first committee meeting, I saw a big thing on our plates. We started prioritizing, and set up short and long term goals. Everybody brought something different. Michelin brought genuine, real business needs and genuine opportunities.

The representatives from Michelin saw the Advisory Council largely as a means to move forward on their strategic employment issues. They were eager for results. On the other hand, the Aboriginal representatives understood the Council to be part of a larger process, which was expected to take time. According to Louis-Joe Bernard, the formal partnership had been created but “it had yet to be understood”.

Gerald Toney described how the Aboriginal partners approached the Council meetings in the early stages:

In the beginning, it was just about understanding how Michelin thinks and the tests they use [...] the perception from the outside was that it was very hard to get in there. And once we looked at numbers and people applying there and not passing their tests, we started asking “why”, and asking them for feedback.

However, this first meeting would prove critical to the initiative’s development, as Manson recalled:

At the first advisory committee meeting, the whole idea of partnership just blossomed. It was a collective group of minds, nobody leading and nobody following. Just lots of enthusiasm. We were all equals there.

The Council decided to meet quarterly, and its early pattern for agenda-setting and interaction among members continued over time. The meetings opened with a time for connection over coffee and tea, where members were able to talk on an informal basis. Jim Morrison, who acted as chair, starting by reading off the agenda and asking if anyone had anything to add. Members of the Council appreciated this approach, as Gerald described:

Everybody adds something and that’s important to them. Everybody has the chance to participate, suggest, and be on the agenda. It’s not a one-man show like a lot of groups or committees, where the chair dominates things and does most of the talking. We let everybody participate because that’s the way things start happening [...] We have respect for each other and we don’t talk over, down or up to anybody. We’re all on the same playing field. As a partner, I think a big part of the success is that everybody has input. Everything is acted upon, and followed up.

First Steps

Tackling the barriers would still be difficult. Michelin had received signals in its meetings with communities that year which were reinforced in the first Council meeting. The company’s managers took note. George explained:

It became really clear that people were intimidated by our hiring process. We recognized the importance of education, lots of math and other skills were needed.

Michelin began to change its recruiting process – small steps at first, more fundamental ones later. The first step was to create better linkages with Aboriginal communities to make sure that available jobs were communicated to Aboriginal candidates on a timely basis. The Aboriginal partners offered help. For example, CMM was setting up an internet-based system – FirstNet – to communicate with its members. The Council recommended that Michelin's job postings be put on FirstNet. Other Aboriginal partners would use their own networks to make sure that information about opportunities at Michelin was accessible within their communities.

With job postings more readily visible, the Council further encouraged Michelin to make its job application system more accessible by enabling on-line applications. This involved major system changes for Michelin, but the company steadily added new elements that were reviewed and modified several times with the help of the Advisory Council.

The question of workforce projections also resurfaced. Michelin was still concerned about releasing these projections due to competitive and labour relations issues. However, eventually a compromise was reached – Michelin would provide approximations or ranges of people in each occupational grouping – which would be enough to give Aboriginal communities the information they needed to make informed training decisions.

Aboriginal members of the Council valued its commitment to action. Many attributed the Council's successes to its style of operation. Valerie explained:

I think it's a place where you're not only happy to see everybody but you know that what you say is going to lead to action. They're at least going to try to understand where you're coming from, and no one leaves the room until that's done right. So it's like consensus the old, traditional way. You know you're not forced to sit there. You're there because you want to be there.

Gerald elaborated:

If they ask me to do something, there's no question it gets done immediately. I know the other Council members do the same thing. Everybody is onboard and committed. I guess that's a big reason for its success.

The Council also spurred the creation of a pilot project to overcome issues raised by the Workplace Skills Inventory. In 2004, Valerie Whynot and Jim Morrison began working together to create a joint APTEC / Michelin Refresher Course – a pre-employment initiative to prepare people for potential employment at the company's Bridgewater facility. The course consisted of an eight-week review of math, science and English as well as behavioural interview skills. The pilot was offered three times in its first year; however, results were mixed. Although many participants passed the WSI, they failed the interview. To show other Council members why this was occurring, Valerie made a two-minute clip of a participant who scored 100% on the test but failed the job interview. She recalled the Council's reaction to this rather shy candidate:

When they saw the clip they realized very quickly why he failed. The interviewer had to draw out all the stuff. "What work experience do you have?" "Well, I work some." [...] All that pulling and prying [...] I wanted to show them that you really have to make a connection with the person, to make him feel comfortable.

It was a moment of revelation for some of the non-Aboriginal members of the Council. Judith Sullivan-Corney put the problem into words.

