

BUILDING **BEST** PRACTICES

BY TOM VENETIS

CANADIAN UTILITIES TAP INTO CCAB'S PAR PROGRAM TO FORGE PROGRESSIVE RELATIONS WITH FIRST NATIONS

Canadian companies are quickly learning that deepening relations with First Nations can be a winning business proposition. Utility companies, in particular, are increasingly involving First Nation communities in their projects and providing more business opportunities for Aboriginal businesses and workers.

Many of them are making this happen through CCAB's highly successful Progressive Aboriginal Relations (PAR) program. Launched in 2001, PAR is an online management and reporting program that has supported progressive improvement in Aboriginal relations at numerous organizations across the country.

Participating companies are provided with a framework to track and measure performance around Aboriginal relations, and a certification component ranks their corporate performance at a bronze, silver or gold level. There is third party verification of each company's assessment, based



on four key performance areas: employment, business development, community investment, and community engagement.

Bruce Power, a nuclear generating company that produces more than 20 per cent of Ontario's electricity, is

one Canadian utility that's used PAR to strengthen its Aboriginal relations. It first achieved Silver certification in 2012, and last year was among 12 companies in Canada to be awarded with Gold certification. PAR, says a company executive, provided the utility with the guidance it needed.



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"The (2012) review provided a structured report that highlighted both our areas of strength and weakness in Aboriginal relations," explains Mike Briggs, manager, First Nations and Métis relations, corporate affairs, at Bruce Power. "We learned (that) there were areas of Aboriginal business development that would benefit from a more concerted focus."

The utility set out to improve these areas, which it did – thanks in large part to information provided in the review. "This provided a 'road map' to improvement," notes Briggs, "so by 2014 we felt we had made significant

progress and chose to undergo a second review, which resulted in us achieving Gold level distinction."

PAR identified key areas of growth in business development with the supply chain. It helped the utility determine if its suppliers were fully or partially Aboriginal-owned, and for those that weren't, it spurred the utility to promote PAR principles. "Some specialized industries, like our own, do not have a lot of Aboriginal-owned suppliers that can readily meet our needs; however, we do not see that as an obstacle (because) we try to instill the same principles of

the CCAB PAR program in suppliers who do business with us: Do they promote the principles of the CCAB within their own companies? Are they aware of CCAB and what it is trying to accomplish? Do they hire Aboriginal peoples and have policies in place to support that kind of action?"

REFINING THEIR APPROACH

At the other end of the country, BC Hydro has also actively participated in the PAR program. The utility signed on in 2008, and was awarded with Silver certification the following year. Today, it is well on its way to Gold. The PAR program, says Rebecca Clapperton,

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law and Aboriginal relations with BC Hydro, helped the utility refine its approach in forging relations with First Nations groups.

"In committing to PAR Gold certification, we launched a company-wide plan to reach that status which meant focusing on areas to invest attention and teamwork," says Clapperton. "That meant embedding Aboriginal relations into BC Hydro's decision-making structure; maintaining Aboriginal hiring goals and strengthening our (Aboriginal) retention and advancement goals; sustaining Aboriginal contracts and procurement levels; and refining reporting structures to better communicate success."

In the last fiscal year alone BC Hydro engaged with 189 First Nations and Tribal Councils on consultations involving 83 capital projects, and in the 2014 calendar year it procured \$130 million in goods and services from Aboriginal vendors.

Ontario Power Generation (OPG) is yet another Canadian utility reaping the benefits of the PAR program. A relatively new participant, the utility is in the process of having its application reviewed for certification. "What I (found) attractive about the PAR program is that it forces you to look at yourself," says Ted Gruetzner, vice president corporate communications and relations with Ontario Power Generation.

Projects that went into the utility's application include work with Lac Seul First Nation on the Lac Seul/Obishkokaang Wassiganikewigaming Generating Station in the Moose River Basin – a development partnership with First Nations where both parties share in revenue and risk. Another is work with the Moose Cree First Nation on the Lower Mattagami River project in the Moose River Basin, where OPG worked with First Nation businesses to involve Aboriginal apprentices.

The utility's work on the Darlington Nuclear Generating Station refurbishment project also involves First Nations. The project will create some 3,000 positions for qualified trades people, of which 20 per cent will be apprentices. OPG will actively reach out to First Nations communities to open those positions to Aboriginals.

The utility also sought input from the First Nation community on other matters tied to the project. "We had 20 First Nation groups attend a seminar where we walked through the project and where we listened to what they had to say," says Gruetzner. "We were told that we were not doing testing on plants that were important to First Nations. From them, we got a list of plants to test."

The upshot? Working at bettering their relations with First Nations has been a winning proposition for utility companies across Canada. And CCAB's PAR program has helped make that possible and paved the way. ■