



**TO DERAIL YOUR NEXT
INDIGENOUS
COMMUNITY MEETING**



A checklist of common mistakes
and why you should avoid making them

Introduction

Hosting frequent community meetings to share information and milestones is an important component of your relationship with the Indigenous community you are working with or hope to work with. If community meetings are done right, you can develop the trust necessary for your project to gain community support.

Community meetings are an integral part of the **duty to consult**. It is at community meetings that you present yourself, your team, and your project. How you arrange, conduct, and close the meetings will be noted and you will be measured accordingly.

You know what they say about first impressions and how many chances you have to get it right. There's a lot riding on how you manage your community meetings so here are 22 actions to avoid if you want to make that first impression a good one.

Ways to share this eBook

Here are a few suggestions on how you could share this eBook with colleagues and/or visitors to your office:

- print a copy and leave it on the table in your break room
- pin it to a notice board
- post it to your website internet and intranet
- add it to the reading material in your waiting room
- take a copy with you if you are working remotely or visiting a field office

About Bob Joseph



Hi there, I'm **Bob Joseph**, a certified Master Trainer and founder of **Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.** Through my more than 20 years of training I have helped thousands upon thousands of individuals and organizations work more effectively with Indigenous Peoples.

I believe that by sharing knowledge and information through training and free resources, such as this ebook and our **blog**, that we can make the world a better place for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Please note, the materials on our **website** are provided for informational and educational purposes only and do not constitute legal advice. We expect you will learn from our educational materials and obtain legal advice as you need.

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1.

Delay the community meeting until project plans are firmed up

Engaging early and often is the mantra of those who are successful in their community relations. No one likes to be told after the fact of events that will have an impact on them. Indigenous communities are no different.

Generally speaking, events that impact Indigenous communities tend to be large-scale, multi-year, and have the potential to change the landscape permanently. The more information the community has leading up to a project, the more prepared they are to make an informed decision about your project.

3.

Try to arrange a meeting during traditional harvesting seasons

Harvesting foods is deeply rooted in the culture of most Indigenous communities.

The foods gathered augment diets but also have a huge role in ceremonies, feasts, potlatches, and other community gatherings and celebrations. Traditional foods are deeply rooted in the social and cultural aspects of a community. The seasons dictate the harvesting activities and in many communities, particularly the more remote ones, when it's harvesting time the entire community is involved in one way or another.

By trying to arrange a meeting during traditional harvesting seasons you are disrespecting the community's culture. So learn about the community, their traditions, the seasons in which the foods are harvested, and adjust your timetable to accommodate those activities

2.

Tell the community when and where the meeting will be held

Always good to keep in mind that ultimately you will be seeking their support/approval for your project. If you start your relationship with the attitude that you are in charge it's quite likely your relationship won't be the type that will generate positive feelings towards you and/or your project.

Always remember that chief and council are busy with matters they consider far more important than you and your meeting.

4.

Delay announcing the date and time of the meeting and limit where you post meeting details

If your strategy is to have a quick meeting with few in attendance and call it community consultation then you're sadly mistaken as to what constitutes community **consultation**. The secret lies in the word "community" and understanding how decisions are made in the Indigenous community you hope to work with. Generally speaking, Indigenous communities are collective in nature which means that the community thinks and acts collectively to achieve what is best for the community as a whole.

If you are hoping to garner community support for your project then you need to ensure as many community members as possible are able to attend your meeting.

5.

Shortly before the meeting, provide binders of technical material about your project for community leaders and members to read and absorb

This is a clearly recognized strategy intended to overwhelm the meeting participants. This tactic is not going to win you respect or community support.

If you have project information that needs to be shared with the community, share it well in advance of the meeting. Chief and council, and their office staff, are busy people with responsibilities that are the equivalent of all three levels of government - municipal, provincial and federal. Your project may not be the only one they've been asked to consider.

