



SEVGEN

GOVERNANCE TOOLKIT

ADVANCING INDIGENOUS RELATIONS
AND RECONCILIATION

KÎYÂNAW KEHITÔTAMAHK

OUR APPROACH

This Governance Toolkit was developed by SevGen Consulting Inc. in partnership with Cooperation Canada, the national independent voice for international cooperation. As a coalition, Cooperation Canada convenes, coordinates and collaborates with Canadian civil society, and partners in Canada and around the globe, to inspire and implement policies and programs for a fairer, safer and more sustainable world.

SevGen Consulting Inc. is a multi-disciplinary, 100% Indigenous-owned management consulting firm based in Maskwacîs, Alberta, offering innovative and meaningful solutions within an Indigenous context that promote equity, collaboration and inclusion.



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Strengthening Organizational Governance

This **Governance Toolkit** is designed for boards of directors and the people that support them in Canada's international cooperation sector to understand Indigenous governance principles and fulfill their organization's responsibilities related to justice and equity, Indigenous relations, Truth and Reconciliation, and ethical leadership.

The toolkit introduces and translates SevGen's *Core Competency Framework* into practical governance guidance, enabling decision-makers to:

- ♦ Strengthen their understanding of Indigenous histories, rights, and contemporary realities
- ♦ Clarify an organization's role in advancing justice and reconciliation through governance, policy, and oversight
- ♦ Embed Indigenous relations and reconciliation commitments into organizational systems, culture, and long-term planning
- ♦ Ensure accountability, continuity, and ethical leadership across board and executive teams

How to Use This Toolkit

Boards are encouraged to set a **regular schedule**, such as dedicating time during board meetings, retreats, or governance committee sessions, to work through the Core Competency Framework and reflection questions at a pace that fits their organization. The goal is to engage in **meaningful dialogue** about current practices, strengths, and areas where further development may be needed. Through this collective reflection, boards can identify **opportunities** to strengthen governance, consider practical **next steps**, and explore **resources** that support continued learning and improvement. Boards may also invite **senior leadership** and the **administrative teams** that support them to participate in this reflective process, helping to align governance perspectives with operational realities.

Core Competency Framework for Board of Directors

Advancing Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous Rights

SevGen's *Core Competency Framework* is designed to support boards of directors in strengthening their governance practices related to Indigenous relations and Truth and Reconciliation. The framework is organized around **four core competencies** that reflect key areas of board responsibility: 1) applying foundational knowledge, 2) establishing respectful and effective relationships, 3) fostering cultural safety and ethical accountability, and 4) demonstrating commitment through strategic leadership.

Each competency is structured within a lifecycle approach that recognizes organizational growth as an ongoing and evolving process rather than a single achievement. The lifecycle includes five stages:

Awareness – Building Understanding: Directors develop baseline knowledge of Indigenous histories, rights, perspectives, and contemporary realities, and begin recognizing how these contexts relate to the organization's work.

Commitment – Establishing Responsibility: Boards translate awareness into responsibility by setting expectations, identifying priorities, and establishing commitments that guide the organization's approach to Indigenous relations and reconciliation.

Integration – Embedding Commitments: Governance practices, strategic decisions, and organizational systems begin to consistently reflect the board's commitments, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives and responsibilities inform planning, policies, and operations.

Accountability – Communicating Progress: Boards strengthen oversight and transparency by monitoring progress, evaluating leadership performance, and communicating outcomes related to Indigenous relations and reconciliation.

Stewardship – Sustaining Commitments: The organization's commitments become embedded in its culture, leadership development, and long-term strategy, ensuring that progress is sustained and strengthened over time.

By combining the four competencies with this lifecycle approach, the framework helps boards move from *learning to leadership*. It provides a structured way for organizations to reflect on their current practices, identify opportunities for growth, and guide continuous improvement in governance related to Indigenous relations and reconciliation.

