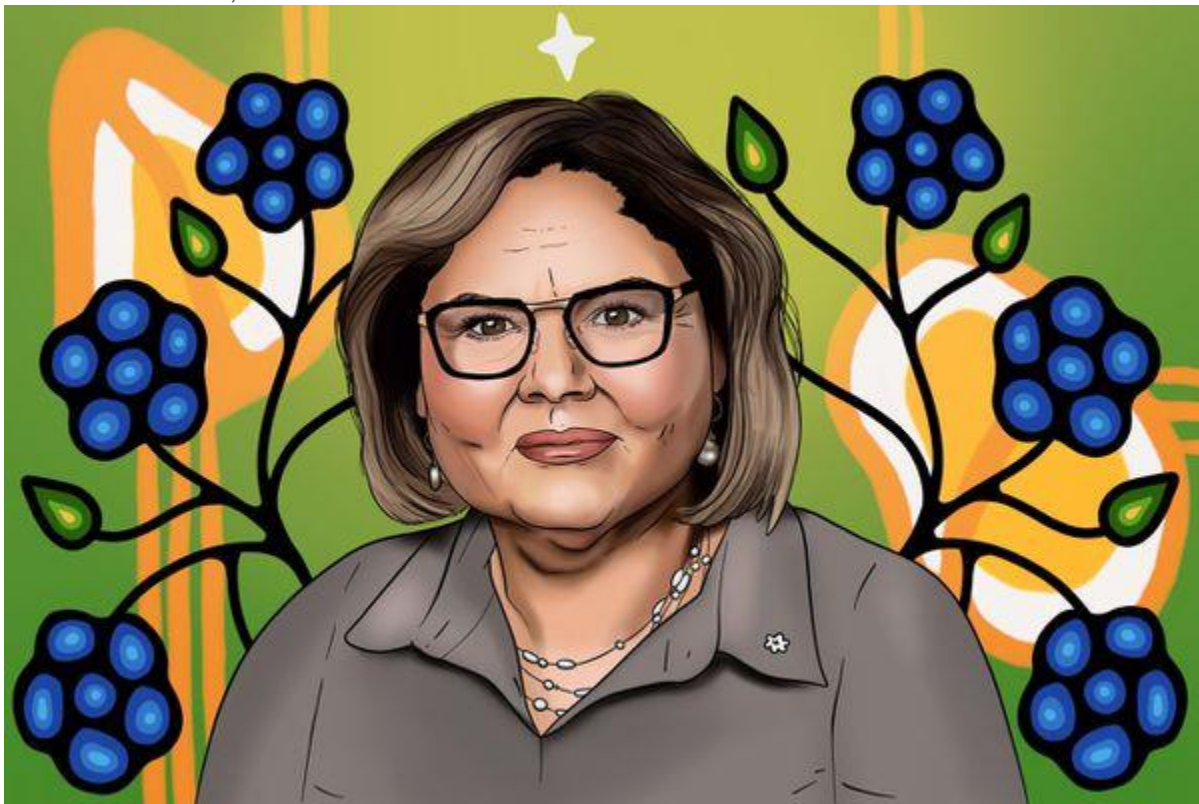


## A business leader at home in a ‘trapper’s cabin and a corporate boardroom’

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Dr. Marie Delorme is currently CEO of the Imagination Group of Companies, which she founded in 2000. CHIEF LADY BIRD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

After an 18-year career in the telecommunications industry, Dr. Marie Delorme completed an interdisciplinary PhD in business, anthropology and sociology. Dr. Delorme is currently CEO of the Imagination Group of Companies, which she founded in 2000. The Imagination Group is an Indigenous corporation made up of three entities that provide services to industry, governments and Indigenous groups in the areas of brand management, business consulting and ceremonial tobacco. Dr. Delorme’s work has been widely honoured – she was awarded the Indspire award in Business &

Commerce in 2014, the Order of Canada in 2018 and an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of Calgary in 2018.

### **How has your upbringing influenced your career?**

I am a citizen of the Métis Nation. I was born in Manitoba, but I have made Calgary my home for over 30 years. The Métis are a unique Western Canadian cultural group who emerged from the Métis Homeland in the 17th century as a result of the French and English fur trade. My father was born in 1882, three years before his father's scrip was issued. My mother was of European ancestry. The history and experiences of my parents and their ancestors inform who I am.

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I grew up in a very traditional Métis household. But I was taught as I was growing up that you have to be comfortable living in both worlds – the Western and the Indigenous. As a Métis citizen I have always lived in two worlds. The best way I can describe this in a business context is that my heritage and life experiences have given me the ability to be equally comfortable in a trapper's cabin and a corporate boardroom.

### **How do you maintain your health and well-being?**

I travel extensively, so maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important. The principles are those that are common to all – quality time with trusted friends and loved ones, looking after my physical and mental health, engaging in activities I enjoy and eating healthy regular meals.

### **What are the challenges facing your businesses?**

The challenges we have faced are common to many businesses. One of our businesses is focused on the knowledge economy, so the only challenge is accommodating the volume of demand for services. The other two businesses are product-based, and thus they are dependent on physical infrastructure. Access to skilled workers, supply chain issues, scaling up, capitalization and sourcing the right technology are always on the top of our minds.

### **How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted your business?**

Because our footprint is national, we made a strategic decision in 2015 to move to a virtual model, so there was no operational adjustment required to accommodate the pandemic. We have been grateful for the opportunity to grow our business over the past two years. Over all, these have been our best two years of the 22 we have been in operation.

