

WHAT DOES FIRST NATIONS CAPACITY BUILDING LOOK LIKE IN 2018?

By Ian MacNeill

One of the questions on the recent First Nations survey conducted by the TLA's Aboriginal Affairs Committee asked First Nations forestry contractors and licensees what the TLA could do to help them succeed. The most common request was for more support in meeting capacity challenges in a variety of areas, including forestry and logging, marketing, and general business. To get a better idea of what this means, we spoke to several First Nations forestry executives. The story we write today is what we have learned from them, so far. We say "so far," because what we know now as a result of these discussions is certainly not all there is to say on the subject, particularly given that no two First Nations communities or challenge situations are alike. Solutions need to be custom fit to suit the environment, and for that reason we would like to think of this story as part of the ongoing dialogue between First Nations, the TLA, and the larger community—industrial, commercial, political and social—on the way to meeting capacity challenges.

So what is a capacity challenge? According to Matt Wealick, who chairs the TLA's Aboriginal Affairs Committee, a capacity challenge is what comes between having a resource like standing timber and utilizing it in such a way as to bring sustainable benefits to your community. "First Nations have tenure, they have leverage with government to make their tenures work, but what they're lacking is knowledge," he says. "They need management skills, connections to contractors, information about markets and a better understanding of policy changes and where they are going." He adds that this is precisely where TLA members can help. "Contractor members of the TLA are good at what they do, they have great capacity, they understand the industry, and they know the players and the policies, where many of the First Nations communities entering the industry don't understand any of that. One way for them to learn is to partner with good contractors, and the most successful ones have done just that."

Klay Tindall of Lil'wat Forestry Ventures, which manages an annual allowable cut (AAC) of 70,000 cubic metres in the Mt. Currie area of the coast, says that is exactly what he has been trying to do since he took over



Photo: iStock



as forest operations manager five years ago. “Building capacity has been a huge focus,” he says. “We want to train our people and create opportunities for them.” He adds that he wants to avoid the trap of giving an individual a single skill because that will relegate that person to seasonal employment. Ideally you want to provide them with a range of integrated skills that will keep them in demand year-round.

Having skilled workers on site makes them more attractive to contractors who are already working tight margins and require efficiency. “We understand that for licensees it’s all about cost management and it’s difficult convincing them to spend another 20 grand to hire untrained First Nations,” he says. “We’re lucky that we have had the benefit of training and a decent-sized licence; we’ve already got next year’s logging engineered.”

If there’s one big hurdle the Lil’wat and other First Nations without the Lil’wat’s natural endowments of a good-sized licence and proximity to a reliable transportation network have when it comes to capacity building, it is cost. Training takes time and money, sometimes lots of it. “None of the capacity-building exercise we’ve experienced could have happened without the profits from harvesting,” says Tindall. “It’s created stability and put money in the bank that can be used on training.” He adds that the Lil’wat recently enjoyed a job grant from the federal government, but one of the requirements of the grant is that recipients match the funding level. “They gave us \$100,000, but we had to match it. How many First Nations have a hundred grand in the bank?”

Making the effort and spending the money has paid off though. The Lil’wat are renowned for their firefighting skills—and were in high demand this past fire season—and they have



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First Nations who are geographically isolated or have small allowable annual cuts will have more difficulties attracting contractors.

had, and still have, a number of contractor partners who have hired their people and helped them advance their skills. These include Hedberg and Associates in Squamish, Zanzibar Holdings (silviculture), and SkyTech Yarding in Pemberton.

Willie Sellars, a council member for the Williams Lake Indian Band (WLIB), says his people have also been working to address capacity challenges. “We do 150,000 cubes a year and we need to get more band members involved because we have an aging workforce,” he says, adding that the cost of training is also an issue. “Logging is competitive and we understand that it’s all about dollars and cents.”

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Contractors can certainly be part of the solution for First Nations, he says, but the band is not just looking for situations where contractors come in, do the work, and send you a cheque.

“People are starting to realize that partnering up with First Nations is something that needs to be done because they are working in traditional territories,” he says. “But it has to be a meaningful partnership. They need to sit down at the table with the leaders, engage with them and provide both employment opportunities and a piece of the revenue that’s generated. WLIB has had a number of successful partnerships, but we’ve also had situations where they come in and say we’ll partner

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with you, and you can have two flagging jobs. That's not good enough. Employment opportunities are important, but that's not where the buck stops."

He adds that thanks to a major highway project, the WLIB knows what a good partnership looks like. "This project demonstrated how partnering can build capacity. Guys that started out as labourers are now driving haul trucks. One young guy has become a surveyor, other guys have gone on to work at a mine the company owns; this is exactly the kind of legacy we were looking for."

He's optimistic about the future as well, especially in the near term, ironically as a result of the forest fires that ravaged the Interior, including 800 acres of reserve land, 400 of which were timber resources. "We also have some private land we were awarded through other highway deals in the past. We're looking to salvage all that wood because it will be an immediate revenue generator for the WLIB. But we don't want someone to come and say we'll log the wood and give you a job; it needs to be more of a win-win partnership."

Both Sellars and Tindall say they understand the situation contractors are faced with when they come on to First Nations land. They understand that if the bar is set too high in terms of jobs or profit shares many contractors working on tight margins may just pass up on the opportunity. Both First Nations have been successful because there has been enough win-win in the relationships to make partnering advantageous to contractors. First

While many communities have been successful in finding training for blue-collar jobs, at the managerial level it's been tougher skidding.

