

Project Insights Report

Building Culturally Safe Workplaces for Indigenous Employees in British Columbia



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Executive Summary

Indigenous employees across British Columbia continue to navigate workplaces structured around Western norms that do not account for the cultural, communal, and ceremonial obligations that are central to Indigenous wellbeing. Because cultural practices often require extended time away and occur in seasonal cycles, many Indigenous workers are forced to choose between honouring their identities and maintaining secure employment. Existing cultural leave policies across Canada remain inconsistent and largely discretionary, reinforcing systemic inequities that contribute to stress, burnout, and limited career advancement for Indigenous employees.

This project set out to understand how workplaces in Victoria and across B.C. could better support Indigenous cultural time, and how gaps in policy and employer awareness shape the experiences of Indigenous workers. Using a mixed-methods design grounded in Indigenous research methodologies and participatory action research, the study engaged approximately 120 Indigenous employees and 300 employers through surveys, interviews, storytelling circles, and focus groups. This approach included both employee and employer perspectives, revealing the structural, cultural, and relational conditions that enable or undermine cultural safety in the workplace.

The research had three interconnected findings. First, many Indigenous employees face significant barriers to cultural participation. More than half reported resistance when requesting cultural leave. Second, major gaps exist between employer intentions and actual practices: formal cultural-leave policies are uncommon, and many workers rely on discretionary approval from individual managers. Third, while employers may lack knowledge or tools to support cultural safety, most expressed strong willingness to adopt clearer guidelines, receive Indigenous-led training, and collaborate on policy reform.

These findings matter for both equity and economic resilience. Culturally safe workplaces enhance retention, strengthen workforce engagement, and support Indigenous leadership pathways — factors that are increasingly important amid labour shortages and national reconciliation commitments. By advancing actionable strategies for employers, unions, and policymakers, this project offers a blueprint for building workplaces where Indigenous employees can fully participate, thrive, and lead.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 More than half of Indigenous employees (51%) encountered resistance when requesting cultural leave. In total, 83% reported asking for time off for cultural reasons.
- 2 Workplaces relying on discretionary, manager-dependent decisions for cultural leave unintentionally reproduce colonial patterns that undermine Indigenous wellbeing and trust.
- 3 Employers are highly willing to improve — nearly 80% expressed readiness to strengthen cultural leave policies — but require Indigenous-led guidance and clear frameworks to act effectively.

► The Issue

The historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism continue to shape the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including in the workplace. Colonial systems have severed ties to land, culture, and community, and these harms persist today when Indigenous workers are not supported in maintaining their cultural practices. Access to ceremonies, gatherings, and community obligations, such as pow wow, sun dance, grief and seasonal ceremonies, and sweat lodge practices, is fundamental to Indigenous wellbeing. These traditions are collective, relational, and place-based; being physically present with family and community is essential to cultural continuity, healing, and identity.

Yet across Canada, cultural-leave provisions remain scarce, fragmented, and inconsistent across jurisdictions and industries. Many Indigenous employees report being denied time off for ceremonies or being treated as though cultural leave is a discretionary favour rather than a workplace responsibility tied to Indigenous rights and self-determination. As a result, workers are often forced to choose between honouring their cultural identity and maintaining their employment. This dynamic contributes to burnout, reduced retention, limited advancement opportunities, and ongoing erasure of Indigenous ways of being in workplace structures.

In British Columbia, and particularly in Victoria, where this project is situated, Indigenous workers continue to face systemic barriers to culturally safe employment. At a community forum in April 2024 in Victoria, more than 30 Indigenous community members came together and described the challenges they encountered when requesting cultural time off, noting the emotional, professional, and economic consequences of inadequate accommodations. Despite widespread commitments to reconciliation and equity, employers often lack the guidance, data, and organizational capacity to adopt culturally responsive leave practices.

Existing approaches have not adequately addressed these gaps. Workplace policies remain largely Eurocentric, emphasizing standardized holidays and individual accommodations without centring Indigenous governance, relational accountability, or community needs. There is little comprehensive, community-informed research examining how cultural leave policies influence Indigenous employee well-being, retention, and career progression, or how employers understand their responsibilities in this area.

