

Information Sheet: Working Effectively with Aboriginal People

This Information Sheet is designed to give you practical suggestions for building a relationship with Aboriginal community members, and for working with an Aboriginal person who may have been trafficked. It can be printed for your reference.

This material is adapted from Robert PC and Cynthia F. Joseph's *Working Effectively with Aboriginal Peoples*, (p 164- 167, Second Edition, 2007). Adapted and reproduced with the express permission of Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., North Vancouver, B.C.

Suggested Approach for Building a Relationship with Aboriginal community members:

DO:

- Research the community, including the Band and Council governing bodies before contacting community members.
- Plan activities by taking into account the timing of issues like fishing, berry picking, or a death in the community and respond appropriately.
- Thank the community for the invitation into their traditional territory. For example, "I would like to thank the _____ *First Nation(s) for agreeing to meet with us and inviting us into your traditional territory.*"
- Try to establish a relationship with the Aboriginal community and meet before you need something. Let people know that you are interested in building a long term relationship.
- Recognize that there are many dynamics at play when working with Aboriginal people and organizations; try to learn about those dynamics in advance.
- Be aware that each Aboriginal community, including the Band and Council, may have a unique process for communicating internally with each other and for making decisions. These communication and decision making processes can impact your organization's ability to work effectively with those communities. It is best to try and clarify these processes before entering into binding decisions.
- Consider dressing casually for work in an Aboriginal community. In many cases, Band offices have more casual dress policies than other office environments and workplaces



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- Know the difference between a Band Chief and a Hereditary Chief before you visit an Aboriginal community.
- Be prepared to meet both Band Chief and Hereditary Chief when working with an Aboriginal community.
- Honour all your promises and agreements, especially your verbal agreements. Traditionally, Aboriginal communities are oral societies and verbal promises and agreements carry more weight than written agreements.
- Be aware that your professional designation (for example a social worker) may create some tension when working with Aboriginal community members. Define your role and interest clearly when working with Aboriginal community members.
- Be aware that Aboriginal rights are communally held, and that the whole community may need to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Be aware that cultural survival is a fundamental driver of an Aboriginal community's decision-making process.
- Expect to participate in cultural events and ask for protocol guidance from the host.
- Ask the First Nation how they want to be consulted. What are their expectations?
- Set preconceived ideas and biases aside when working with members of an Aboriginal community.



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Areas of potential conflict or concern that may hinder building and maintaining a relationship with Aboriginal community members:

DON'T:

- Use acronyms in your communications with Aboriginal community members.
- Use colloquialisms in your communications with Aboriginal community members.
- Use government terms such as “stakeholders” to describe your relationship with Aboriginal community members.
- Tell them you have a timeline and that they have to meet it.
- Tell them what dates to meet, instead ask which dates would work best for their community.
- Go to them with a completed draft plan for your project before consultation has started.
- Expect to consult with the same community in the same way on different issues.
- Expect to consult with different communities in the same way on similar issues.
- Assume a band is necessarily in its own territory; many bands have been moved from place to place by the colonial government.
- Confuse potluck with potlatch; or reservations with reserves.
- Refer to them as Indians or Natives; instead use Aboriginal people, Aboriginal community members or First Nations.
- Say that “some of my best friends are Aboriginal peoples, Indian or First Nations.”
- Tell them that we should all be equal.
- Impose or expect direct eye contact.
- Feel that you must answer or fill the silent periods during discussions. These silent periods can be longer than you are accustomed to, and may be needed for thought formulation. Try to ensure that the speaker has finished before you contribute to the conversation.
- Say “You don’t look Aboriginal.”
- Make assumptions.



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