



# ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOLS FOR WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES

## Introduction

Engaging with a community means investing the time to build an ongoing relationship based on trust and integrity with a group of people working towards shared goals.

The tips on the following pages have been developed to help MEGT employees across all divisions better connect with and show respect for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with which we work. They are offered as suggestions only. Preparation is important however it's equally important to use your common sense, experience, and personal relationships to determine what will work best in each situation.

## Unique communities

There is a huge amount of variation across and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Each may have protocols and expectations that may be quite different to a community only a short distance away. The advice here is to do your research first and don't assume that what is appropriate in one community is okay in its neighbouring community. As with all communities, there may be discord between various groups, so it is important that you take care not to align yourself with any specific group.

## Ongoing relationships

It's also important to treat each contact or meeting individually. You cannot assume that a relationship or issue will progress sequentially. You may have to 'go back to scratch' more than once. Patience and respect are two things to keep in mind at all times.

Engaging with a community should not be a quick one-off contact to get them to do something that you want them to do, even if you believe it's for their benefit. Rather, it's focussing on building relationships over time with individual people, tapping in to existing community governance structures where possible, seeking the advice of respected community members on how best to connect with people within and across the community, being patient and respectful and truly listening to their needs, taking the time to understand the Indigenous concepts of wellbeing and the need for people to think about issues and discuss them informally, being accessible, using appropriate language, and always doing what you say you will.

As with any relationship, only promise what you are sure that you can and will deliver. That's the bottom line to behaving with respect and integrity with anyone, at home or at work.

## Questions

Call MEGT's specialist staff at the Indigenous Apprenticeship and Traineeship Network on **1300 428 642**.

<p><b>Plan thoroughly</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before visiting a community, ask permission well in advance. Keep in mind that permission for one visit is not ongoing access.</li> <li>• Check to see if you need a permit to enter the community.</li> <li>• Research the specific issues that affect the community. Look online for a community profile or ask a contact.</li> <li>• Ask who the most appropriate person to contact is. The initial person you contacted may not actually be a decision-maker.</li> <li>• Check to see what customs are relevant to that community e.g. modest attire, not using direct eye contact, not wearing sunglasses, not directly addressing members of the opposite gender.</li> <li>• Keep in mind that there may be differences of view between Traditional Owners, Elders, Council and other groups within a community. Take care not to align yourself with a group.</li> <li>• Phone a few days prior to make sure your visit is still convenient. Sorry Business may mean no-one is there. Check road conditions, fuel access and mobile phone reception.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communicate with respect and patience</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wait to be invited to look around the community.</li> <li>• Ask community members where you can or cannot walk. There may be Sacred sites or sites which have been the location of Men’s Business or Woman’s Business. Some areas may also be deemed unsafe.</li> <li>• Always ask permission before taking photos.</li> <li>• Check local meeting protocols e.g. opening and closing meetings with prayers or hymns, or acknowledging traditional custodians. Clarify your expected role in any Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.</li> <li>• Be patient and aware that it may take some time to address kinship obligations and relationships.</li> <li>• Don’t assume anything.</li> <li>• Be honest and sincere. Be yourself not your job. Share something personal e.g. tell a funny story.</li> <li>• Openly admit when you don’t know something.</li> <li>• English may be a third or fourth language in some communities. Use simple, clear and appropriate language. Explain jargon and technical language.</li> <li>• Literacy levels vary greatly across and within communities. Don’t assume that someone who can read can also write.</li> <li>• Make sure information is relevant, appealing and easy to understand. Explain the content of any written material that is handed out.</li> </ul>



## ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOLS FOR WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relationships are built on two-way communication. Don't just talk, listen. And be comfortable with silence.</li><li>• Speak slowly if and when necessary.</li><li>• Don't mimic ways of speaking e.g. words, slang, accent.</li><li>• Be open-minded and flexible.</li><li>• Don't be too direct as this can be taken as confrontational and rude, as can direct eye contact.</li><li>• Emphasise the purpose of your activity and the intended benefits to the community.</li><li>• Groups of people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities tend to make decisions by consensus so allow time for everyone to talk through the issues and arrive at an agreed decision.</li><li>• Don't ask hypothetical questions. Deal in practical real issues, not in theoretical ideas.</li><li>• Do not disagree with ideas as this may be taken as personal rejection. Accept all ideas as points to consider, but tactfully explain any limitations.</li><li>• Avoid misunderstandings. Give feedback about what you have understood the decision to be.</li></ul>
<b>Show you're committed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow-up on any actions promptly. Always deliver what you promised.</li><li>• Send any photos taken to your contact in the community.</li><li>• Ask what went well and what could be improved. Act on it.</li><li>• Be prepared to visit many times before trust and confidence in you and MEGT is established. It is this ongoing relationship that will show you are committed.</li></ul>