



**Indsights**

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

Case Study

**Indigenous Treaty Partners**

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# Indigenous Treaty Partners

# Meet Houston and Corey

## INDIGENOUS TREATY PARTNERS



### Meet Houston and Corey

Houston Barnaby and Corey Mattie are the founding partners of Indigenous Treaty Partners, located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Indigenous Treaty Partners offers Indigenous cultural awareness training for large and small organizations across Canada. Cultural awareness training increases knowledge and understanding of what it means to be Indigenous and how businesses can become better allies to the Indigenous population in Canada.

Houston is from the Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation in Québec. He pursued a degree in business and attended Dalhousie University, where he completed his law degree. He is a member of the Bar in Nova Scotia and has represented the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'gmaq Chiefs, where he worked as counsel for the Mi'gmaq Nation of Nova Scotia. His experience as a lawyer allowed him to gain further insights into the role that all levels of government must play in finding a solution to the right self-governance for First Nations and the needs of their communities.

Corey is a Mi'kmaw settler from Halifax, Nova Scotia. His lineage can be traced to the first Indigenous Peoples in Atlantic Canada and European settlers who arrived during the period of first contact. He has completed a commerce degree from Saint Mary's University and a master's degree. Having spent time working for the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, he saw the importance of organizations accessing Indigenous cultural awareness training and incorporating this into their business models as an act of reconciliation. After developing that awareness, he reached out to Houston to begin their journey as entrepreneurs within the consulting industry.

# Community Profile

## Mi'kmaq Communities

Mi'kmaq (pronounced MIG-MAW) are Indigenous Peoples who are among the original inhabitants in the Atlantic Provinces of Canada, having occupied a large area of northeastern North America for over 10,000 years (Paul, 2022). Currently, Mi'kmaq communities are located primarily in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick but with a significant presence in Québec, Newfoundland, and some American states on the eastern seaboard. Their traditional territory is known as Mi'gma'gi (Mi'kma'ki). It is a vast region made up of seven districts: Unama'gi (Unama'kik/"Land of Fog"), Esge'gewa'gi (Eskikewa'kik/"Skin Dressers Territory"), Sugapune'gati (Sipekni'katik/"Wild Potato Area"), Epegwitg aq Pigtug (Epekwitk aq Piktuk/"Lying in the Water and The Explosive Place"), Gespugwi'tg (Kespukwitk/"Land Ends"), Signigtewa'gi (Siknikt/"Drainage Area"), and Gespe'gewa'gi (Kespek/"Last Land") (Gallant, 2008).

According to the most recent census data, approximately 230,000 people identify as Mi'kmaq in Canada, many of whom reside on and off reserve in the regions identified above (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Listuguj is located in Gespe'gewa'gi ("The Last Land"), the seventh and largest district of Mi'gma'gi. Gespe'gewa'gi has been Mi'kmaq and Listugujewa'q traditional territory since time immemorial. It includes what is now known as the Gaspé Peninsula, parts of mainland Québec and Maine, and northeastern New Brunswick. Listuguj comprises 4,058 members; 2,108 live on reserve, and 1,950 live off reserve.



By Michka B - Own work (Mikmaq), CC BY-SA 2.5,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67251179>

# Community Profile



## Historical Overview

Like all Indigenous communities located in what is now Canada, prior to European contact, the Mi'kmaq had established ways of life, governance, trade, and culture that had sustained them since time immemorial. Being in the Maritime region allowed them to become proficient travelers and traders, utilizing canoes to their advantage. The classic Mi'kmaq-style birchbark canoe used on rivers, lakes, and the Atlantic coast had gracefully rounded bow and sterns.

The first recorded encounter of the Mi'kmaq with Europeans was with John Cabot on June 24, 1497. While this is widely recognized as the first encounter with Europeans, the “first official” European contact came from the French, most likely through Jacques Cartier and his voyages. It is documented that the two groups met on the Gaspé Peninsula, a part of modern-day Québec.

