



Partnering with Native Nations in a Good Way

Intended Audience: Non-Native allies

Introduction

Are you interested in collaborating with Native nations but don't know where to start? Or, do you have an existing partnership and want to learn how to be a better relative?

We created this guide to share best practices for partnering with Native nations in a good way. We are grateful to Alli Moran, Levi Brown, Joe Nayquonabe, and Dewayne Hornbuckle for contributing their expertise to this conversation. In addition, we used our own experiences and practices to inform the guide.

Importance of Meaningful Partnerships

It's important to understand why you should strive to create thoughtful, intentional partnerships. Developing meaningful partnerships shows respect for both sovereignty and elected leaders. When you follow a nation's processes for outreach and engagement, you affirm Tribal sovereignty and demonstrate that elected Tribal leaders deserve equal respect to other elected leaders. For example, sometimes folks take an informal approach and fail to use elected leaders' official titles. Use a leader's formal title until you're told otherwise.

Taking time to build meaningful relationships respects and recognizes the time and resources of everyone involved. Tribal leaders are short on time and resources. This is also true for the organizations, governments, and entities looking to engage with Native nations. Approaching engagement thoughtfully helps preserve bandwidth for everyone's important work.

Moving Beyond Past Harms

Intentionally engaging with Native nations in a good way also acknowledges past harms and helps build a new future. Native nations have experienced a long history of organizations, institutions, and individuals causing harm through “community engagement” attempts. Many of these harms are still perpetuated regularly.

Think about groups who claim to know what’s best for Indian Country and come into communities with a “silver bullet solution,” only to fail because they don’t know much at all. They fail to see that solutions already lie within communities. And, they often leave abruptly with a mess in their wake, causing communities to distrust future attempts at partnership. Do the work of developing intentional community engagement programs so you don’t replicate this behavior.

Emotional Labor and Optical Allyship

Thoughtful partnerships help avoid problems related to emotional labor. While well-intentioned, engagement efforts with Native nations often result in non-Native groups and individuals asking Native folks to do free emotional labor. By emotional labor, we mean “unpaid, often invisible work that a person is compelled to do by others to keep [the other person] happy” (Verywell Mind). When we’re unsure or anxious about something like a new partnership, it can be tempting to reach out to those we consider community leaders or experts for help before doing our own research. Spend time doing your own research on developing a meaningful community engagement plan before jumping in.

It’s important to carefully articulate the why behind your community engagement efforts so you can avoid optical allyship and performativity. Optical allyship, defined by Latham Thomas, “makes a statement but does not go beneath the surface and is not aimed at breaking away from the systems of power that oppress.” Communities will see through your efforts if you’re not approaching them from a good place and with solid intentions.

Sometimes, groups undertake engagement efforts for the wrong reasons. Perhaps your organization has a history of failing to engage with communities you claim to serve. Maybe you've gotten some pushback. Embarking on a quick engagement journey to ease public pressure is the wrong move. Ask yourself: am I doing this for the purpose of a photo opportunity or reputational improvement? If your efforts don't involve a genuine desire to learn from and work in partnership with a community, it's time to rethink things. Don't involve Native communities in your mess!

Preparation

Thoughtful preparation is key for partnering with Native nations in a good way. We've separated your preparation steps into a few categories: research, mindset, protocol, and incentives.

Research

Learn as much as you can about Native nations before building a new relationship. Doing your homework shows respect for Native leaders' time. It's not up to Native people to educate you. Here are a few questions (list is not exhaustive) to ask before launching a new partnership:

- Who are the nation's current elected leaders?
- Who is the appropriate point of contact for doing initial outreach to the nation re: your partnership?
- What are some of the nation's biggest priorities, accomplishments, and needs? Does your partnership align?
- How do you pronounce the nation's name?
- What is the nation's history, and how does this history inform the nation's current reality?
- Is there any evidence that anyone else is already engaged or has engaged in a partnership like the one you're proposing?
- What history, if any, does your organization have with the Native nation? If your organization has a history, have you investigated whether harm was caused? Has your organization taken tangible steps to repair harm?

