How to Work Effectively with American Indians

Key principles that form the basis for understanding how to create cooperative relationships with American Indians:

**Building Trust:** American Indians are distrustful of researchers and large social institutions. Due to past bad experience, the goals, policies, programs, and research projects are viewed with skepticism.

**Forming Relationships:** Building reliable relationships with Indian communities requires that outcomes of efforts by policy professional and researchers benefit Indian participants.

**Assuring Participation:** American Indians must define terms of participation. A thin line exists between working “with” and working “for” American Indians; they are sensitive to initiatives developed without their participation or input.

**Building Connections**

The following are suggested principles to follow as you develop planning and research initiatives in Indian communities:

► Recognize the fundamental principle of trust-building
  • Build relationships on a personal basis

► Trust is built through action, not words
  • In order to build trust, one must first break down feelings of distrust through honest interactions

► Engage in a process of relationship building
  • “Indian leadership” is different from mainstream perspectives
    • Successful leaders in today’s Indian communities continue to be guided by traditional culture. Community leaders see themselves as leaders only to the extent that a community regards them as such. Often they will go to the community and seek their advice and input

► Use personal forms of communication
  • Personal communication is more effective than letters or other formal notices
    • Ask the person to meet for lunch or coffee

► Recognize and respect Indian styles of communication
  • American Indians tend to be less vocal or gregarious and will not volunteer information quickly
    • Speak in terms familiar to the community
  • Patient listening skills are essential
Language conveys subtle messages

- Empathetic conversation does not work well in Indian communities
- Pursue the point respectfully if the message was not clear
- Do not translate into one’s frame of reference
- If American Indians perceive you are not listening, they will stop sharing information

Integrate Indian participation into planning and research designs

- Involve Indian participants directly and from the very beginning
- Difficult for members of the Indian community to claim ownership for projects which they had no part conceptualizing

Clarity and honesty are essential

- Honest, clear communication about goals and objectives is essential for building long-term working relationships
- Share information about the intended purpose of project and be clear about what is possible and what is not possible
- Do not convey vague messages (if possible, depending upon) – perceived as lack of commitment

Promise only what you can deliver

- Honest communication about what can and cannot be accomplished is forthcoming

Create culturally appropriate forums

- Exhibit patience and respect in meetings
- Because of oral traditions, American Indians tend to communicate in story form, and they will take their time. It is not aimless discussion.
- Listening requires patience and a perceptive attitude
- Create forums that value these communication styles

Incorporate an approach of working with, not for

- Develop cooperative planning and research strategies
- Build consensus between organizational decision-makers and community participants
- Include ongoing evaluation of activities