



Episode 26: "Being the Hummingbird & Other Indigenous Perspectives on Behaviour Change"

with Stephanie Papik, Director of Strategic Integration of Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Safety and Humility in Strategic Partnerships with Emergency Management BC

In her work and life, Stephanie Papik bridges Indigenous and settler approaches to behaviour change. Stephanie describes some of the similarities between Indigenous ways of knowing and Behavioural Insights. She also describes some of the behavioural practices she uses in her role at Emergency Management BC. Lastly, Stephanie shares ways that we can all use Behavioural Insights to contribute to Reconciliation, which, like many of our most pressing societal challenges, has many behavioural components.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today, we're calling DIBS on Stephanie Papik. Stephanie is the Director of Strategic Integration of Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Safety and Humility, in Strategic Partnerships at Emergency Management BC. And as I learned from some pre-research for today, Stephanie is also the owner of Knotty by Nature Fibre Arts.

And I first met Stephanie at BIG Difference BC 2018, when she gave a lightning talk that has really stuck with me over the last 2+ years, now. Stephanie brings an Indigenous perspective to behavioural insights, and we're also really fortunate that she's now on our BIG Difference Advisory Board. So I'm thrilled to have a chance to chat with, and learn from Stephanie today. So welcome to the podcast, Stephanie.

STEPHANIE PAPIK, GUEST: Good afternoon, thank you so much, Kirstin.

APPELT: And can we just start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself?

PAPIK: Sure. Yes. Well, first, I'd like to tell you I'm calling in from Tseycum, Place of Clay, also known as James Bay, here in Lkwungen territory and deep, deep gratitude to both Songhees and Esquimalt nations who's many elders, matriarchs and community members have been really generous in sharing their knowledge and teachings. It's really shaped who I am and how I walk on these lands.

I am Inuk on my dad's side from the Mackenzie Delta of the Northwest Territories. My grandfather was Inupiaq from Alaska, and then my great, great grandmother comes from Russia. And on my mother's side, I'm Irish ancestry with a bit of Spanish. I guess there was a shipwreck back in the day and yeah, and I've been a visitor here to Lekwungen territory for most of my life. I'm also a mama, my kids are young adults now. My youngest will be turning 20 next month and my oldest just turned 22. Yeah, I wear many hats as you mentioned as you did your research.

APPELT: That's amazing. Well, we're so thrilled that you could be here to join us today. And so let's just jump right in. And can you tell us a bit about your behavioural insights journey? Where did your interest in behavioural insights begin?

PAPIK: It definitely began in the BC public service when the Behavioural Insights Team, I was part of the Public Service Agency, so when it first started, heard about it and loved the many areas that seemed like there was synergies with Indigenous ways of practicing and knowing and learning. So that really excited me.

APPELT: Great. And one of the reasons I thought you would be really interesting to chat with, one of the many reasons, is that it sounds like looking at your CV, that you've used behavioural insights throughout your career in different ways, but at the same time, that's not recognized in your job titles. And I think that's true for a lot of people who are in our certificate program, as well as a lot of people who are trying to change behaviour.

And, for example, your current role, Director of Strategic Integration of Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Safety and Humility, in typical government fashion, there's a lot of words in there, but actually none of them say behaviour. But I know from what we've talked about and just the Ministry Emergency Management BC, there is a lot of focus on behaviour change, human behaviours to prevent or respond to emergencies. So, do you use behavioural insights in your work? And if so, how?

PAPIK: Yes, definitely. It's such a key thing. You know, it all comes down to each person's individual behaviour and how they react or respond within a situation. So primarily how I've used behavioural insights is through the use of circle practice, has been, especially pre-COVID, it was a lot easier, some simple things by changing the arrangement of a room of chairs in a circle, taking the table out, putting in a centerpiece, a visual centerpiece in the middle of the circle, can create and with some nourishing things in there, you can create a centre point for folks, for our energy to go into, and then it's never directed at a single person. And then also we would use a talking piece, a physical object that would signal that this is the person who has the opportunity to share and the rest of us will be quiet and listen, and really listen, listening to understand.