1

Applying
Foundational
Knowledge

2

Establishing
Respectful and
Effective
Relationships

3

Fostering
Cultural Safety
and Ethical
Accountability

4

Demonstrating
Commitment
and Strategic
Leadership

Core Competencies

*Advancing Board Members' Responsibilities Related to
Indigenous Relations and Truth and Reconciliation*

AWARENESS

COMMITMENT

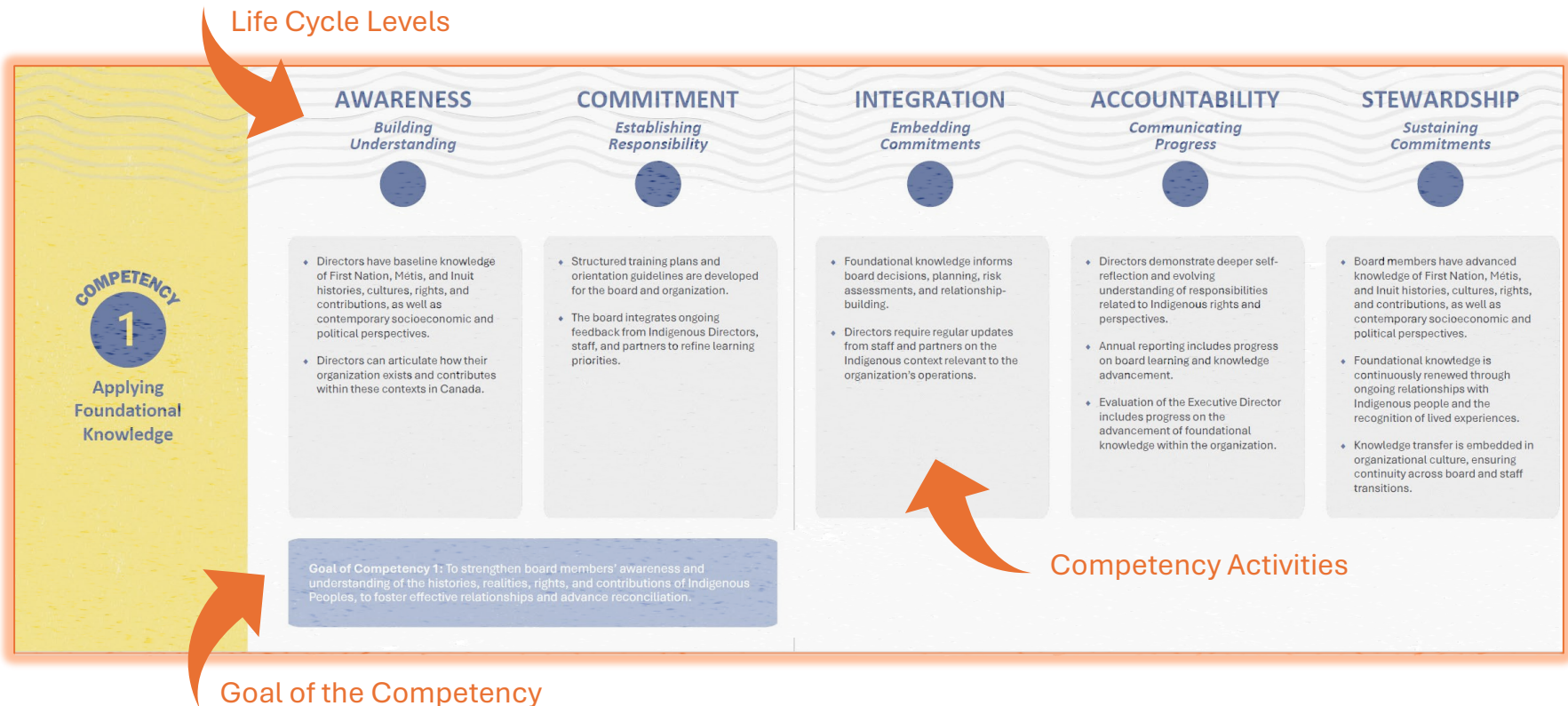
INTEGRATION

ACCOUNTABILITY

STEWARDSHIP

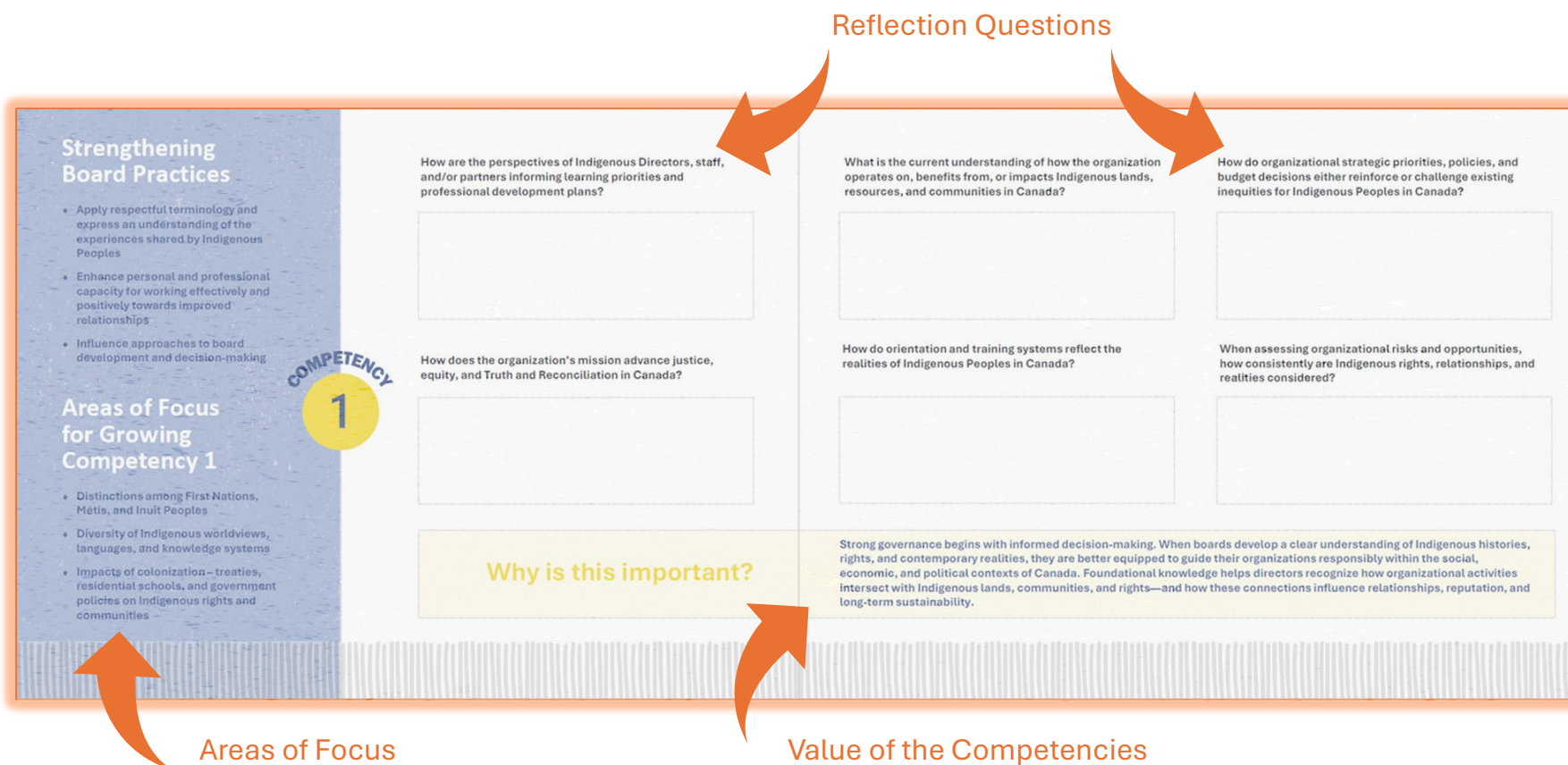
Putting Competency Into Practice

Throughout the toolkit you will see SevGen's *Core Competency Framework* laid out, like in the snapshot images below, describing the goal of each competency and the list of activities to reach competency at every life cycle level. The Framework is very comprehensive, meant to support the evolution of an organization to an advanced level of Indigenous relations and Truth and Reconciliation. At first, it may seem that there are many aspects of the Framework that are missing in your organization, and perhaps, even feel out of reach. But each competency activity represents a powerful step in your organization's journey to building the governance structures, relationships, and skillsets that will enable your work in creating innovation and sustainable global impact with Indigenous Peoples.



