

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

In the previous issue we provided some background on the culturally diverse Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, gave readers insights on terminology, gave a cross cultural perspective on whether or not Aboriginal Peoples were pro-environment or pro-development and closed off with some interests Aboriginal Peoples might have in doing conservation or land trust work. In this article we will give you some practical tips and tidbits of advice taken from our book *Working Effectively With Aboriginal Peoples* which has been written to help individuals and organizations work more effectively with Aboriginal Peoples.

What's the best approach to working effectively with Aboriginal Peoples?

The short answer, and it has much to do with cultural diversity that was discussed in the previous article, is that there is no best approach. What works in one community won't necessarily work in another. How you get decisions in one community won't necessarily be how you get them in another. Who makes decisions will also change from community to community.

So then what can we do? First of all we need to take the time to understand the community, where they are coming from, and what they might want. The best way to do this is to conduct research on the community before you make the first contact.

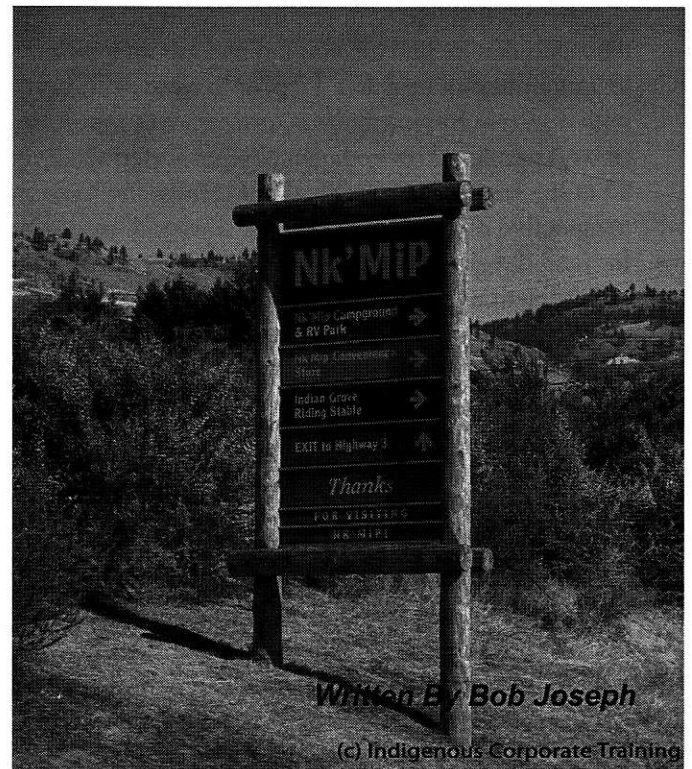
The following checklist can be used to begin your research of a First Nation community of interest.

Find Cultural Background Information through

- Community cultural centres
- Provincial museums
- Books on communities
- Books by community authors
- Traditional use studies

People You Should Consider Talking To

- Government representatives
- Consultants
- Lawyers
- The community's lands and resources person



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Information To Look For

- Community profiles and statistics
- Fishing, hunting, and gathering activities
- Spiritual practices
- Custom elected or majority elected
- Tribal council affiliations
- Other political affiliations
- Decision making structures
- Community priorities
- Date of the next band election; political change is an issue with any government

Questions they will ask you

- Media stories outlining main issues
- Past agreements - written or verbal
- Role of hereditary leaders and elders
- Indian Act legislation that pertains to your work

I would like to help out but they don't return our phone calls or respond to our letters.

