

The transformative partnership lens - my  
journey of brokering self-awareness through  
uranium awareness raising  
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# Introduction

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My PBAS level 2 practicum was focused on public participation work with the Cree community of Mistissini during the environmental review of a uranium exploration project in the area. It was by helping the Cree of Mistissini get engaged on this issue that partnership brokering emerged as a lens through which to see my own growth as a communications professional.

The personal journey of re-framing my day-to-day work within a brokering context involved the internalizing and honing of the brokering skill set as the foundation of my communications practice. And for the community of Mistissini, partnership awareness raising and local capacity building hold the promise of maximizing the benefits from resource development on their traditional territory.

It is this transformative potential of the partnering approach to development that formed the backbone of my brokering journey narrative.

## Background

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Mistissini is an Aboriginal community of approximately 3,500 people some 800 kilometres north of Montreal in the James Bay region of northern Quebec. The Cree Nation of Mistissini has unfettered rights to hunt, trap and fish on a landmass of over 7,000 square kilometres. It is said that the ancestors of the Mistissini Cree have lived in the area dating back over 4,500 years.

In 1975, together with the other eight Cree Nation communities of northern Quebec, Mistissini signed a Land Claim with the federal and provincial governments that accorded a range of rights and self-governance powers, including health and education. As a result of this historic agreement, major hydropower development was undertaken in the 1970s and 80s that now sees this part of the province generate over half of Quebec's electricity.

The Montreal-based sustainability consulting firm I was working for at the time - EEM inc.- was hired by Mistissini's local government in early 2010 to provide socio-economic impact assessment consulting services for the federal and provincial review of a proposed advanced uranium exploration project in the community's traditional hunting and trapping territory.

The bulk of my pre-mentored practice consulting work consisted of public participation planning and implementation. I wanted to engage the community on the issue of uranium development in a way that favoured fact-based discussion, given that the subject is typically surrounded by a lack of understanding and a corresponding degree of fear in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Mistissini in fact ended up coming out in strong opposition to the advanced exploration proposal being put forward by a Quebec-based mining company, with the final report and recommendations emerging from the public review process currently being awaited.

## Partnership awareness raising activities

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The key, first step to my partnership awareness raising in Mistissini was to put in place a community engagement process anchored by the PBAS partnership principles of equity, transparency and mutual benefit.

My mentored practice saw me add an analytical layer to my engagement with the community through partnership scoping and prospective partner assessment, the design of a workshop facilitation plan intended to seed the idea of partnering potential with community leaders and, finally, through the development of a brokering strategy for continuing my engagement with the community in the months and years to come.

The mentored practice also helped me see that I was in fact acting as a broker in a number of ways that I did not necessarily realize at the time. I was yet another example (in a long line of PBAS graduates) of someone who was brokering without the self-awareness that I was even doing so, and without being a recognized 'broker'. This included my role as consensus-building facilitator of community engagement on the uranium issue; as informal government relations bridge builder between the local and regional Cree governments on an issue that threatened to divide them at times; as external coach to my clients and the Chief of the community on how best to navigate the thorny issue of uranium development public opinion; and, as reviewer of partnering context and opportunities through my reflective practice and discussions with my mentor.

These are all aspects of the brokering skill set that I was able to develop through my work in the community, but not without

stepping back to reflect on how the various threads of brokering activities connect as part of a larger tapestry that forms a backdrop to one's day-to-day work.

## Reflecting on the reflective practice

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The reflective aspect of the Level 2 mentored practice showed me first and foremost how little of it I actually built into my daily life as a consultant. I rarely got, or more accurately rarely took, the time to reflect on my work. The lack of time for reflection is a by-product of working in a business that is based on billable hours, but it was also a function of my own lack of commitment to a reflective practice. The weekly log entries instilled in me over time a discipline of reflection that allowed me to step back from the billable hours treadmill and see my practice in a larger, more meaningful, and ultimately more strategic light.