How to Approach the Reflection Questions

The reflection questions available for each competency are a foundational element of the toolkit. They are meant to inspire collective dialogue among board members and with senior management and administration. Approach the questions with an open mind, as the questions themselves may bring learning, with additional research or inquiry involved to support discussion. Take the time to really consider what each question means, both in terms of definitions and in how they apply to your organization's mission, vision, and services. Keep track of discussions in the space at the back of this book, where some definitions and resources are also available to guide you. Every organization will be different in what advancements can be made to enhance commitment and accountability for Indigenous relations and Truth and Reconciliation.



COMPETENCY

1

Applying Foundational Knowledge

AWARENESS

Building Understanding



- ◆ Directors have baseline knowledge of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories, cultures, rights, and contributions, as well as contemporary socioeconomic and political perspectives.
- ◆ Directors can articulate how their organization exists and contributes within these contexts in Canada.

COMMITMENT

Establishing Responsibility



- ◆ Structured training plans and orientation guidelines are developed for the board and organization.
- ◆ The board integrates ongoing feedback from Indigenous Directors, staff, and partners to refine learning priorities.

Goal of Competency 1: To strengthen board members' awareness and understanding of the histories, realities, rights, and contributions of Indigenous Peoples, to foster effective relationships and advance reconciliation.

INTEGRATION

Embedding Commitments



- ◆ Foundational knowledge informs board decisions, planning, risk assessments, and relationship-building.
- ◆ Directors require regular updates from staff and partners on the Indigenous context relevant to the organization's operations.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Communicating Progress



- ◆ Directors demonstrate deeper self-reflection and evolving understanding of responsibilities related to Indigenous rights and perspectives.
- ◆ Annual reporting includes progress on board learning and knowledge advancement.
- ◆ Evaluation of the Executive Director includes progress on the advancement of foundational knowledge within the organization.

STEWARDSHIP

Sustaining Commitments



- ◆ Board members have advanced knowledge of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories, cultures, rights, and contributions, as well as contemporary socioeconomic and political perspectives.
- ◆ Foundational knowledge is continuously renewed through ongoing relationships with Indigenous people and the recognition of lived experiences.
- ◆ Knowledge transfer is embedded in organizational culture, ensuring continuity across board and staff transitions.

Acronyms Used in This Document:

FPIC – Free, Prior and Informed Consent, a principle of UNDRIP

OCAP – First Nations Principles of Data Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession

TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

UNDRIP – United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Strengthening Board Practices

- ♦ Apply respectful terminology and express an understanding of the experiences shared by Indigenous Peoples
- ♦ Enhance personal and professional capacity for working effectively and positively towards improved relationships
- ♦ Influence approaches to board development and decision-making

Areas of Focus for Growing Competency 1

- ♦ Distinctions among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples
- ♦ Diversity of Indigenous worldviews, languages, and knowledge systems
- ♦ Impacts of colonization – treaties, residential schools, and government policies on Indigenous rights and communities

COMPETENCY 1

How are the perspectives of Indigenous Directors, staff, and/or partners informing learning priorities and professional development plans?

How does the organization's mission advance justice, equity, and Truth and Reconciliation in Canada?

Why is this important?

What is the current understanding of how the organization operates on, benefits from, or impacts Indigenous lands, resources, and communities in Canada?

How do organizational strategic priorities, policies, and budget decisions either reinforce or challenge existing inequities for Indigenous Peoples in Canada?

How do orientation and training systems reflect the realities of Indigenous Peoples in Canada?

When assessing organizational risks and opportunities, how consistently are Indigenous rights, relationships, and realities considered?

Strong governance begins with informed decision-making. When boards develop a clear understanding of Indigenous histories, rights, and contemporary realities, they are better equipped to guide their organizations responsibly within the social, economic, and political contexts of Canada. Foundational knowledge helps directors recognize how organizational activities intersect with Indigenous lands, communities, and rights—and how these connections influence relationships, reputation, and long-term sustainability.



