

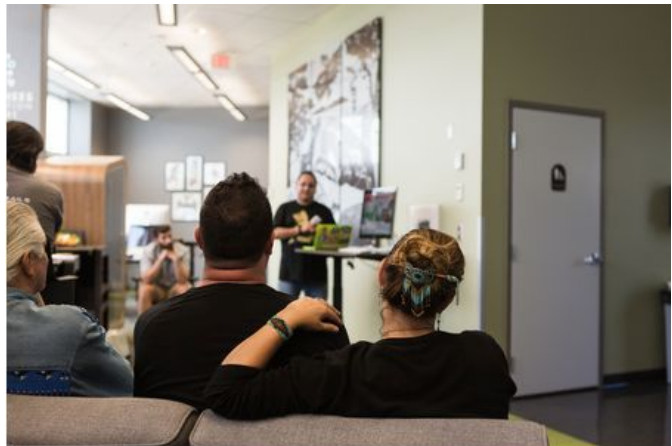


Building Trust Before Truth: How Non-Indigenous Canadians Become Allies

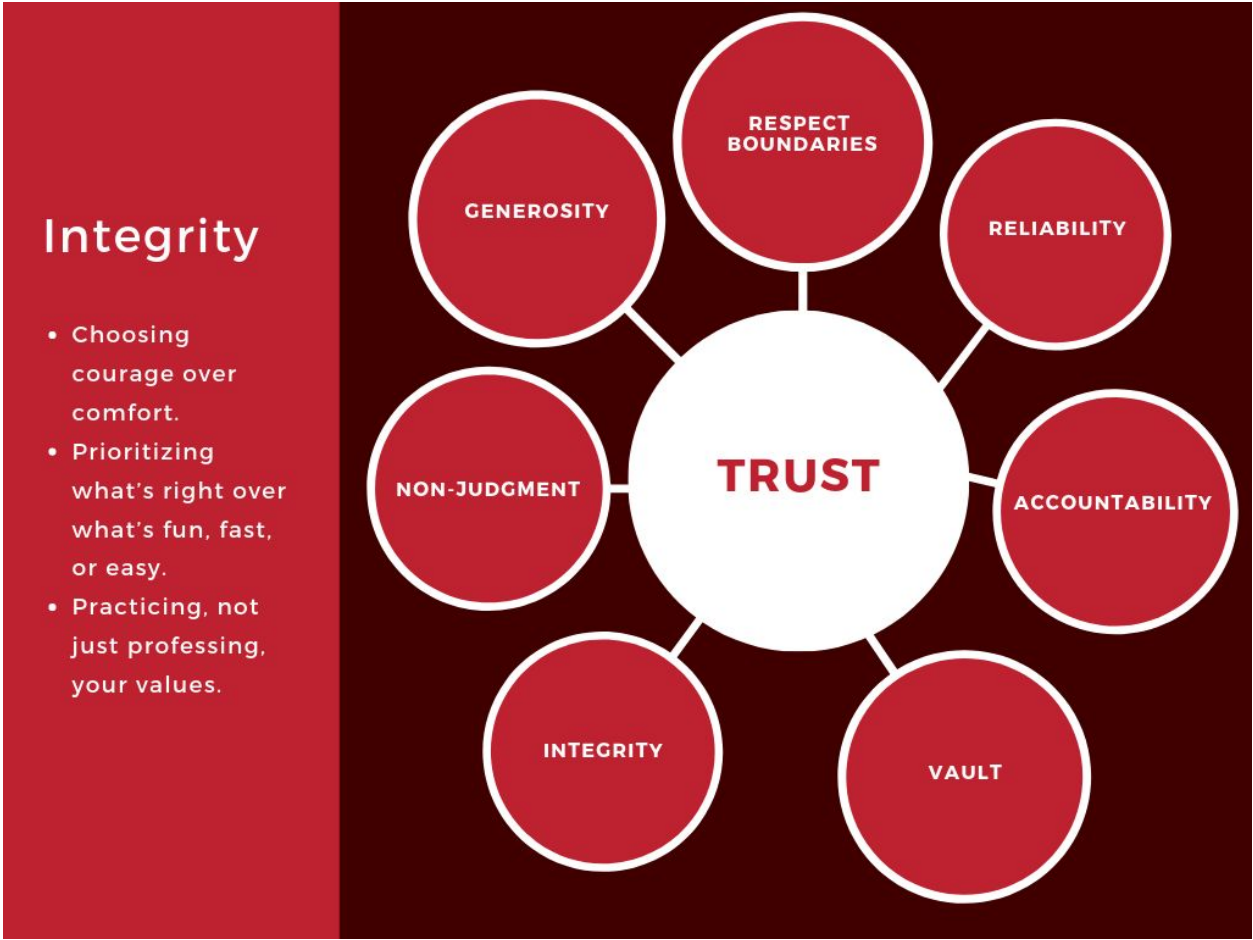


I am a white settler. My heritage is Ukrainian and a mixture of other European ancestries. I grew up on Treaty 1 Territory in Manitoba and I am grateful to live and work as an uninvited visitor on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples of the Coast Salish Nation. I acknowledge the seen and unseen privilege that being a white settler has provided for me throughout my life, privileges in the health care system, in education, employment, and all other areas of a colonized society. I humbly acknowledge that I am not an expert on being an Indigenous ally. I can only share my personal experience and what I have learned. This perspective and my current knowledge, will change and grow over time.

Seventeen years ago I married the man of my dreams. In that beautiful ceremony, I became part of an Indigenous family. My husband is caring, compassionate, loving, loyal, wise, and courageous. I feel lucky for every day I get to spend with him co-parenting, co-working, and co-living. We are the proud parents of two Indigenous boys that are thirteen and nine years old. I am motivated every day to make the world a better place for our boys and all the generations that follow.



It's often said before there can be Reconciliation, there must be Truth. I would challenge that, even before Truth, there must be Trust. Trust built within the allied relationship to hear, respect, and honour the Truth. In the beginning, there are examples of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and settlers being based on mutual respect, cooperation, shared prosperity, and trust. This initial Nation-to-Nation trust was not maintained. Since 1491, there have been 500+ years of heartbreaking examples of trust betrayed in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities on Turtle Island. We need to build an ally relationship on trust because trust is the source of all good relationships. Implementing Brené Brown's [Anatomy of Trust](#) (2018), I want to discuss the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada.



Brené describes the core foundations in building and maintaining trust in relationships. Elements of this framework can apply to how non-Indigenous allies can rebuild centuries of broken trust. Brené Brown's common catchphrase is that "you share with people who've earned the right to hear your story." Let's explore how allies earn the right by building trust. Respecting boundaries, being reliable and accountable, respecting knowledge shared, integrity and being generous with your assumptions is the anatomy of building trust.

Respect Boundaries

Boundaries are a basic human rights. [UNDRIP](#) (2007) defines boundaries better than I ever could.

Indigenous peoples have the right to the full enjoyment, as a collective or as individuals, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Indigenous peoples are free and equal to all other peoples and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular, that based on their Indigenous origin or identity.

