

Toward Self-Sufficiency: Applying the Lessons of Leadership

by Katie Daniel

The Fort McKay First Nation is a community in thriving transition from traditional hunting and trapping to savvy self-reliance, and former Band Administrator and current Councillor Ray Powder is one of the people influencing this healthy business evolution.

Powder's community, about 65 kilometers north of Fort McMurray in Alberta, is adjacent to Syncrude's oil sands development project, launched in 1985. In 1986, under the leadership of Chief Jim Boucher, the Nation made a concerted effort to work with this powerful community stakeholder and incorporated a general contracting business to provide employment for band members, as well as generate profits to improve the community. The businesses, under the umbrella of the Fort McKay Group of Companies have expanded since, and include transportation/trucking, land reclamation, a buffalo ranch, and a complex including equipment maintenance shops, bulk fuel storage, and office space.

The group was recognized in 2004 with an Alberta Business Awards of Distinction. The Eagle Feather Business Award of Distinction celebrated several milestones: full community involvement, business start-up assistance for local residents, and healthy dividends paid out to band members. Ground has been broken for a new partnership with the private sector, to establish an industrial and commercial centre in northeastern Alberta for companies servicing the oil sands industry.

Among the attributes that Chief Boucher cites for their business success is placing qualified local aboriginal people in positions of importance, and Powder is a case in point. After being hired as Band Administrator, Powder went to the Chief for advice on training opportunities for the new position. Chief Boucher recommended that Powder investigate the Aboriginal Leadership and Management programs at The Banff Centre as an appropriate starting point. Powder began his personal development journey in 2001, and received his Certificate of Aboriginal Leadership, Governance, and Management Excellence in 2005.

He began with the Aboriginal Board Governance program and was able to take away much useful information, not only for the team administration of the Band, but also as a Board of Directors member for the Fort McKay Group of Companies. His next program was Aboriginal Leadership and Management Development, and here Powder learned more about being an effective manager – not just from the program facilitators, but also from individuals from other bands and councils across Canada who were willing to share what worked in their own communities. "There were some similarities, and some contrasts. We learned from each other, both taking and offering what works for us."

That circle of shared knowledge was an effective way of learning for Powder, and he made the decision to pursue the Certificate program, taking two programs each year.

The Negotiation Skills Training program really brought things from the theoretical to the practical for Powder, and it had a lot to do with timing. "It's an example of the reality of how the programs started unfolding for me, how the breath of life was getting into the program I was taking." The Fort McKay First Nation was at the decision-point on their Treaty Land Entitlement in 2002 and for Powder, it was an important decision clarified by what he was able to apply from the Negotiations program. "What I learned helped me open my mind to what was presented to all the stakeholders involved and their contrasting needs, helped me understand in depth what the document meant, helped me maintain focus. I had to weigh my pros and cons. The program gave life to what I was doing. It was one of the biggest highlights for me."

Personally, Powder says the programs have made him more well-rounded, both in daily conversations, and in his ability to bring ideas forward in groups and reach out more effectively to his people. Among those ideas, he values what he discovered about governance codes from lead faculty Leroy Little Bear in Practicing First Nation Sovereignty. "One of the things



Ray Powder

I learned about was Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, and how to apply the governance code within our community. Effective, real, practical, something we can live by. Ownership of the framework for us to practice our sovereignty was important.”

Another key learning from the Nation Building: Realizing the Dream Through Strategic Planning program was soon applied when the First Nation was asked by INAC to focus on strengthening their social and human resources development. “It was a perfect opportunity to apply the strategic planning principles. We created a team, using the techniques to develop our SWOTs, vision, mission, and mandate. We were all working on the same page.”

Most important for Powder, perhaps, is where his knowledge, skills and their application can take his community in the future. He reflects a new leadership; those who are open to life-long learning, and taking long-term, strategic visions and implementing them with his new knowledge. “Where do we want to go when we turn the page? Where do we want to be in six months, two years, ten years down the road? Self-sufficient.”