### **What is the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous business?**

Indigenous people have inhabited North America since time immemorial and did so in harmony with the land. There existed sophisticated societal, political, judicial, economic and ecological systems that predated anything in Europe.

In this time of planetary crisis, the corporate world has much to learn from Indigenous peoples and their traditional connection to the land. Traditional Indigenous world views are relational in that all things – animate and inanimate – are connected, as are the past, present and the future. By contrast, the Western approach to business is transactional in nature.

Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall speaks of Two-Eyed Seeing, the learning to see from one eye the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and with the other eye the strengths of Western knowledge and ways of knowing. Learning to use both these eyes together benefits all.

### **Do you think that there is a difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership?**

I think there's a difference in lived experience. The underlying principles of leadership transcend distinctions. Leadership virtues are non-negotiable. Principles and ethics do not change, and ultimately determine the quality of the individual.

Leadership style is an individualistic concept and cannot be generalized in broad categories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous. However, the practical application of leadership approaches will undoubtedly differ, depending on one's life experiences, traditions and community.

I think there's a difference in lived experience. It's reflected in our perspectives on the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership. It's true that if you are an Indigenous person who's a traditionalist, you understand traditional ways of approaching leadership.

I'm not an elder, I'm not a traditionalist, I'm not a ceremonialist. Thus, I do not have the authority to look at leadership through that lens.

So, my approach is that the fundamentals of what makes a good moral and ethical person, and a good leader, transcends knowledge systems and culture. They are value-based. It's who we are as human beings and what we believe, it's how that manifests in how we lead.

I think if you want to parse it more finely, it is important to recognize that Indigenous people are not a homogeneous group and should not be categorized as such. We are all unique, we are all different. As Indigenous people, we don't agree on everything. What needs to be honoured and respected is that we all come from different perspectives.

### **What does leadership mean to you?**

Leadership is about supporting others and amplifying their voices. It is about accountability and earning the trust and respect of others.

Many years ago, I received some sage advice from a woman who was retiring. She said that we are not remembered for the awards and accolades. At the end of the day, we are only remembered for how we made people feel in our presence. That is the best description of leadership I have ever heard.

### **What would you say to Indigenous youth who aspire to be leaders in the business world?**

I encourage Indigenous youth to pursue education – on the land and in mainstream academies. Make a difference in your community and more broadly. Expand your comfort zone. Say yes to new opportunities to learn and grow.

See the world. Travel expands our perspective, exposes us to new experiences, and leads to an understanding that for all the differences between cultures, in many ways people are more alike than they are different.

Read everything – art, history, science, fiction, politics. Reading opens the world, increases your vocabulary, empowers and develops empathy. Reading enables you to look at issues from an informed perspective.

### **How can non-Indigenous peoples in Canada be better allies, supporters and advocates for Indigenous peoples and issues?**

Allyship is about being authentic rather than performative. The first steps are to be self-reflective, to educate oneself and to listen.

There is no one way to be an ally because Indigenous communities and individuals are not homogeneous. Some fundamental principles are to learn about history, ask about culture and protocol, and seek consent and permission to be engaged.

Some universities are offering open source, online learning courses that explore Indigenous histories and contemporary topics. These are good starting points.

Seek historical, biographical, and autobiographical books written by Indigenous authors. There are publishers and subscription boxes that specialize in Indigenous authors.

And of course, read at a minimum the summaries of the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the 94 Calls to Action in the 2015 final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Articles of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

### **What makes you optimistic about the future of Indigenous business?**

Equitable access to education, health and economic opportunities are foundational elements of prosperity. Land rights are critical for self-determination. Businesses and robust economies are key to independence and own-sourced revenue.

In its 2019 Indigenous Economic Progress Report, the National Indigenous Economic Development Board estimated that closing the economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians would lead to an increase of \$27.7-billion to Canada's GDP each year.

In June, 2022, a coalition of more than 25 national Indigenous organizations released the National Indigenous Economic Strategy. This strategy outlines four pillars: people, lands, infrastructure and finance.

The strategy's 107 calls to economic prosperity are a road map to guide governments, industry and institutions in their work on reconciliation and building Indigenous economies. The Strategy outlines why achieving reconciliation will not be possible without vibrant Indigenous economies, characterized by economic self-sufficiency and socioeconomic equality with the rest of Canada.

There are more than 50,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada, spanning all sectors and contributing \$32-billion annually to the country's GDP. This contribution could grow to \$100-billion through procurement, investment and partnerships with governments and industry. Those are a lot of reasons to be optimistic.

### **About the series**

Canada has a long history of dispossession, oppression and discrimination of Indigenous peoples. The future, however, is filled with hope. The Indigenous population is the fastest-growing demographic in Canada; its youth are catalyzing change from coast to coast to coast. Indigenous knowledge and teachings are guiding innovative approaches to environmental protection and holistic wellness worldwide. Indigenous scholars are among those leading the way in exciting new research in science, business and beyond. There is no better or more urgent time to understand and celebrate the importance of Indigenous insight, culture and perspective.

Optimism is rare in media. And coverage of Indigenous peoples often fails to capture their brilliance, diversity and strength. In this weekly interview series, we will engage Indigenous leaders in thoughtful conversation and showcase their stories, strategies, challenges and achievements.

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