Indigenous individuals have the rights to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security of person.

We can define boundaries as mental, physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual. It's as basic as treating people the way you want to be treated. However, as an ally, I need to understand that I don't get to start this relationship with a blank slate. I have a responsibility in this digital age to educate myself on the history that leads us to this point in time.

Most of the people in my generation learned more about European explorers in school than Treaties or the First Peoples of this land. I need to know how boundaries have been crossed. Similar to environmental climate concerns, I don't just get to ignore the pollution that's happened in the past. We have an enormous environmental mess on our hands and each of us has a responsibility to leave the earth better than we found it, for our children. As an ally, I feel I have a responsibility to improve the relationships that were betrayed.



Part of understanding the boundaries that exist today is sitting in the heartbreaking discomfort of the boundaries disrespected in the past. To ground myself in compassion, I ask myself these kinds of questions and let the painful reality of these historical horrors shape, change, and motivate me to do better.

- How would I feel if someone took my five-year-old child away from me to live in an institution kilometers from where I live? How I would feel if my child was routinely abused and mistreated by the adults that were entrusted with their care?
- How would I feel if I were forcefully relocated to a different area?
- How would I feel if it were illegal for me to practice my culture or traditional ceremonies?
- How would I feel if someone denied me the right to vote on decisions affecting land owned by my ancestors for millennia?
- How would I feel if it was illegal for me to leave my community?
- How would I feel if I couldn't access clean drinking water in my community?
- How would I feel if someone didn't listen to my medical concerns in a hospital simply because of who I am or what I look like?
- How would I feel if one of my family members went missing and no one responded or made an effort to find them?
- How would I feel if other people profited from appropriating my culture?

Colonial society has disrespected all of these basic human rights boundaries, repeatedly, for generations. These boundaries are all becoming clearer and more enforced as the social conversation continues.

If you're ever uncertain about boundaries, educate yourself, take an [Indigenous cultural safety course](#) or the [Indigenous Canada](#) course, read Indigenous authors, [listen to Indigenous journalists](#) on [CBC](#) and [APTN](#). Do not sit comfortably in ignorance and claim Indigenous issues weren't taught in school or wait for someone to educate you. Every adult living on this land is responsible to know and understand basic human rights and respect these boundaries.