An important takeaway: Don't duplicate efforts. This happens frequently in the nonprofit sector. If a Native nation has already undertaken a similar partnership in the past, do your homework to discern lessons learned. What worked? What didn't? What might you do differently? If the nation is actively engaged in a similar effort, look for ways to support that effort. Ultimately, listen to nations and respect their wishes.

Mindset

Are you in the right headspace to begin this work? You may have a wealth of knowledge, but if you don't have the right attitude, you and your work are not going to go very far. Humility, openness, patience, and an asset-based mentality are crucial for building strong relationships.

Humility

You may be the expert in your field, but you're very likely not the expert in this new community. Get comfortable ditching your expert mentality and adopting a beginner identity.

Openness

Listen first and listen again. Choose to lead with curiosity and inquisitiveness. Be willing to admit that your great idea might not be a good fit for the community. The thing you want to do may not be the community's first priority (or a priority at all). Be open to pivoting, pausing, or abandoning your idea. That does not mean you or your project failed; it simply wasn't a good fit at that time.

Patience

Know that you'll need to work at the speed of the community, even if it doesn't align with your speed. Demonstrate your willingness to invest in a longer-term process to build trust. Relationships take time in Indian Country.

Asset-Based Mentality

Avoid assuming communities do not have solutions. A lack of resources does not translate to a lack of talents and skills. If your plan does not look to embrace and leverage existing community solutions, you should refine it. Ask Native nations what is currently working well in their communities and how to build on that momentum.

Protocol and Reciprocity

Respecting protocol and practicing reciprocity are two crucial elements of good community engagement. Always err on the side of formality out of respect, and then adjust—with permission—once your relationship has developed in a good way.

Protocol

Before you begin a new partnership, determine the appropriate channels for communication and approval. The leader of your organization should be the person initiating contact with a nation's leadership. This leader-to-leader protocol shows respect to the Native nation. Include time in your plan to receive approval from the nation before starting work within that nation. Receiving approval shows respect for Native nations' sovereignty and prevents surprises later. Ask yourself:

- What department within the partner nation best aligns with how my project will be implemented?
- Who are the main points of contact from that department?
- What process should I follow to receive official approval from the nation to get started?

If you're not sure where your project fits within a particular nation, nations usually list points of contact for general outreach on their websites.

Joe Nayquonabe, CEO of Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, has the following suggestions about initial outreach:

“I think a lot of people assume that you should go to the Tribal elected officials or chairs. And to me, that’s a major blunder. For me, in my nation, our commissioners really act on behalf of our Chief Executive. It’s funny when folks go to elected leaders, and then they get sent straight back to commissioner. You should start as close as you can to wherever the thing you’re trying to pitch will be implemented. Don’t try to usurp the chain of command.”

Failing to follow a nation’s process will result in extra time and headache for everyone involved. Consider this case where a non-Native organization wanted to help support a nation’s foster care system. They started their work by fixing up an old community building on a reservation. While most folks were thrilled, they didn’t ask for the nation’s approval first.

Things didn’t stay positive for long. A rift developed between community members and the leader of this organization. Folks went to the Tribal Council to complain they were doing work without permission. The Council then called a meeting with this leader to explain.

Once he provided an explanation, the Council agreed he was doing good work and ultimately gave him an official resolution. The nation’s district representatives then had to go back to their communities to explain that the person working on their community building now had an official resolution and was in the clear.

While things might have worked out well in the end, frame the situation in terms of time and energy wasted. If this person had started with approval from the nation, the district representatives would not have had to spend valuable time reporting him and bringing the message back to their communities.

It’s not a great look to be reported and required to explain yourself. Wouldn’t you rather start out on a positive note? When working with Native nations, always seek permission first, not forgiveness later.

Reciprocity

In addition to structural processes, consider cultural protocols.

For many Native communities, mutual exchange is a shared common value. Look for ways to incorporate it into your plan. For example, when asking for something (knowledge, permission, etc.), it's common to offer tobacco. Offering tobacco demonstrates respect for the other person's labor, time, and knowledge. If your own cultural protocols do not allow you to handle tobacco, consider bringing another gift to acknowledge the other person's experience. Medicines from your own community or local medicines in the form of tea are great substitutes. Again, it is your responsibility to research those cultural protocols specific to the nation you wish to work with. Cultural competency is incredibly important.

