

Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development Project

Case Study

Limitless Gear, Clothing and Accessories

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One of the key actions in Saskatchewan's Growth Plan 2020-2030 is to grow Indigenous participation in the economy. The success of this action depends on Indigenous nations in Saskatchewan building and maintaining their economic development activities. The Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development project provides made-in-Saskatchewan tools for Indigenous communities to build the governance foundation that will support long-term economic development. An important part of the project involves capturing the experience of Saskatchewan Indigenous communities through case studies and toolkits based on this experience.

The case study in this document was developed by a team of researchers and their affiliates at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. The project is funded by the Government of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Trade and Export Development.

The case studies are designed to be used first and foremost by Indigenous communities across Saskatchewan. The premise of the work is that economic development stories need to be shared among those involved in economic development, both in the community where the economic development activities take place and in other communities looking to undertake economic development. It is important to focus on what has and has not worked. One of the long-term goals is to develop a set of resources that is Indigenous-led and available to Indigenous communities across the province and the country. The cases may also be used as governance training components and/or strategic planning exercises, as well as in teaching.

The case studies combine material from websites and other publicly available sources with material gathered through interviews with leaders and representatives involved in economic development activities. The interviews last between two and four hours and involve a small group of economic development leaders in the community. The questions asked focus solely on the corporate entities and activities that have been developed, and those interviewed are asked questions in their role as a corporate leader.

When approaching community leaders and representatives, we begin with an informal discussion. If the leaders and representatives indicate an interest in participating, we proceed with sending them a formal letter of introduction, which they can use to obtain official permission to proceed. We know communities receive many requests for information, and they do not always see the results of the work that is undertaken. Our goal is to ensure that the case study is shared with the community in a way that is beneficial. To this end, a draft of the case study is shared with the community, and the case study is not finalized until the community gives its agreement. Once a set of case studies have been developed, leaders from the communities involved will be given the opportunity to discuss the findings.

We would like to thank the leaders and representatives for their time and effort. Their knowledge and insights are critical to understanding economic development in Indigenous communities.

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Limitless Gear, Clothing & Apparel

Economic development and growth through entrepreneurship and community support

Overview and Key Learnings

This case study profiles an entrepreneur who has become an active participant in economic development and growth opportunities in Saskatchewan. Cody Demerais, a registered citizen of Métis Nation Saskatchewan in Prince Albert, used an entrepreneurial approach to turn a weekend and evening venture into a thriving business called Limitless Gear, Clothing & Apparel (Limitless) — see <https://www.limitlessgearclothing.com/>. This case shows how Demerais applied his personal values, culture, and identity to build a successful small business. This entrepreneurial approach can be applied by others, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to create economic independence and growth.

Demerais' approach to economic development is based on:

- entrepreneurship
- education and training
- positive mindset and motivation
- access to supports
- transparency and relatability.

In building his profitable business, Demerais acknowledges the support of his family, Métis Nation Saskatchewan affiliates, and his home community of Prince Albert. The driving forces behind his brand development are cultural identity connection, openness to sharing his history with mental health and addictions, and the goal of economic independence.

The key outcomes of Demerais' entrepreneurial approach are:

- focussing fulltime on growing the business
- attaining financial independence
- diversifying the business
- shifting from a storefront model to an increased online presence
- giving back to the community through donations of goods and money
- positively channeling his energies and natural risk-taking behaviours
- using his motivational speaking engagements to grow the business and connect with others.

Background and History

Demerais grew up in a single-parent family, along with his mother and older brother, in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. After the Weyerhaeuser Paper Mill closed in 2006, when Demerais was 11-years old, his mother lost her job and the family struggled. The loss of this job made a significant impact and prompted him to find ways to earn money. He started working odd jobs and has always been employed or found ways to earn income since then. The following years were financially challenging. Demerais could no longer afford to participate in organized sports and recreational activities, nor could he pay for the popular, trendy clothing that his peers were buying. These and other barriers, including issues with

learning and focus, caused Demerais to detach from academics, lose direction and purpose, suffer from low self-esteem, and take inordinate risks.