Reliable, In Every Situation

Another aspect of building trust is being reliable. Be an ally, every time, no exceptions. This means that if someone wants to be an ally, they can't just be an ally in a board meeting and remain silent when they hear racist jokes at a friend's party. Allies need to identify as allies all the time and in every situation, including Facebook. This is challenging, I've unfriended several people over inappropriate images and attempts at humour. The examples we see are just a small sliver of the ingrained prejudice that still exists in today's world.



As heartbreaking as these situations are, they are also rich opportunities to educate people that don't understand First Nations, Inuit and Métis history in Canada. I try to respond to the

conversation tenderly, kindly, and generously. For example, "I know you are just trying to be funny here, but this message perpetuates very harmful stereotypes of Indigenous people, this image is harmful because it doesn't accurately portray the diverse, wise, resilient, and wonderful Indigenous communities across Canada."

Accountability, Own up to Mistakes

We're all human. No one can get it right 100% of the time. Allies need to hold themselves and other allies accountable when they've overstepped boundaries or fell short on understanding white settler privilege. This could mean using incorrect language or forgetting to acknowledge traditional territories. One embarrassing mistake I made 17 years ago at my first Pow Wow, was calling Regalia a costume. I didn't understand the profound difference between putting something on to pretend you are something you are not (costume) and wearing traditional outfits (Regalia) that connect Indigenous People with a cultural heritage and spiritual practice. I apologized immediately, and I haven't made that mistake again. The important thing to remember is allies need to acknowledge their mistakes, then learn and grow from it. Maya Angelou (2014) said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."



A strong ally will use their white settler privilege as an amplifier to create safer spaces for their Indigenous friends and partners. For example, I take it upon myself to call out racist jokes, and not leave the work up to my Indigenous friends and family. The responsibility of education and enlightenment doesn't fall exclusively on Indigenous Peoples. We all share the responsibility.

Accountability is being willing to answer challenging questions about what brings you into the role of identifying yourself as an ally. Your motivations need to be transparent. Far too often in Canadian history, people showed up to Indigenous spaces claiming the best of intentions, and the result was massive widespread cultural genocide (Residential Schools, Indian Hospitals, Starlight Tours, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the 60's Scoop, the list goes on and on). This historical shame is a reality that every Canadian now faces. Ask yourself, how will you show accountability to that history? What are you doing to rebuild relationships that have decayed over time?

Develop Your Trust Vault



You can think of the vault like a *trust bank account*. Your deposits are developing strong relationships based on trust, but withdrawals occur when you violate trust. Betrayal includes ignoring opportunities to build trust. Canada's historical relationship with Indigenous Peoples has brought the Nation-to-Nation trust bank to an all-time low, with a deficit incurred from centuries of systemic exploitation and racism.

Although modern settlers are not directly responsible for the entire history, the goal as an ally is to focus on your personal trust bank and prevent your balance from ever dropping. Trust in action is rooted in respecting boundaries and is built slowly over time in small acts of kindness. If someone shares Indigenous stories, customs, or traditions with allies, that information or experience is a gift. It does not give you permission to share or replicate the gift, especially for profit or mass production. It doesn't become yours because someone shared it with you. Respect the cultural customs, traditions, and history that belong to Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous knowledge has always and will always belong to Indigenous Peoples. Copying, re-framing, or restructuring any part for profit or convenience is a boundary that should never be crossed.

For example, think of going to someone's house and they share a cup of tea with you. In this situation would you take home the cup? No. Would you tell others about the tea and try to pass it off as your own? Nope. How about stealing their tea and starting a tea company for your own profit? Of course not. You leave with the honour and privilege of sharing that experience and thankful to the person who shared it with you.

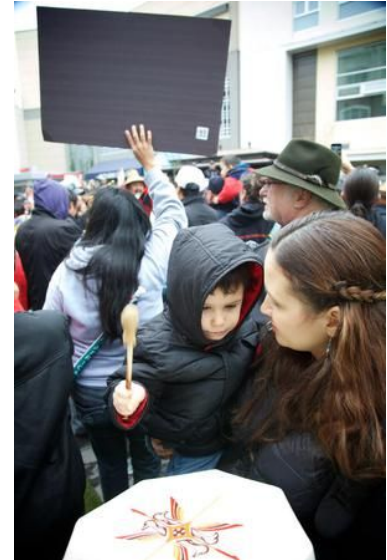
As an ally, it is also important to respect if some people don't want to welcome you into their circles. They are under no obligation to invite you into their community. If someone invites you, always treat it as one of the highest honours with gratitude and humility. We build trust daily, through every action and reaction, and you don't gain trust by demanding or stealing a teacup.