We don't all come out of school knowing exactly how to conduct ourselves in an interview. For people who haven't had any of the opportunities that the majority of the population have had, it's got to be really tough. You're 30-35 years old, and you have to go through this stuff for the very first time. It's the opening of people's awareness of all the layers that need to be peeled back in order for people to have an equal opportunity.

A Broadening Effort

The revelations would continue through subsequent Council meetings. The September 2005 meeting was held at Michelin's Waterville plant, providing an opportunity for all Council members to tour the facility and meet other Michelin employees involved with the partnership. As always, the agenda included a progress report on the pilot projects. Thinking it an innocent question, Jim Morrison asked: "Why is education such a problem for Aboriginal people?"

The room went silent – until Valerie spoke up.

I asked: "do you really want to know, Jim?" And then I answered him. I talked about racism in the schools. I talked about teachers pushing our kids through so that they're out of the school system, even today. I talked about guidance counsellors telling Aboriginal students "why are you bothering to fill out that application?" This is 2007, and I can guarantee it's still happening. And that's how we got on another whole topic, that of education. Our challenge as a Council is: what do we do about it?

Others spoke up, sharing stories of racism in schoolyards and how it affected young people and their capacity to be successful in school. The discussion had a profound effect on the non-Aboriginal members of the Council. It also revealed a key characteristic of this Council, as Judith explained:

It's very clear that people around that table trust one another to the point that they've shared personal, deep experiences that you don't normally get at a meeting like that.

Valerie elaborated:

You put your heart on the table and realize that it can be crushed in an instant. But if you also know that trust and comfort level is there, that's a partnership. It's a relationship. It's as close to intimacy as you can get and I think that's the whole point. Being able to trust the Aboriginal community members, being able to trust not just a non-Aboriginal person but an entire board and company – that is huge.

Members of the Council also encouraged Michelin to look inward – at the workplace climate for Aboriginal employees, which also required a considerable level of trust. Jim explained:

It is establishing enough trust so that they've been willing to talk to us about things that we can improve on. In any company, if you're going to get better, that's what you need.

As a result, all Michelin Nova Scotia employees participated in a four-hour generic interactive diversity workshop. In addition, all Nova Scotia managers and supervisors attended a one-day workshop on leading diversity in their work areas. But Michelin committed to do more – to provide training that would deal specifically with building Aboriginal awareness among Michelin managers.

The Next Challenge?

In late 2005, the Council members were considering ways to act on what they had learned about the challenges in the education system facing Aboriginal students. This would be a very new direction for the group. Michelin managers were concerned and surprised at the turn of events:

We needed to be very conscious of our role and what our role was not. We're careful to say that it is not our role to tell the government what they should do or to ask them to formulate policy or change their policy. And education is their responsibility, not ours. What we can do with governments is point out where we're having difficulty.

Jim and George pondered what to do about the education challenges. The partnership had moved quite quickly.

Part C: The Results of the Partnership

The Council members encouraged Michelin to get in touch with the Department of Education, and Judith helped to organize a meeting with top officials. But it was a step that Michelin took with caution. George commented:

If anyone ever told me early on that I'd be meeting with the Deputy Minister of Education, I wouldn't have believed them.

When Michelin managers met with education officials, they talked about the company's needs and its experiences in meeting them. There was an immediate response – plant tours, more meetings and a commitment by the government to take action. In parallel, the Nova Scotia government developed new educational initiatives designed to promote Aboriginal success in the school system, including a module on Aboriginal awareness for every Grade 10 student in Nova Scotia.

Direct Effects

At a May 2007 meeting of the Michelin Advisory Council in Halifax, Jim Morrison offered a further update on activities and results of the partnership. The first item on the agenda was a toast to the Michelin managers – Michelin had become a “representative employer”. This meant that while Aboriginal representation in the Nova Scotia labour force was 1.2%, the representation of Aboriginal people in Michelin's workforce had risen to 1.3%. – doubling in just four years. The number of job applications had increased by more than tenfold – up from just 20 in 2002 to over 240 in 2005.

Michelin attributed these successes to the work of the partnership and the Advisory Council. A wide range of initiatives had been undertaken since the Council first met almost three years before.

- The development of more effective recruiting practices, including an internet-based job application system, and much closer relationships with Aboriginal organizations and networks such as FirstNet
- Pilot projects that not only prepared Aboriginal candidates for jobs at Michelin but also revealed the nature of the barriers to Aboriginal employment. The pilot refresher courses were being further developed and delivered with the Nova Scotia Community College in collaboration with the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq. This would broaden the training to employers beyond Michelin.
- Initiatives to create a welcoming work environment for Aboriginal employees at Michelin, including Aboriginal awareness training, mentoring relationships for new Aboriginal employees, and the development of an Employee Assistance Program tailored to Aboriginal employees

At the same time, the purpose of the partnership remained constant and its goals were clearly understood by all of the partners. Valerie Whynot provided her perspective.

