

Module Objectives

Although Native Americans may share many attributes in their values, way of life, and historic and present-day circumstances, each tribe is unique.

This module is intended to help you understand and appreciate Native American cultures and to develop skills for effective cross-cultural communication. Only direct interactions, experience, and personal relationships with Native Americans can really build this understanding and appreciation.

In this module, you'll gain a basic understanding of:

- The importance of cultural factors.
- Skills for cross-cultural communication.
- Important and practical steps for working more effectively with tribes.

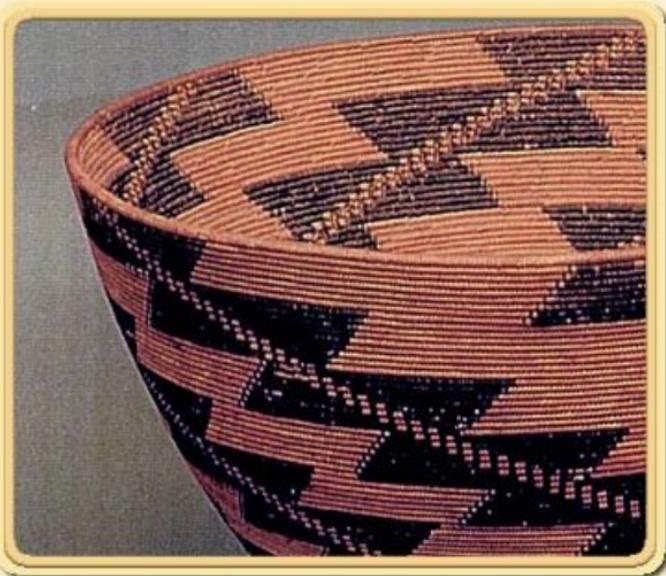


What is Culture?

Culture could be described as "the way of life" of a people. Culture includes a vast array of behaviors and beliefs. Critical cultural factors may differ greatly from culture to culture.

Factors that should be considered when interacting with Native Americans include, but are not limited to:

- History, from a tribe's own perspective.
- Traditional values and attitudes, including the tribe's relationship with its homelands, and social etiquette.
- Spirituality, such as ceremonies, rituals, sacred objects and places, and beliefs.
- Societal structure, including bands, clans and other kinship relations, gender roles, and the position of elders and children within the tribe.
- Governmental structures, protocols and laws, including traditional and westernized models.
- Language, which includes spoken, written, and non-verbal communications.



Native American Cultures

When you're working with Indian tribes, it is critical to be sensitive to each tribe's history and culture. While some tribes are related culturally or linguistically, related to others, each of the more than 560 Indian tribes are unique.

However, there are some cultural attributes that many tribes share, such as:

- Respect for the natural world.
- Spirituality.
- Reverence for elders and children, and the importance of clans and kinship.
- Communal leadership and consensual decision-making.



Protection, Preservation of and Respect for The Natural World

One important theme within many Native American cultures is a strong connection to all aspects of the natural world. It is important for federal employees to understand that the vitality of Native American cultures and religions are often inextricably linked to the environment. In fact, there are culturally important or sensitive resources.

The resulting sense of responsibility towards the environment often affects the way that tribes approach and evaluate programs that impact the natural world's resources. This sense of responsibility also influences how Indian tribes approach protection and preservation.

A subsistence lifestyle is still practiced by many tribes. This may involve using natural resources for subsistence such as fishing, farming, ranching, hunting and gathering, for the maintenance of spiritual and physical health.

Consider the impact on natural resources during the federal program planning and implementation phase. Early consultation may be the most effective way to ensure that the impacts to natural resources are addressed.



