

Forging Linkages & Finding Solutions A BC Treaty Commission Conference for First Nations

Sheldon Tetreault, National Centre for First Nations Governance Capacity Building Presentation – October 29, 2008

I'm very happy to be here and I want to thank the Treaty Commission for hosting the conference and for inviting me. I'd also like to acknowledge the other workshop facilitators; I truly respect what you've been able to accomplish in your communities, to Chief Sophie Pierre and Chief Robert Louie and I'm honoured to share this responsibility with you.

I'm happy because you're all here and I'd like to acknowledge all of the chiefs and councillors and elders and staff who, as leaders, I realize have a trillion other things to do and responsibilities that you face. I used to say billion, but in the era of economic bailout packages you have to say trillion now to get any kind of traction. So I recognize that you have a trillion other things and it's inspiring that so many of you have taken time out to come today for this week, for the conference to share ideas together, to do some learning together and, of course, build capacity for our communities collectively.

I can't get through the introduction without even talking about capacity building. That's the workshop I will be hosting and this is exciting because we talk about capacity building all the time. Think about how many meetings you've been at recently where you're talking about the need to build capacity in your community, reports that talk about the need to build capacity, going back to the aboriginal commission – the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Even, dare I say, it's a very popular conference topic, too. Capacity building is always something we're talking about.

I look at my own experiences, and Jody briefly went through them, and my whole working life has been around building capacity – that's what I do. I don't consider myself an expert in capacity building. I consider maybe I'm a Master's degree in capacity building but I would say there are probably a lot of PhDs in the room that do capacity building and have 20 and 30 and 40 years of experience building capacity in their communities.

Based on that you might assume that we all know what capacity building is, what it means and how to do it. I think it would be a pretty fair assumption to say we all know what it is and how to do it.

But then there's always that voice you hear in your head that says don't make assumptions- remember, you know what they say about assumptions. I was really kind of tickled when I heard Chief Louie say that he went back to his dictionary to check out the meaning of the words because that's what I tend to do as well. When we use terms so much they kind of lose their meaning sometimes, so I like to go back and see what we were originally talking about when we were using these terms.

Recently I did that. I looked up capacity. Just what exactly is the definition of capacity. Capacity is the ability to do something. That's actually the definition in the dictionary – the ability to do something. I thought well, that's great, I need capacity and we all could use a little of that, the ability to do something. But it really isn't very helpful; it doesn't help us to know what this is all about.

Then I went back and looked at the concept of capacity building, when you put those words together and when they started to be used and gain wider circulation.

Interestingly, capacity building as a concept really only got traction in the 1990s and it wasn't in Canada and it wasn't in First Nation communities. It was in the international development field. We're talking about groups like Oxfam, CEDA, the World Bank and the United Nations.

These organizations were working in Third World countries and saying here's the situation we have today and we don't want, by any indicator, to be in this situation. We want to be over there, somewhere different. We want to be in an improved place. They talked about capacity building, the process to get you from here to there. It got a lot of traction and then afterwards INAC and Human Resources Development Canada started to use the term capacity building in Canada in relation to First Nation communities. That's where it started and it's caught like wildfire, and we use it all the time now.

I'm going to give you a definition of capacity building that's in common currency, at least among those development kinds of agencies: the process by which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems, set objectives and achieve objectives.

That's a bit better than the ability to do something. It's the process by which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems, set objectives and achieve objectives. I like that. I like that because it starts to break it down a little bit.

It talks about a process which I think is important. It's not an end state, it's not a noun; it's something you're working through. I like that it talks about multiple players. We're talking about individuals, organizations, institutions and societies. There's a whole range of people that have to be involved in capacity building and have to do capacity building.

It also talks about the ability to perform functions, which I think we all agree on, but then it has some interesting ones like solve problems. Have you thought about capacity building as the ability to solve problems, to set objectives, to do things like visioning, to plan where you're going and then to achieve those objectives?

I like that. I really like the definition to help somebody understand it, and intuitively we need to do capacity building, and I think that's why the word gets so much usage.

But it's still not super helpful, because we still don't know where and when it happens and what it looks like when you're doing it.

