

How Do We Build Relationships?

A companion resource to [*Cooking in Two Worlds: A Process Guide for Incorporating Indigenous Foods into Institutions*](#)

Building relationships with Indigenous people and communities is an extremely important part of bringing Indigenous foods into public institutions. Before we reach out to communities we must ensure that we are advanced enough on our cultural safety learning journey that we do not unintentionally do harm in the process. In this spirit it is highly recommended that learners read the [“Where do we begin” Summary Resource](#) and [Cooking in Two Worlds: A Process Guide for Incorporating Indigenous Foods into Institutions](#). Building collaborative and reciprocal relationships is foundational to this work. Therefore we want to ensure that we start on the proverbial right foot.

Learn

Spend time learning about the local Indigenous communities and their food systems. It is up to us to reach out to other successful institutions to learn about how others have overcome barriers and had success. We must also learn about our local Nations and their capacity, priorities, and current projects. So that when we reach out we know we are not putting an additional burden on an already burdened system. Often a google search, reading a wikipedia article, or scrolling on a nation's social media can be a way to see what is going on in a community on a superficial level.

Listen

We must be mindful about entering into a relationship with Indigenous communities if we already have the outcome of the project mapped out. We should look to do more than consult, we must enter into this relationship in the spirit of collaboration. Indigenous communities and people are the leaders of their own future. It is our job to honor and support their choices and allow them control over how the relationship advances. We must listen closely, and hear beyond our own desires, to what the Elders or Knowledge Holders might be sharing indirectly.

Be the Medicine

We can become medicine. Our work and our passion for Indigenous foods is medicine. It is not about our job title or our intended outcomes, it is about bringing our good feelings and thoughtful ways of being into this work that is the real medicine. Elders and Knowledge Holders tell us to never show up empty handed. When we go to invite people to a gathering or a meeting we always bring a gift. This can translate to driving out and dropping off a card and/or a food offering to the person you are trying to meet with.

Make Time for Tea

Being in a hurry can be seen as a sign of disrespect, so it is good to make time to truly listen to Elders and Knowledge Holders. So slow down, listen, learn, and remember that relationships take time. Once you have made a connection with a community member, or have been given a connection, go and meet them. Ask them if they would like to go for tea, coffee, or lunch or have a meeting? Then sit back and listen as you learn about the person, the communities, and what the priorities may be. Have another cup of tea and talk about when you can come back to connect further.

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“Maintaining the social aspect of our food is so incredibly important, it’s not the most efficient way, but it’s the only way.”– Jess Housty - Knowledge Holder

Scenario

We have recently begun a new food program at our institution. The hope is to focus our truth and reconciliation work around food and get more Indigenous foods into our institution, onto our menus, and into the minds and bellies of our community. However, we currently have no idea how to reach out to the Indigenous community. What are some steps to guide me in a good way?

Responding To The Scenario

The most important step to reaching out to Indigenous communities happens before the first telephone call. We must first ensure that we know what we are asking for and that we are ready to ask for it in a culturally safe way. Meaning we must first be adequately aware of our existing cultural biases and stereotypes to ensure we do not unintentionally cause harm while doing this work. We have to also ensure we have a reciprocal relationship and are listening to what the community is sharing.

The Three Main Avenues to Reaching Out to Indigenous Communities;

Indigenous Liaison Staff

- » Elders in residence
- » Aboriginal Liaison Nurses
- » Indigenous Education Councils and/or District Leads of Indigenous Education

Indigenous Services

- » British Columbia Indigenous Program Services Coordinators
- » Tribal Health Directors
- » Tribal Education Departments
- » First Nations Health Authority

Direct Approach

- » Connect with local Indigenous caterers, chefs, food producers, or restaurateurs within the community.

Reflective Questions

- » What do you feel and experience when you are listened to and acknowledged?
- » How can you bring those skills and abilities into your relationship building activities?
- » Have you done some research? Have you spent time learning about the Nation(s)? Website, Google search, social media, books and news articles? What is happening for the Nation and what may you need to be aware of?

Ways To Reach Out

Before we try and reach out to Indigenous communities directly we should ensure that we’ve tapped into the support systems already offered by our institution, before potentially inadvertently reinventing the wheel. Indigenous liaison staff offer a great starting point for relationship building with the local community. If these positions are not available, the next step would be to reach out to a related Indigenous institution, like a Tribal Health Center or Education Department. Perhaps reach out to a Health Director or Tribal Council and see if they have anyone on staff who may be interested in having a conversation about your food project. Keep in mind that Indigenous institutions are often very busy and don’t necessarily have the resources to provide assistance. If none of the above are an option then there is always the direct approach of going out into the community and connecting with local Indigenous caterers, chefs, food producers or restaurateurs within the community.

Also, whenever working with an Indigenous community, Elder, cook, or knowledge holder, remember to compensate their time fairly. These people are experts in a very rare field, their time is incredibly valuable, and so they should be compensated as such.