Growing up, Demerais was disconnected from his Métis heritage and did not establish a solid sense of cultural identity. When he was a young adult, he actively sought out community connections to learn more about himself as a Métis person. For a couple of years, Demerais was the youth representative for his region with Métis Nation Saskatchewan. This experience helped him to finally feel a sense of belonging, which was an important missing element in his life. This role also helped to broaden his horizons and community network of support.

As a teenager, he embarked in a risky lifestyle of substance abuse and drinking. But a series of life-changing events convinced Demerais to make transformative change. One night after drinking heavily with his best friend, he crashed his car into a tree, almost killing his friend. Demerais was arrested and jailed for drinking and driving. Feeling hopeless and overwhelmed with guilt, he unsuccessfully attempted suicide and the downward spiral of substance abuse continued. Demerais recognized that he was in a self-destructive cycle yet continued the same behaviour patterns. He realized that his risky behaviour was taking a toll and could lead to an early death, having come close to overdosing on more than one occasion. He was in the middle of a mental health crisis, knew that he was wasting his potential and needed to break the cycle to find his purpose.

Demerais began thinking about what he could do to make a living. He began talking with people who felt stuck in their careers and were unsure about how to change course. He did not want to be one of these people. Advised to do an apprenticeship program for a trade, he decided against this, knowing he wanted a career that would foster his creative side and be free of the demands of a 9-to-5 job. He envisioned a career in which he could connect with his Métis culture, work for himself, and have the economic freedom to make his own decisions.

A serendipitous conversation with an unsuccessful entrepreneur convinced Demerais to start his own business. After making a large financial investment, this individual was left with a stockpile of t-shirts he couldn't sell. This conversation struck a chord with Demerais, who had been interested in entrepreneurship since playing the lemonade stand video game as a child and inspired by his father who had an oil-sands business. Now, he reflected on how he could succeed in business. After thinking about a product to sell, he settled on clothing. He remembered as a teenager being unable to find clothes that reflected his Métis identity. He wanted his product to have social connection and impact, so brand was a major consideration. The 2011 movie *Limitless* inspired the business name, along with the message of motivation, hope, and a life with no limits.

While Demerais was working on developing and marketing his *Limitless* brand, he and the same friend who was in the car crash were invited by the Saskatchewan Health Authority to share their story about drinking, driving and substance abuse with students and staff at local schools. During the next couple of years, the pair presented a handful of times and Demerais' friend began his own entrepreneurship journey to start a construction business. Seeing his friend act to be his own boss and create his own freedom was encouraging and promoted Demerais to consider his own employment options. He soon realized he enjoyed public speaking, particularly about a subject that he is passionate about. He had

found his purpose. He began reading books on self-improvement and strategies for developing a positive mindset. Keen to help others by sharing the story of his mental health struggles, he approached community groups, businesses, and schools. They welcomed his fresh and honest views on life. Word of his inspirational talks began to spread, and soon he was giving 40 to 50 speeches a year both within and outside the community. Sharing his story was emotionally difficult but also cathartic.

In 2017, Demerais sold 100 t-shirts to his friends from the trunk of his car. The t-shirts all sold within three months and fueled his dream of full-time entrepreneurship. Demerais continued to work while developing his business idea. During this time, he met his fiancé, who encouraged Demerais to go to school for business training. Her continuing support has been a major part of his success.

With his goals written down on a piece of paper, Demerais was ready to make his dream of business-ownership a reality. Now, six years after he started his own business, his company is thriving, he is giving back to community, and he and his family are living comfortably in a house they bought in 2020.

