

Working Effectively with Indigenous  
Peoples™

# 27 Tips On What to Say and Do



By Bob Joseph at Indigenous  
Corporate Training Inc.

# Foreword

Handy practical tips to incorporate into that next meeting.

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# Research research research

Research your personal, your corporate, and your team's perspective on working with Indigenous Peoples. The best time to do this research is before you start but it's never too late to start either.

This research can help you determine who to talk to, identify things to say and not say, help you get a sense of questions they will ask you and so much more. In short it will make you more culturally competent.

Check out our Indigenous [cultural competency self-assessment checklist](#) as a starting point.

# Take training before you start

It is in your best interest to ensure you and your team are familiar with and understand the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the challenges and **issues** they face. Learn about the difficult topics, such as **residential schools**, education, health and housing issues, and how to respond respectfully if the topics are brought up.

The training you take should provide you the means to build effective, sustainable, and mutually rewarding relationships with Indigenous communities. It will save you time, money, and frustration in the long run.

It can even **help your career**, as some training and some practical experience will help separate you from the crowd and other applicants.

Here are some **key points** to look for when selecting an Indigenous awareness trainer.

# Do community research

Set aside the time to do extensive research into the community history, governing parties, **worldviews**, **culture** and traditions.

This is the single most important step to take **prior** to contacting the community. It can speed up consultation and engagement activities, buy you time, save resources, save you from going down the wrong path and more.

"But Bob, I don't have time to do this research!" If you don't do it and you start your work you can easily find yourself months down the road realizing you're going to have to start over because you hadn't done your due diligence. Starting over is frustrating for everyone and a waste of time and resources.

# Know community dynamics

Recognize that there are many dynamics at play when working with Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous governments, and organizations.

One example could be, the traditional leaders work well with the elected leaders and in other places it's the opposite in that the traditional leaders don't get along with elected peoples.

Try to learn all you can about the dynamics of communities and the individuals in a community before trying to start a relationship and undertaking work. Such learning can help you come up with more **effective strategies** in your work in the community saving you time and resources in the long run.

# Recognize Nation autonomy

One Indigenous Nation cannot speak for another Indigenous Nation. Strive to avoid setting up processes, discussions, engagement or consultations where this could be an issue.

# Watch your timing

Through your research you will learn about the timing of traditional activities so you can plan your work to respect these important events.

Timing can be everything for the person who wants to build effective and sustainable relationships with an Indigenous community. Consider those whose cultures revolve around **fish and fishing**. They have a very limited window (dictated by nature and regulated by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans) in which to catch enough fish to feed their members through the winter and for cultural events and feasts. The priority of fishing can extend to the entire community – including the Chief and Council. In this environment, it may be next to impossible to get a meeting to happen during the fishing season. Talk about bad timing.

Next, consider the issue of death in a community. Life is precious in any community, but population is a critical concern to communities struggling to grow as Nations. In this context it is not uncommon for all community operations, including the Band office, to shut down completely following the death in a community. Try not to be disappointed if this happens to you.



# Establish relationships early

It would be ideal for you to try to establish a relationship and meet before you need something.

Efforts devoted to building the relationship in the early phase is a wise and valuable investment of your time and resources because it can help build trust which can be hard to come by when things get rolling with tight timelines etc.

Consider hosting "get to know you" meetings, or attending community events and meeting new people as a way to establish a positive relationship.

# Match team composition

Try to match your team's composition with the community's decision-making structure. In other words, if women are the decision makers, then send women and visa versa.

It doesn't become a problem in every situation, but if it does occur expect delays. That's why it's vital that you do your research and identify the leadership structures and assess the governance traditions of the community you want to work with.

Matching your team to the community's work team is a wise and respectful strategy that can establish a good working relationship quicker and avoid problems in the long run.

Obviously, if the only person is you or a teammate and you don't match then you have to go.

# Use caution shaking hands

Offering a hand for a handshake is a fairly common social practice when meeting people. This works most of the time, but we do have to remember that when we are working with Indigenous Peoples we are working across cultures with individuals in their own right and that some Indigenous People do not shake hands and therefore are not expecting, or are uncomfortable with, a handshake. With this in mind, we have to understand and be prepared to offer a hand and not have one offered in return.

Should this happen to you, be sure not to read anything into the fact that someone from the community didn't offer to shake hands with you when you offered a hand first. Do not interpret it as a sign of disrespect, or a sign that they don't like you, when it could possibly be a sign that they simply don't shake hands.

