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OPINION

For Mi'kmaw educator Marie Battiste, inner growth is essential to be a leader

KARL MOORE AND WÁHIAKATSTE DIOME-DEER

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'One of the most important things about leadership is understanding your own skills and talents and how you can use those to best understand and serve your purpose,' Marie Battiste says.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHIEF LADY BIRD

Marie Battiste is a Mi'kmaw educator, researcher, author, speaker and now retired professor from the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Battiste is an honorary officer of the Order of Canada, a fellow of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Having earned degrees from the University of Maine, Harvard University and Stanford University, she has also been awarded four additional honorary doctorate degrees. Dr. Battiste has received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award (or Indspire Award) in 2008, the University of Saskatchewan's Distinguished Researcher Award in 2005, and the Canadian University Teachers Association's distinguished academic award in 2013. Her current research is a seven-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council partnership project called Thinking Historically: Thinking Globally, which aims to assess the teaching of history across Canada, including what and how Indigenous knowledges and histories are being taught in kindergarten to Grade 12 schools across Canada.

What is your approach to leadership?

One of the most important things about leadership is understanding your own skills and talents and how you can use those to best understand and serve your purpose. While not everyone has the full opportunity to do so in climates of disadvantage and racism, I believe self-discovery and inner growth are important foundations to one's leadership. Personally, I have brought my own reflections to life within my work in Indigenous education. My research, writing, teaching, advocacy and activism are all grounded in self-awareness and in the respect and honouring of my identity and the assets from my communities' knowledge systems. This sense of purpose guides both my learning spirit and my approach to leadership.

How might non-Indigenous leaders learn from Indigenous ways of life?

Indigenous ways of life embrace a more holistic worldview, anchored in the understanding of how we are all interdependent. Developing an understanding of our inherently interconnected relationships is the first foundational element of understanding the world and our place within it. When we understand how we are related, we better understand our obligations and responsibilities to one another, to the Earth and to the seven generations to come. I believe that this long-term and big-picture thinking can help us to understand the impacts of our decisions today and into the future.

What does being Indigenous mean to you?

For me, it's all about the relationships. You can claim your indigeneity, but if you have no connection to a community, or with the rights, the duties and the obligations of being a relative to that community, it's hard to truly connect with the true meaning of being Indigenous. One cannot simply fashion out an Indigenous identity from reading about being Indigenous. It requires building and maintaining relationships with the community or communities that you care for and belong to, with the people of those communities, and with empowering and advocating for their assets and potentialities through their self-determination.

How has your Indigenous identity influenced your career in academia?

My Mi'kmaw identity was enriched by learning about my own people's struggles of holding on to our language and the ways literacy has been both a gift and a threat to our Indigenous knowledge systems. This eventually led me to focus my doctoral dissertation and continuing research on addressing cognitive imperialism in and through education. To this day, I continue to work with educators on how to tackle Eurocentrism, racism and cognitive imperialism. Inspired by and empowered in my Mi'kmaw identity, I've committed my career to exploring how to effectively both teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous children so that they can retain their unique collective identities and languages, as well as how to support learning that builds upon both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

How is research on Indigenous peoples and issues evolving in higher education?

Research on and about Indigenous peoples is changing to research by and with Indigenous peoples. It is imperative that research be accessible, beneficial and supportive to both Indigenous peoples' self-determination goals and to the cultivation of our own aspirations. Over the years, more and more Indigenous communities and scholars are helping to enhance the capacities and skills necessary for us to empower our own knowledges and conceptions of well-being.

Currently, things are slowly changing as people and institutions begin to better understand the value of Indigenous knowledge and its unique epistemologies, theories, methodologies and ethics. But it must be emphasized that this research cannot or should not be for any one person's individual empowerment or for university funding purposes. Along this evolution, we must always remember that this research is in the aim of Indigenous self-determination goals.

How can we as a society work toward greater Indigenous equity?

While supporting Indigenous societies to be on par with Canadian societies is seemingly an equitable goal, it is not the end product desired by Indigenous peoples. What is truly sought is Indigenous self-determination. This means the active respect of our Constitutional Indigenous and treaty rights, the survival and recovery of our languages and knowledge systems, and the growth of

our own institutions to serve our current and future needs. But this cannot be achieved in a climate of systemic racism and continuing colonial oppression. Therefore, we must decolonize before we can talk about equity.

Decolonization requires each Canadian to understand their complicities in the privileging of whiteness as well as the colonial legacies of systemic racism and discrimination. Both individually and collectively, we need to critically assess our place in cultivating or fighting against oppression whether it be regarding Indigenous nations, race, class, abilities, gender or sexual identities. Further, it requires unpacking the official laws and policies made in those eras that disallowed Indigenous identities, language and knowledges to flourish. Once we collectively commit to this, we may create more equitable, empowering and self-determining solutions, together.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Canada has a long history of dispossession, oppression and discrimination of Indigenous peoples. The future, however, is filled with hope. The Indigenous population is the fastest growing demographic in Canada; its youth are catalyzing change from coast to coast to coast. Indigenous knowledge and teachings are guiding innovative approaches to environmental protection and holistic wellness worldwide. Indigenous scholars are among those leading the way in exciting new research in science, business and beyond. There is no better or more urgent time to understand and celebrate the importance of Indigenous insight, culture and perspective.

Optimism is rare in media. And coverage of Indigenous peoples often fails to capture their brilliance, diversity and strength. In this weekly interview series, we will engage Indigenous leaders in thoughtful conversation and showcase their stories, strategies, challenges and achievements.

Karl Moore is a professor at the Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University, in Montreal. He is also an associate fellow at Green Templeton College at Oxford University. He was the host of a long-running video series for *The Globe and Mail* in which he interviewed chief executive officers and business professors from the top universities in the world. His column, *Rethinking Leadership*, has been published at [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com) since 2011. He has established a global reputation for his research and writing on leadership, and he has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders, including CEOs, prime ministers and generals.

Wáhiakatste Diome-Deer is completing her master's degree in educational leadership at McGill. She holds a bachelor of arts degree in psychology and brain sciences from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and has completed graduate work at Harvard University in Massachusetts. She is a consultant in education, leadership and Indigenization for organizations and schools, and has previously held positions at the Kahnawake Education Center, the Quebec Native Women association and the Canadian Executive Service Organization. Ms. Diome-Deer is a traditional Kanien'kehá:ka woman from the community of Kahnawà:ke.

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