Upon completion of your community research and decision to proceed, you may find that community people may be really hard to get a hold of. If this has happened to you it is important to know that you are not alone. Communities can spend a great deal of their time consulting with government agencies that have legal and regulatory requirements to consult with communities. The numbers can be

staggering. I spoke with one chief earlier this year who said that he and his council and administration team numbering less than 15 people were dealing with multiple Environmental Assessment processes as well as a few hundred consultation Referrals all at the same time. Think about it from the perspective of the community for a second. referrals for land development are written requests sent from government agencies to communities for review and comment. They can be quite complex packages of technical information requiring the feedback of technical staff that many communities don't have. Throw in the Environmental Assessment processes and it is easy to see that a team of less than 15 people are in triage mode trying to decide who to work with and who not to work with. They would be happy to engage if capacity issues could be addressed. You could offer to lend technical, financial and other resources to the community to help them work with you. Such an approach could see a priority rather than another person or organization seeking time on an already busy agenda.

We've got our foot in the door but do not want to make mistakes.

The key things to do in your first meeting and subsequent interactions should include observing cultural protocol, using a joint problem solving approach, watching terminology and pronunciation, and being prepared to do more listening than speaking.

It also goes without saying that one should avoid acronyms. In attending many meetings in communities along with other representatives I have witnessed first hand the use of acronyms that make great sense to the people who are using them, but leave others in the dark. Remember that not everyone works in your organization or sector nor is familiar with those acronyms that are designed to speed up communication. In fact, they might not even want to learn your acronyms. In such circumstances acronyms can actually break down communication by forcing people to consider asking potentially embarrassing questions about the meaning of the acronyms. Avoid using them and opt for readily identifiable terms.

Lastly try to avoid using colloquialisms. There are many very common colloquialisms in popular

communication. Each has connotations that may be offensive to some the people that meet and work with. The intent here is to help you avoid using the expressions that may offend some people. Some sample colloquialisms are "circle the wagons," "low man on the totem pole," "too many Chiefs not enough Indians," and "have a pow wow to discuss that issue."

Do's and Don'ts

The following are some things to do and not to do when working with Aboriginal People:

Do:

- Research the community and governing parties before going to the community.
- Undertake capacity building initiatives.
- Take training on "Working Effectively With Aboriginal People" before you start.
- Thank them 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."
- Use caution when shaking hands. The typical North American elbow grab and double pump may not be needed or appreciated.
- Try to establish a relationship and meet when you don't need something.
- Approach issues with a joint problem solving approach.
- Ask the First Nation how they want to be consulted. What are their expectations?
- Know the difference between a Band Chief and a Hereditary Chief before you go to a community.
- Be prepared to meet both Band Chiefs and Hereditary Chiefs on the same day and in the same meeting.
- Be prepared to say that you are having a problem and that you are there to get some thoughts from them on how to solve it.
- Consider dressing down for community meetings. Band offices in many cases have more casual dress policies than businesses.
- Anticipate questions they may have of your organization and prepare answers to those questions.
- Honor all your agreements, especially your oral agreements. Traditionally these are oral societies and oral agreements are as important in

- Aboriginal communities as written agreements.
- Be flexible. Understand that it is not uncommon for the band office to close on very short notice for various reasons, for example, a death in the community.
- Call ahead to confirm your meeting time.

Don't:

- Tell them you are there to speak to them as a stakeholder.
- Tell them that you have a time line and that they have to meet it.
- Tell them what dates to meet, ask which dates would work best.
- Go to them with a completed draft plans or maps; it can send the message that you are willing to work with the community as long as they do it mostly your way.
- Expect to work with the same tribe in the same way on similar or different issues.
- Confuse potluck with potlatch.
- Confuse reservations with reserves.
- Refer to them as Indians or Natives. Instead use Aboriginal People or First Nations.
- Say some of my best friends are: Aboriginal People, Indian, or First Nations.

- Ask them if they know well-known First Nations personalities, for example Chief Dan George.
- Tell them you prefer a municipal style of government
- Tell them, "We should all be equal."
- Ask them if they are going to be Canadian when this is all over.
- Need or expect direct eye contact.

We would like to close by saying Aboriginal Communities may be interested in working with people and organizations, but that systemic limitations sometimes make it difficult for communities to meet with every organization that wants to do business with an Aboriginal community. By considering and implementing some of the things we have suggested, you may be able to increase your chances of "Working Effectively With Aboriginal Peoples."

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