



Helpful Hints for Working with Government Agencies

Working respectfully with tribes and tribal programs

When working with tribes and tribal programs, **what not to do** is often just as important as best practices.

Avoid These Common Mistakes

1. Don't Treat Tribes Like Ordinary Stakeholders

- Tribes are sovereign governments, not simply community groups, nonprofits, or interest groups.
- Avoid placing tribes in the same category as public commenters or advocacy organizations.

3. Don't Assume All Tribes Are the Same

- Each tribe has its own government, culture, priorities, and history.
- Avoid using a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

5. Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep

- Broken commitments can damage trust for years.
- Be realistic about timelines, funding, authority, and outcomes.

7. Don't Dismiss Traditional Knowledge

- Avoid treating Indigenous knowledge as less valid than scientific or technical information.
- Do not extract knowledge without permission or proper attribution.

9. Don't Use Excessive Bureaucracy

- Complex paperwork, short deadlines, and rigid processes can create barriers.
- Avoid expecting tribes to adapt entirely to agency systems.

11. Don't Speak for Tribes

- Allow tribes to define their own priorities and positions.
- Avoid assuming what is “best” for a tribe without tribal input.

2. Don't Consult After Decisions Are Made

- Consultation should occur before decisions are finalized.
- Avoid presenting tribes with a completed plan and asking for approval or comments.

4. Don't Ignore Tribal Protocols

- Different tribes have specific processes for engagement.
- Avoid bypassing tribal leadership or contacting staff without understanding tribal protocols.

6. Don't Rush Relationship Building

- Trust takes time.
- Avoid engaging only when the agency needs something or has a regulatory requirement to meet.

8. Don't Share Sensitive Information Without Permission

- Cultural sites, sacred places, burial grounds, and traditional knowledge may be confidential.
- Never assume information can be publicly disclosed.

10. Don't Assume Silence Means Agreement

- Lack of response may reflect capacity limitations, competing priorities, or consultation concerns.
- Follow up respectfully rather than assuming consent.

12. Don't Ignore Historical Context

- Many tribal-government relationships have been shaped by broken treaties, forced relocation, boarding schools, and other harmful policies.
- Avoid approaching interactions as if there is no historical context affecting trust.

Red Flags That Damage Relationships

- Checking the “tribal consultation box” without meaningful engagement.
- Contacting tribes only when funding or permits are involved.
- Failing to follow up after meetings.
- Making decisions based solely on agency priorities.
- Using tribal input without explaining how it influenced decisions.
- Viewing tribes as beneficiaries rather than governmental partners.

A Useful Rule

“Nothing about tribes without tribes.”
If a decision, policy, project, or program may affect a tribe, involve tribal governments early, often, and in a way that respects their sovereignty and expertise.