Respectfully Engaging with Indigenous Communities

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOLS, CHURCHES
OR ANY GROUP TO ENGAGE WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

AUSTRALIANS TOGETHER

Respectfully Engaging with Indigenous Communities

Are you engaging with, or planning to engage with an Indigenous community? This information can help you get started or help you find the most appropriate approach.

When done well, meaningful, long-term relationships between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous groups can help people develop cross-cultural understanding, new perspectives and new friendships, and can help acknowledge historical pain and contribute to healing taking place.

Careful consideration needs to be taken before engaging with an Indigenous community, as it can put pressure on Indigenous people and communities, and it takes time to build a mutually beneficial relationship. It's important to consider why you want, or even need, to engage. You need authentic intentions, reasons and contacts. There are other ways you can build connection in your school, church or group. Here are some ideas.

A great way to start is to connect with your local Indigenous community. Here's some information about engaging locally.

Engaging begins with getting to know community members, supporting community initiatives, attending community events and learning as much as you can. Doing these things can help ensure your approach to engagement is seen as respectful by the community; the community you're engaging with may have a different understanding of respectful engagement to you. There's no one way to engage and no two communities are the same. If you've engaged with an Indigenous person or community before, don't assume that what you learnt applies to all Indigenous people or communities.

RECOMMENDED PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGEMENT

The principles below come out of research conducted by Australians Together in 2016 and our experiences engaging with Indigenous communities. The research involved interviews with people in churches, who'd been involved in cross-cultural engagement for at least five years, and the Indigenous communities they engaged with. It found that the motivations, goals and definition of success differed between groups.

Whether you're initiating a relationship or building and maturing an existing relationship, these principles can help guide your engagement.

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INITIATING A RELATIONSHIP:

Things to consider if you're about to engage with an Indigenous community.

1. Get leadership on board.
Leadership support, in both the Indigenous community and the non-Indigenous group, plays a significant role in forming a cross-cultural relationship. If senior leadership didn't initiate the engagement, it's important to gain their support early.

2. Find a relationship broker to help bridge the cultural divide.
If you know someone with an existing and meaningful relationship with an Indigenous person in the community you're engaging with, this person may act as a relationship broker who can provide introductions, cultural explanations and advice. However, it's important not to assume that this one person holds all the information about a community.

3. Undertake cultural training.
Cultural training could include pre-engagement, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and safety training. It involves understanding privilege, stereotyping and one's own cultural inheritance. Cultural training may include learning some Indigenous language and cultural differences specific to that group.

4. Get support from Elders.
It's important to know who the Elders are in the community you want to engage with and get their support. It's not always easy to know who they are, and this may be guarded information. A good place to start is by meeting with local community organisations, or your relationship broker may be able to provide an introduction. As with all relationships, it takes time to build a relationship with Elders.

5. Develop a shared purpose for the relationship.
A shared purpose is essential for the relationship. Consider your purpose for the engagement and why the Indigenous community might want to engage with you. The relationship broker may be able to help facilitate this process.

BUILDING AND MATURING A RELATIONSHIP:

Things to consider if you already have a relationship with an Indigenous community.

1. Review the steps for Initiating a Relationship.
You may find inspiration for building on your relationship.

2. Plan engagement activities equally, as peers.
There's a historical inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that can be invisible to the latter. To engage respectfully, we must be mindful of this inequality and the power dynamics it created.

One way to understand this historical inequality, and how it continues to have an ongoing impact today, is for non-Indigenous people to do pre-engagement training.

We have resources here that will help you create a relationship based on a mindset of equality.

Payment for services conducted by Indigenous people, such as speaking at an event or to your group, is an important way to acknowledge equality and value time.

3.Take part in activities that are meaningful for both parties.
Building a relationship is based on equity; where each party within the relationship gets out of it what they want. It's therefore important to be open and interested in what a meaningful activity is for the Indigenous community. Non-Indigenous people may place higher value on 'doing' and structured activities, while Indigenous people or communities may value unstructured time together. It's important not to presume or impose your ideas.

4. Ensure you have a shared understanding of what it means to be on the right track.
Unless this has been explicitly discussed, it's likely that each party understands this differently. For example, for Indigenous people, the right track might be about relational growth and how the relationship continues. For some, there may be an expectation of obligation; for example, you may be called on when a community member is visiting your city. Non-Indigenous groups may have an action-oriented approach and may feel the relationship is on track if certain activities have been done.

It's all about relationship, and if you work towards a mutual understanding, then you're on the right track.

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INITIATING A RELATIONSHIP:

Things to consider if you're about to engage with an Indigenous community.

6. Commit to building the relationship slowly and to working with the community long term.
Research tells us that 3-5 years is the average time it takes a non-Indigenous person to build a trusting relationship with an Indigenous person or community. The best relationships are built over time and have long-term intent. Relationships are about people, not goals and outcomes; they need the same people engaging.

7. Listen well and observe.
Indigenous knowledge is held and passed on carefully within Indigenous communities. How you listen and respond to Indigenous knowledge will be significant in building your relationship. It can help you gain respect and show that you're trustworthy and that knowledge can be shared with you.

BUILDING AND MATURING A RELATIONSHIP:

Things to consider if you already have a relationship with an Indigenous community.

5. Establish a 'safe' environment.
A 'safe' environment involves building trust through a commitment to listen and learn. It's a place where stories can be shared and different views can be voiced.

Sometimes, the idea of an environment being safe is interpreted as meaning that people can ask questions that may otherwise be seen to be insensitive. However, asking these questions can create painful experiences for Indigenous people in the relationship and therefore undermine the safety of the space for all within it. A better way to find answers to these questions is to explore other avenues of learning instead. Our Language and Terminology Guide is a good place to start.

6. Get youth involved in cross-cultural activities.
Youth can find cross-cultural engagement rewarding. It can help young people to build cultural awareness and shape their future.

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth benefit when the relationship continues after the physical visit is over.

7. Take the time to understand, respect and recognise cultural, political and lifestyle differences.
Respect in relationships is about appreciating and valuing the differences in the perspectives and worldview of others, not simply the similarities.

One cultural difference you may come across relates to the sharing of knowledge. Non-Indigenous people are often happy to share knowledge and stories, but it's not always the case in Indigenous communities. It's important to respect this and not to expect things be shared with you.

Another example is when a non-Indigenous person receives a skin name. This is a sign of respect and trust, which carries with it relationship obligations and expectations. If you're given a skin name, it's important to learn and understand what's expected of you.

8. Listen to Indigenous people's stories and be open to hearing a different version of history.
Many Indigenous people have suffered from intergenerational trauma and the scars, along with the healing process, continue today. When done well, cross-cultural relationships can aid in the healing process.