

Tips for Working with American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Tribal Diversity

- **Be aware that being Native means something different to everyone.** People may refer to themselves as Indian, Native, American Indian, Native American, Indigenous, Alaska Native, or First Nations, or by their tribe's name. *To learn more about different perspectives on indigenous self-identification, [click here](#).*
- **Understand that there are 574 federally recognized, sovereign tribal nations in the US.** There are also numerous state-recognized tribes and other tribal groups proactively pursuing federal recognition. Take the time to research and make yourself aware of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual diversity, cultural customs, and perspectives.

Understanding Cultural Differences

- **Practice cultural humility.** Approach tribal communities with an open mind and good intentions.
- **Recognize different cultural worldviews.** Understand that others may not think the same way you do, so do your best to avoid using a Western, non-Native perspective. Native cultures are often more collectivist, meaning they value the community above the individual. In different cultures, family can mean ancestors, extended family, clan, etc.
- **Be respectful.** Tribal decisions, cultures, traditions, and values should be respected and honored.
- **Check your own privilege.** Learn about your own heritage and the [privileges](#) that come with it.
- **Emphasize cultural strengths and include culturally based practices.** In addition to community-based and evidence-based practices, utilize [community protective factors](#) and include cultural traditions to strengthen your work.
- **Seek permission before asking questions.** For example, when you attend a cultural event, ask if you may ask questions and, if permitted, be mindful of how many questions you ask. Not every cultural custom will be explained to you; some traditional practices are not meant to be shared. Sometimes, it is better to wait and allow community members to share information when they feel comfortable.

Relationship Building

- **Collaborate with tribal liaisons to help guide your work and strengthen relationships with the community and leadership.** Tribal liaisons serve as ambassadors for tribal members. They are invested in tribal concerns and may act as educators or interpreters between tribes, agencies, or governing bodies.

- **Familiarize yourself with political, traditional, and spiritual leaders, as well as other decision makers.** Learn how to address leaders appropriately, such as Chairman/Chairwoman, Governor, President, Secretary, Treasurer, or Representative. Take time ahead of a meeting to look at meeting invitations, use Google, visit the tribe's website, read past meeting notes, etc. Also, listen at the start of a meeting for how leaders are addressed. Avoid calling an elected official by their first name, unless explicitly told otherwise.
- **Listen carefully.** Pay attention when tribal members are speaking and recognize that they are often experts on their own communities. Listen closely without interrupting. Allow each person time to share their story.
- **Remain flexible.** Be adaptable to the pace, needs, and traditions of the community.
- **Be patient in building connections.** It may take some time for rapport and trust to develop. Be patient, and don't take it personally if you encounter initial suspicions or hesitations. Try to learn the local history of the community, its experiences with neighboring non-Native communities, and the tribe's experience with both federal and state governments.
- **Make sure Native voices are heard.** Allow Native people to tell their own stories and direct their communities' programs, not vice versa.
- **Establish mutually beneficial partnerships.** Native communities will know if you are trying to use them to demonstrate your organization's diversity, such as to enhance a grant application. Devote time to building trust and genuine relationships, and work in partnership with Native communities. Ensure individuals and organizations are compensated fairly.



Communication



- **Recognize different communication preferences.** It is important to acknowledge and use appropriate communication methods when there are language, geographical and technological barriers. Ask what method of communication is best if you are unsure.
- **Acknowledge that there may be language barriers.** For many elders, English is their second language.
- **Ask for permission.** Obtain Native community approval before undertaking any activities. Ask permission before attending any tribal events, as they may be private.

Information Collection and Sharing



- **Honor confidentiality.** Information and data must be respected as tribal property. Partnerships typically require data use agreements or other formal consent arrangements. Discuss when and how the information will be shared and by whom.
- **Ask permission before recording, photographing or sharing anything,** including meeting notes and any personal information.
- **Acknowledge concerns around misclassifying and misusing data.** American Indian and Alaska Native populations have serious concerns about breaches of confidentiality within their communities, as [their data has been misused in the past](#).

Meeting Etiquette



- **Acknowledge whose land you are on.** It is important to acknowledge the land you are on at the start of an in-person meeting or event. To figure out whose land you are on, [click here](#) and enter your address.
- **Give space for invocation.** Whenever possible, start events, virtual or in-person, with an invocation. Identify and respectfully ask someone prior to the meeting to say a blessing or open the floor so an attendee can volunteer to give the opening prayer. Alternatively, should no one volunteer, give attendees 1-2 minutes to silently bless the proceedings in their own way.
- **Be lenient around time.** Events and meetings may not begin and conclude as scheduled. People may not be prompt—because they don't value your time, but because they are focused on building relationships or listening to someone else's stories. This is an example of different values or beliefs.
- **Offer an honorarium.** After hosting an event or making important decisions, do your best to provide an honorarium, such as sage, a necklace, or a monetary gift, to acknowledge people's time, culture and expertise.

Did you know?



- **Many people who are eligible are still not enrolled members in their tribe for a variety of reasons.** Avoid asking anyone if they are an "enrolled member." This is a complex issue.
- **Some common phrases belittle Native culture.** Sayings such as "let's have a pow wow," "lowest person on the totem pole," "Indian giver," "spirit animal," "off the reservation," etc. are disrespectful and diminish Native culture.
- **Most tribal members do not receive money from casinos.** Of 574 federally recognized tribes, only 273 operate gaming facilities and many of these tribal casinos barely break even.
- **A Native dancer's outfit is called regalia.** Avoid saying costume when referring to Native dance outfits and traditional attire. Often regalia takes years to create and is passed down from one generation to the next. Feathers are sacred and highly valued.
- **Food, and sharing a meal, is a crucial part of many Native cultures.** In most communities, those who are able-bodied are expected to get plates for elders or mothers with young children. Elders are typically served first. Be conscious when you are at an event and wait until you are invited to get food. When offered, accepting food, especially homemade, can be seen as a sign of respect.

Tips adapted from: [SAMHSA's Toolkit for Engaging with Native Communities](#)

Additional Resources

- IA2 has a [compendium](#) of resources on the topic of engaging tribal leaders.
- The Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network's informational guide on [Engaging Tribal Leaders and Tribal Stakeholders for Prevention Efforts](#).
- SAMHSA's [guide](#) provides general information to enhance AI/AN cultural competence.

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