This research project addresses this knowledge gap by examining the barriers that Indigenous employees face when seeking cultural time off and exploring how workplaces in B.C. can better support these needs. By engaging both Indigenous employees and employers, the project seeks to build a nuanced understanding of attitudes, practices, and constraints surrounding cultural holidays and ceremonies. This dual perspective is essential for generating practical, scalable strategies that can drive meaningful workplace change.

The issue extends beyond individual workplaces. When cultural needs are unsupported, Indigenous employees face constrained career mobility and diminished income potential, further entrenching socioeconomic inequities. Employers, meanwhile, lose talented workers and forgo the opportunity to integrate diverse cultural perspectives that strengthen organizational performance.

By grounding the project in community co-design, wraparound support, and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Reconciliation principles, this initiative aims to promote long-term systemic change in British Columbia's labour market — supporting Indigenous wellbeing, enhancing workplace inclusion, and increasing Indigenous representation in leadership and decision-making roles.



What We Investigated

Guided by cultural safety, reconciliation, and intersectionality frameworks, this research project investigated how workplaces in Victoria, British Columbia, could better recognize and accommodate Indigenous cultural holidays and ceremonies. Approximately 300 employers and 120 Indigenous employees were engaged through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and storytelling circles, using a mixed-methods, descriptive research design grounded in Indigenous research methodologies.

The project was led by the following research questions:

1. What barriers do Indigenous employees face in accessing time off for cultural holidays and ceremonies, and how do these barriers impact their well-being, retention, and career advancement?
2. What are the attitudes, knowledge gaps, and challenges among employers regarding the implementation of culturally inclusive workplace policies?
3. How do discriminatory workplace policies and practices contribute to systemic exclusion, burnout, and underrepresentation of Indigenous employees in leadership roles?
4. What are the most effective strategies for engaging employers in adopting culturally safe practices and equitable hiring processes?
5. What measurable outcomes can be achieved through culturally safe workplace initiatives, including increased retention, leadership representation, and inclusivity for Indigenous employees?

Data collection, which took place in 2024, involved multiple methods intentionally chosen to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and to capture both breadth and depth. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and storytelling circles, were used to explore personal experiences with cultural leave, discrimination, reporting mechanisms, and perceptions of cultural safety. These sessions were held both in person and online to increase accessibility. Elders and Knowledge Keepers participated through one-on-one interviews. Quantitative and qualitative surveys gathered broader data on cultural leave practices, inclusion efforts, and employer policies across sectors.

A document analysis of workplace policies, employee handbooks, and diversity frameworks was also undertaken to identify structural gaps and discriminatory practices. All data were analyzed through thematic analysis for qualitative insights and descriptive statistical analysis for survey findings, with triangulation ensuring coherence and rigour.

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) model was used to ensure community involvement in shaping research questions, methods, and interpretation. A two-eyed seeing approach integrated Indigenous knowledge systems with Western methodologies, ensuring cultural relevance alongside methodological rigour. This approach was chosen to produce research that was both academically sound and directly beneficial to Indigenous communities and actionable for employers and policymakers.

What We're Learning

Employers often lacked understanding of Indigenous cultural obligations, placing extra emotional labour on Indigenous employees

Through surveys and focus groups with about 120 Indigenous employees and 300 employers, many Indigenous participants described having to explain and justify why they needed time off for ceremonies, grieving, and seasonal responsibilities. Employers often did not grasp the scale of extended kinship networks, the cyclical nature of ceremonies, or that commitments could last weeks rather than a single day. This lack of understanding was rooted in broader erasure of Indigenous laws and traditions and in limited awareness of colonial harms beyond high-profile issues like residential schools. As a result, employees reported feeling caught between Indigenous worldviews (obligations, spirituality, community) and rigid Western workplace frameworks, which drained their energy and diminished their capacity to do their best work.

