Tips for Working Effectively with Aboriginal Peoples

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1. Research the community before going into the community. Where is the traditional territory? Who are the leaders? Socio-economics? Health issues Strengths?
2. It is helpful to have some understanding of the historical determinants of health of Aboriginal people. Colonial practices such as the reserve system and residential schools have had a significant multi-generational impact on Aboriginal people.
3. Take into account community activities: fishing, berry picking, death in community and be prepared to change your schedule.
4. Changing schedules part II: expect it to change and adapt – community and family needs often take priority over other commitments.
5. Schedules Again: Consider how you might adapt your practice to suit community needs. Tightly scheduled appointments are often unworkable. Is there another way to set up practice that would suit?
6. Thank the community for the invitation into their traditional territory.
7. Gift giving is one way to honour a relationship.
8. Ask people where they are from. Land, nationhood and familial ties are significant identifiers for Aboriginal people and relationship building.
9. Use caution when shaking hands. Very traditional people often have a softer grip.
10. Try to establish a relationship and meet before you need something.
11. Learn about and stay up to date on Aboriginal issues and perspectives.
12. Consider dressing down for work in the community. In many cases, Aboriginal offices have more casual dress policies than corporate Canada.
14. Honour all your agreements, especially your oral agreements. Traditionally, Aboriginal communities are oral societies and oral agreements are even more important than written agreements.
15. Be aware that cultural survival is a fundamental driver of an Aboriginal community’s decision-making process.
16. Expect to participate in cultural events and ask for protocol guidance from the host.
17. Ask the First Nation how they want to be consulted. What are their expectations?
18. Never underestimate the benefit of having pizza with someone over lunch or participation in a community event can have on the development of a trusting relationship.
19. Don’t feel that you must answer or fill the silent periods during discussions. These silent periods can be longer than you are accustomed to, and may be needed for thought formulation. Try to ensure that the speaker has finished before you contribute to the conversation.