Spirituality

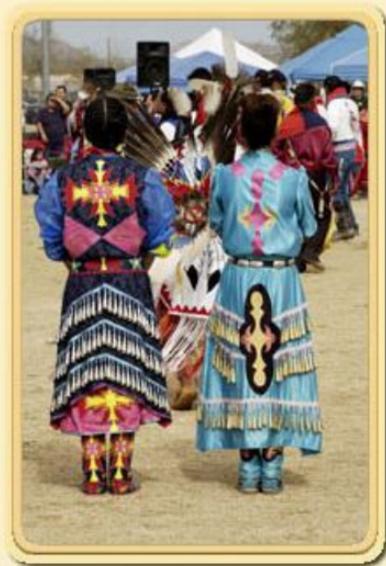
A strong respect for spirituality (whether traditional, Christian, other, or a combination of any and all) is common among tribes, and often forms a sense of unity. Spiritual practices are often deeply ingrained in day-to-day living. For example, many tribes conduct meetings with traditional opening and closing ceremonies, which may be in the form of prayer.

You may attend or plan for meetings that involve traditional tribal openings or closings where tribal representatives may wish to express their spirituality. You may be guided to stand or remain seated in silence. Applause or verbal recognition may be inappropriate. Guidance is not always provided beforehand, you may then follow the lead of the tribal people in attendance.

Specific practices such as ceremonies, prayers and religious protocols vary among tribes. For centuries after European contact, practitioners of traditional Native American religions were often persecuted and, as a result, many religions were practiced in secret.

[The 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act](#) established the policy to protect and preserve for Native Americans their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise their traditional religions.

Be aware that many traditional tribal beliefs and practices are not to be shared publicly. Permission must be granted in advance for recording of any kind (photographs, tape recordings, video recording, etc.).



Reverence for Elders and Children, and the Importance of Clans and Kinship

Elders and children are accorded special respect in many tribes. Elders are recognized as the keepers of cherished cultural knowledge, and are honored for the sacrifices they made for the welfare of future generations.

Children and youth are understood to be the future leaders who will ensure the continuation of the tribe and its traditions. Extended family, kinship, and clan ties are also extremely important in many tribal communities.



Leadership and Decision-making

Tribal traditions often require that tribal leaders deliberate extensively and consider the long-term consequences of their decisions. This responsibility to consider the impacts of decisions on future generations may contrast with the time frames required by federal agencies.

Furthermore, tribal governing bodies may meet to deliberate at set times of the year or tribal decision-making may be constrained by the tribe's ceremonial schedule, and federal employees should be aware of these schedules in order to provide adequate time for tribal decision-making within the federal planning process.



Cross-Cultural Communication Protocol

Language

Tribal members may speak English as a second language. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 25% of American Indians and Alaska Natives 5 years and older speak a language other than English at home.

Like traditional Native American religions, the use of Native languages was actively discouraged by the schools that many Indian children were forced to attend. As a result, many Native languages are considered in danger of being lost forever. To respond to this threat, many tribes have instituted Native language programs to encourage their use in all aspects of tribal life. Because language is an integral part of culture, the continued use of Native languages is a priority for many tribes.

In cases where a tribal member who is not fluent in English needs to communicate with a federal employee, the tribe may provide an interpreter. As is the case with many languages, however, some concepts are not easily translated. Therefore, cross-cultural communication can be more challenging than typical conversations.

Problems in cross-cultural communication occur primarily because people assume that the elements of their own culture are clearly understood by everyone, thereby misunderstanding the distinctions between their culture and that of others. Being sensitive to such possibilities and seeking clarification in a patient and respectful manner can go a long way in bridging any gaps that may exist in cross-cultural communication.



Cross-Cultural Communication Protocol (continued)

Demonstrating Respect

In your work as a federal employee you are representing the federal government. Remember, many historic federal policies toward Native Americans resulted in a general distrust toward government officials, making it especially important that your interactions with tribes are carried out in a thoughtful and respectful manner. Tribes are sovereign nations, and are to be treated accordingly.

Respect can be demonstrated in many ways.