And by knowing that and then it gets passed around, so it also really helped me, I used to be painfully shy, I didn't know the word about anxiety, but now, you know, I go "Oh, I had anxiety when I was young, and nothing scared me more than when someone in a meeting all of a sudden or workshop would say, turn around and put their finger at me and say, what do you think, Stephanie?". And I'd be like, "Oh my God, I think I want to die right now. My amygdala's saying run away." And with a circle, it was "Okay, four more people until it's my turn. Deep breaths. Listen to this person. Don't worry about what am I gonna say.". And that really, really helped me to manage my anxiety and ability to stay present. So those are some ways.

With COVID now, you know, we're all meeting online. Though, we've been doing some other ways of creating that visual. Or thinking about also in emergency management, in an emergency operation center, we're taught that the walls are visual tools. And so having some pieces in there, like we've put, in multiple places within each of the provincial emergency coordination centres, a poster that has the text of gratitude to be here on WSANEC territory and recognizing the nation. So that's been like a visual cue and a gentle reminder and a tool for folks of like "Oh yes, okay, I'm going to do that practice and acknowledge the territory.". So those have been a couple of ways that I've been using behavioural insights.

As well, we've been doing a lot of practice of mindfulness, cultivating that so that in those moments we can remember that. Sometimes there is a narrative that can be like, "Oh, we're in emergency, there's no time for niceties. We're going to go right", and there's always time for a breath. You take an inhale, exhale and come from a place of kindness and compassion, remembering, you know, this person is at probably one of the most scariest times of their life. And when we take a moment of kindness, how that can really shift things and make it be a little bit less harsh than what they're going through already.

APPELT: I love what you're saying and the listeners can't see, but I am nodding along ferociously as you've been speaking. And I think that's really neat. And certainly, circle practice sounds, it always has sounded really intriguing, but especially now when we're in a world of, "oh should I mute? Are you unmuted? Mute. Unmute." Having those parameters set up so we understand who's sharing is so wonderful.

And the other piece that you started to mention a little bit there is that being present and gratitude. And I know you've done a lot to bring gratitude as a behavioural practice into your work. So can you tell us a bit more about that?

PAPIK: Sure, yes. So, this came out of, we do a self-discovery and awareness workshop through free flow of writing. And in that, I was talking about the 28 days of gratitude and how I had participated on Facebook through a group once, and that idea of that power of repetition, over time, it creates new neural pathways, new habits and tendencies. So, it really helped me shift from kind of like very worrisome, apocalyptic type thinking to starting to see the positive and look for those pieces.

And so, someone in the workshops said, "Oh, I wish we could do that in government.". And that night I thought, "Well, why not?". And so, we use MS Teams. It's a meeting invite Monday to Friday from 8:00 AM to 8:01 AM, so, it's not so much like a meeting that we all come to, it's just a little place holder in our calendar. And it's a virtual space where people throughout the day can pop in if they want to just read the gratitude that's been left there. I get feedback from people saying, "Oh, I don't really post too often, but I'll often go there and I just get my spirits lifted up from seeing so many public servants and the different ways that they're expressing gratitude each day.". And then there's those that do express it and, you know, you can like them and heart them.

And so, we have that as a calendar invite saved on the Cultural Safety and Humility website share-point so that anybody who goes on the share-point sees it and wants to participate can basically self-invite themselves to it. I think we had maybe like 20 folks and we're up to 85 now. So, it's been a really nice little physical space and reminder.

APPELT: And I love how you just said it so perfectly just then, it's a reminder, it's that external cue, because we get swept up in things and having that external reminder can be so powerful. And I think that's a really good segue to talk a little bit more about these different perspectives on behavioural insights, and with your experiences as an Inuk woman, and then your university Honours degrees in Science, you bring together several different perspectives on behaviour, and behavior change.

And in a recent meeting, you mentioned that behavioural insights reminds you of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the way that it integrates knowledge of human behaviour and tries to work with, rather than against human behaviour. Could you unpack that idea for us a little bit?

PAPIK: Yeah, I found, in terms of like reclaiming and understanding Inuit practices, and then seeing where in Western society, where we work with human behaviour rather than controlling it, that's where we've had a lot of success. And even when I think about appreciative inquiry and when they looked at, you know, all the areas where people made these big strides, what were some of those commonalities and that really strength-based approach. So, for example, you know, like harm reduction. And now we have, you know, a globalization of addiction, and we have globalization of colonization.

