

Recommendations for Developing and Maintaining Tribal Relationships

Develop and cultivate contacts with the local tribal community programs, Indian Health Center, social services, and elder services programs. You may need to submit a written request about your project to the tribal secretary, and ask to be put on the tribal council agenda. The elected tribal leaders may not be your first contact with the tribe. Reach out to the elders or other traditional leaders in the community. Maintain a practice of patience for tribal procedures. Many tribal communities practice proper introductions for each tribal member present. Take the time to sit and talk with the members of the tribe. Build long-term relationships, before you discuss business. When presenting, make the tribal elders the center of your presentation, but be brief. Solicit support, input and guidance.¹

Remember that the Indigenous community is the expert and their support and guidance in creating long-lasting relationships will be an important factor in your ability to serve tribal communities.

What if I Am Not Native?

Learn as much as you can about the local tribe(s), especially their history and relationship with federal and state programs. Take the time to learn about key tribal organizations. Express commitment to being part of the community. Attend community functions (e.g., pow wows, cultural gatherings, health fairs).¹

Engagement Strategies

Respect the Tradition of Oral History and Personal Interaction¹

- Face-to-face interaction is important. While modern technology facilitates communication in a variety of ways, it is culturally congruent to have face-to-face interaction, particularly on difficult matters.
- Initial meetings held on tribal land demonstrates a willingness to engage at sites that are significant to the tribe.
- Consider engaging in a talking circle as opposed to following a traditional meeting format, and negotiate communication strategies that are comfortable for both parties. Consider engaging in tribal traditions that open and close each meeting, such as a prayer, sharing of food, and smudging.
 - ❖ **A Talking Circle** is a Native American traditional way for people to solve problems. Every participant sits in a circle, a token (e.g., a feather, or a talking stick) is passed clockwise around the circle. Each person is able to speak for as long as they wish about their concerns or topics they wish to address. Then when finished the token is passed to the next person. The token may be passed around the talking circle many time as needed.²
 - ❖ **Prayer** is referred to traditional worship practices of Native Americans. Sacred narratives and beliefs are deeply based in Nature and connection to the earth.
 - ❖ **Smudging Ceremony** is a Native American practice used to cleanse and purify the body, mind, and spirit. Smudging is used to remove negative energy, attract positive energy, and restore balance using plants such as tobacco, sweet grass, cedar, and sage.³

Recognize Historical Trauma¹

- There is a history of deep distrust of government, particularly of the government's effort to "help" Native Americans. Many elders harbor painful memories, unresolved issues and anger. Establishing long-term relationships will help re-establish trust.
- First attempts at collaboration may be met with resistance. Advance efforts by asking tribal members what they need in order to move forward.
- Use empowerment strategies. Ask tribal members how they envision successful collaboration. Remain consistent in following through on your promised actions.
- Attend topic trainings on local tribe history, engaging Native American communities, and other tribal practices.

Understand how Native Values Conflict with Current Policies/Practices¹

- Western professional practice is rooted in formal relationships with clients. Many Native American tribes value a more informal connection. This connection may conflict with current professional boundaries.
- Consider working with agency administrators on more culturally appropriate interventions with Native Americans. Designating a conference room where smudging before meetings can be conducted, to help create a more positive space for important discussions.
- Review, and revise as able, any policies and procedures that may interfere with more culturally appropriate interventions.

Partner with Tribes and Agencies¹

- Look at the needs of the tribe(s). Are there ways to partner on projects to achieve a goal?
- Consider partnering on grant funded projects. Can the government agency provide a grant writer and the financial knowledge when collaborating on grant applications?
- Consider if tribes are aware of federal, state, or local funds they can access.

Culturally Responsive Communities, Tribes, and Native Organizations increase Cross-Cultural Understanding through the following Actions⁴

- Provide encouragement for community members who show an interest in pursuing a career in social work, health and human services, and education.
- Provide opportunities for mentoring, job shadowing, and internships.
- Establish a welcoming and supportive environment for new personnel moving to the community/organization, and provide opportunities for these professionals to participate in cultural events that strengthen relationships and support cross-cultural collaboration.
- Sponsor regular meetings with community members, leaders, organizational staff, and supervisors to develop ways to incorporate cultural values in their programs.
- Implement a support structure for elders and assist organizational personnel to involve the elders in program development. Elders will help foster the incorporation of traditional knowledge, values, and beliefs.
- Coordinate services of all local and regional social services, health, economic, cultural, and educational programs for mutual support and benefit in the communities.
- Host an annual community workshop (with food) including tribal staff and clients to discuss ways organizations can increase positive outcomes within the community.
- Encourage all members of the elderly services circle to take an active role in guiding new comers to understand the local cultural practices and aspirations to become contributors to community life.

For more information, visit the Tribal STAR website at theacademy.sdsu.edu/programs/tribal-star

References

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