- Be willing to admit limited knowledge of tribal culture, and invite tribal members to educate you about specific cultural protocols in their community. When in doubt about something, don't assume. Rather, ask respectfully.
- Understand that certain objects, such as feathers, beadwork, artwork, medicine bags, may be sacred, and should not be touched or discussed.
- Do not take photographs without permission.
- If you are unsure of the appropriate attire for any meeting or event, ask your tribal contacts for guidance.
- Listen and observe more than you speak. Learn to be comfortable with silences, or long pauses in conversation. In tribal communities, any interruption is considered highly disrespectful, and may undermine your credibility.
- Federal jargon, acronyms, and standard operating procedures that are commonplace for federal employees may not be familiar to tribal members. Therefore, adjust your presentation accordingly. Educate, but don't patronize.
- Understand that Native Americans may convey truths or difficult messages through humor or by telling stories.
- Be careful about pointing your finger, which may be interpreted as rude behavior in many tribes.
- Respect personal space.
- Please consult with your agency ethics officer or general counsel regarding gift acceptance.



General Tips for Working More Effectively with Tribal Governments

The following tips will help you as you interact with tribal representatives.

- Take time to learn about the tribe's history and culture, tribal customs, and preferences. In addition, it is essential that federal employees understand the political environment in which the tribal government operates. For example, find out if there are tribal councils, business committees, or corporations. Learn the time frames in which these decision-making bodies operate, such as the frequency of council meetings.
- Always remember that you are a guest of the tribe that you are visiting. Respect their customs and laws. If you are invited to participate in an event or ceremony, watch respectfully, and remember that some events or ceremonies are for tribal members only.
- Consider opportunities for collaboration with other departments or other federal agencies that may benefit the tribe with whom you are working.
- Become familiar with the efforts and outcomes of your agency's prior work with the tribe.
- Ensure that tribal leadership or their designees are involved early in discussing projects, plans, or issues that may affect tribal concerns. Communicate early and often.
- If your agency has an established protocol agreement for purposes of government-to-government interaction with a tribe, make sure that you follow it. If there is no such agreement in place, talk to tribal leaders about whether it would be beneficial to establish an agreement.



General Tips for Working More Effectively with Tribal Governments (continued)

When appropriate, plan your tribal visits so that you have flexibility to participate in any social or cultural events that you may be invited to. Such participation will help build your cultural understanding and foster positive relationships.

Clarify your role and authority to tribal leadership and officials to avoid raising unrealistic expectations, or making commitments that cannot be fulfilled.

If you are unsure of how to handle a particular situation during your visit to a tribal community, contact your agency's tribal program director or tribal contact for advice.

Be aware that tribes, like other governmental bodies, experience changing priorities with changing administrations.

General Tips for Working More Effectively with Tribal Governments (continued)

In all of your work, ensure that potential impacts to tribes and tribal resources are considered. Consult with and involve tribes whenever government activities could affect their people, land, resources, and/or rights. If you are unsure or unaware of what such affects may be, consultation is recommended.

Be aware of your cross-cultural communication skills, and keep in mind that they can be improved by:

- Being open-minded. Keep your opinions flexible and be receptive to new ways of thinking and seeing the world.
- Listening and observing.
- Demonstrating sensitivity and respect for different cultures.

This is critical to building effective working relationships.

Respect confidentiality and the right of a tribe to control information it deems sensitive, but understand that sometimes federal laws do not permit government officials to maintain confidentiality. Ask about the tribe's position on the confidentiality of information prior to documenting the information or taking possession of materials the tribe may consider sensitive.

Be honest with the tribal representatives if you are not certain that you can provide the level of protection the tribe desires to have. Seek counsel from other federal officials who are familiar with strategies that may allow you to use information while still respecting the tribe's confidentiality concerns.



Knowledge Check Introduction

Take a few minutes to check your understanding of some key concepts presented in this module.

Knowledge Check - Question 1

Which of the following are important to know in order to begin to understand a tribe's culture? (Choose the best answer.)

- A. [The tribe's history, from its own perspective.](#)
- B. [The tribe's governmental structure.](#)
- C. [The tribe's cultural protocols.](#)
- D. [All of the above.](#)



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- D. [All of the above.](#)

Select the correct answer. The

Resources Exit/Save

of 6



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar containing "http://tribal2011.golearn.biz/orientat...". The main content area displays a confirmation message: "Correct! In order to begin to understand a tribe's culture, understanding each of the items listed is important." Below the message is a "Close" button.

Knowledge Check - Question 2

Which of the following statements is true?