And so when we focused on the end behaviour of like somebody using, then often what's generated are feelings of shame and blame and unmet expectations, it makes my stomach hurt. And we know the brain science shows that, you know, when we give feedback in a way that feels threatening, it activates our

amygdala. So, the behaviour response we get is freeze, fight, flight, or fawn, versus when we do it in a strength-based way, it activates our prefrontal cortex. So, puts us in our planning, thinking compassionate brain.

So really working with not focusing on end behaviour, but working with the individual, separating them from the problem. So, they're not the problem. And the situation is a problem, the context is, I think the golden rule of social psychology is that the situation is a better indicator of behaviour than the individual. So how come how can we shift the situation to cultivate those feelings? And usually, you know, people need to feel a sense of belonging. A sense of safety. Basic needs being met. And so for Inuit culture, some examples of behavioural nudges that are woven throughout, I could share those if you like?

APPELT: Absolutely.

PAPIK: Okay, so they begin from even before when a baby is born. And so, when an elder passes and you know, you lose the elder, a loved one can be quite hard on your mental health and well-being. And so, when the next baby is born, they'll give the baby a name of the elder who's recently passed. And then they treat that baby with the same respect as the elder. And then as that baby grows up, they start to earn more respect.

And it's neat, really cool, because, like, so when you catch your first fish in the winter, you get the little tail pinned on the outside of your parkas. It's 40 below, so you know, it won't be stinky. And then when you're in community, people are like, oh, my goodness, you know, you caught your first fish, that's so wonderful, so, you get more respect.

And then also at the same time, you're learning how to practice humility because it's, you know, to boast is not Inuit at all. It's very important to get that balance of how to act with humility and also receive that respect. So that is one example of, I know a few examples of kind of how we have some behavioural nudges that are woven through our culture.

Another one is tattoos. So if folks saw me or they look me up, they'll see I have face tattoos and the one on my forehead comes with a story and a teaching around forgiveness. And every Inuit women across, whether it's in Russia, Alaska or what we know as Canada or Greenland, we all had this tattoo on our forehead. So, it speaks to the importance and significance of us practicing mindfulness, I mean, forgiveness with each other on a daily basis.

And then the ones on my chin, my understanding are for like you're your first moon time, your ability to take care of a home, your ability to light and keep the stone lamp lit. So, now these are all ways to kind of create social accountability and also demonstrate your abilities and how you can contribute to your family and community.

APPELT: Those are really amazing examples, and I love that there's this continuing thread of having these external reminders, similar like with gratitude, it's the external reminders of the tattoo is to remind you of, like you said, humility or forgiveness. And I think that's really powerful.

And the other thing that really resonated for me there was when you're talking about, it's not so much the individual as the context, and that power of the context across individuals and how, you know, there might be little bits of the individual, but it's the individual in that context.

And so those interactions and that's something that has been part of my research, as part of my PhD program, was looking at, is it the individual? Is it the situation? Is it the interaction? And so seeing that theme come out

for you as well is really interesting. And so you've shared some of the ways that nudges are kind of woven into cultural practice. And then another related idea I wanted to ask you to speak about is I know that you're very committed to bridging worldviews.

And so I was wondering if there are other ways that you've combined the two views on behaviour, the more Indigenous perspective on behaviour and the more behavioural science perspective on behaviour. Ways you've combined the two throughout your career.

PAPIK: I would say definitely I think the circle practice, because circle practice is something that humans all around the world have practiced, right? Whether it's like the Knights Round Table, Ubuntu or even the UN, you know, they gather in a circular fashion or that simple act of gathering around a fire. It's our earliest form of self-government. It's the inherent right that all humans have to practice. The specifics of what it looks like and sounds like, you know, that's where there is the unique cultural contributions, whether that's from Indigenous nations or cultures on other continents. So I think that's been really my biggest bridging tool.

