

## **“Start by Having Tea”**

Lessons Learned From our Work with Indigenous Partners

“Creating culturally sensitive, trauma-informed,  
evidence-based tools for Bill C-65”

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Our government-funded project focused on supporting federally regulated sectors, including First Nations communities, in becoming compliant with Bill C-65, legislation aimed at reducing workplace violence and harassment. From the outset, we were aware that rates of workplace violence are high in many First Nations workplaces, making this both an urgent and meaningful area to address. At the same time, we recognized a familiar and problematic pattern: First Nations communities were once again being asked to fit into a framework created by the federal government. Our intention was to use this funding not just to support compliance, but to do so in a way that was culturally sensitive, appropriate, and genuinely meaningful. As a BIPOC person and the lead researcher on this project, this work felt particularly important and personally significant to me.

One of the most impactful lessons I learned came after attending a presentation by an Indigenous researcher. When I asked about how to build meaningful partnerships, an Indigenous woman approached me afterward and simply said, “Start by having tea.” That advice stayed with me. It highlighted how deeply ingrained it is in Western culture to move quickly into action, often skipping over relationship-building. Given the long history of harm and exploitation by dominant Western systems, it is entirely appropriate that Indigenous communities approach partnerships with caution. We learned that relationship-building is not a preliminary step, it is the work. We invested significant time in this, supported by team members who already had long-standing relationships with local Indigenous communities. These relationships, built over years rather than months, allowed us to engage more authentically. Importantly, these individuals were not brought in as occasional consultants. They were embedded throughout the entire project, shaping decisions and processes from beginning to end.

One of the most immediate lessons we encountered was the difference in how time is experienced and valued across cultures. Western approaches to time tend to be rigid, deadline-driven, and shaped by what often feels like an artificial sense of urgency. This was reflected in our own project requirements, where we had clear deliverables tied to funding timelines. In contrast, many of our Indigenous partners operated within a more flexible and relational approach to time. Many were also significantly overextended, under-resourced, and already carrying multiple responsibilities within their communities. Partnering with us, while done in good faith, added to their workload. To address this, we adapted our approach by creating two separate delivery tracks. One followed the structured timelines required for our broader deliverables, while the second allowed for a more fluid and flexible pace for Indigenous partners. This shift was essential. Even scheduling engagement sessions could take months, not due to lack of interest, but due to capacity constraints and competing priorities within communities.

We also reflected on the limits of true co-creation within the constraints of the funding model. Ideally, co-creation begins with jointly identifying the problem to be addressed. In our case, the topic—workplace violence and harassment prevention—had already been defined by the funding body. While this is an important issue, it meant we were not able to fully engage in co-defining the focus of the work with communities. We were transparent about this limitation in

our partnerships. We also remained committed to ensuring that, even within these constraints, the work was adapted in ways that were meaningful and relevant to the communities involved. This reinforced an important lesson: engagement is far more likely when the topic itself reflects community priorities.

Embedding community members within our research team significantly strengthened our ability to engage in authentic co-creation. For example, in a qualitative study exploring psychological safety among diverse employees, our Indigenous partners were involved at every stage. They helped shape the research questions, supported recruitment, conducted interviews, and participated in interpreting the findings. This approach differed fundamentally from more traditional models where input is only sought at the end. The findings themselves were also enriched by this process. While many aspects of psychological safety were consistent across groups, our partners highlighted an important addition: the ability to express one's cultural identity in the workplace. This extended existing definitions of psychological safety and emphasized the importance of authenticity, not just in a general sense, but specifically in relation to cultural identity.

Our Indigenous partners played a central and ongoing role in shaping our workplace training program on conflict management and psychological safety to ensure it reflected lived experience and cultural relevance. We began by developing a set of training videos informed by focus groups with equity-deserving groups, capturing common workplace challenges and experiences. These initial materials were then reviewed by our Indigenous partners, who provided thoughtful feedback on both the content and approach. While the training was well received, they identified an important gap: the need for additional videos that more explicitly reflected the workplace realities of equity-deserving individuals, including the often invisible effort required to navigate dominant workplace norms. In collaboration with our Indigenous partners, we co-created new video content based directly on their insights and recommendations. These additional videos were then brought back to community for review through focus groups, where they resonated strongly with participants, further validating the importance of this iterative, community-informed approach.

Another powerful contribution from our embedded partners was the suggestion to move beyond text-based representations of psychological safety. They encouraged us to consider visual approaches. This led to the creation of an artist-in-residence role, where an Indigenous artist developed visual representations of psychological safety as part of our project. This was not something we would have considered on our own, and it became one of the most impactful elements of the work. The resulting images offered a more accessible, culturally resonant way of understanding and communicating complex concepts.

Overall, this project reinforced that meaningful partnership requires flexibility, humility, and a willingness to rethink standard approaches. It is not enough to adapt content; we must also adapt processes, timelines, and definitions of success. Most importantly, we learned that when communities are genuinely embedded in the work, not consulted at the margins, the outcomes are not only more culturally relevant, but also more innovative and impactful.