By subjecting my consulting work in Mississauga to the structure of the mentored practice I learned, through doing, just how important the discipline of partnership brokering is in terms of pushing through personal and professional obstacles towards growth and fulfilment. Part of this is as a result of the iterative insight gained from the weekly log reflections, but another important aspect is in the weekly calls I had with my mentor and having to describe to a complete outsider, who was an ocean and many time zones away, the core of the local context and the challenges that I faced.

In fact, the PBAS 'critical friendship' attributes that seem so basic in a book became transformative for my professional practice when I considered them honestly and carefully. An ability to listen actively, to speak precisely, to suspend preconceptions, to maintain a non-judgmental attitude - all of these should be fundamental attributes for any professional's growth, not simply that of a partnership broker's.

Through my reflective practice it became obvious (somewhat painfully at times) that I had let myself get caught up in the treadmill of billable consulting work and that I was missing opportunities for growth that the reflective brokering practice offers up to those that put in the effort. Once I adopted the brokering skill set and mindset as the new guideposts for my work with the Cree, I became a better advisor to them.

## What were my brokering challenges and breakthroughs?

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During my first weeks of log entries I felt like I was fumbling around in the dark, not sure how to situate the partnering conditions in the community and just as importantly, not at all sure how and where to inject myself - as a broker for sustainable development partnerships - into an ever-changing and confusing local situation. By being forced, through the mentored practice, to analyze and describe social and political power dynamics with objectivity, clarity, and honesty, I was able to gain a necessary degree of confidence in my own practice.

What I learned is that a certain amount of this tension is required for a breakthrough, and it is not something to be avoided at all costs. I am typically drawn to avoiding or defusing confrontational situations, and yet with brokering, sometimes confrontation is required in defence of foundational partnership principles. The brokering philosophy and skill set grounds the practitioner and equips them with tools for positive change. Once I saw my consulting work through the brokering lens as opposed to a client lens, the issue of conflict and uncertainty on the ground was no longer a professional threat, simply a natural progression of an issue and one that could be productively engaged through the active use and improvement of the brokering skill set.

As a result, I was able to slowly shift my consulting role from reactive to proactive, to pushing boundaries just a little bit with the client. I did this by gaining confidence in the fact that the sustainable partnership agenda I was advancing was principled and meaningful, that delivering sustainable solutions to development questions in a way that provides mutual benefit is a profoundly different way to approach the planet where a 'winner takes all', 'growth at all costs' mentality abounds.

I learned by 'doing' that brokering is by definition about navigating obstacles, and in the partnership scoping and awareness-raising phase, these obstacles can seem insurmountable. It takes a broker with courage, patience and insight to be able to

recognize that the push and pull is part of the necessary growing pains for working in a way where equity, transparency and mutual benefit are both the drivers of the process and its outcomes. It is the broker's role to keep the focus on the big picture by continually injecting both the reality and possibility of the situation into the equation.

## Conclusion

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Sustainable development is about acknowledging the limits of the natural and human environment in a global economic status quo based on ignoring this reality. Being on the frontlines of that disconnect can be overwhelming and intimidating, but the partnering skill set and reflective practice act as anchors and a launch pad for bringing about positive change in a world where social, environmental and economic balance is so rarely struck.

At the very early stages of the partnering process where my work with the Cree Nation of Mistissini was focused, long before there is even discussion of an eventual formal agreement taking shape, there is just the potential of a partnership. The partnership broker is working for an idea - a powerful idea that positions them as a change agent for the sustainable development paradigm.

I have learned first-hand from working with the people of Mistissini that trust is the basis of all successful collaborations, that change comes slowly only when you expect it to come fast, and that the partnership broker needs to look for a series of small victories over a long period of time, not for the quick home run.

And while I can admit to initially being surprised by the level of the community's opposition to the uranium proposal in question, I was equally surprised by their underlying openness to keeping the door open to building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with other mining companies that may come along in the future.