Brand and Logo

Knowing that the Limitless brand and logo would be key to his success, Demerais put careful thought and consideration into their design. He sought to connect with others who may have had similar struggles by projecting resilience and openness. He envisioned a logo with gears as symbols of strength, inspired by his favourite video game and reflecting the strong Métis presence in Prince Albert. To create the first logo (see Figure 1), Demerais collaborated with a friend and eventual co-worker on the intertwined gears to represent the Métis infinite symbol. The second logo (see Figure 2), which also incorporated the two gears, was inspired and developed from the collaborative efforts of another friend who also became a valued staff member. This meaningful logo was developed to publicly use the business to share his story of surviving the suicide attempt. He wanted to be transparent and hoped that the design would resonate with others. To help lessen the stigma of mental health, a portion of the proceeds from the sales of product with this logo were donated to Canadian Mental Health. A version of the tree of life inside a gear (See Figure 3), representing survival, resilience, and strength, was the next logo to be developed followed by a design incorporating wheat to pay homage to Demerais' home province of Saskatchewan (see Figure 4).

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The logos appear on all Demerais' t-shirts and other merchandise. (See Figure 1, 2, 3, and 4). There have been several logos developed over the years which showcase the community of Prince Albert, Métis culture, and the Limitless brand in various forms.²

Demographics and Community Support

Located in roughly the centre of Saskatchewan, Prince Albert is the province's third largest city, with a population of 37,756.³ Prince Albert is a central hub for access to northern Saskatchewan. Mining, tourism, forestry, retail, commerce, and health care are important industries, which bring in travelers, creating economic benefits but also social challenges.⁴

Table 1. Prince Albert Indigenous Identification Demographics 2021

Demographic Group	Number
Métis	6,465
First Nations	9,385
Inuit	20

Table 2. Prince Albert Broad Age Group Demographics 2021

Total Distribution (%) of the population	Number
0 to 14 years	21.7
15 to 64 years	62.4
65 years and over	15.9
85 years and over	2.2
Average age	37.7
Median age	35.2

As Table 1 shows, Prince Albert has a sizeable Indigenous population. This community has supported Limitless from the outset, but support has not only come from his group. The entire Prince Albert community has rallied around Demerais, boosting his business by sharing information, providing resources including donations of mannequins, and promoting the business through social and professional channels. The same person who donated the mannequins extended an invitation to participate in a regular coffee gathering of local businesspeople and entrepreneurs. During these conversations Demerais learned a great deal about the ins and outs of business ownership. Support was also extended when sixteen people, including Prince Albert's mayor, councillors, and police chief, and business leaders throughout the province wrote letters of support for Demerais' nomination for the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce Award for Young Entrepreneur of the Year.

The statistics show that Prince Albert has a young population, with fewer older people than the national average. Demerais originally planned his clothing line to appeal to youth, but people of all ages buy his product and attend his speaking engagements, likely because they relate to his authenticity, transparency, and willingness to share his mental health struggles.

Economic Development

Education, Training, and Mentorship

To acquire the skills to be a successful entrepreneur, Demerais approached Saskatoon's Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI),⁵ which offers diverse supports to Saskatchewan Métis citizens. He accessed training through a private post-secondary educational institute, Praxis School of Entrepreneurship in Saskatoon.⁶ There, Demerais developed his business plan and studied social media, sales, financial management, and market research analytics and data. Even after he graduated, Praxis continued to support and encourage him through mentorship, resources, and advice. Demerais also completed a four-day digital certificate through Blue Moose Media, sponsored by GDI.⁷ GDI also provided funding for a few months to bridge the financial gap until the business was profitable.

Mentorship has been key to helping Demerais learn about different aspects of business and to gain strategies and resources that have helped to grow and expand Limitless. He has sought out mentors to learn specific aspects and has found people are more than willing to help and/or make connections. Customers have been valued for more than purchasing products, conversations often help with the decision-making process, establish new relationships and contacts. Demerais highly values these mentorship relationships and makes this part of his personal and practice. He fields many requests for guidance and tries to answer questions or pass along advice as his schedule allows. Youth outreach is a priority and he continues to help people in need access supports.

Raising Capital

Demerais was unsure of the financial requirements to establish a business, but he knew he wanted to avoid major loans. To raise the capital to purchase the initial inventory and overhead, he worked fulltime at Eagles Nest Group Home. He sold personal items, including a utility trailer, to purchase inventory, pay for insurance, and cover overheads. His mother generously gave him some of her funds. To supplement his income as a youth care worker during the early stages of setting up Limitless and doing store renovations, Demerais provided speaking engagements and lawn care on the side. The increased stress and risk of burnout prompted the decision to resign from his youth care job and use some of his personal funds to focus on the business full time.

