

# Protocols in Aboriginal Communities

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To improve relations between Indigenous Communities and those who seek to work in those communities, it is vitally important to know the basics of Indigenous cultures, but more importantly the protocols needed by non-Indigenous people to get to know and develop on-going relationships with Indigenous people.

These are the basic lessons that we know to work. These have been learnt through years of painful mistakes and ineffective consultation and communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. It is our experience that when simple protocols have been observed then cross cultural understanding will take place, as both groups will gradually learn from each other. As the trust increases with time and consistent effort, more knowledge is shared.

The following comments are generalizations and there are exceptions to all of these.

In this there is an important lesson. Indigenous people and communities are diverse, they are as diverse as the country they come from regardless of the dominant view in our society. However, there are also common threads. The following will also need to be carried out with care and with every Indigenous person in our community that you come into contact. And just because you know some Indigenous people does not mean that all will want to know you or feel comfortable with you.

- 1 It is important to be sensitive to history. Not all Indigenous people have the same history or perspectives on history. More specifically, the Indigenous view of time does not separate the nearer distant past from the present. It is more of a Western perspective to separate these and this is convenient when you do not want to be burdened with the sins of your fore fathers.
- 2 In meetings of Indigenous organisations, always wait to speak. Do not try to push the pace of the meeting along. Often, non-Indigenous people are

not sensitive to the fact that often the first part of any meeting involves what appears to be small talk. This talk in fact is very important as people re-acquaint themselves with each other. Always wait until this is finished and then you will find that the business you came to complete will be addressed and dealt with very quickly. Often, non-Aboriginal people do not pick up the subtle nonverbal communication that is going on. This is why it is important to sit back, wait, listen, and watch. We are always identified as lateral thinkers and tend to move away from the linear approach.

- 3 Consider the barriers that many Indigenous people face in dealing with Western systems. Many Indigenous people with responsibilities have many commitments to family and community. When organising meetings, it is better to organise them in a place that community members can easily get to. It is also wise to arrange transport and child care for meetings to ensure that you get a wide range of the community there. Have the meeting in a place at which Aboriginal people feel comfortable. This generally means a place that is close to or amongst where most of the local communities live.
- 4 Ensure that you understand most aspects of Aboriginal English (AE). Aboriginal English is a recognised dialect of standard Australian English, it is highly efficient in its expression, and has a significant non-verbal aspect. It is not recommended that you use it, but rather that you are aware of its subtleties. After a while it is easy to pick up and you will probably start using AE expressions and hand actions unconsciously.
- 5 Do not try to change things. Aboriginal culture is steeped in oral traditions and continues to survive because of these traditions amongst other reasons. You must work with these traditions and practices.
- 6 You can only work within existing social structures. This is why getting to know who is related to who, and who they will be comfortable working with, is a must. Often, separating the genders and different kinship groups can improve consultation and communication as you will not be placing people in situations they are not comfortable with.

This is not to say that it is proper to bring up the past, especially the darker parts of Australia's history, rather just be aware of where people's attitudes may come from. If we understand the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, then we can never make value judgments on the actions and lifestyles of Aboriginal communities today.

When considering history or teaching history always try to weave in an Aboriginal perspective as a normal part of Australian history. It is a shared history.

It is important to listen for a long time before professing any form of understanding. Always demonstrate that you can be taught and can laugh at yourself. People who take themselves too seriously are generally not liked.

It is important to share. This means sharing anything: time, money, knowledge, skills, t-shirts, food, almost anything. In Aboriginal culture, people are more important than objects or possessions. It is far more important to work on the nature and quality of the relationships between people. This involves taking time to sit down and talk, sharing your own experience and history freely when you are asked. Over such times, Aboriginal people will slowly get to know you. The questions will not come all at once, but eventually you will be placed onto the human landscape.

One of the most impressive aspects of Aboriginal thought is that ability to build and hold a massive memory of networks of people, of who they are, who they are related to, who they are married to, etc. Of course, this stretches back over time. This is one expression of the Dreaming that ties all things together.

People skills are important. Remembering names and the relationships between people will help you. Aboriginal people easily and commonly read body language. Too much direct eye contact may be inappropriate depending on whom you are talking to.

It is usually a good idea for men to speak to the men, and women to speak to the women, especially if you do not know people personally. Over time, this is not so important. But Aboriginal people are sensitive to body language and often a well-meaning person can offend by being too friendly with someone they have not been properly introduced to.

Elders are highly respected and should be treated as such. The knowledge and culture Elders hold is valuable and will be shared with those considered worthy of custodianship of language, culture and country. Every conceivable effort must be made to ensure Elders are consulted and treated with respect. This may often mean things such as arranging people to pick Elders up from airports and meetings, and that they are paid at the same rate as a professional consultant, especially if the Elder is passing on information or consulting on a document or project.

It must be remembered that knowledge in Aboriginal culture is owned and not shared without a fair trade or with good reason. This should be seen in comparison to Western cultures where information and knowledge is expected to be shared at all times and at minimum cost. Do not expect Elders to just give you information. If you demonstrate enough respect and a genuine commitment to the Elders' goals, then information may be shared with you.

Consultation is a must. Non-Aboriginal people cannot speak for Aboriginal people unless they are known and trusted by the people for whom they speak and even then you must indicate to whom you have spoken and that you have done your best to find out what the Community thinks. Always state that you do not know everything and are always open to correction.

To find out what people think, you must take the time to talk to a wide range and cross-section of the community. Such consultation takes time. It is important that, if you are carrying out consultation on something that requires Aboriginal input, you go back to the people involved a number of times to check and re-check your facts. This allows time for the people involved to consider all aspects and angles of the knowledge they are sharing with you.

Taking time to consider, formulate, and express a response to a question is considered appropriate. Too often in classrooms, teachers will not wait long enough for Aboriginal students to respond. They think the pause before answering means the student does not know the answer. Yet, in Aboriginal culture, taking this time is considered polite.