

Transcript of Interview with Despina Papadopoulos

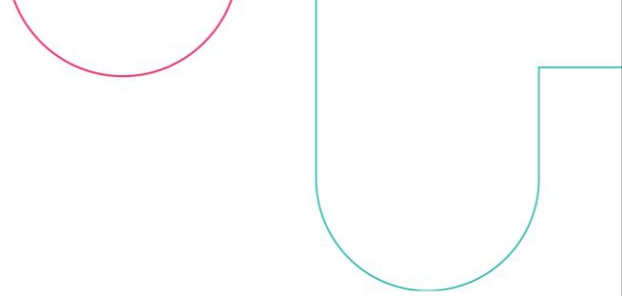
[00:05]

My name is Despina Parthena Papadopoulos, and I'm named after my great aunt Despina and my grandmother Parthena. And as you can tell from my very long last name, I'm of Greek ancestry, as both my parents were born and raised in Greece. I am a settler and a member of the Northern and Indigenous Health Team at the former legacy organization, the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement, which we now call Healthcare Excellence Canada. And as part of the Northern Indigenous Health Team, I was brought in originally to support what we had called the Suicide Prevention Collaborative, which then became the Promoting Life Together Collaborative. Experiences with the Collaborative, one thing that I reflected on a lot is sometimes you don't know what you don't know. However, you can still spend the time to support your own learning and your own readiness by really taking the time to listen, to learn, to self-reflect, to unpack sometimes some of the biases that you may have and to really be mindful of your own assumptions, as well as perhaps the assumptions that your organization may have. And I remember early on when I joined the organization, I just assumed, we're doing a collaborative with northern communities where there are First Nations, Métis, Inuit populations, so of course, we must have relationships in place and before I started in the organization, that would have already been part of the conversation.

[02:05]

And as I quickly learned, that was not the case. And so what I've learned through this experience is that as a mainstream organization, sometimes we may have these really great ideas and resources and have good intention to really want to work alongside community or other organizations, in particular Indigenous organizations. But if you're coming at it with just your own ideas, it's not the best approach. In fact, it's probably not an approach you should be taking at all. And what I've learned through this experience and prior to that is that whatever you embark on, it really needs to be guided by the needs of community and the needs of the Indigenous organizations you're working alongside and learning from. And so right off the bat, I learned very quickly that you really have to try to come from a place of humility, and you have to be very okay with being uncomfortable. And in fact, you have to almost become comfortable with being uncomfortable and vulnerable because you are going to make mistakes. However, what's most important is that you learn from those mistakes and then move forward in modelling good practices and processes. And in addition to taking the time to really shift your thinking from being very outcome-focused, you really need to focus on being relational and building trust.

[03:45]



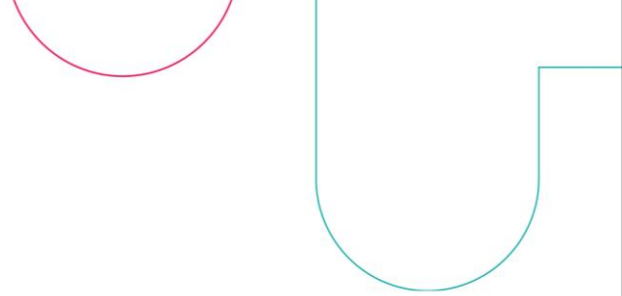
And it is as important to develop relationships and trust within your own organization as it is to develop those relationships externally because you need organizational readiness, and that often means having to support your own organization's journey towards truth and reconciliation. Building that level of readiness and understanding across the organization helps to enhance and develop infrastructures, including policies and protocols that you need in order to work in a good way.

[04:27]

The Promoting Life Together Collaborative brought together teams from coast to coast to support the development of meaningful partnerships between health organizations and Indigenous communities to develop life promotion initiatives. This was a 19-month initiative that supported learning and development of community partnerships, and there were six different teams from across northern and remote regions, including teams from British Columbia, Newfoundland, two teams for Manitoba, Ontario and Alberta. And as the convener of this initiative, our organization became the seventh team as it became very evident that we were also learning alongside all the teams. This initiative embraced and modelled codesign with Indigenous partners and included coaching and mentorship for the teams, and the design, delivery and evaluation of this collaborative was guided by a guidance group that included leaders, Elders, a youth representative, who have knowledge and expertise in Indigenous mental health and community wellness, suicide prevention and life promotion.