There were significant gaps between formal policies and day-to-day practice around cultural leave

Only 41.9% of employers reported having formal written procedures for Indigenous cultural observances, while 32.6% relied on informal, case-by-case accommodations and 20.9% reported no recognition at all. This meant many Indigenous employees' access to cultural leave depended on the goodwill of individual managers rather than enforceable organizational rules. Among Indigenous employee respondents, 83.3% had requested time off for cultural reasons, yet more than half (51%) encountered some form of resistance, and 7% were outright denied. In total, 42% reported having to use vacation or sick time to attend cultural events, showing how "discretionary" approaches make cultural participation precarious and inequitable.

Systemic barriers to cultural leave negatively impact Indigenous employees' wellbeing, trust, and career progression

Nearly 46% of Indigenous employees reported that the inability to take cultural leave caused stress or irritation. More than one in five (22%) reported more severe impacts such as burnout and difficulty balancing work and culture. About 23% felt these barriers had hindered their career advancement, while many others described a neutral but unsupportive environment where they avoided asking for leave because the process of explaining themselves was exhausting. Discrimination and racism were widespread: over 56% of employees reported experiencing discrimination based on their Indigenous identity, yet less than half of these incidents were reported. Fear of reprisal (13%), distrust of HR (47%), and the belief that "nothing would change" (35%) reveal how current systems undermine cultural participation and erode confidence in workplace protections.

Employers and employees expressed strong willingness to change, but need Indigenous-led guidance and concrete tools

Despite the challenges, employers showed substantial openness: 47.5% said their organizations were "very willing" and 32.5% "somewhat willing" to strengthen cultural leave policies. A majority of 75% were open to collaborating with Indigenous organizations or experts. Employers identified practical needs such as guidance on policy development (59%), Indigenous cultural awareness training (69%), Indigenous-led mentorship or consulting (54%), and funding for diversity initiatives (49%). Indigenous employees echoed these priorities, with 58% calling for flexible cultural leave policies, 61% for recognition of Indigenous holidays, 55% for cultural training for staff and leadership, and 46% for Indigenous-led employee networks. Focus group participants emphasized that supportive supervisors who not only approve leave but actively learn about and share information on cultural practices significantly boost retention and engagement.

True inclusion requires integrating Indigenous perspectives into policies, leadership, and everyday workplace culture

Findings show that “checking the box” through one-off events or symbolic gestures does not meaningfully change Indigenous employees’ experiences. Both employees and employers stressed the need for “Indigenization, not institutionalization” — embedding Indigenous histories, rights, and identities into governance structures, policies, and daily practices. This includes uplifting Indigenous leaders and decision-makers, investing in restorative approaches that acknowledge past harms and build respectful futures, and forming long-term relationships with local Indigenous nations. Cultural safety is not achieved by policy alone; it depends on Indigenous-led design, sustained education, and structures that make cultural participation a supported and expected part of workplace life, rather than an exception to be justified.

★ Why It Matters

This project shows that cultural leave is feasible within Canadian workplaces and necessary for advancing reconciliation, improving labour-market equity, and addressing workforce shortages that disproportionately affect Indigenous communities. By documenting the experiences of 120 Indigenous employees and the practices of 300 employers, the project provides a community-informed evidence base on cultural leave in British Columbia. The findings reveal systemic inconsistencies in cultural-leave recognition, misunderstanding of Indigenous cultural obligations, and impacts on employee wellbeing, retention, and advancement. These insights hold important implications for employers, unions, policymakers, funders, and training providers across Canada.



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At the level of workplace practice, the findings show that cultural safety cannot be achieved through symbolic gestures or isolated training sessions. Employers often expressed support for reconciliation principles but lacked the tools, knowledge, or policies required to meaningfully integrate Indigenous cultural needs into organizational systems. Outdated time-off frameworks, case-by-case accommodations, and rigid scheduling practices directly undermined inclusivity efforts. The research shows that culturally safe workplaces require Indigenous-led design of policies, experiential learning opportunities, culturally grounded supports, and clear no-penalty rules to protect employees from retaliation or career stagnation. These lessons extend beyond the specific project context: any sector employing Indigenous workers, including health care, construction, education, hospitality, and the public service, must reconsider traditional models of attendance management, credentialing, and performance evaluation to ensure they do not embed colonial assumptions that conflict with Indigenous worldviews.