Keep in mind that the typical North American elbow grab and double pump with firm squeeze may not be needed or appreciated either. If they offer a hand then match the intensity and actions. If they don't offer a hand simply withdraw yours in a way that is not too obvious and move on.

# Prepare to be recorded

Some communities have had problems in their dealings with people who were less than honourable in remembering what they said.

As a result, be prepared to have your meetings recorded via microphone or video camera.

# Always do protocol

It can be customary among Indigenous Nations to acknowledge the host peoples and their territory at the outset of any meeting. The long struggle for respect has been tough, but through it all Indigenous communities have continued to follow basic protocols.

It follows then that if you want to work effectively with Indigenous Peoples one of the best ways to do it is to show respect to the people you are working with. This can be established at the beginning of any meeting by following proper protocol and acknowledging the host community, its people, and its territory.

During the research process look for clues as to proper protocol. If you can't find any try to determine if you are meeting on traditional or treaty lands.

Here are two examples of appropriate “protocol” messages.

## *Treaty Territory Protocol*

“I would like to thank **(what the community calls itself here)** for agreeing to meet with us today and for welcoming us to your treaty lands.”

## *Traditional Territory Protocol*

“I would like to thank **(what the community calls itself here)** for taking the time to meet with us and for inviting us into your traditional territory.”

# Stay up-to-date on issues

A key to working effectively with Indigenous Peoples is to understand their issues and perspectives in advance. Learning a community's history and current issues will enable you to anticipate its priorities and core concerns about your interests.

I use google alerts to track communities and people I'm working with. I ask google to give me timely, weekly reports on a community and specific people I'm working with as it helps me see important messages and trends that can guide me to change my strategy or approach.

Consider utilizing social media to help learn about and understand people and communities. Many high ranking leaders have twitter accounts and are commenting on media issues, sometimes even before they hit **mainstream media**.

If a community publishes its own newspaper or blog I always subscribe or follow those too.

# Ask “where are you from”

Do ask people “where they are from”.

Whenever I meet other Indigenous peoples one of the first things I ask or am asked is, where you from? It does not mean where do you live, it means where are your people and territory.

If they say, "I'm Bob and I'm from the downtown eastside" I've learned that they don't live in the community and maybe don't spend all their time thinking about community interests.

If they say, "I'm from the xyz nation and our territory is over here", I've learned they are part of a community and do pay attention and maintain ties to it.

Obviously you can't say "where are you from" when you are out in the community but you could change it up and say, "this is a beautiful community, did you grow up here?" The answer you get could surprise you.

# Proper communications

Internal community communications happen in many different ways and can impact your organization's ability to work effectively with those communities.

Some prefer town halls, others post meeting minutes on their website, some use First Nations radio, some use television, others communicate in their own newsletter or publication.

Be sure to do proper, as in it is the same as they prefer, communications to ensure people have a chance to engage.



# Pacing of communications

Try to match the pacing of communications of the people you are working with.

The traditional mode of Indigenous communication is oral so speech nuances like tone, tempo, volume and inflections can be very important. Be aware and try to match the community style of speech if you can without trying to copy their accent. Also, don't be in a rush to respond until you figure out the pacing etc.

# Mind the agenda

Do seek strategic placement for your organization's issues on the community meeting agenda.

Some communities don't meet every day but meet periodically so they try to cover a multitude of agenda items in a single sitting. If you want to make a presentation at the next meeting, you will want a good position on the agenda. A bad placement would have you speaking after someone who might agitate the community - pretty hard to have a good response to your presentation if everyone is upset.

A suggestion is to ask for a copy of the agenda in advance of the meeting. If your position on the agenda is unfavourable, then ask for a better position or maybe even be prepared to postpone your presentation until the next meeting in hopes of a better placement.

# Mind people alignment

The old saying that “You can tell a lot about people by the company they keep” applies to your work in Indigenous communities, whether you realize it or not. For example, if there is an upcoming election and you have aligned yourself with the outgoing Chief or Council, you may have created a serious “people alignment” problem for your work.

Your selection of consultants to work on your behalf can have similar sensitivity. The reputation of how your hired consultant works with Indigenous Peoples will be considered a reflection on you and your company. Hire accordingly; this also applies to **contractors and subcontractors** as your project progresses.

When attending a multi-party meeting with an Indigenous community, try not to sit close to people whose issues with the community are more contentious than yours as you could inadvertently be perceived as part of that contentious issue.

Also, be wary of the first person who wants to be your friend, and try to get to know those who seem to be avoiding you.