The Europeans' interactions with the Mi'kmaq people in what are now the Maritime provinces were different between the French and the British.

The French relation was slightly more respectful, with the groups establishing trade and interracial relationships; however, there were still disputes and atrocities. This mutual relationship is still reflected today, with many Mi'kmaq people speaking French and inhabiting the Francophone regions of Canada.

Relations with the British were primarily hostile. They committed genocide against the Mi'kmaq for control over their lands, including issuing head/scalp bounties and many other objectionable practices (Paul, 2022). The British colonized the area and forced many people off the land for farming and hunting.

The Mi'kmaq are not subject to the Numbered Treaties, which apply to many First Nations and Métis communities across central Canada (Government of Canada, n.d.). Instead, their relationship with the Crown is through a series of Peace and Friendship Treaties signed between 1725 and 1779. These were signed in agreement with the British Crown, and explicitly acknowledge that the Mi'kmaq people did not cede or surrender their land rights to the Crown (Mi'gmawei Mawio'mi Secretariat, n.d.).

# Community Profile



A key component of these treaties is the “moderate livelihood” clause that provides for a treaty right to hunt, fish, and gather in pursuit of a moderate livelihood subject to federal regulation (Government of Canada, 2021).

## Contemporary Community/Business Profile

Currently, Mi’kmaw people operate a variety of businesses in a diverse range of sectors. Some of the main industries associated with this Indigenous group are forestry, commercial fishing, professional/technical services, retail, and tourism, which are all staples of the broader regional industry landscape.

Tourism development was identified as a major priority for economic development by community members in Listuguj. Their community website describes the benefits of developing cultural tourism and eco-tourism by creating opportunities for visitors to experience their culture and lands in a guided way. Throughout the process, the community wants to ensure that tourism projects are sustainable and support Listuguj economically, socially, and culturally.



## Beliefs and Values

One of the central belief systems associated with Mi’kmaw people and their communities is the notion of Two-Eyed Seeing. Coined by Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, this term describes the balance between Western method and theory and Indigenous Knowledge needed to promote reconciliation and understanding. In Marshall’s words, Two-Eyed Seeing is “To see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together.” Commonly incorporated in academia and business, this standard for good relations and mutual respect is derived directly from Mi’kmaw heritage (Peltier, 2018).

# Inspiration Behind Starting Indigenous Treaty Partners

## Inspiration Behind Starting Indigenous Treaty Partners

Both Houston and Corey bring their own unique experiences to Indigenous Treaty Partners, and both saw a need to provide Indigenous cultural training to organizations in Atlantic Canada. A gap existed in the region, and they felt strongly that they could help fill that gap. Like many entrepreneurs starting out, Houston and Corey questioned whether they were the right fit to fill that need and if it was something that they thought they could do:

*“An added benefit would be to be very perceptive and particular about markets and what is available in the market and what is the market looking for and then seeing if you have a particular skill that will respond to that market need and then bringing those two together.” – Houston Barnaby*

It turns out that Indigenous Treaty Partners was exactly what organizations were looking for when it came to learning more about the Indigenous experience in Canada and forming partnerships with various Indigenous communities in the region.

*“We’ve been working in Atlantic Canada, where there’s not a lot of organizations that do what we do. We’ve been able to grow very quickly. And because of that, we’re now working across Canada, and now we’re even getting some clients in the United States.” – Corey Mattie*

## Services Offered

When Indigenous Treaty Partners launched, it primarily offered Indigenous cultural awareness training for the boards of their partner organizations. The curriculum helped non-Indigenous people and organizations engage and support Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Through face-to-face visits, it focused on topics and issues related to Indigenous history, reconciliation, government and industry relationships, and community engagement.

Both Houston and Corey quickly realized that there was a greater need within these organizations to include more than just their board members. This realization resulted in their training growing to include entire teams of staff within these organizations.

