

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