COMPETENCY 2

Establishing Respectful and Effective Relationships

AWARENESS

Building Understanding



- ◆ Directors have baseline knowledge of ethical engagement principles, FPIC, OCAP, and the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP as frameworks for relationship-building.

COMMITMENT

Establishing Responsibility



- ◆ The board adopts commitments, protocols, and accountability frameworks to guide the organization's Indigenous engagement.
- ◆ The board acknowledges its role in supporting Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

Goal of Competency 2: To strengthen board members' capacity to establish respectful and effective relationships with Indigenous Peoples through deepened understanding of the organizations' role in reconciliation within the local, regional, national, and international contexts.

INTEGRATION

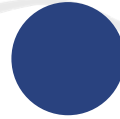
Embedding Commitments



- ◆ Relationships with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations are prioritized in organizational strategies and governance practices.
- ◆ Directors prioritize long-term investment in human and financial resources adequate to build relationships with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Communicating Progress



- ◆ The board establishes clear metrics and evaluation plans to assess the effectiveness of Indigenous relations.
- ◆ The board monitors engagement outcomes in alignment with established Indigenous engagement practices.
- ◆ The board provides comprehensive and transparent disclosure of the organization's Indigenous relations practices and performance.
- ◆ Evaluation of the Executive Director includes progress on advancing Indigenous relations.

STEWARDSHIP

Sustaining Commitments



- ◆ Directors have advanced knowledge of ethical engagement principles, FPIC, OCAP, and the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP as frameworks for relationship-building.
- ◆ The board incorporates wise practices to manage risk in Indigenous partnerships.
- ◆ Relationships are long-term, resilient, and embedded into board and organizational culture.
- ◆ Relationship approaches evolve based on Indigenous partners' feedback.

Strengthening Board Practices

- ♦ Empower organizations' commitments to reconciliation
- ♦ Apply principles of ethical engagement
- ♦ Instill approaches that invite respect, appreciate diverse perspectives, and reduce barriers to meaningful participation

Areas of Focus for Growing Competency 2

- ♦ Duty of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples
- ♦ Reconciliation at the personal and professional levels
- ♦ Meaningful relationships with Indigenous Peoples
- ♦ Board responsibilities through an Indigenous lens

COMPETENCY 2

What formal commitments have been adopted to guide respectful and ethical Indigenous engagement across the organization?

Can the organization clearly articulate its vision and purpose for engagement with Indigenous partners?

Why is this important?

How are relationships with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations prioritized within the strategic plan and operations?

How does the organization ensure that sufficient financial and human resources are allocated to support long-term relationship-building rather than short-term consultation?

When considering new initiatives, partnerships, or risks, how consistently are potential impacts on Indigenous rights and relationships assessed?

What metrics or evaluation frameworks have been established to assess the effectiveness and integrity of relationships with Indigenous partners?

Strong and respectful relationships with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations are essential to the credibility, effectiveness, and long-term success of organizations operating in Canada. Sound engagement practices reduce reputational and operational risks while creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration and shared outcomes. Over time, these relationships contribute to enhanced governance and improved decision-making, and help to build a reputation for integrity and accountability.



COMPETENCY 3

Fostering Cultural Safety, Self- Awareness, and Ethical Accountability

AWARENESS

Building Understanding



- ◆ Directors have baseline knowledge of systemic barriers affecting Indigenous participation in economic, social, and political systems.
- ◆ Directors receive ongoing cultural safety, ethics, and anti-racism training.
- ◆ Directors can explore and articulate their own biases, privileges, and responsibilities in relation to Indigenous Peoples in Canada and globally.
- ◆ Orientation of new Directors and staff includes cultural safety principles.

COMMITMENT

Establishing Responsibility



- ◆ The board develops a vision and plan for advancing cultural safety, including commitments to reduce barriers, create inclusive practices, and invite diverse perspectives.
- ◆ The board adopts policies or guidelines on equity, ethics, Indigenous inclusion, and cultural safety.
- ◆ The board integrates principles of cultural safety into the organization's vision, mission, values, and strategic plan to ensure long-term commitment.