Demerais' motivational speaking engagements are key to Limitless's economic growth. He has given over 130 talks in the last two years. During the pandemic, many of these sessions were virtual, increasing access to a broader geographic area. He recently has facilitated mental health workshops in Alberta and Ontario. These engagements help to cover Limitless's operational costs as well as help him give back to the community through fundraisers.

SaskMétis Economic Development Corporation (SMEDCO) helped by offering Covid relief zero-interest loans, including a partial grant. As well, a kind, anonymous doner provided funds to Limitless at a critical time. This donation demonstrated to Demerais the importance of giving back.

Principles

Demerais was determined that his business would uphold five core pillars: independence, creative freedom, Métis cultural connections, relationship building, and inspiring others/giving back.

Independence

For Demerais, a key principle is independence: making decisions that support his vision and allow him to chart his own course. Staying true to this vision, Demerais remains the sole owner and CEO of Limitless. He admits that having all the responsibility for the business has been a lot of work but would not have done it any other way. In the future, he would consider taking on a partner who is driven, has connections, brings knowledge and experience, shares his vision and goals, and can take on some of the financial responsibilities.

Creative Freedom

As a creative person, Demerais aims to embody this principle both at Limitless and in his speaking engagements. Demerais' creativity is reflected in the evolution of the logo, as Demerais searched for the perfect symbol to represent his brand. His creativity is also evident in his speaking engagements. Although he is sometimes asked to speak on a particular topic, within these limits he is free to connect with his audience in the way he thinks is best.

Métis Cultural Connections

Demerais' Métis heritage inspires everything he undertakes in life. He started both of his ventures—Limitless and his speaking career—because he wanted to connect with the community. With the Limitless brand, he is building pride in his Métis heritage by producing clothing that reflects the culture. In his speaking engagements, he inspires audiences to reconnect with their culture and to develop a positive mindset. He also appreciates the opportunity to share his Métis heritage with those from outside the culture.

Relationship Building

Demerais values relationships in all aspects of his life. Even more important to him than being a successful entrepreneur is reaching out to people, being open and honest, and sharing his struggles. His speaking career is built on a foundation of community connections and trust. Limitless, too, has the same foundations: His clothes inspire others with a message of strength, resilience, and hope.

Inspiring Others/Giving Back

Demerais deeply appreciates the support he has received from the Métis and non-Métis community alike. In the spirit of reciprocal relationships, giving back to this community is a core principle. He donates proceeds from some of his speaking engagements at fundraisers to mental health awareness organizations and other community initiatives. For Demerais, an important part of giving back is finding ways to inspire others. He received encouragement and support at key moments which contributed to

develop his positive mindset. Demerais is passionate to help others find their own purpose and seek out ways to move dreams to reality.

Growth and Profit Generation

The first customers for Limitless t-shirts were Demerais' friends. After his day job, he drove around Prince Albert visiting acquaintances, showing them the t-shirts, and spreading messages of inspiration and hope. When he began selling his t-shirts at his motivational speeches, interest in his merchandise spread, and soon people of all ages were buying them. He attributes Limitless's early growth success largely to his motivational speeches. His audiences were inspired by his story and brand. Reasonable pricing and regular sales help to make his products affordable and accessible.

In November 2019, Demerais opened a retail store. The Prince Albert store was open typical retail hours and Demerais had one staff member. Sales were strong. But all that changed overnight in March 2020 when the pandemic struck. The store was open only sporadically and customers were scarce. Demerais had to let his employee go. He opened the store only in the mornings, staffed it himself, and poured time and energy into his new website. He had time to process, pack, and ship online orders as many were placed online in the evening. He even delivered purchases to keep the business operating. He now uses the store as an office and warehouse, as well as for retail. The store is currently open only on Fridays and Saturdays. He is exploring staffing options which would help increase store hours.