And I've found it helps to create space for voices that aren't always heard. You know, you can count on the type A's we'll always hear from those folks and we might not hear from some other people who are really insightful and very thoughtful. And I might just not have, you know, my culture talking over people or interrupting is really disrespectful. And when I ran the Indigenous Youth Internship program for over five years, I had so many supervisors say, "Oh, you know, this Indigenous youth intern, they're so shy and quiet" and invariably I talked to them and they're like, "Oh my gosh, I'm the least shy person, I know. It's just, you know, in my culture, it's so disrespectful to talk or interrupt. So there's not space for me or my voice.". And I think that's just one of those pieces that kind of helped to bridge and make that space for what's been missing.

APPELT: Yeah, I think, once again, the idea of putting in those external cues so that it makes the space one where everyone can contribute. I love how that's becoming a theme for our talk today. And I think some of the other things you mentioned when we were having an earlier conversation were the idea of repetition and the power of repetition, could you speak a little bit about that?

PAPIK: Yes. Yeah. So interesting, because I've heard in some areas where they say, you know, in terms of time management, repetition is disrespectful. And what I find, repetition is so important. Here on the island, I receive teachings from elders about repeating things four times and again, back to, you know, the daily gratitude. Right. The whole reason that works is because of that power of repetition every day.

Being intentional about finding something, to be grateful, you know, even if it's for like my cup of coffee. That's, you know, whatever it is, finding that one thing that you can be grateful for that day. That power of repetition over time, one thing is that, you know, they might hear it from me, and they could hear it from you lots of times, but then if they somebody else picks it up and repeats it and thinks it's a great idea, it's just the brain and how it works, you know, our brains constantly stereotyping "safe, not safe, safe, not safe". So, to hear you say it perhaps, someone might actually hear it for the first time just because of the social conditioning we've received from the media and whatnot. There is a little bit of that subconscious fear of Indigenous people. And so that's another real benefit of repetition.

And one of the things I find in terms of allies in government can do is say, like, you know, "I echo what Stephanie or this other indigenous person said, and here's my own perspective on it, on how I understand that". And then that really helps, too. And so then over time, it's kind of like planting seeds, you let them go. And then eventually one or two will sprout. And then it becomes a thing. And that's how I found. Yeah. Over the especially this last year.

So, with the pandemic, I've been offering an agreement of patients with technology. And so pretty much every meeting starts a little bit wonky and I'll just throw that out there. And with that repetition now, it's become a common phrase at EMBC that people say. And so now we've integrated the thoughts of patients and patients with technology.

APPELT: So that's so good. Yeah, I think our ongoing thing is just at the end of every zoom, there's always a little bit of awkwardness and you over time, you embrace the awkwardness through repetition of having lived that awkward moment many times, you know, it's going to be okay. Which I think maybe brings us to my next point, which was, thanks to you for raising this earlier, is we often talk about using BI to tackle major societal problems, and for those of us living in Canada or other countries with mixed settler and Indigenous populations, reconciliation is one of the most urgent problems we face, and a lot of that has a behaviour element. So how do you think behavioural insights can contribute to reconciliation?

PAPIK: I think yeah, I think there is some really great ways. One of the ones I do for a behavioural insight, I think is because of those physical elements, so, for example, one I like to share is - I invite you to clap your hands together. And you'll notice either your right thumb or your left them on top. Notice how that feels with your hand clasped.

Now you take a breath. And then now I invite you to unclasp your hand and switch so that your other thumb is on top. You notice how it feels, usually we find in circle people feels a little awkward. Yes. Uncomfortable. Yeah. And so, and another cool thing I learn, too, is so at the same times, so recognize like, "Okay, it's awkward, it's uncomfortable and we're still safe", right? And can even take another inhale and exhale.

And then another trick someone taught me is actually physically look over your shoulder, your right shoulder, your left shoulder. Say "I'm safe". And that can really help your amygdala to know "Okay I am safe. There's no saber-tooth coming. I can feel uncomfortable. This is uncertain area, but I'm okay".

And so, I've had people tell me, like, you know, in those moments where you're uncomfortable, because that's like in this work, you know, we're going into new areas that are uncomfortable, uncertain, through media like, if you grow up watching Disney, like me, you know, we have racism embedded within us. No blame, no shame, just that's part of that broader situation.