If you get the sense that community leadership and staff are inundated with requests, consider providing funding to the community to **hire someone** to review referrals. A win/win solution that is both cost and time efficient.

6.

Start the meeting right on the minute, regardless if members are still arriving

Let go of your rigid timetable. You will want to have as many community members in attendance as realistic before you begin your presentation.

If you are unsure when it's time to start your presentation, ask the chief or a council member if they are expecting more people to arrive.

7.

Overdress and arrive with a team of similarly dressed individuals; arrive in most expensive vehicle in fleet

Flaunting wealth can send the message "I have lots of money" or "I am a defender of the empire" - neither of which is appropriate or endearing to an Indigenous community.

The dress standard is generally quite casual in an Indigenous community so tone it down when visiting a community.

8.

Schedule the meeting so that there isn't a break for members to discuss presentation/project; if there is a break, don't arrange for refreshments

This relates back to collectivity - the community needs time to digest and discuss the information you present. A break provides the opportunity for those in attendance to discuss what they've heard and to frame questions that probe for further information.

Providing time for them to talk together and with you and your team over coffee is considerate and allows for informal conversations. The conversations that flow over food may not seem as though they are related to you or your project but you might be surprised at the information that is being gathered and the opinions that are being formed.

9.

Fail to acknowledge the traditional or treaty land on which the meeting is held

Generally speaking, when one Indigenous nation visits another, the guest nation acknowledges whose land they are on. This is a cultural protocol that dates back thousands of years and has been respected by generation after generation. When you have been granted the opportunity to present your project during a community meeting, you are a guest on your host's traditional or treaty land. Respect your hosts by following **protocol**. Not doing so is offensive and disrespectful.

Here are two basic territorial acknowledgement. You can expand them by including some historical information you have picked up during your research into the community and thanking the chief by name.

Protocol on First Nation's Traditional Territory

I would like to thank the _____ for agreeing to meet with us today and for welcoming us to your traditional territory.

Protocol on First Nation's Treaty Territory

I would like to thank the _____ for agreeing to meet with us today and for welcoming us to your treaty lands.

Here's a free eBook on protocol: [Guidebook to Protocol](#)

10.

Mispronounce community and leaders' names

It is disrespectful in any social situation to mispronounce your host's name. When communicating with Indigenous Peoples, keep in mind that, due to assimilation goals of the federal government, traditional names were considered too awkward to pronounce so every status Indian was given a **European name** by the Indian agent in the region. The names of nations were also changed for ease of registration.

Respect your host by taking the time to learn to pronounce names correctly. Many community websites include how to pronounce the name. Another way to learn is to call the band office after hours and listen to the answering machine recording. Practice until it's perfect.

11.

Don't do any research into community history, governance structure, culture, worldview

All Indigenous Peoples are the same, right? They are one big homogeneous group, right? Both statements are incorrect and both are very common misperceptions.

If you are working with different communities or have worked with a community in the past and therefore think you understand how things work, you are setting yourself up for some humiliating moments.

There are over 600 Indigenous nations in Canada. Each one has its own community history, culture, and economic reality although there may be shared languages and worldviews.

A best practices tip is research, research, research before you engage with the community.

12.

Only present the positive aspects of the project

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have endured over 150 years of dealing with government agencies and agents that have misrepresented the true intent of laws, restrictions, and rules that govern and constrain their lives.

There are pros and cons of every project. Don't downplay the negative impacts and don't embellish the positive.

Transparency is a "must have" in any successful relationship with an Indigenous community.

13.

Use colloquialisms in your speech and powerpoint

Colloquialisms are like verbal stink bombs - nothing will clear a community room faster than a reference to "Indian giver" or "Indian time" or "circle the wagons" or "low man on the totem pole". Colloquialisms are offensive, demeaning, and ignorant and there is never a situation in which they are acceptable.

If you do inadvertently use a colloquialism in your presentation or in a conversation with an Indigenous person don't try to wiggle out by dismissing the offense as political correctness. Apologize promptly and sincerely.

