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■ FIRST NATIONS

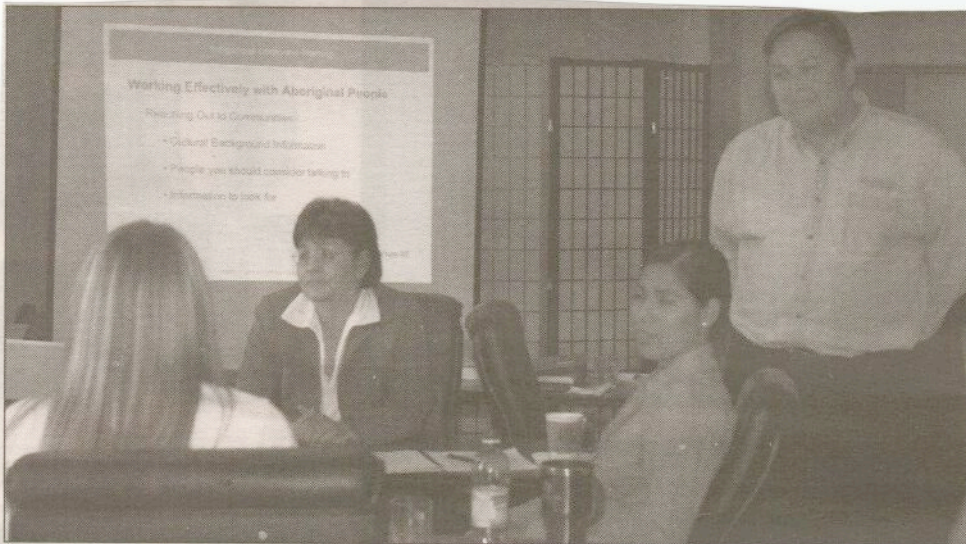


PHOTO BY NICOLE FITZGERALD, THE QUESTION

Bob Joseph, right, leads a discussion about relationship building on Tuesday.

Cultural gap narrows

Whistler, Mount Currie take another step toward working to enhance opportunities

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After many meetings between Mount Currie Band leaders and those in Whistler, good intentions and the acknowledgment of the lack of cultural understanding between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities finally moved into action this week.

At a workshop entitled "Working Effectively with Aboriginal People" on Tuesday, Band and Whistler Chamber of Commerce officials were aiming to close the gap. And in large measure, it appears they succeeded.

"I am really pleased with how the workshop went," said Christine Leo, director of community advancement for the Mount Currie Band. "You could see by the questions being put forward that our objective was being achieved and that this is opening the door to increase community and understanding, and close the cultural gap between employers and First Nations employees."

"I think it is long overdue."

Good intentions were evident at the workshop. By the end, companies were already putting plans in motion to draw from the 600-person employment pool available from the Lil'wat Nation.

Whistler.com is looking to involve First Nations in a call centre, the Whistler Museum has secured funding for a First Nations employee, the new Four Seasons hotel is looking into an education program for employees and Whistler Resort Cabs would like First Nations people to become involved as ambassadors as well as drivers.

"(First Nations) would talk about culture and history as ambassadors," Leo said. "It is more than just driving a cab. There is more opportunity and training involved."

Representatives from a variety of Whistler businesses attended the workshop, where speaker Bob Joseph, the founder of Indigenous Corporate Training, led the discussion. Also taking part were members of the Mount Currie Band council, elders and representatives of the Whistler/Mount Currie Learning Communities program.

A lot of ground was covered, including First

Nations history, linguistic diversity, hereditary and governing structures, the Indian Act, self-government and the treaty process as well as pivotal court cases involving aboriginal rights.

Martina Pierre, Lil'wat Nation elder, spoke about the history of First Nations, from the battles of Louis Riel to residential schools, sharing her personal trials and triumphs as well.

Pierre, dean of the Ts'zil Learning Centre, Band councillor and university instructor, said people need to understand the history of her people in to forge a meaningful relationship with them. She said First Nations are still formulating their identity and making sense of past traditions and the ones they create today as they seek healing and understanding.

"There is a hunger for the knowledge about the history of First Nations to address the issues that First Nations are dealing with today," she said. "People have to have patience with that dialogue in rediscovering who we are in our history or even making our own history... As an oppressed people, we have yet to be decolonized and make our own mistakes... I feel hopeful that people are listening to our issues and understand and that people no longer need to be racist."

Kirby Brown, director of employee experience for Whistler Blackcomb (WB), said he was amazed to learn that the last residential school wasn't closed until the mid-1980s. "I think a lot of people dismiss First Nations by saying, 'Why don't you just get over it. It's been over 100 years,'" Brown said. "But people misperceive how recent the residential school situation was. For many, the issue is still wide open, a fresh wound that only ended one generation ago... I never appreciated what a direct link there was between that experience and its social-economic impact."

WB has involved First Nations via high schools through the Peak Experience program. However, Brown hopes First Nations cultural awareness will be added to the company's employee education. The Whistler and Mount Currie Learning Communities program is helping First Nations better adapt to working environments such as those in Whistler. Résumé building, interview skills and other skill and education-related services are offered by the organization in an effort to prepare prospective employees.