Goal of Competency 3: Fostering cultural safety, self-awareness and ethical accountability as an important step towards creating respectful and healthier board and organizational environments.

INTEGRATION

Embedding Commitments



- ◆ Board meetings and governance processes include practices and conduct that create safe, respectful spaces and dialogue.
- ◆ The board and organization have Indigenous representation and leadership proportionate to the organization's service delivery for and with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Communicating Progress



- ◆ The board adopts a process to guide the assessment of organizational culture and Indigenous representation across the organization. The process prioritizes Indigenous and internal feedback.
- ◆ The board monitors inclusion, equity, and cultural safety indicators within the organization and regularly evaluates the effectiveness of cultural safety efforts.
- ◆ The board responds to concerns raised by Indigenous individuals or partners in a transparent and timely manner that aligns with organizational policy.
- ◆ The board maintains open communication and transparency with staff and partners, fostering an environment where issues of ethics can be raised without fear of retribution.
- ◆ Evaluation of the Executive Director includes progress on advancing cultural safety within the organization.

STEWARDSHIP

Sustaining Commitments



- ◆ The board prioritizes continuous improvement in organizational culture based on Indigenous and internal feedback.
- ◆ Cultural safety practices and ethical accountability are incorporated into bylaws, governance manuals, and succession planning.

Strengthening Board Practices

- ♦ Model personal and professional awareness within governance
- ♦ Integrate reflection into board practices
- ♦ Align with organizational commitments

Areas of Focus for Growing Competency 3

- ♦ Ethical accountability and values alignment
- ♦ Personal biases, assumptions, and the many forms of privilege
- ♦ Defining racism: saviour mentality, racial gaslighting, relational racism, systemic racism
- ♦ Incorporating worldviews and diverse perspectives
- ♦ Creating respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples

COMPETENCY 3

What opportunities exist to examine personal and institutional biases, privileges, and responsibilities that may influence governance decisions?

How are cultural safety principles incorporated into the organization's vision, mission, values, and strategic plan?

Why is this important?

What processes have been established to ensure continuous improvement in organizational culture based on Indigenous and internal feedback?

What training and onboarding processes are in place to develop a baseline understanding of systemic barriers affecting Indigenous participation in economic, social, and political systems in Canada and globally?

What goals or targets could be established to improve Indigenous representation and leadership within the organization?

What indicators or measures are used to monitor cultural safety, equity, and inclusion across the organization?

Organizational culture directly influences whether people feel respected, heard, and able to participate fully. For organizations working with Indigenous Peoples, cultural safety and ethical accountability are essential to building environments where meaningful collaboration and honest dialogue can occur. Prioritizing cultural safety strengthens an organization's ability to attract and retain diverse talent, build stronger partnerships, and respond constructively to concerns when they arise. It also supports ethical leadership by ensuring that governance structures encourage openness, learning, and accountability.



COMPETENCY 4

Demonstrating Commitment and Strategic Leadership

AWARENESS

Building Understanding



- ◆ Directors have baseline knowledge of their responsibilities related to reconciliation, Indigenous relations, and risk management.
- ◆ Directors can articulate the importance of Indigenous relations for organizational strategy and ethical leadership.

COMMITMENT

Establishing Responsibility



- ◆ The board identifies specific Calls to Action and UNDRIP principles that apply to board activities and the organization.
- ◆ The board sets clear commitments to reconciliation, Indigenous relations, and Indigenous rights.
- ◆ The board considers how its role as a steward of resources shapes responsibility to reconciliation and Indigenous rights in Canada.

Goal of Competency 4: To strengthen board members' capacity to integrate Indigenous relations into the organization's strategic priorities and organizational culture by embedding relevant values, practicing servant leadership, and ensuring ethical accountability at the governance level and within operations.

