

The Corporation, First Nations-style

Model based on Japanese approach to business adds spirituality and human development to enterprise

Paul Harris

An intriguing business model that adds spirituality to principles adopted by Japanese corporations has been proposed to aid the economic development of B.C. First Nations.

"Certainly there's a lot of money being thrown around to get First Nations people involved in business," said Chief Garry Oker, of the Doig River First Nation near Fort St. John in the province's resource-rich northeast. "But the money that's being talked about is only based upon production. As long as there is production, money will flow, but if it stops, where are we?"

While Oker welcomed joint ven-



Chief Garry Oker: a lot of money being thrown around to get First Nations involved in business

ture projects involving major resource companies, he said plans to increase production must not be at the expense of First Nations culture. He said some bands are creating a digital map of their territories to improve their understanding of the resources available and to gauge the impact of economic development upon them.

"It's a new model of business that's spiritual and conscious of human development, not one just based upon data and processed information," he added. "We want to have corporations that are conscious of people's needs, values and principles, so that if there are concerns we can put the process on hold for a while.

"We have to evolve to new ideas

and new ways of doing business, by sharing knowledge. The Japanese are very good at that because their whole idea of a corporation is to share knowledge. It's based upon the idea that everybody is important.

"The companies are an organism encouraging innovation and development and problem-solving. Everyone is included – that's the kind of system I want to see happen for us in resource development. The Japanese model can respond quickly to the needs of the people; it's not rigid."

He said such a move requires business sophistication from First Nations.

"We want meaningful consultation, to be included in the deci-

sion-making, not just a token thing where we are talked to because people want access to our land."

Judith Sayers, chief councillor of the Port Alberni-based Hupacasath First Nation, agreed.

"We're looking for people who can respect us and who we can work with. The success to a partnership is having the same values and accomplishing something together."

The Hupacasath is certainly diversifying economically. Its community of 240 people on Vancouver Island has several projects in the pipeline, including ones in forestry, hydro and tourism. It's also embarking on a joint venture with Vancouver's Polaris Miner-

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als Corp. in the construction aggregates sector.

"The main goal is sustainable development, to make sure we're not harming the earth for future generations. We have set standards to accomplish that. We need to make use of all our resources, including our human resources. We have 80-per-cent unemployment during winter in our community."

As First Nations expand their economies, good business advice becomes more important than ever.

"You have to protect the long-range impacts of business," Sayers said. "We need to surround ourselves with the right advisers. And you have to make a large effort to communicate with the community."

She added that town hall-style meetings are held by the community to discuss financial arrangements behind projects, such as loans for various initiatives.

David Tuccaro, president of the National Aboriginal Business Association, expected further business growth.

"Aboriginal business is booming and new opportunities are appearing all across the country," he told delegates at last week's Resource Expo '04 conference in Vancouver. "I believe we're in the best place that we have been in the history of Canada. Over the next five years you are going to see more agreements that benefit the aboriginal community. No longer are they passive bystanders – the aboriginal people are ready, they are educated, and they are businesspeople."

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