*“More and more of our clients have been asking for additional help because once they have our Indigenous cultural awareness training, they realize there are many needs within the organization and next steps that they would like to see happening within the organization.” – Houston Barnaby*

Out of that need grew additional pieces of training and packages that Indigenous Treaty Partners could offer their clients. They began to venture into management consulting by offering Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP). These plans help organizations build relationships with Indigenous communities by looking inward and establishing a set of best practices and goals that will help advance the goal of national reconciliation through various commitments. These best practices can include tailored hiring practices, developing meaningful relationships with other Indigenous businesses, and community involvement.



# Cultural Awareness Training



## Importance of Cultural Awareness Training

It is essential for organizations to include Indigenous cultural awareness training and RAPs within their company framework. A better understanding of Indigenous Peoples in Canada makes sense from a business perspective. The Indigenous population is growing at approximately twice the rate of the rest of Canada (Statistics Canada Reference, 2002b). Indigenous Peoples represent the fastest-growing working group that will be available for hire. This fact is especially important because it will help address the employment gap left by older generations retiring while also greatly increasing the percentage of the workforce comprised of Indigenous Peoples. Organizations will need to position themselves in a way to attract top talent, which requires understanding the people they will eventually hire.

*“More and more companies are waking up to this fact, and they’re realizing that to do that work, to make meaningful relationships takes time and a very real intention behind it. And we believe that’s where our cultural awareness training comes in.” – Houston Barnaby*

For Houston and Corey, their goal is to provide organizations with the ability and confidence to work well with Indigenous Peoples. They look at this as a form of reconciliation. By helping organizations understand their communities better, they will be in a better position to forge relationships with Indigenous Peoples.

*“I believe it was the Hereditary Chief, Robert Joseph, who said that truth and reconciliation is Canada, and that the reconciliation piece really does hit home in terms of our two nations. Our Indigenous nations are working well with our non-Indigenous counterparts. It’s a true reflection of the real Canada. And so, any way that we can support that bridging of our nations and work well together and creating that, that true representation of our country is really meaningful.” – Houston Barnaby*

## Establishing Partnerships/Relationships

A key driver of success for any entrepreneur or business starting out is building a client base and establishing relationships with potential clients. For Indigenous Treaty Partners, they have approached this in a few different ways. Both Houston and Corey credit their ability to network and attend as many events as possible as a key to their success. These networking opportunities are a great way to connect with organizations and learn more about their clients' needs. This allows them to focus on building relationships rather than just focusing on transactions.

*“Once we do make that relationship, it’s not just providing service and leaving. We really work hard to ensure that the partnership is more of a relationship and not just a business transaction. So, we can continue to serve the organization and to support them wherever we can.” – Corey Mattie*

They also credit their ability to be open and honest about their intentions, leading with their heart, and listening to their clients as a successful way to establish and maintain lasting partnerships.

Surrounding themselves with mentors and champions that believe in them is also important. They have been fortunate to partner with great mentors who have been able to offer support and advice along the way.

## Successes

During its early stages, Indigenous Treaty Partners were able to expand their capacity by partnering with larger organizations. Forming these relationships has been crucial to its success. Recently, they were asked to provide training to the Health Association of Nova Scotia and its over 120 members.

*“We’re going to be in all corners of Nova Scotia, not only in the downtown core but also the very small towns, to share the message on why reconciliation is so important in this country. And it’s an incredible opportunity that we certainly do not take lightly.” – Houston Barnaby*

They have also partnered with Ameresco Canada, a leading renewable energy company, to create a scholarship for Indigenous students who are interested in pursuing a career in the science and engineering fields.

*“These organizations are leaning in and providing dollars to support Indigenous students because they realize the incredible need for Indigenous students to enter the workforce and to eventually work at these places.” – Houston Barnaby*

## Five-Year Plan

Indigenous Treaty Partners has a strong presence in Atlantic Canada and would eventually like to expand and meet the needs of businesses and organizations across Canada. It hopes to open offices in Toronto and Vancouver and hiring more staff while it scales its business by offering training via an online platform that will help support different streams of knowledge sharing for a variety of industries in Canada.

