

Working Effectively with Indigenous
Peoples™

23 Tips On What Not to Say or Do



By Bob Joseph at Indigenous
Corporate Training Inc.

Foreword

Handy practical tips to incorporate into that next meeting.

Bob Joseph



I train thousands of people every year and the issue that learners are most concerned about in their work with Indigenous Peoples is saying or doing the wrong thing. This guide is provided to help people avoid saying or doing the wrong things. It's based on content starting on page 174 of our [Working Effectively with Aboriginal Peoples®](#) book.

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Don't use colloquialisms

Few things will tarnish you faster than the thoughtless use of colloquialisms. Many colloquial expressions used in popular communication carry connotations that may offend at least some of the people you will meet.

Use these 8 colloquialisms at your peril!

1. Indian giver
2. Circle the wagons
3. Low man on the totem pole
4. Rain dance
5. Too many Chiefs, not enough Indians
6. Pow wow
7. Indian Summer
8. Indian Time

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Don't use acronyms

We have attended many meetings in First Nation communities and have witnessed first-hand the overuse of acronyms by other visitors, which may make great sense to the speaker, but not to those listening.

Remember where you are and who your audience is. Not only will many in your First Nation audience be unfamiliar with your acronyms, they may not even want to learn them. Or, worse yet, will think you're talking code so it's best to avoid using acronyms.

Don't use all technical terms

Much the same as the overuse of acronyms, overuse of technical terms will leave the same impression. First Nations people are like audiences anywhere in the sense that they want a presentation they can relate to and understand.

One comment we often hear First Nation community members say is, "How come the presenters have to use such big words?" Use plain language that everyone can understand.

A good presentation will include layperson and technical person information.

Don't use "stakeholders"

In your written and verbal communications

"Stakeholder" is a commonly used business term that should be avoided at all costs when working with First Nation communities. If the 'Rod and Gun Club' (a stakeholder) doesn't like what you are doing they can lobby their MP or MLA to try to effect changes. If a First Nation community doesn't like what you are doing they have the ability to launch legal action thereby putting your work in immediate jeopardy for a number of years.

In this context, First Nations people are not merely stakeholders - they have constitutionally protected rights and are used to dealing with Canada, provinces and territories on a **Nation-to-Nation** basis.

Consider these recommendations that we make in our courses. Use "rights holder" instead of "stakeholder". You could also say something along the lines of "we are reaching out to governments, Indigenous Peoples, and stakeholders to gather feedback for our work."

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Don't force your timelines

and tell them they have to meet them

Timelines are thorny issues in First Nation communities. A good working rule to incorporate is “our timeline is our problem”.

At present, most people who go to a community to do business have a timeline. Push too hard on meeting those timelines and you'll create resistance which in the end will stretch your timeline out even further.

Additionally, If you push for the sake of your timeline, you may find that it compromises future business opportunities in that community. Conversely, you will likely win respect and a more receptive hearing if you approach the community with an attitude marked by interest and willingness to listen, leaving your timeline back in the office.

There are ways to overcome timeline issues such as capacity building or **building long term relationships**.

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Don't use "equally"

As in "we have to treat you equally with others..."

"Equality" and "Equally" are terms that should be avoided when working with First Nations people. When they hear the term equality or equal they hear that they have to give up their **constitutionally protected rights** or they hear we can be equal only if **they** give up **their** human rights to be who they are as a People.

They have no interest in giving up their constitutional, legal, political, or human rights and will react strongly when these words are used.

Don't insist on dates to meet

It sounds obvious but this sometimes happens.

Don't tell the community what dates you should meet and then insist on it.

Your meeting is just one of many and may not be a priority for the community representatives who are very busy managing and addressing the needs of their communities.

There are also cultural, traditional and seasonal pursuits such as **hunting** and **fishing** that only happen at certain times of the year and these will take precedence over your meeting.

A more respectful strategy is to ask which dates would work best for their community.

Don't name drop

As in "I just came from this other community and they liked me..."

Many people assume that it is okay to name drop as they move from community to community in their work. Such assumptions are risky and can be outright destructive. Everything can change as we move between communities, even when communities are in close proximity to one another. Ask yourself where the value is in adding this into a conversation. Here's an article on the pitfalls of this from our blog:

["First Nation Name Dropping - the Dead Cat Bounce"](#)

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Don't best friend it

As in "some of my best friends are Indigenous Peoples"

Personal connections are important and there are times we should bring them into a conversation. Bring them in too soon though and you risk being seen to be over compensating. Worse yet, you could name drop the wrong person or community, both of which can be disastrous for you. Give the relationship a little time before you "best friend" it.

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Don't discuss types of chiefs

Elected vs. Hereditary chiefs

This can be interpreted as disrespectful to the lineage of [hereditary chiefs](#) that dates back to time immemorial.

Some communities have elected chiefs. Others have elected and hereditary chiefs or other forms of traditional government leadership.

The system of having band chiefs and band elections every two years was forced upon First Nations in the *Indian Act*.

