

# ABORIGINAL PROTOCOLS: WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

- Try to build a friendly rapport and trust so that a working relationship can be built over time.
- Seek out interagency groups that service Aboriginal communities in your area and attend meetings, they may have a service guide. A good service guide will detail other relevant information, like all of the Aboriginal organisations or language groups in the area.
- Contact local organisations and meet people in the community. Attend community open days, fair days and other events.
- Familiarise yourself with the area you are working in. Have a look at maps and get to know the Aboriginal language groups in your area, and the history of those language groups - do your research!
- Get knowledge of the community, including dominant family groups, preferred names and original custodians.
- Be aware and respectful of relevant extended family and kinship structures when working with Aboriginal people. Ensure that extended family is included in important meetings and in making important decisions.
- Do not assume that all Aboriginal people have a knowledge of their culture or history – levels of knowledge vary and this can be for various reasons, including separation from family and community.
- Because a person is Aboriginal it does not make them experts in 'all things Aboriginal'. It also means that they do not know every other Aboriginal person in Australia. E.g. "Oh you're Aboriginal, you must know [insert name] from [insert place] then?"
- Many Aboriginal people feel uncomfortable being put in a position of having to talk about themselves or their achievements. This is commonly known as "big-noting" and can also be a barrier to employment.
- Do not arrange to visit communities (unless prior arrangements have been made) on a Pension week or during social events, sporting activities (e.g. Koori Rugby League Knockout), NAIDOC Week (first week in July), funerals or community meetings.
- If a tragedy or "Sorry Business" (funerals, deaths etc ) is mentioned do not inquire further, you are likely to offend - attempt to rearrange your consultation.
- There is also a need to be aware that a community may have a spokesperson on a particular issue. Be sure to ask with whom you should speak on an issue.
- Give the options that are available and let these be discussed amongst the community / group. Let the community / meeting know you will come / phone for the answer in the next hour/day/week. Time must be given for them to consult



**Landcare**  
New South Wales



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with relevant members of the community.

- When organising meetings, events or activities with community members, ask whether the topic of conversation or activity is suitable for everyone or if the issue of Men's and Women's Business will apply. You may need to conduct two separate activities with male and female community members.
- Communities have seen a long history of people saying all the right things and promising many things on their visits, but this is often the last time they see or hear from the person. It is important for Aboriginal people to see the follow up on visits and/or information.
- Aboriginal people may prefer to meet outside in an environment that is more familiar. Let the community choose a meeting place.
- Offer assistance with transport to and from meetings, events or activities, particularly for activities being held in rural and remote areas.
- If appropriate, remunerate Aboriginal people for their time and expertise.
- Never involve yourself in business other than what you have come about.
- Referring to an Elder or leader as Aunty or Uncle may not be

appropriate for an outsider, unless a strong relationship has been established.

- Strict time keeping is often not an issue in Aboriginal communities. If you make an appointment to meet someone at a particular time, do not be disturbed if they do not show up exactly on time.  
  
If an important issue arises, the meeting with you may not occur until much later. Do not leave after 10-20 minutes. However, this is not always so and if the community contacts turn up on time it would be disrespectful if you were late.
- It must be remembered that what works well in one community may not be transferred to others.

DISCLAIMER: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of publication. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the user's independent advisor.

