

WORKING WITH TRIBAL NATIONS

PROTOCOLS & CONSIDERATIONS



A Guide for Authentic Collaboration & Collective Impact

Since time immemorial, the Nimiipuu have lived by a covenant with the land. Authentic partnership begins when we move from being spectators of history to partners in the future.

Cultural Values

Sacredness of Place

We recognize the land and its resources as living relatives rather than commodities, moving with reverence for the spiritual integrity of the landscape.

Intergenerational Exchange

We bridge the wisdom of Elders with the vision of youth to ensure every action is rooted in ancestral knowledge and built for the future.

Relational Responsibility

We move with the understanding that we are all related, holding ourselves accountable to the people, the land, and the long-term trust we build together.

Reciprocity

We ensure the flow of knowledge and resources moves in both directions, giving back to the community with the same intentionality with which we receive.

Narrative Justice

We honor the community's right to define its own identity by prioritizing local voices so the story of the land is told by those who belong to it.

Core Values for Partnership

To work effectively with Tribal Nations and communities, align your approach with these foundational principles of conduct:

Tamáalwit (Natural Law)

This is the overriding law that dictates our relationship to the Earth. Respect the interconnectedness of all things—land, water, people, and movement. When you plan a project, ask: How does this honor the four interconnected elements?

Sovereignty & Protocol

Tribal Nations are sovereign governments with their own laws, leadership structures, and decision-making processes. Elected leaders, elders, cultural knowledge keepers, and community leaders often help guide discussions. Never assume that one Tribe's process applies to another.

Generational Responsibility

Move beyond short-term timelines and consider the long view—how decisions today affect future generations and the lands we share.

Cultural Humility

Approach Tribal engagement with the understanding that you are a guest in a long-standing story. Listening to community perspectives, cultural teachings, and lived experiences is essential before proposing partnerships.

THE ELEMENTS OF TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

1 *Land* **The First Relationship**

Before partnership with people, there is relationship with place. The land that holds the history, the knowledge, and the responsibility we carry forward.

Step 1: Learn the Homelands. Understand whose land you are on and the history carried in that place. Recognizing the Tribal homelands connected to the project area is the first step toward respectful partnership.

Step 2: Spend Time with the Land. Understanding begins with presence. Spend time with the land itself and participate in community spaces, such as Tribal events or gatherings, where the relationship between the people and place can be experienced and better understood.

Step 3: Audit Your Presence. Identify how your organization's current work impacts the land. Does it align with or disrupt Tribal stewardship?

2 *Water* **The Flow of Understanding**

Water connects us all. This stage is about identifying shared interests and initiating the first "ripple" of contact through reciprocity.

Step 4: The Headwaters of Consultation. Engage early, while the vision is still forming. Come with humility and a willingness to listen. Partnerships that begin at the headwaters flow from shared understanding and community priorities.

Step 5: Where Connection Begins to Flow. Use your time spent on the land and community presence to identify the appropriate point of contact, such as a Tribal leader, department director, non-profit lead, or independent consultant. Focus on aligning with the individual whose expertise matches the work, ensuring your outreach is targeted and respectful of the Tribe's internal protocols.

Step 6: Practice Reciprocity. The offering of a gift and the sharing of a meal are longstanding cultural practices that acknowledge respect and relationships. Through hospitality, trust is built and people are welcomed into a space of listening and learning.

Step 7: Creating the Confluence. A meaningful partnership is like two rivers meeting; when they merge with respect for one another's rhythm, they move forward as one powerful stream.

3 *People* **The Pulse of the Community**

Tribal communities are living networks of relationships - families, Elders, youth, cultural practitioners, leaders and professionals who each carry knowledge about the place and the future of community.

Step 8: The Heartbeat. The drum carries the heartbeat of the people and the land. Take time to connect with the many voices within the community; Elders, youth, cultural practitioners, leaders, and professionals each carrying knowledge of place, culture, and the future. When these voices are honored, the work moves forward with one heart, one mind, and one sound.

Step 9: Amplify the True Voice. Ensure the community's voices are the ones telling their own stories, hiring Native historians and educators to speak for themselves rather than interpreting the culture through an outside lens. Honor cultural and community knowledge as specialized professional expertise by providing honoraria or professional fees for Elders, artists, and consultants.

Step 10: Honor Cultural Privacy. Understand that some knowledge and ceremonies are sacred and not meant for the public. Always ask for permission before documenting or sharing community stories. If a boundary is set, respect it without question.

4 *Movement* **Walk the Trail Together**

Movement connects our past to our future. This stage turns vision into action through permanent partnership and an open invitation for others to join the walk.

Step 11: Stepping onto the Path. Turn vision into action by formalizing how we will walk together. Clearly define roles, establish a consistent communication plan, and identify the specific resources each partner contributes. By setting this foundation early, we move from "talking about the work" to "doing the work" with transparency and accountability.

Step 12: Invest in Local Capacity. Direct your resources toward the community's existing strengths. By prioritizing Tribal businesses, professionals, and local talent, you strengthen the community's own infrastructure and ensure the economic benefits of the work stay on the land.

Step 13: Maintain the Trail Relationships. Stay intentional and open, welcoming new partners to the path while keeping existing connections strong. When you treat the work as a lifelong commitment to the people and the place, you move from being project partners to being a reliable part of the community.



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