INTEGRATION

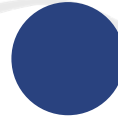
Embedding Commitments



- ◆ Governance processes, such as policies, strategic plans, and budgets, reflect commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights in Canada.
- ◆ Programs and operations reflect commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights.
- ◆ Indigenous perspectives are considered in strategic and operational decisions.
- ◆ Human and financial resource investments reflect commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Communicating Progress



- ◆ The board monitors progress on commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights.
- ◆ Strategic leadership evolves to address changing contexts, lessons learned, and deeper commitments based on Indigenous and internal feedback.
- ◆ The board provides comprehensive and transparent disclosure of the organization's progress on commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights.
- ◆ Evaluation of the Executive Director includes progress on advancing commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights.

STEWARDSHIP

Sustaining Commitments



- ◆ Commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights are reflected in long-term strategy, leadership practices and development, and organizational identity.
- ◆ Leadership approaches evolve based on Indigenous and internal feedback.

Strengthening Board Practices

- ♦ Maintain reciprocal and respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples
- ♦ Evaluate existing policies, procedures, programs, and plans in alignment with conciliation commitments and Indigenous rights
- ♦ Support and enact Indigenous engagement at all levels of the organization and not just at the board table

Areas of Focus for Growing Competency 4

COMPETENCY 4

- ♦ Strategic Integration – embedding Indigenous relations into board and organizational priorities, planning, and decisions
- ♦ Development of plans, policies and/or procedures, and accountability measurements to assess progress
- ♦ Communicating commitment and expectations
- ♦ Servant leadership – building trust and sustainable relationships in alignment with ethical accountability

Which Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and UNDRIP principles are most relevant to the organization's mandate?

How do budget allocations, staffing decisions, and program investments support commitments to reconciliation and Indigenous rights in Canada and globally?

Why is this important?

What responsibilities does the board hold as leaders and stewards of the organization's values related to reconciliation and Indigenous rights in Canada and globally?

How can the organization remove organizational barriers that limit Indigenous participation, partnership, or leadership opportunities?

How is progress in Indigenous relations and reconciliation, including successes and challenges, communicated to members, partners, and the public in a transparent manner?

How will reconciliation and Indigenous relations commitments remain embedded in long-term strategy, leadership development, and organizational identity?

When reconciliation and Indigenous relations are implemented as governance responsibilities, rather than short-term initiatives, organizations are better able to better contribute to justice, equity, and responsible resource stewardship in Canada. Strategic leadership ensures that commitments to reconciliation are reflected in key governance decisions, including strategic planning, resource allocation, leadership development, and organizational policies. This helps to ensure that barriers to Indigenous participation and partnership are identified and addressed, creating more inclusive and equitable systems.



Capturing Meaningful Dialogue

Keep track of organizational strengths and gaps in knowledge, potential resources, and first steps here.

