

TRIBAL HISTORY AND CULTURE PROJECT

Protocol Considerations

An essential ingredient for successful relations with other cultures is understanding and observing the protocols of those cultures. It is equally important to understand that each culture or nation will have its own characteristics that require a unique approach to protocol.

As school district leaders seek to establish government-to-government relations with neighboring Tribal nations, it is important that they do their homework on the Tribe's governing structure and protocols. In many instances, the rules will vary from Tribe to Tribe.

Sovereignty

Building relations with Tribal governments starts by comprehending and acknowledging Tribal sovereignty.

Under the U.S. Constitution, treaties and federal law, federally recognized Tribes are sovereign. While there are limits to Tribal sovereignty, the fundamental concept is that Tribes are recognized as legal and political entities who have authority to govern themselves.

Tribes have their own unique form of government, which may or may not seem familiar or easy to identify by someone looking in from the outside. Some Tribes have long-standing, well-established governments, while other Tribes are less formal with recently developing governmental structures. There is no "one size fits all" protocol for working with the Tribes in Washington state. As with any culture, there can be differences of opinion and expectations within the same Tribe.

Protocol and cultural considerations

When working with Native Americans, everything hinges on relationships and trust. Given the history of Tribal relations in America, it can be difficult to make progress quickly. The process of building relationships requires patience, tolerance and respect for cultural differences.

Each Tribe and Tribal interaction should be approached with care and respect, keeping in mind that once someone is offended, it can be difficult to repair relationships. It can be valuable to make a preliminary contact to introduce yourself and ask about customs and expectations.

The following are some general observations and suggestions regarding protocol with Tribal nations. Again, these are general in nature and should be verified with the expectations of your neighboring Tribe or Tribes.

- **Salutations and titles.** In meetings and correspondence, it is important that Tribal leaders and representatives be treated with respect and addressed with proper titles. Take the time to learn and use their official titles, such as Chairman, President, Secretary, Treasurer, or Representative. Remember that Tribal council members are elected officials of another government.

- **Prayers/Blessings.** It is often customary for Tribes to offer a prayer or blessing at the beginning or conclusion of a meeting. While the practice will vary from Tribe to Tribe, the blessing will be offered by an elder or spiritual leader, sometimes in song, and usually in the Tribe's language. As with all such observances, it is important to show respect for the blessing through appropriate behavior.
- **Time.** The concept of time can be an important cultural difference—although this can vary widely among and within Tribes. In some circumstances, you may find that meetings or events start only when everyone has arrived and don't finish until everyone has had a chance to participate. Again, be sure you understand the protocol and customs of your Tribal neighbors.
- **Silence.** Some Indian cultures emphasize a demeanor that is quiet and reserved, which means Tribal representatives may speak very little at meetings. Do not interpret silence or detachment as a negative response; always assume that Indian participants are listening, even if they are not outwardly participating in the conversation.
- **Language.** Be respectful of Tribal languages and the fact that English may be a second language for some members, especially elders. Also, be aware that differences in language and speaking abilities can lead to communication problems, misunderstandings and differing expectations.
- **Anger/Frustration.** As you seek to establish relationships and collaborate with Tribal nations, do not be surprised by an occasional expression of anger or resentment from participants over the historical mistreatment of Native Americans. It is important to be sensitive to their concerns, to listen without being defensive, and to demonstrate a sincere interest in establishing a positive relationship.
- **Gifts.** Many Tribes have a longstanding custom of giving or exchanging gifts as a means of encouraging and confirming relationships, especially at ceremonial and cultural events. Protocols will vary from Tribe to Tribe, so check first to determine the appropriate occasions and customs for gift exchanges.

Understanding protocol and culture will go a long way toward establishing and strengthening government-to-government relationships with neighboring Tribal nations. It is worth the time and effort to learn about these customs as you work to collaborate on implementing Tribal curricula and closing the achievement gap for Native American students.