14.

Design a powerpoint filled with acronyms and technical terms

If the goal of your community meeting is to provide information about your project then use language that your audience can relate to and understand. People can only make informed decisions if they are informed. Technical terms and acronyms may be the norm with your colleagues, but to a lay person they are meaningless.

15.

Include Indigenous symbols/images/art in your powerpoint you don't have permission to use and aren't related to the community

Dressing up your presentation with Indigenous symbols, imagery, or art may seem like a good idea but it can be problematic if not executed with attention to detail. Some guidelines to keep in mind:

- Is the chosen image relative to the community? A picture of a West Coast big house would be inappropriate in a presentation to an Inuit community.
- If you include a copy of a painting, do you have permission to do so?
- If you include a copy of a painting or carving, is the art from the community you are presenting to? If you are presenting to a Nu-chul-nuth community, including Haida art would not be respectful of Nu-chul-nuth artists.

16.

Manifest the attitude that the meeting is a mere formality - a box that must be checked off for project approval

That era in which that attitude was the norm ended in 2004 when the Supreme Court of Canada set out the basic principles applicable to the **duty to consult**. Indigenous Peoples are aware of their rights and the legal obligations of project proponents who want to work on their land.

Community engagement is very much part of the duty to consult and your attitude will be measured.

17.

Manifest the attitude that your project is the answer to the community's challenges and issues

Non-Indigenous project proponents sometimes erroneously think that potential skills training, jobs and procurement contracts are the Holy Grail for an Indigenous community. What they don't realize is that while those are considerations, they are not the only considerations nor are they necessarily the most important considerations.

Decisions about long term, resource extraction projects tend to be made with a longer view in mind - that of **seven generations**. What will be the impact of this project today on the community seven generations from now?

Not all challenges and issues are addressed with jobs and a sudden spike in the local economy. Such influxes can bring additional challenges to a community.

18.

Interrupt a question with the answer before the speaker has finished asking

In the non-Indigenous North American culture, crosstalk and interrupting is somewhat acceptable. In an Indigenous community, interrupting the person speaking is considered rude and aggressive, especially if you are a guest of the community. It is never acceptable to interrupt an Elder.

19.

Interrupt a question if it seems off topic and ask the speaker to get to the point

Indigenous Peoples often don't follow the brisk point-counterpoint style of conversation. They may take time to consider what they are going to say next. These cultural pauses in their conversations and questions may be longer than what you are used to. Also, English may not be their mother tongue so they are formulating their thoughts in a second language.

Interrupting is rude, as is urging the speaker to get to the point.

If you are uncomfortable with the pauses that is something you need to address within yourself if you are going to be successful in working with an Indigenous community. Remind yourself that you are working cross culturally.

20.

Check your watch or phone while someone is asking a question

Rude in any culture, but following what you've read in the previous two points, extremely rude in an Indigenous community.

Your timetable is your problem.

21.

Wrap the meeting up right on the minute, even if there are still unanswered questions; pack up and leave immediately

This goes back to the goal of the meeting. Was it to lay the foundation of a mutually respectful relationship? Provide comprehensive information about your project to the community? Or, to check "community meeting" off the to do list?

Not staying until all the questions have been answered sends a message that your timetable is more important than sharing important information with the community.

There are many reasons for the meeting to have taken longer than scheduled: it may have had a delayed start, there may have been more questions than anticipated, the questions may have had more layers than anticipated, some questions may have required longer answers.

If the level of questions took you by surprise it could be because you underestimated the depth of knowledge held by the community in regard to your type of project.

There is value in mingling with the community members, helping them with their coats or holding open the doors as they ready to leave. It provides an opportunity for anyone who may not have felt comfortable speaking up in a group to ask you a question.

22.

Don't send a copy of the minutes or a letter thanking the community for attending the meeting

If for no other reason than keeping a record of your engagement activities for future reference, send a thank you letter to chief and council. Aside from that reason, it's just good manners.



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