Before you offer tobacco or a gift, consider the seriousness of the ask. Is your attempt heartfelt? Are you prepared to follow through on your ask with action?

Incentives

Sometimes, you'll need to incentivize participation at the start of your work. It's another unique aspect of working in Indian Country. The need to incentivize participation stems from trust. Until you can produce good work and show the community that you're capable of acting on your words, you need to find creative ways to bring people in. Giveaways are also very common in Indian Country and align with Indigenous values.

Incentives are not just for outside groups. Sometimes, Tribal leaders use incentives to motivate community members. Why would folks within a community have to do this? One answer is survey fatigue in Indian Country. Folks are constantly asked what their needs are, but sometimes, solutions are not implemented. Consider surveys from state and federal agencies, charities, and Tribal governments themselves.

An Example

We'll share an example demonstrating the effective use of incentives from a Native nation in our region. Leaders from the nation wanted to take their community through a strategic planning process.

Producing an end product that reflected the needs of the full community required meaningful community participation. Rather than a small group, leaders wanted a broad swath of the community to participate.

They started the process by heavily incentivizing participation. They gave away food, gift cards, propane, and coolers to encourage folks to share their input. Once the organizers built trust and demonstrated that solutions would actually be implemented, they no longer needed to incentivize participation to the same extent.

Data Matters

External groups also need to consider the lasting impacts of data theft and abuse on Indigenous communities. Native people have had their data and knowledge stolen and misused for centuries. This will likely impact your community engagement efforts and require you to use unique strategies like incentivization to encourage participation.

Consider how you plan to share any data collected with relevant Native nations. Educate yourself and your organization on Indigenous data sovereignty and why it matters. Data sovereignty is the right of Indigenous peoples and nations to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their own data. (Thank you to Dr. Stephanie Russo Carroll for this definition.) Extensive data is collected about Native nations, but this data is rarely collected by Native nations or for nations' desired uses. Think about whether some or all of the data you collect is relevant to nations' goals. If it is, build transparent data sharing methods into your plan.

What does a good partnership look like?

Now that you've started the work to prepare, we're going to show you what a good partnership actually looks like. Here are some insights and examples from Indigenous leaders:

- Joe Nayquonabe (Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures CEO): “Good partnerships are not a one way relationship. The best partnerships are those where we’re adding to them just as much as our partners and vice versa. ...There is this give and this take, where each of us is getting better for having joined the partnership. And, there is an investment in trust.”
- Dewayne Hornbuckle (Youth Outreach Advisor for Choctaw Nation Tribal Services): “When both sides are open to learn about each other, partnerships go more smoothly. If you come in with preconceived ideas, walls can easily go up. Being willing to learn, willing to change, and willing to be flexible helps a lot.”
- Levi Brown (Director of Tribal Affairs for the Minnesota Department of Transportation): “A good partnership looks like getting to know your partner(s). It’s pivotal to avoid making decisions based on assumptions--you could end up very quickly offending or having a misunderstanding that didn’t need to happen if you’d simply asked questions.”

Final Reminders

Best practices for positive partnerships are always changing. Just because one model works for you at a particular time in a particular community does not mean it will work forever. Continue to expand your knowledge of community engagement: we owe it to communities to never stop learning.

When doing this work, know that your own social bubbles and positionality (where you’re located in relation to various social identities) matter and will impact how you view things.

Your community engagement process may lead you to doing something totally different than what you set out to do—that is very ok!

At the end of the day, remember to always respect Tribal sovereignty.

Additional Resources

- What is Emotional Labor? (Verywell Mind):
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-emotional-labor-5193184>
- Collaboratory for Indigenous Data Governance: <https://indigenoustatalab.org/>
- What is Tribal Sovereignty explainer video (NGC):
<https://nativegov.org/resources/what-is-tribal-sovereignty/>
- What is Indigenous Governance explainer video (NGC):
<https://nativegov.org/resources/what-is-indigenous-governance/>
- What do Tribal Governments Do explainer video (NGC):
<https://nativegov.org/resources/what-do-tribal-governments-do/>