Demerais' growth plan has been twofold: featuring the work of other entrepreneurs from Saskatchewan who share his thinking; and engaging vendors and getting them to sell his line. Currently, there are four businesses in the province that carry Limitless products in Weyburn, Chitek Lake, Emma Lake, and Saskatoon. Limitless also does custom orders for sports teams and other groups and organizations. Demerais intends to continue growing by selling more all-season gear such as winter coats and shorts. He also plans to move away from the staffed store-front model and further develop online sales so shoppers can buy 24/7. He has projections and plans for growth throughout Saskatchewan, western Canada and beyond as word spreads about his brand and product can be accessed online.

Demerais began earning income six months after start-up and began taking dividends. The business has shown significant growth with each passing year. Sales during speaking engagements and trade shows have markedly contributed to this growth.

Marketing

Demerais is a strong believer in market research. He values conversations and feedback from friends, mentors, and customers, adapting his strategies after receiving feedback in surveys, social media channels and polls, customer comments and requests, and informal conversations. When selecting product to carry, he always seeks customer feedback. He recently decided to sell coffee based on feedback. He then researched suppliers and selected a company in Saskatchewan after tasting samples. About six batches have been sold so far, and the volume is steadily increasing.

Tracking purchasing trends over time has helped Demerais predict peak selling seasons and indicate what customers are looking for. Some customers come to the store specifically to see him. These

interactions help him identify areas of interest and products that work and don't work. He also relies on his own instincts. For example, when he rented his first retail space, he chose a black and white colour scheme. But he found the store dull, so he added lime green. The bright colour elevated his energy levels, and he was keen for others to have the same experience in the store.

Of course, Demerais' high profile in the community as an in-demand speaker helps with the marketing of Limitless. Prince Albert residents associate him with both ventures, and word of mouth is a powerful form of advertising. Other marketing strategies he has used include radio ads, gift card auctions, bus bench ads, and trade shows.

Inventory Control and Sales

Demerais uses the website builder platform Wix to keep track of inventory and sales. He also uses the Square Point of Sale system to manage online and in-person sales. The two systems are compatible, work well together, and effectively manage growth. Demerais hired a consultant who greatly helped with the technical aspect of the operations.

Staffing

Demerais is the owner, CEO, main operator, purchaser, decision-maker, cleaner, packer, and shipper. In short, he does whatever needs to be done. When the store was open for typical retail hours, he had one fulltime staff member. Future planning includes a supportive team to run the business operations so Demerais can continue to learn more about mental health and wellness and business, and increase his public speaking engagements and workshops.

Product Diversification

After a few months of selling different coloured t-shirts with the Limitless logo, Demerais branched out to carry other clothing like ball caps and sweatshirts. He has since expanded to include a wide variety of items, including an inspirational children's book that he authored. Besides the growing diversity within the Limitless line, outside products are also popular such as the above-mentioned coffee, kettle corn, BBQ seasonings, handmade dishcloths, and towels. Though the profit margin may be minimal, including brands from outside of Limitless increases variety and helps other entrepreneurs, which is important to Demerais. He is currently working on a manuscript to be completed this year and plans to return all proceeds from future sales to back to the business.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

Challenges

When he set up the business, Demerais found it tricky to balance his fulltime work, speaking engagements, his new career, and his homelife. On evenings and weekends he devoted himself to trade shows, street fairs, promotions, and his motivational speeches. He soon realized that to achieve his dream of running a successful and inspirational business, he would need to devote almost all his time to Limitless.

The global pandemic was a huge challenge, arriving only three months after the brick-and-mortar store opened. Demerais responded by developing his online presence and sales soon rebounded. But he did observe that some members of the community were not tech-savvy, creating a barrier to access for some potential customers.

Other barriers include the downtown location of the physical store. Parking meters directly in front of the store require small change, which not everyone has. This location requires constant vigilance: dealing with vandalism, removing needles, and interacting with people experiencing mental illness, poverty, or homelessness.