Michelin is not making exceptions. They're not hiring these individuals because they're Aboriginal. They hiring them based on their skills and knowledge required to fit into that workplace, and at the same time preparing their own company for the future.

Andrew Mutch, Human Resources manager at the Waterville plant, summed it up for the company.

The Aboriginal community in Nova Scotia is the single largest growing population of working employees that we have. That is a fact, as well as a response to people who ask: "why are you doing this, is it just for the benevolence?" This is a population we need – and we get good, solid employees.

The Merits of Patience

The long time horizons required for results continued to be an issue for Michelin managers. One senior manager commented:

You have to do a lot of prep work before you see results. It's a little tough for us because we're a results-driven organization, and we want to do something this afternoon and see the result before we go home tonight. So that was a tough one for us. But there is a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes. It's that momentum thing. A bit like an older luxury car – you step on the gas and it takes a while to get it going, but once it gets going, you move!

In contrast, the Aboriginal partners were less concerned with the early numbers. Instead, they were more interested in the direction of change, and the sense that Michelin was committed to the partnership. Manson Gloade explained:

Michelin people can be very hard on themselves. They were worried about the fact that early on, only two people were hired through the partnership. But they are undoing hundreds of years of history, and changing some carved-in-stone perceptions on both sides.

Looking ahead to Future Spin-Offs

The Michelin partnership also had much broader impacts on Aboriginal employment within Nova Scotia. Since signing the Michelin agreement, two additional partnerships had been formed – one in nursing and another in trucking. One of the Aboriginal members of the Council linked the additional partnerships to the Michelin experience:

The Michelin partnership was the first that was done, and now we have two more. I think a lot of other organizations out there now feel comfortable in doing this. They're starting to see what's happening. It's a chain reaction and it's great – it gives our people hope and faith you know, a future outlook.

Gerald Toney saw the long term value for both employers and Aboriginal youth.

It's making it a lot easier for Aboriginals coming through the school system to take a look at options like working in a plant, and they're more able to prepare themselves to get into the workplace at a younger age. This way, the student has a chance to look at a lot of options, think about what it takes to get there, and make better career decisions. It's a wake-up call that industry's out there saying that they're short of people – and this is how you get people ready for it.



For Manson Gloade, who continues to have responsibility for the federal government's Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiatives, the future was very promising.

The ground has been tilled and fertilized. Now we are watching it grow.

Appendix 1: Map of Nova Scotia with Michelin Plants and Aboriginal Communities

Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq First Nations



-  Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq
-  Union of Nova Scotia Indians



Appendix 2: Quick Facts and Links

- Nova Scotia has 13 Mi'kmaq First Nations.
- In total, there are 12,943 registered Indians in Nova Scotia, and of these, 4,339 live off-reserve.¹
- The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM) is a Tribal Council incorporated in 1986 to proactively promote and assist Mi'kmaw communities' initiatives toward self determination and enhancement of community. CMM represents the First Nation communities of Bear River, Annapolis Valley, Glooscap, Millbrook, Paq'tnekek, and Pictou Landing. (www.cmmns.com)
- The Union of Nova Scotia Indians is a tribal organization that came into existence to provide a unified political voice for the Mi'kmaq people of the province. It represents five First Nation Communities within Cape Breton (We'koqma'q, Wagmatcook, Membertou, Eskasoni and Chapel Island) along with two First Nations located in mainland Nova Scotia (Indian Brook and Acadia). (www.unsi.ns.ca)
- The Native Council of Nova Scotia is the Self-Governing Authority for the large community of Mi'kmaq/Aboriginal Peoples Residing Off-Reserve in Nova Scotia throughout traditional Mi'kmaq Territory. (www.ncns.ca)
- The mission of the Nova Scotia Office of Aboriginal Affairs is responsible for coordinating the province's approach to Aboriginal issues. Its mission is to lead Nova Scotia in Aboriginal Affairs by building mutual understanding, respect and a lasting relationship. (www.gov.ns.ca/abor)
- The Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI) is an initiative of the Government of Canada. AWPI's mission is to facilitate the process of equitable participation of Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian workforce through enhancing awareness, capacity and partnerships between Aboriginal peoples and all sectors of the economy. This process is built upon a foundation of mutual respect, innovation and the pursuit of excellence. (www.awpi.gc.ca)

¹ Source: Nova Scotia Office of Aboriginal Affairs (www.gov.ns.ca/abor)

Appendix 3: The Partnership Agreement