[05:52]

I have also learned is that it's actually not that hard to be relational and to take a holistic approach to learning and doing. However, what I think I've learned is that sometimes it's not necessarily the norm of how mainstream organizations work. And so because of that, when you try to work in that way, you'll find that sometimes you'll be questioned, and that it will take a lot of time for others in your organization to really understand that, and you'll also need to have really hard conversations, and sometimes you'll feel like you're being pulled in different directions. However, it's so important to stay on that path because not only do you have an incredible opportunity to support and perhaps being a bridge of being responsive and respectful of Indigenous ways of being and doing, you also have a really important responsibility and accountability to the work, to your relationships and to do things in a good way and then to hopefully make positive— to support and help making positive system transformation. And so for me, the biggest thing is to kind of shift that mentality and to really focus on doing good, instead of looking good. We often had to loop back with our own internal comms team to ensure that anything that we produce is reviewed and at that time approved by our comms. And the guiding principles were co-developed not just with the guidance group but with the teams in the collaborative, and they are so foundational to our learning. And they are, they're something that



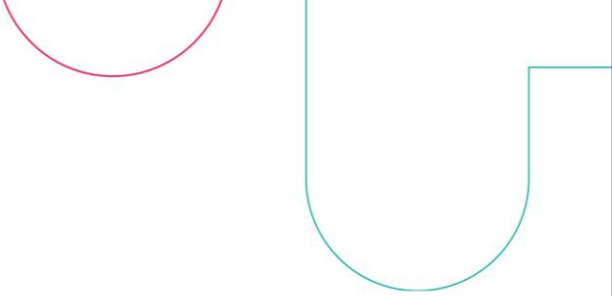
we use to really model how we work together, how we embrace shared leadership, and there is intention in the language that we used.

[07:59]

So when it came time to wanting to share our guiding principles within the organization and externally, there is a protocol and process in place internally where it goes through a copy edit, there's a style guide and a formality of ensuring that whatever we produce as an organization follows and aligns with other products or resources internally. And so right off the bat, we had to have a few conversations with the communications team to talk about why we couldn't do that, that there is intention in the language that we use. And even if they weren't grammatically correct or follow the style guide, it was okay because they're part of our learning. They're part of our process. And there's meaning behind that process. And so it took a few conversations for them to understand that. And then it got to a point where comms would come to us and say, "Listen, we've been asked to use the guiding principles, but we know we're not going to touch them, and we know we have to ask the guidance group if we're going to use them in any way." Actually, now, it's incredible how comms always comes to us first to ensure that we're following appropriate processes and protocols, but also ensuring that there is an understanding around what it means to honour and respect Indigenous knowledge, and that we can't just take whatever has been learned and share it any way that we want. So just taking that time to develop protocols and processes, not just with the guidance group, but internally and having those conversations to say, I know there's a desire to want to take and learn what was developed and shared within this collaborative, but we can't do that without following our process of ensuring that we follow up with our guidance group and that we just don't take whatever knowledge we want and share it any way that we want.

[10:09]

We had to learn to be less rigid and more flexible and to work differently. So what that meant was we didn't have to be married to an agenda. It was okay not to have an agenda. It was okay to spend a half a day just being relational and that we needed to be flexible with our timelines and our approaches, and really modelling shared leadership and consensus building and codesign, and also, I think for me, just really emphasizing the importance of process. It's not, it's really about how we get there and how we do things and really trying to find ways to ensure that we are honouring and respecting different worldviews and creating ethical spaces to be able to honour, respect Indigenous knowledge and different ways of learning and doing. If you take the time to just not only honour what you're learning, but take the time to support staff, understand why we have to do contracts a different way, why we have to use specific language, why we need to invoice or create structures to ensure that those who are working with us are



compensated in an appropriate time, why it's important to compensate Elders and spiritual advisors. And so there's a lot of conversation, a lot of time that you need to take to build those internal processes to support it. And sometimes you have hard conversations and sometimes they make you uncomfortable.

[12:00]

And while it may be hard sometimes to have conversations that will create discomfort, it is through those conversations that you will learn the most. These conversations often created learning opportunities for staff to unpack biases and to enhance cultural safety and humility. This also helped to develop and enhance infrastructures internally that were needed so that we can work in a respectful way that honours different worldviews. And this inevitably supported our organization's own journey towards truth and reconciliation.