Demerais would like to see better social infrastructure to help people with these problems. He speaks about the barriers facing Indigenous people, pointing out how owning a business can help them overcome these challenges by having a purpose, gaining financial independence, participating in the community, capitalizing on creativity and strengths, and contributing to local economic development. He observes that more Indigenous people would have entrepreneurial success if they had access to government grants to offset financial barriers and help navigating bureaucratic processes.

Supply chain issues and shipping can also create challenges. For example, Demerais sells 'lifestyle' brand ball caps, but for months they were unavailable, with only a few hundred available worldwide. Demerais worries these problems can make him seem unprofessional. However, they are difficult to overcome. Demerais initially included shipping costs in the price of his merchandise. But he found that for some items, the shipping was so high that it drastically impacted the profit margin to the point where the profit would be pennies. Shipping is charged, but, is set as low as possible to cover costs and still make a decent profit.

Milestones and Accomplishments

Milestones

Saving up to cover the \$1,200 for the first order of t-shirts moved Limitless from idea to reality. This milestone, along with support and encouragement from his fiancé, inspired Demerais to leave his fulltime job to focus on growing the business. The moment he took the first t-shirt out of the box, says Demerais, it was like Christmas in January. Making the sizeable donation of \$7,000 to a local school's hockey fundraiser during the early year of the business was a key moment. Other milestones include opening the storefront, getting the website functioning, and earning enough profit to purchase a house.

Accomplishments and Awards

As Demerais looks back on the last four years, he outlines four key accomplishments. First, through ups and downs, he has kept a positive mindset and stayed resilient. Second, his quick shift to mobile/online sales during the pandemic meant that sales did not suffer. Third, his hard work to find distributors has meant that the Limitless brand is now more widely available in stores across Saskatchewan. Finally, both his sales and speaking success has allowed him to give back to the community through fundraisers and donations. For example, he donates to mental health awareness campaigns and fundraisers for cancer.

Demerais has been honoured with several awards. Soon after opening the bricks-and-mortar store front, the Prince Albert community gave him an "inspirational award" for being a Métis leader. In 2021, Demerais won the Young Entrepreneur of the Year for Achieving Business Excellence (ABEX) from the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce.

Learnings

Advice

For Demerais, the risks associated with starting a new business have absolutely been worth it. He recommends starting a business to anyone who has a passion. Because he struggled with traditional learning, entrepreneurship suited Demerais' style. He wished this option had been presented earlier in his life, so he could increase engagement and channel his energies in healthy ways. He advises people to reflect on their passions and know their strengths before reaching out to people, networking, and seeking resources. Being adaptable and willing to shift course helps when facing unexpected situations. He also asserts the importance of being free to make mistakes but also to own up to them. When a spelling mistake was made on \$5,000 worth of hoodies, they had to be redone. Donation requests must be considered carefully. He only says yes to requests that uphold his principles. Finally, says Demerais, doing everything yourself can be hard and having the right team (including suppliers and vendors) is essential so look for people who are a good fit and source of support.

Inspirational Quotes

Demerais has several quotes he shares with others at his presentations:

"If we pursue the life we dreamt of/want with hard work and dedication and keep dreaming, we can accomplish the life that we envision for ourselves. We are not stuck; we are able to pivot and move—chase our own dreams."

"Once you believe you have the ability and capacity to do great things, that is when life becomes limitless."

"Lead by example."

"We have limitless potential inside of us. We have to believe in ourselves."

"Community is everything."

Going Forward

From the outset, Demerais has been committed to a holistic approach: His story, his business, and his brand are integrally connected. Demerais' future goals include philanthropy like building schools, hockey rinks, community centres, and playgrounds. Both Limitless and his speaking engagements are growing, so he has more funds to give to accomplish these goals.

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Notes

1. Demarais would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their work on the design of the logos: Logo 2 — Victoria Muskaluk; and Logos 3 and 4 — Dane Sanderson (Media Made Simple).
2. Limitless Website. 2023.
3. Statistics Canada. 2022.
4. City of Prince Albert. 2015.
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