And so in those moments to, you know, clasp your hands, switch them the other way, take a breath. Know that you're okay. It's okay to feel scared. It's okay to not know how this is going to work out. It's okay to make mistakes. That's how we learn and grow. And, you know, when we approach ourselves with some compassion, kindness, a little bit of humour and step into that courageous space and do or say something, you know, that's where the magic happens. It's quadruple word score in terms of like this work is, you know, people have called me and said, like, "I don't really understand what is cultural safety and humility and reconciliation". And when I explain to them, they're like, "Oh, that's the practice of mindfulness".

And, you know, there's a really great hidden brain podcast called Where Gratitude Gets You, and they show that when you cultivate the emotions of gratitude and compassion, that is what creates self-control, not willpower. And compassion is cultivated through mindfulness. So, you know, I get people emailing me and they they've said, like, you know, "Thanks to, you know, doing like our self discovery and awareness workshop, I feel like engaged with my work. I feel motivated. I have purpose again". I've had people say, you know, "I have better relations at home with my family now, or at work" as well as like, you know, being able to do their job, to be more inclusive to all of the people that we serve in BC.

APPELT: I really love that. And I think, again, it's interesting, it's this ongoing theme of the external, like you have to bring yourself out of yourself to do that clasp and realize that, you know, this is going to be okay. And like, if you get into your head in it, you might not be able to do that. But making yourself do that clasp, and then just realizing, "Okay, it's going to be okay". I think that's a really neat way to think about it.

PAPIK: And then in terms of other things people can do, is starting to use some circle practice, inviting in that time for the relational and there's lots of different ways to do it. And I know some people will say, "Oh, circle's really ineffective and takes a long time". And, you know, there's ways you can do check ins that are fun, like one word check in, or check out that are challenging, and find like three words and not 100 hundred words why you chose those three words, or online tools like mentee.com. We've used that for creating a space of agreements of how we want to show up and support each other.

And actually that's probably the most effective one in terms of people wanting to use a behavioural insight tool to contribute to reconciliation, is making five minutes in a meeting to offer some agreements for our time together in terms of how we want to show up, how we want to support each other. It creates a space for calling in culture rather than a calling out.

So, for example, in one of our meetings, a youth said, you know, "I'm feeling really frustrated every time we have our big group check in, I don't feel heard. People are talking over me. They're interrupting". And so, we talked about how could we do just that in a strength-based way. And when we had our next check in and we said, "Does anyone have any agreements you'd like to offer for our time together?". That youth put up their hand and they said, "Yeah, could we show respect for each other by honouring each other's words with silence? And you can use the talking tool to help piece that". And they were like, "Yeah".

And then over time, right, that power of repetition, it's really shifted, and it happened. And, you know, we didn't say, like, you know, "Sally is always talking over everyone. I never get a chance". You know, we don't have to go down that road at all. "We're just like, let's do this together.". And so we did. And then even over time, when that power to repetition, because we offer those agreements every meeting, they start to create a culture shift.

So another agreement they offered was belief in good intentions, belief in the basic goodness of people. And that really helped me so much on a personal level. You know, my inner critic is so strong. And when my partner would do something to help me, but without asking, and just do something, I would get frustrated. Like I'd get mad. Like, "Do they think I can't do it? Like, is there something wrong with me?" And my own internal dialogue.

And then when I would ask, and then I find out that, you know, they're just trying to help me and like, "Okay, well, I love open communication to know that how you could support me because I do appreciate help.". And now instead of being grumpy, I take a breath and I'm like, oh yeah, belief in good intentions. "Are you trying to be helpful right now?" And they're like, yeah. "Okay". well, thank you. And let's have some open communication.

APPELT: Oh, I love that.

PAPIK: Yeah. Five minutes calling in culture makes all the difference. That really contributes to culture shift. And yeah, in the internship program I learned that from the youth. I used the circle way agreements first and taught them. And then they started making up their own, I was like, "Oh, you can make up your own well, of course you can." And then over time I just thought how that shifted.

And we had in year 9 and year 10, we had 100 percent retention of the 25 indigenous youth for the full year, which was unheard of in any employment program or leadership program, aside from year one of the internship program. And then it happened again in year 10. And I transitioned out and was under the leadership of Bradley Dick and Melissa Fox, who carried on using those tools. They had 100 percent retention that year too. Yeah.

