



Addressing the Needs of Tribal Foster Youth

## **TRIBAL STAR TIPS FOR FOLLOWING PROTOCOL WHEN WORKING WITH TRIBAL COMMUNITIES**

These tips for following protocol will focus on two areas: protocol in the context of others (group setting), and protocol to engage community leadership. *Merriam-Webster defines protocol as: 3 a: a code prescribing strict adherence to correct etiquette and precedence.* The ability to follow and understand protocol when working with Tribal communities will assist one's efforts to set a foundation for long-lasting and trusting relationships.

Because of a long history of broken treaties, attempted genocide (California policy in 1848), and federal policies that broke apart Native families, Native communities are hesitant to collaborate with health departments, non-Tribal social service agencies, and academic institutions. In both the distant and recent past, the "words" spoken by non-Natives when forming agreements were not honored which today results in much of the distrust and anger held by Natives toward non-Natives. Additionally, with the recent success of Tribal enterprises (gaming, retail, etc.), many Tribal members expect that any effort to build relations include a hidden agenda to seek financial support.

The use of protocol when engaging with Native community members can show Tribal gatekeepers that one has taken the time to learn the value of culture, tradition, and humility. Using protocol does not guarantee Tribal participation; it increases the probability of participation. The following recommendations are not based on the culture of any single tribe, but on the application of Tribal values to group and individual interaction.

### **A new frame of reference.**

Tribal protocol requires behavior that demonstrates humility, respect, the awareness that all things are connected, and that our individual and group behaviors can help and hurt current efforts to solve community problems. Tribal values emphasize family/clan/group/Tribe, not the self or individual as in contemporary mainstream society. When working with Tribal entities it is important to behave as if one is acting on behalf of the group's greater good. Questions are best framed in a manner that conveys awareness that the "family" (or greater whole) may be affected, positively or negatively by the answer.

For example, when asking Tribal leaders to participate in an advisory capacity (or give input in a decision-making process) it is best to ask for the "help and advice that will enhance the wellbeing and future of Tribal youth within the community". When hosting an event, one should approach one's role as though one were leading a large family reunion, making sure every individual is acknowledged, and that the group discussion and decision process is conducted in a respectful and harmonious manner, with an emphasis on ensuring the entire group benefits from each individual that is present.

*Tribal STAR is a project of the Academy for Professional Excellence,  
San Diego State University School of Social Work  
<http://theacademy.sdsu.edu>  
6505 Alvarado Road, Suite 107, San Diego, CA 92120*



**Here are four cornerstones that help encourage trust among Tribal people:**

1. Demonstrate respect for Elders, Tribal Leaders, elected Tribal Leaders, and Spiritual Leaders by acknowledging and appreciating their roles in the community and seeking their advice as experts of the community.
2. Schedule meetings and events around meals, and impart the sense of importance of eating together combined with community sharing. This is a good time to recognize individuals new to the community, and to praise an individual's or organization's recent success.
3. Always publicly acknowledge Tribal participation at meetings and make sure non-Tribal participants know who in attendance is from one of the local reservations, and any who are recognized as leaders.
4. Model a spirit of cross-cultural collaboration by including and recognizing the efforts of both Tribal and non-Tribal entities throughout your event.

**Engaging Tribal Leadership:**

- ★ Know your local Tribe(s); know where the reservations are located, and if you are in an urban area, know which Tribe(s) is acknowledged to have occupied the land where you or your training is located.
- ★ Try to attend a local community event (fiestas, gatherings, pow-wows, storytelling, and cultural events), identify the leadership at the event, and humbly and respectfully introduce yourself.
- ★ When asking for support, frame your request in the context of how it will help Tribal Youth and the Community.
- ★ Be yourself, with sincerity and transparency, and follow through with each commitment you make verbally, or else run the risk of being part of a continuous chain of broken promises and dishonor. Remember to "honor your own words".

**When Hosting Your Event:**

- ★ Ask representatives from the local Tribes to help officially welcome attendees.
- ★ When Elders and Tribal Leaders are attending, make sure to recognize them formally in front of the group.
- ★ When a new Tribal representative arrives (especially to standing meetings), make sure to personally take the time to introduce them to everyone before the meeting starts, so they can begin building on a face-to-face interaction.
- ★ Model cross-cultural collaboration by your own behavior, create the time and space for everyone's participation and point of view.

**What Not To Do (Tips from Karan Kolb-Williamson):**

Although it is important to know all you can about the history of Tribal people, be careful not to imply that you are an "expert" about a Tribe (especially when speaking to a member of the Tribe). Remember that much of the published literature about Tribal people was written by non-Natives, so it is improper to correct any Tribal person when they are speaking about Tribal or cultural affairs. At times, it is best to be silent. Don't try to impress or flatter Tribal people by dressing as a Tribal member; it could be interpreted as trying too hard to "fit in". For more information visit the Tribal STAR website at <https://theacademy.sdsu.edu/programs/tribal-star/>.