I would also encourage people to stay away from conversations around style of government. For example, "I prefer a municipal style of government."

Don't assume a Band is in its own territory

Throughout Canada, many bands' **reserves** have been relocated from their **traditional territories** for different reasons. Do your due diligence research and learn the history of the community you are working with or hope to work with. This will help you avoid talking to the wrong community or talking to communities in the wrong order.

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Don't make assumptions about the band's authority

In land use matters

Don't assume that the band Chief and Council are able to make land use decisions regarding their Peoples' territory.

We know of instances where the traditional leaders make land use decisions and the elected ones do housing, health care and education.

We have also seen instances where community members, who do not support a band council decision, go to great lengths to change the decision and/or the leaders who made those decisions.

Keep in mind the rights of First Nations peoples are collectively held in law and consultation with the broader community may be required.

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Don't go with a completed draft plan

Showing up with completed draft plans signals to the community that your project is a done deal and you are meeting with them only because it looks good - an item to be checked off on the list. Insincerity is easily detected.

Don't assume men rule

We see people go to communities from time to time with the assumption that they will be dealing with men and that the men rule.

Some communities have a matriarchal leadership while others have a patriarchal leadership structure. Do your research in advance find out what roles exist and who does what and when.

Don't cut cookies

or use the same old consultation process

Don't expect to consult with the same community in the same way on different issues. What worked last time may not work next time.

Different issues will have different concerns and impacts. Take the time to learn the concerns of a community - it could be providing employment or preserving culturally significant areas - and modify your approach to respect the individual issue. It's always good to avoid the cookie cutter approach when working with communities.

Potluck & Potlatch

The same right?

Don't confuse potlatch with potluck.

Potlatch is an ancient, traditional gathering held by many Northwest Coast First Nations that survived the best attempts of the government to banish it. It is a primary means for the communities to bear witness, to confirm in public any changes in status such as marriages, birth, death, and coming of age and so much more. The word itself is a Chinook Jargon word that means "to give".

At a potluck I bring the rice crispy squares and you bring the chicken wings.

Reserves & Reservations

The same right?

Don't confuse reserves with reservations.

Reserve is the Canadian term. Bands and their members are situated on reserves. Reservation is the American term for a place where Native American tribes live. So, in Canada, we don't have reservations except at hotels, restaurants and airlines.

There are also urban reserves, of which there are two types: one is a reserve that was **rural** but became urban when a neighbouring town expanded around it, while the second is created when a First Nation acquires a block of land in a city and works through the process of **acquiring reserve status** for the land.

Don't use bad terminology

What is the best terminology? Is it "Indian" or "Native" or "Indigenous"?

Our suggestion is to always go with what they are calling themselves. Call the band office after hours and they will tell you what they are calling themselves in their answering machine message. A little research goes a long way here.

I talk all about this subject in this short video.



Don't question Canadianness

I was at a community meeting one time where a curious participant asked the community members if they were going to be Canadian when the treaties and court cases were all done.

It's a good question if you are trying to start a bench clearing brawl. Do your own research rather than risk it. Treaties are attached to the Constitution. It makes Indigenous Peoples a part of Canada.

Court cases are fought in Canadian courts most of the time. If Indigenous Peoples were trying to not be Canadian, why would they fight court cases using a Canadian court? Many understand that to be Canadian.

I should note a small number of communities take a sovereignty perspective.

Don't impose eye contact

Don't impose or expect direct eye contact.

Many non-Indigenous people believe that it's important to maintain eye contact during conversation.

For many Indigenous Peoples, continuous eye contact may not be expected or appreciated. For [residential school](#) survivors, eye contact with school or church officials could have resulted in physical punishment.

For hunter societies, if they were spending all their time looking each other in the eye they could miss dinner walking by.

Don't overdress

Don't overdress for community meetings.

Along with any assumptions, you should also leave behind the business suit, Gucci bag or high heel shoes. This style of attire can send two wrong messages:

- 1) you have lots of money
- 2) your attire indicates a “defender of the empire” attitude.

Both of these messages can have serious ramifications for your meeting by setting a tone that may not accurately reflect you or your organization.

Don't fret meeting duration

Don't fret, stress, and obsess about the duration of a meeting.

Sometimes meeting agendas aren't adhered to if certain topics take longer to discuss or new ones arise. Be present in the moment. When you book a meeting with a community, try to keep a buffer of time between the expected ending of the meeting and your next appointment. Don't check your watch, and definitely turn off your phone or put it in quiet mode.

If you forget to turn it off and it buzzes or flashes lights don't pick it up, read and then start to reply as this is very rude.

Don't answer too soon

Don't feel that you must answer or fill the silent periods during discussions. These silent periods can be longer than you are accustomed to, and may be needed for thought formulation. Try to ensure the speaker has finished before you contribute to the conversation.

Thanks for reading

Thanks for reading. We hope you found 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

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

27 Must Do's free ebook

Hey if you liked this ebook why not download the companion book called 27 things you should say and do when working with Indigenous Peoples.

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