



RESEARCH BRIEF RFNG | Rebuilding First Nations Governance

Supporting Strong Leadership: Addressing Turnover and Strengthening Retention of Indigenous Executives

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The following is a summary of the dissertation: “Turnover and the Retention of Indigenous Executives in Indigenous Organizations. <https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/67a5f7b0-4e3c-49e8-86fe-3a169bda99cf/content> The summary was prepared by the author with the assistance of the AI product ChatGPT.

Overview:

Indigenous executive turnover is a pressing challenge for First Nations organizations, with average tenure lasting only about 3.5 years. Frequent turnover disrupts community services, drains resources, and undermines trust. The findings in this study are based on results of online surveys, individual interviews and focus groups with Indigenous leaders in British Columbia and other parts of Canada. Leaders pointed to burnout, lateral violence, and governance tensions as major causes, but also shared practical strategies to strengthen retention. Addressing turnover is not only about human resources — it is about protecting self-determination and supporting strong, stable governance for our Nations.

Turnover is not just an HR issue — it is a governance challenge tied directly to self-determination and community well-being.

Why This Matters:

Stable leadership is critical for advancing community goals, managing funding, and delivering programs. Despite a robust mainstream literature, research on executive turnover in Indigenous organizations is extremely limited. This study addresses part of that gap by outlining the causes, impacts, and strategies for improving leadership stability. Even so, much more work is required to build a comprehensive evidence base across the diversity of Indigenous governance contexts.

Indigenous executive turnover averages just 3.5 years and often leaves organizations “putting out fires” rather than building long-term vision. One participant recalled, “The ball gets dropped and there’s no transition. We lose that connection. In the CEO position, we lose the connection with the partnerships. The old partners are calling and texting me, with no communication on me leaving.”

The impacts of turnover include:

- Loss of continuity and halted projects.
- Increased costs (severance, recruiting, onboarding).
- Staff uncertainty, reduced morale, and community distrust.
- Disrupted relationships with external partners.

Why do Indigenous Executives Leave?

- **Political Turnover & Governance Tensions:** Newly elected councils sometimes “clean house,” disrupting operations and vision.

“New chiefs and council would get elected and they’d go in and they’d clean house. Without regard. And then of course, what happens then is the administration suffers, the operation suffers and vision gets distorted and cracked and blurred.”

- **Burnout & Compassion Fatigue:** Executives are pulled in too many directions with heavy responsibility for staff and community.

“I’ve got 220 [employees] and during COVID, I was trying to keep our staff safe and employed. And that is huge, right?”

- **Lateral Violence & Toxic Environments:** Executives face bullying, jealousy, and undermining from councils, staff, and membership. Toxic environments affect not just leaders but their families.

“We suffer from lateral violence and colonization where our people don’t recognize the capacity of our people... someone always gets jealous and wants to sabotage you.”

That's why I find myself moving on."

"It was really tough. We're tough on our own people. My family suffered the most."

Six Strategies for Retention

1. Fair & Competitive Pay with Regular Increases

- Ensure compensation reflects sector standards, with regular increases.
- Provide benefits and pensions where possible

Some First Nations have already begun to restructure their compensation frameworks, offering salaries and benefits that rival those of non-Indigenous organizations. This shift has allowed these communities to retain top talent and reduce the frequency of executive turnover.

2. Capacity-Building & Mentorship

- Provide training, networking, and cultural supports.
- Support executives to attend leadership development and governance programs.
- Create safe spaces for cultural learning and guidance from Elders.

"I do have a group of elders that really are my guides... elders have adopted me as their granddaughter."

3. Recognition & Respect

- Regularly acknowledge contributions to build morale and belonging.
- Chiefs & Councils can strengthen retention by publicly recognizing executives and showing appreciation for their work.

Just as executives recognize staff, participants emphasized that governing bodies should also recognize executives to foster belonging, motivation, and pride.

4. Housing Supports

- Explore staff housing or partnerships with governments to secure accommodations.
- Prioritize housing in retention strategies, especially in remote communities.

Investments in building more housing units within First Nations communities are crucial to ensuring that leaders have stable and affordable living arrangements. By creating more housing options, communities can not only retain their leaders but also attract new talent

5. Work-Life Balance & Wellness Supports

- Encourage flexible hours, reduced workweeks, or four-day work schedules.
- Support executives with wellness programs, mental health resources, and time off for family and cultural responsibilities.

Executives reported that burnout and compassion fatigue were key reasons they left their roles. Redesigning workloads and investing in wellness is critical to sustainability.

6. Governance Clarity: Balancing Support & Autonomy

- Clearly define the roles of Chiefs & Councils (policy-making) versus executives (operations).
- Empower executives with decision-making authority, while providing support and mentorship from leadership.
- Reduce political interference in daily administration.

This balance helps executives feel trusted and supported, while ensuring accountability to leadership and community members.

“So, they're allowing me that flexibility and freedom which also allows us to grow into new areas that are largely unmet.”