- A. You can assume that all Native American cultures are all pretty much the same.
- B. Some Native American cultures may share some characteristics, but each is nevertheless unique.

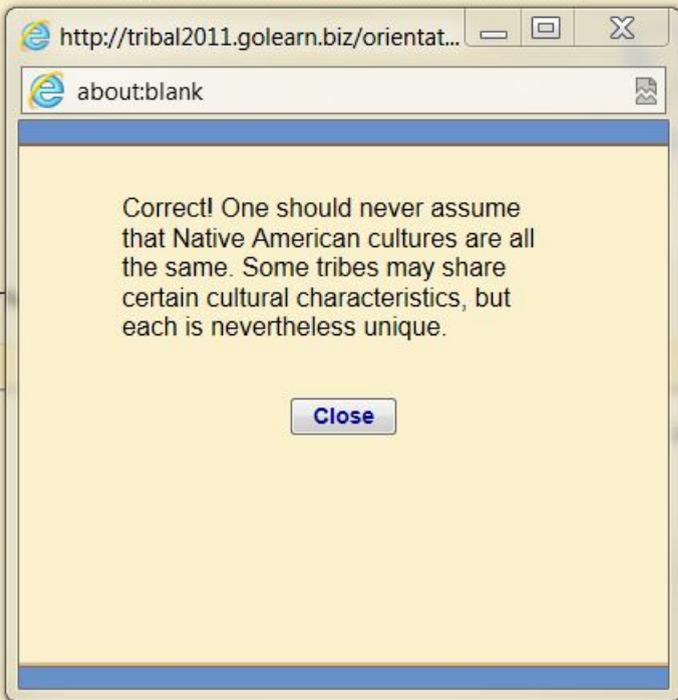


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Knowledge Check - Question 3

Is the following statement true or false?

One of the best things a federal employee can do when working with tribal governments is to take time to learn about the tribal governmental structure and culture.

- A. [True](#)
- B. [False](#)



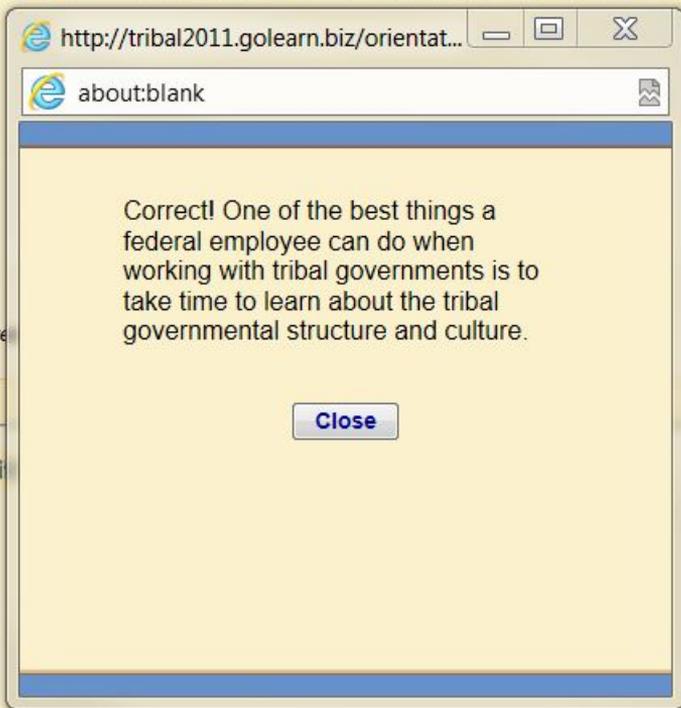
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- A. [True](#)
- B. [False](#)

Select the correct



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Resources Exit



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Course Summary

In this module, you learned about cultural factors, the components for good cross-cultural communication, and practical tips for working effectively with tribal governments.



Congratulations

You have now completed the *Cultural Orientation and Working with Tribal Governments* course.

In this course, you learned about cultural factors, the components for good cross-cultural communication, and practical tips for working effectively with tribal governments.



Working Effectively With Tribal Governments

Certificate of Completion

Presented to:

[Redacted Name]

[Redacted Title]