

Protocol Failures

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The Aboriginal Wellness Group has, in recent months, experienced several breakdowns in our unity and group stability. Sadly, the cultural and spiritual lessons we have tried hard to instill within all members of our community have failed to take hold. This failure, in part, is the result of the prison environment in which we reside. The prison makes it difficult to achieve the goal of practicing the teachings (lessons) available within the culture and spirituality of Aboriginal society.

For one, the Aboriginal Wellness Group is having problems achieving unity, understanding, and positive interactions amongst ourselves given the lack of support within the prison, as well as during childhood and adolescence. Generally, most prisoners are lacking pride in themselves and their familial or cultural histories. This lack of pride can manifest into a strong desire to be noticed and recognized as someone of importance and consequence. It is much easier and often safer to present as strong, angry and hostile, rather than show a softer side to avoid being seen as easy targets or weak.

Going to school to achieve the higher levels of education was not an option for most of us and even employment took too long for many individuals in prison to attain. Granted there are individuals who have achieved some of the highest levels achievable, but they are the exception to the norm. These are important elements to find support amongst ourselves.

Many who are involved with the Aboriginal Wellness Group also have little to no cultural or community identity other than the knowledge that they have Aboriginal blood somewhere in their family. Often, they have never really identified themselves as Aboriginal. Because Aboriginal teachings do not jibe with what they know and how they have lived, they return to ways of thinking that they learned while involved with the “subculture”. It is hard to make a change, especially positive change, and sometimes it is easier to turn and run back into the burning house.

The transition to make positive change can be achieved with the guidance and assistance of an Elder who is truly respected. The Elder must demonstrate that they are not simply an ear for anyone to offload or complain to. The Elder's wisdom, honesty, directness, and strength of character will ensure mutual respect and growth.

In the prison environment, such an Elder is incredibly valuable for those who want to change their lifestyle and get away from all the destructive practices they were involved with prior to and during their time in prison. The individual inside must also be willing and able to ignore any negative criticism from individuals outside the group.

Ego makes it very difficult for those starting out on their healing journey not to respond angrily to belittlement, but it is important that the individual ignore the comments, but do not necessarily ignore the person. A nonverbal acknowledgement of the person can defuse the situation. We all have an innate ability to read human body language, so why not communicate with those tools? Those tools are less offensive and minimize the hostility from the person you are communicating with.

Tragedy and loss will often trigger a person to want to turn their life around, but quite often there is not the assistance or guidance required to achieve that kind of turnaround in prison. It is very rare to find a person who facilitates programs or counsel people in prison with similar life experiences. That lack of insight and experience by facilitators or counselors makes it very difficult for most people in prison to take them seriously or respect them.

Trust is a very important factor in helping people in prison who are trying to change their lives for the better. They are predisposed to reject any help offered to them to avoid ridicule from their peers. In the beginning, the individual will feel uncomfortable and vulnerable, and use anger to address the discomfort. In such cases, it is preferable for the facilitator to carry the bulk of the discussion in any group counseling or sharing. If the facilitator does not have the lived experiences as the individual, it would be beneficial to have someone there who has the experience and has successfully changed their quality of life using the tools being offered.

In prison, some individuals participating in programs or groups such as the Aboriginal Wellness Group, sometimes do so with the intent to exploit these programs or groups to get out of prison faster. The Aboriginal Wellness Group members are far better able to determine the sincerity among group

members and take the appropriate action. The Aboriginal Wellness Group has a constitution or protocol document. This document outlines how an individual must behave to remain in good standing with the Aboriginal Wellness Group, culture and spiritual practices. If an individual fails to adhere to these rules, there are sanctions the group may apply.

In prison, the administrative staff are an important factor in how effective the Aboriginal Wellness Group will be in supporting group members in making positive change. Prison administration and staff need to adhere and support the protocols of the group for it to be successful. This support would not just strengthen the core of the group, but also any individuals on the periphery.

As a group, we have a connection to each other through our culture, spirituality and heritage. We can help each other because we know the sincerity of the others due to our proximity. Once an individual is willing to make a positive change in their life and there is a support network of peers willing to help, there is not too much that will stop them from achieving that goal. The Aboriginal Wellness Group is important in helping individuals achieve their goals.