Organizational Strengths

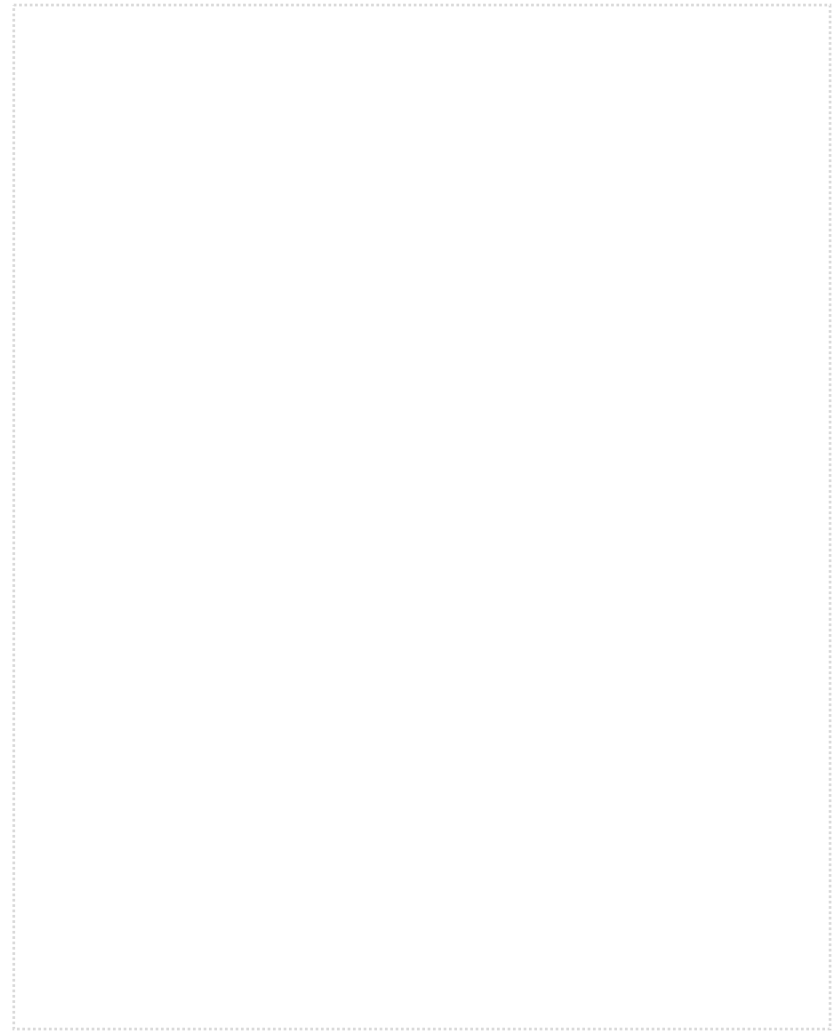
Gaps in Understanding and Capacity



Potential Resources to Support the Organization



First Steps in Making Progress



Key Definitions

Competency – Competency in this context refers to the knowledge, understanding, and attitudes that enable board members to respectfully and appropriately engage within the histories, cultures, perspectives, and contemporary context of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. It goes beyond basic awareness to include the capacity to apply learning in decision-making, governance, and relationships in ways that reflect respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.

TRC Calls to Action – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in 2008 under the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* to research and document the experiences of residential school survivors, their families, members of their communities, and former staff of residential schools. In 2015, the Commission released a 6-volume final report, which included 94 Calls to Action that call on all sectors of society to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation.

Truth and Reconciliation – The term reconciliation was developed by the TRC after six years of collecting the testimonies of over 6,500 residential school survivors. The term reflects the foundational framework for healing developed by the Commission, which includes the 94 Calls to Action for all Canadians and the Principles of Reconciliation. These principles provide direction to adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*; uphold the inherent, Treaty, and constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples; adhere to the responsibility of all Canadians to contribute to the creation of a more equitable and just society that respects Indigenous sovereignty; and establish a system of education, political will, accountability, and transparency that will close the many significant gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

UNDRIP – The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007 to establish a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous Peoples of the world. It elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of Indigenous Peoples. Canada was one of four countries that voted against UNDRIP during its adoption in 2007. In 2016, the Government of Canada endorsed UNDRIP without qualification and committed to its full and effective implementation.



Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) – FPIC is a fundamental UNDRIP principle that requires the consent of Indigenous Peoples before undertaking any projects or developments that may affect their lands, territories, resources, or rights.

Cultural Safety – The concept and terminology of cultural safety was developed by Maori (New Zealand) Indigenous Rights Leaders. In their words, “Culturally safe practices recognize and respect the identities of others and meet their needs, rights and expectations. Culturally unsafe practices diminish, demean or disempower the cultural identity of an individual.”

Indigenous Relations – Indigenous relations refers to the ongoing process of building respectful, equitable, and sustainable partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, governments, and organizations.

MAKING PROGRESS

After working through this toolkit and identifying your organization’s strengths and gaps in knowledge, skills, and action, the next step is to translate reflection into intentional, informed action. Organizations are encouraged to engage an Indigenous advisor or partner to help guide this next phase, ensuring that future plans, relationships, and decisions are grounded in Indigenous expertise, perspectives, and lived experience.

Valuable Resources

- ♦ National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (nctr.ca)
- ♦ United Nations on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (un.org)
- ♦ First Nations Information Governance Centre (fnigc.ca)
- ♦ The First Nations Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession - OCAP® (fnigc.ca/ocap-training)
- ♦ National Indigenous Economic Strategy (niestrategy.ca)

“Boards need to lead and set a tone, and if we use our influence greatly, we can make a difference.”

~ unknown