# Expect different leaders

It is possible to meet elected and hereditary chiefs in the same community and meetings.

A Band Chief is elected by Band members to govern for a specified term. Under the specifications of the *Indian Act*, First Nations must have an election every two years.

A **Hereditary Chief** is a leader who has power passed down from one generation to the next along blood lines or other cultural protocols, similar to European royalty.

It is possible, and so one should be prepared to meet both Band Chiefs and Hereditary Chiefs on the same day and in the same meeting. Hopefully this information turns up in your research and you can plan accordingly on how to deal with such situations.

# Know the collective way

Be aware that Indigenous rights are communally or collectively held and that the whole community may need to be involved in the decision-making process.

On occasion we have seen both traditional and elected leaders end up facing the anger of the people for decisions made about their collective rights.

We have seen decisions get overturned later because leaders were off-side in their authority and decisions. If you want to avoid such situations simply take a "cast a wider net approach" and talk to more people in the community.

# Joint problem solving

Use a joint problem solving approach in your work with communities.

If you think about the history of Indigenous relations it has been very much a "Hi, I'm from the government and I'm here to help." The problem is that all that help has not really been helpful. So to say, I'm here to help sends the wrong message.

Instead say things like, "I have lots to share but I know I have lots to learn and I'm looking forward to working with the community on these items of mutual interest." Don't be afraid to ask them for ideas on how to solve problems too.

# Honour your agreements

Honour all your agreements, especially your oral agreements

Traditionally, Indigenous communities are **oral societies** and oral agreements are even more important than written agreements. In Indigenous culture, your word is more important than anything written on a piece of paper. At all costs, you must make sure that you protect your word and integrity in all your dealings on behalf your organization. Nothing can damage your reputation more than having to say, "Things have changed and I will no longer be able to deliver what I promised."

A good mantra to adopt is "promise less, deliver more".

# Anticipate their questions

Anticipate questions they may have of your organization and prepare answers to those questions in advance.

Expect questions in regard to the scope of your proposed work and its impacts on the community. Expect also to be questioned about your personal and corporate history and values.

If you're in government expect all kinds of challenging questions, especially questions about past relationships.



# Dress for the weather

Consider dressing down for work in the community. In many cases, community offices have more casual dress policies than does corporate Canada.

Showing up in the pinstripe suite or with that Gucci purse can send the wrong message.

Don't get me wrong, some communities dress professionally as we would expect in business or government but others don't and dress more for the region and the weather.

# Aid cultural survival

Be aware that cultural survival is a fundamental driver of an Indigenous community's decision-making process.

Every decision made reflects the need to protect the land and culture for **future generations** and is the reason that decisions can take longer in Indigenous communities.

Decisions made that protect cultural survival and the **land** can sometimes not make sense from a **business** perspective but if we can align cultural survival with government or business objectives things can run a lot smoother.

# Avoid sacred sites

Avoid **sacred sites** at all costs. Some of the biggest conflicts in Canada have been around sacred site issues. Indigenous communities will escalate things really quickly around sacred sites issues.

Remember that they don't like to talk about sacred sites as they don't want to make them public knowledge. It may be necessary to sign confidentiality agreements or have off-the-record meetings to learn about them.

# Participate in cultural events

At some point during your work with an Indigenous community, you may be invited to participate in cultural events.

It could be an opening prayer, a smudge, or some other form of cultural activity. They may even ask you to dance in front of 500 of the closest relatives.

It can be very unnerving to participate in a smudge or another type of ceremony for the first time. When in doubt about what to do, ask the host or a friend of the community to explain the ceremony's participation process. If all else fails, follow the lead of the people in front of you.

If you are invited to attend a potlatch, consider it an honour - here are some [potlatch protocol](#) guidelines.

# Be prepared to ask for help

Be prepared to say that you are having a problem and that you are seeking their help on how to solve it.

It's a very simple and honest admission that you are having a problem and have come to them for advice. Seeking their input shows respect, humility and a willingness to learn.

# Thanks for reading

Thanks for reading. We hope you find these tips helpful for your work with Indigenous Peoples.

If you want to learn more personally consider registering for one of our public training sessions. If you are interested in helping out your whole team, consider bringing us on-site to deliver training. Our website address is [www.ictinc.ca](http://www.ictinc.ca)

Don't hesitate to contact us to discuss your options. You can send us an email at [info@ictinc.ca](mailto:info@ictinc.ca) or give us a call at toll free 1.888.986.4055

Halakas'la

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# Guide to Terminology

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