Reconciliation Systemic Change

From Acknowledgement To Action

A practical guide for resource and construction companies on responding to colonialism as structural context, not personal accusation — and what genuine systemic contribution looks like

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Principle: ***Reconciliation is action, not words.*** **We examine our own systems, listen to Indigenous Peoples and communities, and change how we make decisions, deliver services and share power.**

Challenge: Company representatives often freeze when colonialism is raised in a community meeting or on site — hearing it as a personal accusation rather than structural context, and responding with either guilt-paralysis or defensiveness. Neither response is being asked for. This guide reframes the issue into concrete, testable operational questions, and gives representatives practical guidance for what to do when it comes up.

Part 1 — What "Colonialism" Is Actually Naming, Operationally

Strip away the abstraction and it comes down to two repeated mechanisms: decisions about a community's land and resources were made by someone else, and the economic benefit flowed somewhere else. Cultural erasure, broken trust, and poverty alongside resource wealth all trace back to those two things.

This reframe turns an unanswerable historical question — "how do we fix colonialism?" — into an answerable operational one:

> Does our project repeat that pattern, or does it genuinely break from it?

The Concrete Shift: From Consultation to Shared Decision-Making

Consultation, as most companies practice it, means presenting a plan and gathering feedback — the company still holds the decision. This is the most common thing communities are pointing to when colonialism comes up, because it is structurally identical to the historical pattern, just with better manners.

- **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC):** Means the community has real power to say no, or to say yes only with conditions, before key decisions are locked in — not a chance to comment on a finished plan.
- **Joint decision-making bodies:** Joint bodies with real authority over camp policy, environmental monitoring, and hiring practices — not advisory panels whose input can be overridden.
- **Equity ownership, not just royalties:** An equity stake or joint-venture structure gives the community a seat in decisions about how the resource is developed, not just a payment for access to it.

The Concrete Shift: Where the Economic Benefit Actually Lands

- **Indigenous-owned businesses as prime contractors, not subcontractors:** There is a real difference between a major contract going to an Indigenous-owned company directly versus a non-Indigenous company subcontracting a small piece to check a box.
- **Procurement targets with teeth:** Tracked, reported, and tied to actual spend, not intent.
- **Fund capacity, not just wages:** Training and apprenticeship pipelines that lead to senior technical and management roles, not just entry-level labour — the gap between "we hired locally" and "we built a pathway to run this someday" is where a lot of goodwill is lost.

The Concrete Shift: What You Fund and Who Controls It

- **Fund what the community identifies, not what the company proposes:** This sounds obvious but is routinely skipped — a company decides a youth program is a good investment and builds one, rather than asking what the community's own priorities are (which might be language revitalization, a health clinic, land guardianship funding, or something the company wouldn't have guessed).
- **Fund things unrelated to your project's optics:** Supporting land guardianship programs, self-government capacity, or language programs — even ones with no direct tie to your operations — signals investment in the community's self-determination generally, not just in smoothing your own project through.

Part 2 — TRC Call to Action 92: What It Actually Requires

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission directed Call to Action 92 specifically at the corporate sector. It is the clearest existing framework for what "meaningful contribution" looks like from a business, and is worth treating as a checklist rather than a reference.

> *"We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources."* (TRC, 2015, p. 10)

The Call lists three specific actions (TRC, 2015, p. 10)

- "Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects."
- "Ensure Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects."
- "Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations — delivered through skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism."

A 2017 survey of more than 500 Canadian businesses found 85% were not engaged with Indigenous communities at all, and only one in four knew of the TRC's call to action for business (Indigenous Works, 2017). In our experience, most corporate activity still focuses on economic reconciliation (jobs, procurement) rather

than the fuller governance-level commitment the Call describes — adopting UNDRIP as an actual reconciliation framework. That gap is itself a useful context: partial engagement (hiring targets, land acknowledgments) without governance-level change is the most common pattern communities are reacting to.

Model: Equity Partnership vs. Standard Royalty Structure

	Standard royalty / IBA	Equity partnership
Decision authority	Company decides; community is consulted	Community holds a seat in governance decisions
Payment structure	Fixed royalty or lump-sum payments	Share of profit, tied to project performance
Time horizon	Often project-length	Long-term, ownership persists beyond a single project phase
Community relationship to project	Stakeholder to manage	Co-owner with a stake in outcomes

Part 3 — A Practical Guide for Company Representatives

What individual representatives can actually do when colonialism is raised in a meeting, a negotiation, or an informal conversation.

What NOT to Do

- **Don't perform guilt.** Performing guilt (over-apologizing, self-flagellating) shifts the emotional labour of the conversation back onto the community, who now has to manage your reaction.
- **Don't get defensive.** Responding with "that wasn't us" or "we're different" dismisses the structural point being made and reads as an unwillingness to engage with it.
- **Don't treat all Indigenous history as interchangeable.** Generic Indigenous history training is a starting point, not a substitute for knowing the specific Nation's treaty status, prior experience with industry, and specific grievances.
- **Don't overpromise what you can't deliver.** Committing to something (a consent right, a governance change) that is actually a corporate structure decision, without checking, erodes trust faster than admitting you need to escalate.

What TO Do

- **Listen for the specific ask underneath the framing.** Often what's being asked for is specific — a different decision process, a different contract structure, a different person at the table. Colonialism is usually cited as context for why that specific thing matters, not as a debate to be resolved in the room.
- **Do your homework on the specific community.** Learn that Nation's treaty status, prior experience with industry, and specific history before the meeting. Specificity is what earns credibility.

- **Be honest about the limits of your authority.** If the ask exceeds your authority — equity structure, consent rights, governance change — say so plainly and commit to bringing it back to the people who can decide, with a real timeline.
- **Follow up in writing, quickly.** A concrete follow-up (a meeting date, a document, a named contact) does more to build trust than a well-worded statement in the room.
- **It's okay to say no clearly.** If a request is genuinely outside what your company will do, say so honestly rather than deflecting or over-promising — a clear no is more respectful than a vague maybe.

Quick-Reference: Reframing in the Moment

Instinct	Reframe
"What do I say to this?"	"What decision or structure is actually being pointed at?"
"This is a historical grievance I can't fix."	"Does our operating model repeat the pattern, or break from it?"
"We already did a land acknowledgment / training."	"Where does decision power and economic benefit actually sit in this project?"
"I need to defend the company."	"I need to hear the specific ask and find out if I can act on it."

The Honest Caveat

A company cannot undo colonialism, and communities generally aren't asking an individual company to. What they can assess, fairly quickly, is whether a company's operating model — who decides, who benefits, who is accountable when harm happens — repeats the old pattern or genuinely breaks from it. That is a testable, visible thing, not an abstraction, which is why it is worth treating as a design question for the business rather than a discomfort to manage in the room.

Version [X] — Reviewed [Month/Year] — Next review [Month/Year] — Developed with reference to the TRC Calls to Action; legal and community review recommended before adoption