Nations that are more isolated or have smaller AACs are going to have a tougher time of it, says Tindall, which brings us back to the money problem, which is of course a much larger social and political issue. Although some funding has been made available for training—witness the job grant from the federal government to the Lil'wat—getting it is often like winning a lottery, and one you can't rely on over time. Funding for training needs to be consistent so that planning can take place and sustainability built into community growth. And while many communities have been successful in finding training for the blue-collar jobs, at the managerial level it's been tougher skidding. "We need more managerial training," says Tindall. "It's easy to find guys to run saws, but we need people who can run the crews and work in the office."

Both Tindall and Sellars also agree that on the First Nations' side, when jobs are offered, the rigours and responsibilities of the

Lessons Learned: First Nations Capacity Building

Lessons were learned from the TLA's first-ever First Nations Survey and follow-up interviews with Aboriginal forestry executives. Here's a summary.

Capacity Building from a First Nations Perspective

First Nations are looking for on-the-job training and opportunities so their people can acquire an integrated range of skills leading to year-round employment, with a special emphasis on the development of managerial skills.

Partnerships need to result in meaningful benefits to all parties starting with jobs and training and, where possible, opportunities for advancement; offering a few flagging jobs does not constitute a partnership.

Employment and training are important, but First Nations also want to share in the profits for resources taken

from their land. These kinds of profits create stability and certainty and can be used to finance their own training, advancement, and investment.

Government needs to provide more consistent funding for training initiatives, especially in cases where First Nations' communities are remote and have smaller AACs that diminish their market appeal.

Capacity Building from the Contractor Perspective

First Nations need to understand that if the bar is set too high in terms of jobs or profit shares, many contractors working on tight margins may just walk away.

When jobs are offered, the rigours and responsibilities of the workday need to be respected; workers need to show up and work a full day—consistency and reliability are key.

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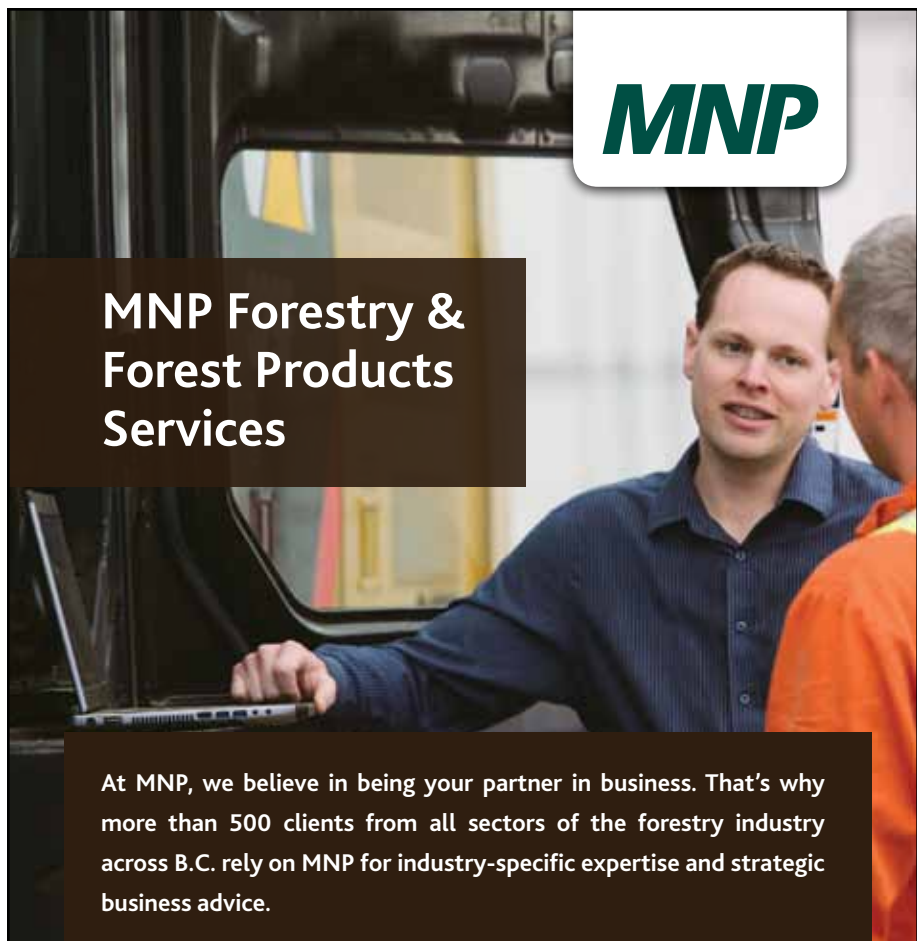
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workday need to be respected. “Steady jobs can be a shock to some people,” says Sellars. “But we understand that nobody wants someone coming in and wrecking equipment and costing money, or not showing up for work. There has to be consistency.”

Building First Nations capacity is obviously going to confer economic benefits on both industry and BC’s Aboriginal people, but its virtues go far beyond that, says Richard Missens, a faculty member at the First Nations University of Canada in Regina. It builds the skill sets that lead to better self-governance overall, and that itself is a reason for pursuing it. He says that an added challenge when it comes to capacity building is that “the labour markets in many First Nations communities are non-existent—so there are not enough ‘real’ jobs. As a result, many of the training efforts within First Nations communities result in an exodus of skilled workers to outside jobs or [a situation] where people are recycled through endless training schemes.”

Thanks to the survey and our discussions with First Nations forestry executives, important lessons have been learned about capacity building. Both industry and First Nations have to come to the table and make efforts to craft mutually beneficial partnerships, and then work diligently to fulfil their promises and obligations. As well, in order to enhance the attractiveness of these partnerships to industry and provide stability to First Nations, government needs to step in and provide funding for training on an ongoing basis, especially when it comes to remote communities with less to offer. And finally, we need to keep the communication lines open, learn from our experiences and keep moving forward together.▲



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