



Making Land Acknowledgements Meaningful

Introduction

In these past years there has been much dialogue about reconciliation, its intent, efforts and sense making of it among society, and within that conversation I have often been asked about my own perspective and learnings regarding land acknowledgements. I've been honoured throughout my career to visit and work with many Indigenous cultures in all regions of Canada to help build hope and career readiness among our communities as individuals explore the world or work and learning towards fulfilling their self-determined preferred future. I have answered the request many times to work with corporate teams to facilitate conversations that move from gaining insights about differing cross cultural worldviews about employment and economic participation into tangible plans that support inclusive workplaces and business growth. Acknowledging the lands upon which I have visited to be of service in these ways across every province and territory of Canada is a gift and having the ability to keep learning from the Indigenous peoples on these travels keeps me inspired in my vision to see Indigenous talent enjoy meaningful careers.

I cannot remember a time when we, Indigenous peoples, did not acknowledge and honour the land upon which we walked, especially when we walked in lands that we were guests upon. Throughout my years it was taught to me to always have an appreciation when walking in nature, to see what I could see, and to recall that Creator gave the plants and animals special gifts so that we could learn from them and have life. At community gatherings there was always someone there to offer gratitude for the lands that sustained our way of being. As I formally began my career in the 1990's, meetings and conferences hosted by Indigenous organizations always began with honouring the traditional territory of the Indigenous host nation through a public statement and practice of their cultural protocol which opened the event for guests, welcoming them to come together for dialogue in a respectful way. So, for many me, and I would say for many of my friends, land acknowledgements are not new, it is a very old teaching and tradition. It is nice to see and hear others now joining in this cultural practice and I enjoy helping others find their own way to connect with this practice.

In this document I will offer a few thoughts that I hope will be helpful for you as you reflect on what your own role in reconciliation may be and how a land acknowledgment can be one action you may consider taking towards honouring the place in which you live, play and work. Please note that for the general intent of this overview document I have attempted to summarize complex concepts for the reader so it may provide some starting points for your reflection and learning. For information in a more complete approach do feel free to contact me to arrange for a learning session on this and related topics.

What is a land acknowledgement?

A land acknowledgement is a meaningful statement created from a good place with knowledge and respectful intent by an organization (or individual) that has made a commitment to honour the First Peoples of Canada and their traditional land upon which that organization is now situated. The people who work at this organization become aware that their workspace is upon ancestral lands of a peoples that have undergone eras of change as this country was established. This is a statement that often appears on websites, public and internal facing documents, and shared verbally at public events by members of an organization. These statements contribute to the recognition that the organization has regarding the role that Indigenous peoples have in Canadian society. A land acknowledgement informs others that the organization understands and is awareness there exists a history of this land prior to the organization being established in Canada. This awareness includes the recognition that the Indigenous peoples of today, as descendants of the First Peoples of this place, have unique relationship with the land and with Government of Canada, a relationship status which no other group in Canada holds.



When do we use a land acknowledgement?

Land acknowledgements are usually practiced at the commencement of meetings and gatherings, or when a guest speaker is introducing themselves, in virtual and in person settings. Acknowledgement of the land and the Indigenous peoples who are the traditional and current inhabitants of that place begins a meeting or gathering in a positive way for all participants, it helps to provide a centering of common place for us to reflect and be thankful for the space which we will be using for discussions, learning and dialogue.

Typically, the acknowledgement is delivered by the host of the gathering and, when hosted by or in partnership with an Indigenous group, it often includes their specific meeting commencement cultural protocols.

In virtual meetings, the host of the gathering will usually again open the meeting with the land acknowledgement as part of the opening commencements before other welcoming remarks are provided.

When your organization is hosting a meeting for special guests, especially those that may have travelled to be with you, it is a good practice to include a land acknowledgement in a meaningful way as part of your formal opening.

As a formal guest speaker should I offer a land acknowledgement?

If you are a formal guest speaker who will be addressing meeting participants during an in-person event, it is appropriate for you to offer a land acknowledgement as a sign of respect to the nation of peoples upon whose territory you have travelled to for this experience.

As a guest speaker in a virtual meeting, you can acknowledge the traditional territory and lands upon which the host organization for the event is located, and in addition share an acknowledgement of the traditional lands upon which you are currently speaking from in your location.

As a meeting a participant should I offer a land acknowledgment?

It has been my experience, at most large events, that once the formal opening has been completed, which will often include the land acknowledgement and other cultural protocols, that it will not be required that each person offer a land acknowledgement as they contribute to the discussion, or within smaller discussion groups. The formal opening ceremony is conducted on behalf of the guests and participants to open the event in a good way for all to contribute with a good mind going forward. However, depending on the topic, community, and personal experience, some people do like to give a version of a land acknowledgement when speaking in a plenary, as an example.

How does my organization create a land acknowledgement?

This is one of the most asked questions I receive. My response is that your organization should only undertake this endeavour when you are ready and have the capacity to make it meaningful. As I described earlier, when we acknowledge the land and the Indigenous peoples as stewards of that land, it is a relational context in which we recognize we are a guest of those peoples and their lands, so we should conduct ourselves as such. So, on that note, I respectfully suggest you reflect on how your company envisions a reciprocal relationship with Indigenous peoples, how your company's history and future story in Canada will play a role in that relationship, and how you will make space for what this acknowledgment means within your company's mission. It should be part of a strategy that can be woven within your values and vision for how you want your company to be viewed by stakeholders, Indigenous peoples, industry, and your workforce. Earlier I mentioned that a land acknowledgment honours the traditional territories of the First Peoples of the area, their existing or relative Nation-to-Nation formal relationship with the Government of Canada, and land acknowledgements also incorporate reference of specific First Nation, Inuit and Métis



peoples in the region and territory in which your company is located and does business today so research and understanding these relationships is part of the process.

How your company implements the acknowledgement and conducts your business going forward is important as people will consider the alignment between your acknowledgement and your actions. Thus, as you can see, this is an opportunity for your company to consider how else you may develop your capacity for Indigenous inclusion through productive procurement partnerships, human resource development, community engagement and other efforts to help you fulfill your business needs for growth and development and become an ally with Indigenous peoples.

The executive team needs to support this approach and become familiar with what this acknowledgement means in the context of doing business so they can champion the work of Indigenous inclusion and see this as a standard practice when engaging into dialogue with partners, industry, suppliers and others when appropriate opportunities arise. The company should ensure there is education with all employees about the meaning of your land acknowledgement and how to use it so it becomes a welcomed part of how operations are conducted, and not misunderstood as a 'special program' that are only supported by the few.

A Few Final Thoughts

In closing on this topic, I have found that an organization's land acknowledgement only carries meaning when it is constructed through a process that includes learning of the place and the history of the peoples in that area upon which you work, when you take time to reflect of your intent for relationship with Indigenous peoples, and how your company will be accountable to making positive use of the statement going forward. I welcome you to contact me if you would like help in navigating this process and dialogue about additional things to consider in your unique approach to making a land acknowledgement meaningful for your organization. Just as each community is different, each organization has its own culture and therefore your land acknowledgment should be representative of your uniqueness. Each company has a different starting point on the journey of Indigenous inclusion, so I encourage you to take a few steps, gain some wisdom, continue to learn and keep walking forward.

Please do check back with me from time to time at bridgingconcepts.ca as I continue to expand my writings and have additional topics to share with you.