For example, and I don't mean to be facetious entirely, but when you send your receptionist out in your band office to the 'dealing with difficult people' workshop, is that capacity building? Then they come back and say I know how to deal with you now. Or if you've run a pre-apprenticeship training program in your community and you manage to get 15 young men and women through that program, is that capacity building? What about when you develop an election code, is that capacity building? Or if you host one of those community-to-community forums with a neighbouring municipality, you know the ones funded by UBCM, is that capacity building? Are you building capacity? Or if you negotiate at the treaty table for 10, 15 years and for whatever reasons you never actually achieve a treaty, are you building capacity?

I say yeah, all of those things are building capacity and that's where it gets a bit fuzzy, because it's hard to say when capacity building starts and ends. It starts to sound like that old saying, "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger." It's like everything starts to become capacity building. Then the cynic in me comes out and says, "Is this kind of just a buzz word that we use that doesn't have any real meaning? What's the purpose and the usefulness of talking about capacity building?"

It's a good thing to pepper into your speech, talk a lot about capacity building because you get a lot of nods. But then you can't really be held to what happens afterwards because what is it and when does it happen.

I'm sure some of you have also been in situations where you've heard the term capacity building used against you. We can't do that because you don't have the capacity yet, you've got a lot of capacity building to do before you can take on that kind of responsibility. That kind of bothers me. You also get into situations where, like I think Sophie mentioned, sometimes the focus tends to be overly negative in that you're talking about deficits, you're talking about gaps, you're talking about things that don't exist when you can also take the perspective of looking at all of the strengths and the resilience that we do have in our communities.

I think sometimes we shine this light of capacity building rather narrowly onto ourselves and we don't recognize that we live in a web of relationships and that our success is also dependent on other people. So if we take that light and shine it over this way, you can see that other people also have to build capacity; other people, other organizations, other institutions have to build capacity to be able to support our success.

I'll give you a really simple example of that. When I was the administrator in Mount Currie in one, two-year span, I had four funding services officers. Every six months one would leave and they'd hire a new one and then another one would leave and a new one would come. I can tell you that I was the one doing capacity building and it was with INAC to make sure that they understood how their job worked so that I could be successful. How capacity building happens isn't just a one way street.

That's all my cynical stuff. But I don't want to be a cynic and I do think that the definition and this concept have meaning. I think what has to happen is that we have to spend time talking about what it means to us. What are we building capacity for? What are the best practices around capacity building? What are the things you need to be able to support your ability to build capacity in your community? This is the perfect opportunity because we have workshops coming up over the next two days to talk about capacity building so we'll do that.

My hope is that when we have that discussion we keep the broad focus, that we think about not only job and skills training as capacity building, but also about developing institutions, developing our organizations, developing laws which all support capacity building. And that we not only shine the light on ourselves but also on the organizations and institutions around us that have to be a critical partner in building capacity.

I hope that we also talk about a coordinated strategic effort to build capacity because it seems like capacity building can be a very fragmented affair - it happens here and it happens here and it happens there. I'd like to see something a little more strategic and coordinated in terms of action.

We'll have a chance to talk through some of this in the workshop. We're going to do it around four main questions. What is capacity building? What are we building capacity for? What works best when you're building capacity? And what do you need to be able to do it better?

The workshops are based on those four questions. It's not going to be a lecture; it's going to require your full participation. We're going to use a facilitation technique called the Interview Matrix which I can guarantee you is not scary; it's unusual maybe or a little different, but it's harmless and it's also powerful.

We'll be able to harvest all the knowledge that exists in this room. As I said, all of the PhDs in capacity building that we already have here to come up with some solid ideas and recommendations to move us

forward when we're talking about capacity building.

I'll just say thank you. Again, my name's Sheldon Tetreault. I'm the director of governance advisory services with the National Centre for First Nations Governance. We're a national capacity building organization. We help build governance capacity and we have offices across the country; one in BC at Park Royal (in West Vancouver) and the regional manager is Michelle Guerin. In BC we've worked with over 30 First Nations on a number of different projects like constitution building, codes development, leadership training and treaty implementation and law making.

I'll have more information about our organization in our workshop room and I look forward to seeing you over the next two days. Thank you very much.