

Falling Over Glass Cliff

Meaningful reconciliation to support leadership of Indigenous women | Angelique EagleWoman

By **Angelique EagleWoman**



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(June 12, 2019, 9:33 AM EDT) -- Due to colonialism, Indigenous women have been the targets of violence and oppression for centuries. Many Indigenous scholars draw parallels between the treatment of the earth and the treatment of Indigenous women by colonizing forces. The actions of strip mining, polluting and reckless disregard to the consequences impacting the earth are analogized to the crisis known as the national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).

Despite this ongoing colonial mentality and despite the historic trauma intergenerationally transmitted, Indigenous women continue to reclaim their power as leaders. Most, if not all, Indigenous societies were matriarchal and women held positions of authority in decision making.

In contemporary times, the challenges faced by Indigenous women professionals should be of paramount importance as Canada grapples with reconciliation.

With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, the theme of reconciliation is being appropriated in mainstream institutions, from government offices to public universities to municipalities to private companies. As highlighted in a recent blog post, "Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Universities and Colleges" by Pam Palmater, she states that many of the actions being taken in the name of reconciliation at academic institutions are actually actions required under human rights laws on the federal and provincial levels, employment laws and pursuant to commitments to equality and diversity.

Rather, she points out true reconciliation measures would include recruitment and retention of a significant percentage of Indigenous faculty, staff and students along with other measures such as providing meaningful governance opportunities for Indigenous academics and communities on Indigenous curriculum, research initiatives and direction of research funding. Superficial actions such as renaming a building or including a land acknowledgment are not enough to put an organization on a path of reconciliation.

Adding to the reconciliation measures that are meaningful, the hiring of Indigenous women in academic, public and private leadership positions requires support and good faith inclusion in those settings.

Recently, the trend of the "glass cliff" has gained traction on the hiring of women, particularly racialized or women of colour, into top leadership roles when organizations are dysfunctional and require a "saviour" to turn things around. When they are unable to do so, then they are blamed for the failure of the organization.

"The glass cliff scenario is furthered when the company in crisis needs a leader with people management skills but doesn't require someone to be a particularly aggressive decision maker. This passiveness and lack of agency reinforces gender stereotypes and sets the female leader up for a high-risk situation because her hands are tied and she's not able to actively improve the company's situation," reported an article in *Fast Company* titled, What is the glass cliff, and why do so many women CEOs fall off of it?

Indigenous women professionals take on challenging roles for the same reason all other professionals do — to contribute to a broader vision and lead an organization to the next level.

The sad truth is that Indigenous women often face double standards, silencing, undermining, isolation and disrespect as they attempt to perform the duties and responsibilities they were hired to take on, particularly in mainstream Canadian institutions.

There are many Indigenous women professionals who have faced difficult and distressing employment situations that they left or were forced out of.

Several high-profile position changes of Indigenous women include Elder Marilyn Buffalo (Samson Cree Nation) hired by the University of Alberta to serve a two-year contract as senior Indigenous adviser and then abruptly let go a month later; Lynn Lavalée (Anishnaabe-Metis) resigning as the first vice-provost of Indigenous engagement at the University of Manitoba after little more than a year citing systemic racism and resistance by the administration; Sandra Muse Isaacs (Cherokee Nation) resigning from Saint Mary's University in an act of protest after the failure to carry out recommendations to hire more Indigenous faculty and expand the curriculum in the wake of an Indigenous student's murder; and Jody Wilson-Raybould (We Wai Kai Nation) the first Indigenous Justice minister and attorney general of Canada recently ousted from that position and finally from the Liberal party caucus altogether. The list goes on.

To add insult to injury, Indigenous women professionals at the point of constructive dismissal, resignation or termination are often characterized as incompetent or as not exhibiting a proper leadership style or any of a number of allegations that shift the blame to the woman who dared to step into her power and lead from an Indigenous perspective.

For reconciliation to make a difference in mainstream society, it must be more than a few feel good moments in an otherwise unchanged mainstream institution. The systemic factors working against Indigenous women must be dismantled and space created to allow in Indigenous perspectives, leadership, ideas and critiques to improve organizations and organizational behaviour.

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