And it's not so much about the number as much as the individual that they were able to ask for and have the space to ask for what they need in a way that felt safe for them, and everybody else around them. So, we were able to collectively meet each other's needs and support each other through that year.

APPELT: That's really amazing that you were able to build that and to have that reward of seeing that people are engaged and staying on. And one last piece that I was hoping you could mention to us and tell us a little bit about, is you mentioned that, I don't know if this was more in the online context or in all contexts, but inviting folks to place a symbol near their workplace to remind them. So could you tell us a little bit about that?

PAPIK: Yeah, that kind of goes back to that idea of, you know, learning about in emergency operation centres, of walls being real estate and visual reminders. And so having a little visual cue, whether that's printing off and making your own little poster that acknowledges the territory you're on, and perhaps how to pronounce it, I find people often tell me, you know, a fear of mispronouncing is often a reason why people hesitate to give a territory an acknowledgment.

So having that there is like, "Oh yeah, it sounds like that, is a nice reminder visually, one" to, "Oh yeah, you know, I could do that as a practice, a way to honour the nations to whose territories I'm on". It's protocol for the nations and it's that good reminder, like I am a guest on these territories and shift into that place of gratitude.

And then it helps me to think about, when I give gratitude to the nations and I do think about like Marianne Thomas, Marie Cooper, May Sam and all and all the time and wisdom and love they shared with me that it reminds me like, "Oh yeah, I have a responsibility here too. What can I do to be an ally to make space for Indigenous people's knowledge and practice?"

APPELT: So you mentioned the symbol as helping people to have kind of an external cue to have them think about gratitude and learning based on the Indigenous history of where they are. And so maybe that's a good segue way to my last question for you, which is about our learners and if you have a message for our BI practitioners in training?

PAPIK: Yeah. I think one is definitely to be curious about your own ancestral practices that are rooted in behavioural insights. You know, I'm sure I also have Celtic ancestry, and so, you know, we have lots of symbols of a tree of life, and flower of life, so inviting in some of those pieces that can get lost, and exploring some of those, I think, including circle practice as one of those.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think that's a wonderful note to close on.

PAPIK: Oh, maybe one more thing, too I think is in terms of like, we're all in this together. We're here to stay. We have quite a past. And really the key is for us to do our own self discovery and awareness around our own journey about things to learn, and things to unlearn, and approach ourselves with compassion and empathy, and patience, recognizing, you know, we're going to make mistakes, we're going to humbly bumble along. And, you know, we're always a moment, a breath away from re-grounding whenever we feel lost. Invite in that invitation of a symbol that maybe you as listener might want to create.

Another symbol I love is the hummingbird. And there's a story if you Google, a story of the hummingbird in the forest fire and this idea of the forest fire. And the hummingbird is like, "What can I do?". And they go and fill up their beak with a little bit of water and fly back towards the flames and then the other animals see them and think, "Oh, you know, we could do something, too". And then they band together. So, you know, that idea like be a hummingbird or you know, some symbol that inspires you to lean in and take a breath in and do something that kind of feels uncomfortable, that's towards reconciliation. Yeah.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's very powerful. And I think it's a perfect message for our audience because I think a lot of our guests have talked about behavioural insights as a community that we all like to be a part of because it feels like we are trying to be little hummingbirds. And I love that we can use those hummingbird powers in different ways. And maybe we haven't been applying them as much as we should in certain directions, and to nudge that, you know, there's lots of fires we can be putting out and we can try to contribute to putting out more fires.

So I think that's a perfect note to close on. And I just want to thank you for joining today, because it's been so lovely to learn from you. And I could chat with you for hours, but I'll be respectful of your time. So I hope our listeners learned as much today about indigenous approaches to behaviour change, and your amazing ideas that you're threading together from across approaches, as I did.

And I also want to close by recognizing the territories that I'm on, so I'm coming from the Musqueam, Salish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, here in Vancouver and very privileged to be listening and learning from those areas. So thanks to them and thank you, Stephanie, for joining us today.

PAPIK: Thank you so much for having me. I always enjoy any behavioural insights conversations, so interesting.

APPELT: Excellent. Yeah. And thanks to our listeners for joining us for another episode of Calling DIBS.