Integrity, Even When It Gets Tough

Integrity permeates your thoughts, words, and actions. It does not happen instantly, but operating out of integrity every day is a crucial part of being an ally. Allies need to be authentic in expressing their goals and vision in the current social climate. Integrity is not a destination, it's a continuous and daily effort.

Integrity is (Brown, 2018):

1. Choosing courage over comfort.
2. Prioritizing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy.
3. Practicing, not just professing, your values.



Non-Judgment & Compassion

Indigenous cultures are different, not inferior. They vary across North America, all strong and resilient, and have endured generations of institutional judgment and racism. It is everyone's job to fight systems of oppression, discrimination, prejudice, and mainstream stereotypes whenever opportunities arise.



I want to take a moment here to caution against "colour-blindness". We are not all the same, we don't all have equal opportunities. This philosophy disregards historical context and current states, it's just not honest. If you don't recognize privilege and what that means, I encourage you to take this "[How Privileged Are You](#)" test. We need to get comfortable being uncomfortable and talking about differences. Historical racism and discrimination has impacted the present

and caused the prevalent inequities we face as a society today.

Non-judgment grows from compassion, understanding, and empathy. It is not your place to judge, make suggestions, observations, or add opinions. The role of an ally is a supporting role, not a leading one. Non-judgment means that, even if you don't agree with something, respect that opinion and perspective and try to approach understanding with respectful curiosity. A great example here is how the mainstream population might view homeless individuals. The common judgement is that homelessness results from poor life decisions. However, statistics reveal that

homelessness is more commonly a result of childhood trauma and mental health (Maté, 2009).

Generosity, Balance & Equity

Be generous with your assumptions about people, including yourself. The social structure in Western society has been imbalanced for far too long. Part of Reconciliation is trying to create balance within the current unjust systems that exists because of a long history of trauma, prejudice, and systemic racism against Indigenous Peoples. True allies see the Reconciliation conversation as an opportunity to educate and encourage humanity to do better. They see an opportunity to, with strong and unwavering dedication, use the framework of restitution to make the world a better place for everyone. It's examining the question, what am I doing to make things right?

To learn from the past, we start by listening, reading and hearing with open hearts, then use that wisdom gained as a compass to direct the decisions we make every day. Education is one of the most important keys to a generous worldview because generosity comes from understanding.

Seek Trust, Seek Truth

I call on all non-Indigenous Canadians to listen and continue to educate themselves on true Canadian history. If you're wondering where to begin, [Reconciliation](#) projects are actively happening across Canada that you can get involved in. In the meantime, there is a plethora of art, [movies](#), [books](#), and [music](#) you could engage with to better understand Indigenous experiences and perspectives in Canada - both from a historical and contemporary standpoint. Look for opportunities to educate yourself and, when appropriate, ask questions, attend events, and become more involved in the activities that are already going on around you. We've listed a few places to start at the bottom of this article in the Additional Resources section.



To reiterate, we build trust by respecting boundaries, being reliable and accountable, respecting the trust vault, showing integrity, showing non-judgement, and by being generous with your assumptions. We build trust in small acts of kindness and there are no shortcuts to building trust. If you are ever in doubt, educate yourself, ask questions, and seek answers from the right people

whether it's Indigenous Peoples or other respected allies within the community. True allies will see the value in relationship building by authentically gaining, building and maintaining trust.

Additional Resources

- [#Next150 Reconciliation Challenges](#)
- [Brene Brown video discussing the Anatomy of Trust](#)
- [How Privileged are you?](#)
- [Indigenous Allyship: An Overview](#)
- [Indigenous Canada Course at the University of Alberta](#)
- ['I'm a white settler': Why that matters in healthcare](#)
- [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#)
- [Read the Truth and Reconciliation Report Before You Form an Opinion](#)
- [Reconciliation Canada](#)
- [San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Online Training](#)
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#)



Robyn has been with Animikii since it began in 2003. She supports the team in a variety of ways from website content strategy and information design to administrative support, bookkeeping, strategy, and people operations. She has a psychology degree from the University of Alberta, and, Art Therapy and Counselling training. Robyn has Ukrainian and European ancestry and was born in Winnipeg, MB on Treaty 1 Territory. She is grateful to work and live with her family, including two amazing boys (13 and 9 years old), on Lekwungen territory in Victoria, BC

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