Houston and Corey envision Indigenous Treaty Partners creating a private equity company that would raise funds for Indigenous communities so that they can participate in the renewable energy sector that Nova Scotia and other Atlantic provinces are currently investing in.

*“If these projects are going to be happening in their backyard, we want to make sure that they have access to top tier talent in terms of people to manage these investments, making sure that they have money invested in so that they could meaningfully participate and build equity for their communities. Because we know that Indigenous communities are some of the least funded communities in this country.” – Houston Barnaby*

Also, they hope to continue to grow their scholarship fund so that they can help Indigenous students break into industries where there is little Indigenous representation.

## Challenges

In Canada, Indigenous-focused cultural trainers face competition from larger companies with varying levels of understanding of Indigenous histories. There are several cross-cultural training programs available both in-person and online across the globe (TechNavio, 2022). Businesses in Canada, the United States, and Mexico are expected to experience the most growth in this market (TechNavio, 2022). North American businesses are expected to contribute 31% of the global cross-cultural training market’s \$1.8B USD growth alone between 2022 and 2027 (TechNavio, 2022). This contribution will provide a great opportunity for Indigenous-focused businesses looking to expand their services, enabling them to establish meaningful connections with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities through their own lived experiences and perspectives.

It is essential for these training programs to be culturally appropriate and respectful, and Indigenous-owned businesses are well-positioned to meet this need. As the demand for Indigenous inclusion in the workplace continues to expand, there is significant potential for new Indigenous cultural training and consulting businesses to thrive in the Canadian market and beyond.

# Indigenous Values and Culture

## Indigenous Values and Culture

Both Houston and Corey recognize the importance of their Indigenous heritage and the role that it plays when it comes to running their business. They incorporate the Seven Grandfather Teachings (love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, humility, and wisdom) in every decision they make with their business. A key component of their business and continued success has been the inclusion of their Indigenous ethos and consensus-building strategies when they are looking to expand or design a new product for their clients.

*“One of the considerations that we’ve always taken very seriously is what it means to be Indigenous in the twenty-first century. We didn’t just want to be Indigenous people who own a business, but we wanted to be an Indigenous business. And that meant bringing our principles that our peoples have always had for thousands of years into the modern day.” – Houston Barnaby*

They also recognize that their traditional culture may clash with Western capitalistic ideals, but Houston and Corey try to overcome this by running their business with honour, respect, and love. They credit these principles as the reason for some of their earlier successes — and their continued success as a company progressing in its entrepreneurial journey. They both feel very strongly about maintaining those key qualities and see these characteristics as an important way to:

*“Stay true to who we are as an Indigenous business that is owned by Indigenous people.” – Houston Barnaby*

## Reconciliation in Action

The promotion of employment equity has played a crucial role in advancing opportunities for cultural training and consulting businesses. The Government of Canada has set a precedent for others by implementing initiatives such as Many Voices One Mind: A Pathway to Reconciliation, the First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment

Strategy, and the 50/30 Challenge to address inequities faced in federally regulated organizations (Government of Canada, 2017; Government of Canada, 2022). These initiatives aim to establish a better foundation of accountability through factors such as improved education, hiring processes, and support networks (Indigenous Works, n.d.; Government of Canada, 2017). In addition, establishing policies to further invest in inclusive employment and workplace practices can enhance organizations’ value by promoting Indigenous participation. This approach is seen in areas such as federal contracting and procurement where the Canadian government has imposed a mandate for awarding at least 5% of the total value of contracts to businesses that are managed and led by Indigenous Peoples (Public Services and Procurement Canada, 2021). Programs and policies like these emphasize the importance of prioritizing diversity and inclusion in the Canadian workforce, which can serve as a model for others to emulate.