The findings have broader implications for provincial and federal policy. The absence of standardized cultural leave provisions forces workers to rely on managerial discretion, resulting in inequitable access and inconsistent application across organizations. Governments, regulators, and funders can address this gap by establishing cultural leave as a universal employment standard, adopting broader definitions of kinship, and implementing anti-reprisal protections. These system-level reforms matter not only for equity, but for labour-market competitiveness. Indigenous employees who do not feel culturally safe are more likely to experience burnout, exit roles, or avoid advancement opportunities — outcomes that contribute to ongoing labour shortages in key sectors. By enacting supportive policies, governments can advance reconciliation while simultaneously strengthening workforce stability and supporting economic inclusion.

The findings make clear that cultural leave itself functions as a wraparound support: it enables Indigenous employees to participate fully in cultural life, maintain community relationships, and manage grief and ceremonial responsibilities without jeopardizing employment. Participants emphasized that cultural safety is inseparable from wellbeing, mental health, and long-term career success. Effective wraparound approaches therefore include Indigenous-led counselling supports, mentorship programs, Elders/Knowledge Keeper access, and reporting systems that reduce the burden of self-advocacy. Many employers expressed willingness to adopt these supports but noted they lack the resources or frameworks to do so. This indicates a need for policy and funding models that help organizations, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, access shared Indigenous HR resources, ombudsperson services, and training infrastructure.

While many employers expressed commitment to reconciliation, they also acknowledged uncertainty about how to implement equitable hiring practices, revise onboarding systems, or integrate Indigenous histories and rights into organizational structures. The research provides a roadmap: Indigenous-led training, transparent promotion criteria, mentorship programs, advisory committees, and annual Indigenous-lens policy reviews. These approaches move organizations from performative gestures toward sustained structural change. They also respond to employer-identified needs such as policy development guidance (59%), cultural training (69%), and Indigenous-led consulting (54%), creating a strong foundation for scalable learning models across sectors.

Importantly, the implications extend to wider economic and social priorities. In a context of labour and skills shortages, high turnover rates, and rising demands on public and private sector workforces, inclusive workplace practices are a competitive advantage. Employers who implement cultural leave and cultural-safety policies are better positioned to recruit and retain Indigenous talent, increase workforce engagement, and strengthen leadership pipelines. This becomes especially relevant amid demographic shifts, increasing migration, and growing attention to Indigenous participation in emerging sectors such as clean energy, infrastructure, and climate adaptation. As Canada navigates transitions toward a low-carbon economy, meaningful reconciliation must be embedded into labour-market design.

► **What's Next**

Building on the project findings, the next phase focuses on mobilizing knowledge across British Columbia's labour market and supporting system-level adoption of cultural safety practices. The research team will begin by sharing the report with Human Resources professionals, managers, and employer networks to support policy change within organizations. Partnerships with unions are also planned to embed cultural leave provisions directly into collective agreements, ensuring protections are enforceable rather than discretionary. At the policy level, the project will engage funders and government bodies to establish cultural safety—particularly cultural leave—as a funding and compliance condition across sectors, strengthening accountability for equitable workplace practices.

In the longer term, the project aims to expand the scope of research nationally by building a cross-provincial dataset on Indigenous workplace experiences. A larger evidence base will support advocacy for legislative amendments to provincial and federal labour codes to formally recognize Indigenous cultural leave and align employment standards with reconciliation commitments. The research team also intends to pilot a “Cultural Safety Index” that organizations can use to track progress on key indicators such as retention, promotion, inclusion, and uptake of cultural leave.

Several emerging research opportunities have also surfaced. These include assessing the comparative effectiveness of different cultural leave policy designs, longitudinally examining causal links between cultural leave, safer reporting systems, and Indigenous leadership, and conducting cost–benefit analyses to quantify the organizational value of cultural safety investments. Additional lines of inquiry include exploring differences between urban and rural workplaces and mapping employer resistance to inform targeted implementation supports.

Together, these next steps aim to move the project from insight to action by supporting organizations, governments, and unions in building workplaces where Indigenous employees can fully participate, thrive, and lead.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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