CULTURAL PROTOCOLS
FOR WORKING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Foreword
This document outlines steps to give you some knowledge and skills on how to conduct successful, productive communication with Aboriginal individuals, communities and family groups. This information will help build positive, long term relationships.

It has been prepared to improve direct communication between Aboriginal people and others who work in Indigenous communities. This will help avoid unnecessary delays and conflict. Remember Aboriginal communities have been subjected to “research” for many years and many people have become reluctant to cooperate and they don’t need much of an excuse to refuse to participate. This could have a serious impact on your project.

Aboriginal people have legitimate concerns over the negative influence that visitors/workers can have on their families, community and culture. If you have respect and behave in a sensitive, culturally appropriate manner when visiting or working in communities - Aboriginal people will support your and your project.

Different communities, groups and individuals will require different approaches, depending upon particular circumstances as every community and every individual is different

Remember it is a privilege to be out in the communities not a right

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**Working with Aboriginal communities — a practical approach**

Community consultation happens when you actually visit the community and meet with the Council, the health clinic and whoever else you need to speak to, to discuss your project face to face. Inform as many local community peoples as possible about your project, and they in turn are given the opportunity to get to know you. If you don’t present well at the initial meeting, your project could be judged accordingly and regaining lost ground could be impossible. This will have a major impact on the research project.

Speak plain English, don’t be tempted into speaking appalling pidgin, the community will find this offensive, most community people have a good understanding of English even though it may not be their first language. What you do when you get to the community is definitely **not** your own business, everyone will be watching you. If you are interesting enough every aspect, every nuance of you will be discussed and digested for future reference.

**CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- Kinship relationships
- Avoidance rules
- Law Business
- Funerals – “Sorry Business”
- Taboos
- Shame vs embarrassment
- Public vs Private Space
- Verbal and non-verbal communication styles

**PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- Getting There:
  - Travelling by Plane
  - Travelling by 4X4
- Community Accommodation

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Decision Making

Indigenous people prefer to take their time trying to find an agreement that makes everybody happy. Discussions and debate to seek agreement will take place before meetings and even held. Time consuming in their short term; in the long term Indigenous people hold that their method avoids bad feeling and trouble in the future.

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<tr>
<th>NON - INDIGENOUS</th>
<th>INDIGENOUS</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. A person talks about themselves in terms of their work, opinions, what they have done and would like to do and what they own etc.</td>
<td>1. A person describes who they are by talking about the group they belong to and their relationship to others within this group.</td>
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<td>2. To feel good about themselves a person needs to have some personal privacy and space to renew themselves.</td>
<td>2. To feel good about themselves a person needs to spend plenty of time doing group things with others in their group.</td>
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<td>3. It is important to be able to “sell yourself” and it is all right to talk about how good you are.</td>
<td>3. Being self-deprecating (not big-noting yourself) shows you have a good character.</td>
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<td>4. Being direct shows you are willing to be honest and open. It OK to challenge someone else’s ideas because it helps to “clear the air”.</td>
<td>4. Proper behavior is to maintain harmony. That means: - go with the flow, avoid open trouble and make sure you and other do not lose face.</td>
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<td>5. People like to “get down to business” and “get to the point”. They often feel impatient with too much chit-chat.</td>
<td>5. It is important to feel congenial towards someone before you can do business with them.</td>
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<td><strong>6.</strong> It is easy to make <strong>new</strong> friends but they come and go quickly.</td>
<td><strong>6.</strong> It is normal to be wary of and not that friendly with strangers. It takes a long time to form a relationship and you expect it to last.</td>
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<td><strong>7.</strong> If you don’t like what is happening in a particular group you can go find another.</td>
<td><strong>7.</strong> It is very difficult to walk away from your group even if you disagree with them. To be made outcast from a group is extremely stressful.</td>
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<td><strong>8.</strong> People put most energy into horizontal relationships eg. Friends, spouse</td>
<td><strong>8.</strong> Your family relationships are very important to you and you take your obligations very seriously.</td>
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<td><strong>9.</strong> Competition within a group is healthy and makes it strong. Different groups often work together for a common purpose.</td>
<td><strong>9.</strong> It is not good to compete with people in your own group but it is normal for different groups to always be competing with each other.</td>
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<td><strong>10.</strong> Decisions reflect what the majority wants. It does not matter if some people <strong>disagree</strong>.</td>
<td><strong>10.</strong> Everybody should agree with decisions that are made by the group (consensus).</td>
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**CONCLUSION**

Recognising that there are differences across cultures as diverse as the many Indigenous communities and mainstream Australian is pretty easy. Understanding them isn’t, and dealing with them is even harder. An inability to deal with cultural differences has profound implications for efficiency, harmony, task performance, productivity and the actualisation of goals and desired outcomes.

There is no Procedural Manual for this; the real keys for fair dinkum negotiations and decision making are patience, sincerity, respect, an open mind and the development of connectedness and serious consideration of the information listed below:
• Accept that it is not your role to change people’s values to what you think is “right”.

• Accept that it is not your role to redistribute power within the group to match your concept of what is “right”.

• Beware of the cost-time factors in your culture which allow people little time or justification for developing personal relationships which are central to dealing successfully with Indigenous communities who value long term not short term relationships. Appropriate/adequate time-lines should be recognised as a crucial element of a job or job description. It should be recognised as a Key Performance Indicator.

• Mind your own business and only become involved if you are invited. There is *Women’s Business, Men’s Business and NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS.*

Aboriginal communities may be cautious of new projects and your approach should be ‘culturally appropriate’. Aboriginal people, as do non-Aboriginal people, appreciate courtesy and respect for their culture and ways of doing business. It is important to consult early with appropriate agencies, affected communities, groups or individuals.

If at all times you keep and open mind, treat people with common decency and respect you won’t go too far wrong.