Organizations such as the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) collaborate with cultural trainers to offer certification programs, such as the Progressive Aboriginal Relations (PAR) certification, to enhance efforts toward inclusivity (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, n.d.). This accreditation program is designed to help Canadian businesses develop and strengthen relationships with Indigenous Peoples by evaluating organizations’ dedication to Indigenous engagement and employment practices (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, n.d.). The PAR certificate is an effective tool for businesses demonstrating their commitment to reconciliation, cultivating positive work environments, and improving their relationships with Indigenous communities (The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, n.d.).

The positive impact of partnerships with cultural trainers can be seen throughout a variety of areas in the Canadian workforce today. One of these areas is procurement, which involves purchasing goods and services by evaluating needs and contracts and choosing suppliers (Government of Canada, 2022). The Government of Canada purchases approximately \$18 billion CAD worth of goods and services from the

# Contributing to Reconciliation

private sector annually, \$440 million CAD of which is spent annually with Indigenous businesses via procurement contracts (Government of Canada, 2019). As non-Indigenous businesses strive to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation, considerations for Indigenous businesses are increasingly being integrated into the procurement process to address this purchasing disparity and adhere to the 5% procurement mandate. These considerations include promoting equal opportunities for Indigenous suppliers to compete for contracts, incorporating Indigenous Traditional Knowledge into products and services the government procures, and fostering relationships with Indigenous communities (Government of Canada, 2022). Though much work still needs to be done to create a mutually beneficial procurement system that adequately engages Indigenous businesses and the economies they operate in, cultural trainers can help to bridge this gap by providing the educational component necessary to developing meaningful relationships. Through these partnerships, cultural trainers are given a powerful platform to share their knowledge and lived experiences. This provides a stronger opportunity for Canadian businesses to establish long-term partnerships and gain mutual trust with Indigenous communities.

## Contributing to Reconciliation

Indigenous Treaty Partners envisions itself playing a crucial role in reconciliation in Canada, particularly when it comes to economic reconciliation. Their business works primarily with non-Indigenous-owned businesses, so they view their business as a champion for Indigenous Peoples. They see the value and contributions they are capable of but also recognize the role that non-Indigenous people play in the broader goals of reconciliation.

*“At the end of the day, it’s about supporting our communities and ensuring that they’re getting their fair share of the economy, and really that starts with encouraging non-Indigenous businesses to rethink the way that they operate. I always say that reconciliation is about doing*

*things completely differently. Non-Indigenous peoples have to lean in and do things differently, and so do our Indigenous peoples.” – Houston Barnaby*

Houston and Corey recognize that there are opportunities available to Indigenous communities, but the broader business community in Canada will have to play a stronger role to ensure that Indigenous Peoples are not left behind. By helping organizations make those connections and inroads within Indigenous communities, they see the effect that business can play in helping Indigenous communities build the capacity to take on larger projects and meaningful business relationships.

## Final Thoughts

For Indigenous students, both Houston and Corey offer practical advice that future entrepreneurs can use on their entrepreneurial journey: just do it. If you have an idea or a dream for a business, it is better to try than to live with the regret of not trying.

Finding mentors and champions who support you is also crucial. Surrounding yourself with like-minded people who believe in you will help during the moments when questions or doubts may arise. Having a support system that you can turn to for advice and encouragement can often push you over the hump.

Finally, stay consistent.

*“When Corey approached me with this idea, we met every Tuesday, so it was only once a week for maybe two or 3 hours every Tuesday, but it was consistently every Tuesday. And at first, it was just a piece of paper with a couple of things written on it. We would scribble it up, you know, try again, try again. But we always kept trying.*

*And that’s the most important piece. You may not see success in the first week, month, or maybe a year, but if you stay with it and you truly believe in what it is you’re doing, success will find you. So, consistency is one of the biggest keys to our success.” – Houston Barnaby*

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