

Indigenous Relationships: Tips and First Steps

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First Steps + That First Meeting

- Before you do anything else, figure out what traditional, land-based nations exist in your community. These are the groups that you want to establish relationships with first.
- Find out the history of your organization's relationships with local Indigenous nations and organizations. There is nothing worse than feeling sideswiped as you hear horror stories for the first time in a meeting of things that happened many years before you were around.
- Talk to other institutions to get advice on what they have done, what worked and what didn't. This is especially true if there are other local museums that work with the same territorial nations you want to connect with. Museum people love helping other Museum people.
- Once you've done the above steps, go to the local territorial nations first; the education or lands person is the best bet. Do not go to a nearby Nation first, or to a local Indigenous organization like a Friendship society. Proper protocol is that you approach your local land-based nations first.
- Don't be surprised if they don't jump on your invitation to meet. Remember: in the era of reconciliation, every nation has a TON of requests from cultural institutions, businesses, municipalities, you name it. On top of that, they are dealing with their own internal issues, like education for their children or access to water. If you really want to create a relationship, then email, phone, email, phone. Don't give up. They likely want to work with you too, they just don't have time. This is your job, your whole life at work. For them, it is one small part of a huge, complex, busy picture.
- When you finally have a chance to meet with them, remember: this process is about collaboration, not consultation, and about relationship building. Don't come to them with an idea of exactly what you want, when you want it, how you want it. Get a relationship going, then discuss needs and wants of both parties and move forward together once trust is established.
- Also, when that first meeting arrives, have a small gift to say thank you for making time to meet with you.
- Send a thank you card after your first meeting. This gives both parties a chance to breathe (snail mail takes forever) but also gives you an excuse to say, hey, let's meet again soon. Also, reiterate your appreciation that they took the time to meet with you in the first place.

Tips and Best Practices

- Don't be scared to ask questions. Humbly ask for advice. Better to ask for advice than make really bad mistakes. There is a big difference between Indigenous ways of knowing and acting, and Western ways of knowing and acting.
- Understand that things aren't in your control and your timelines may not be their timelines. In fact, as much as possible, avoid timelines; no, throw them out the window!

- Go to their events and activities. Be supportive and show you want a real relationship. Be interested in what they do. Learn about who they are and what is important to them.
- Meet them in their spaces. The doctor doesn't come to you, because that is a hierarchical relationship. This needs to be an equal partnership, so go to meetings in Indigenous spaces. Take turns hosting meetings.
- Have food. Conversations flow better over a meal.
- Speaking of food. Understand each nation's protocols, and if you don't know, ask. Better to ask and go from there than to make mistakes and try to make up for it in the future. Example: blessing of food varies from Nation to Nation.
- Be prepared to spend money. These nations are busy and you can't expect them to work for you for free, even in terms of consultation. Find grants and write good proposals if your facility budget won't cut it.
- Act under the advice of your Indigenous partners. Don't ask for advice, then not follow it. This will quickly ruin your relationship.
- Relationships need to be facility-wide. You don't want one person being the only connection point – if they leave, their connections go with them. Create a widespread understanding about the relationship and the long term goals. Everyone needs to be on board.
- Furthermore, training needs to be facility-wide. Everyone needs to have an understanding of Indigenous protocols, history and reconciliation.
- Keep it up! Don't do one project with a nation and have it be a huge success, then never talk to them again. Find simple ways of keeping in touch. Send Christmas cards. Give them updates when there is a new senior staff member or big project. Invite them to exhibit openings. Keep going to their stuff. Real relationships take work and commitment.