



# Tribal Engagement Basics



We believe that the most innovative, comprehensive, and viable solutions happen when there is equitable participation and inclusive conversation.

Tribal representation matters—but too often, Indigenous voices have been left out of the public policy decision-making process. As tribal engagement consultants, we help our clients rebuild relationships with tribal communities based on renewed trust. Our approach is tailored according to each tribe's unique culture, history, perspective, and structure. While many of these considerations vary considerably across different communities, the following definitions and guidelines provide important background and context for tribal engagement in the United States.

## Governance

- » **Tribal Sovereignty** – Tribal nations are typically committed to the principle of self-governance and are determined to affirm and maintain their sovereignty. Tribal sovereignty ensures that any significant decisions related to their land are made with the participation and consent of the tribe.
- » **Federally-Recognized Tribes** – American Indian or Alaska Native tribal entities officially recognized and eligible to receive services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) with the Department of the Interior (DOI). This designation acknowledges the "trust responsibility" that grants access to federal and state funding and recognizes federal protections. Reasons for a tribe not to be federally recognized may include termination of recognition, no existing treaty, or the tribe chooses not to pursue recognition. As of early 2021, there are 573 federally recognized American Indian tribes, Alaskan Native Corporations, and Native Hawaiian Organizations.

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- » **Government** - All federally recognized tribes are self-governing. After the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, many tribes adopted legal governing structures, including legislative bodies and executive offices. The Chief Executive of the tribe may be referred to as chairman or chairwoman, president, or principal chief—among many other titles depending on the tribe. Tribal governments define membership, regulate domestic relations, levy taxes and regulate property.
  - » **Federal Trust Responsibility** - The trust doctrine is a source of federal responsibility requiring the federal government to support tribal self-government and economic prosperity, duties that stem from the government's treaty guarantees to protect Indian tribes and respect their sovereignty.
  - » **Tribal Enrollment** - Eligibility requirements for membership or citizenship vary from tribe to tribe. Tribes determine their enrollment and create their membership criteria.
  - » **Tribes and Bands** - American Indian tribes are societies of people grounded by blood ties, family relationships, and languages dating back thousands of years. Bands, historically, describe a collective group within a broader tribal coalition. Tribes and bands are terms used interchangeably, but "band" would accurately describe smaller entities with similar kinship and customs within a larger tribal group.
  - » **Clanship** - Some tribes use a social organization system known as a kinship clan structure. Clans are a group of people that trace their connection to a common ancestor(s). Not all tribes use a clan structure.
  - » **Trust Land** - Land in which the United States government holds title, and located on or near reservations to benefit future tribal generations. This includes protecting the original tribal land base, and natural resources within.
  - » **Reservation** - An established location for American Indians held in trust and reserved by the federal government for a tribe as their permanent homelands.

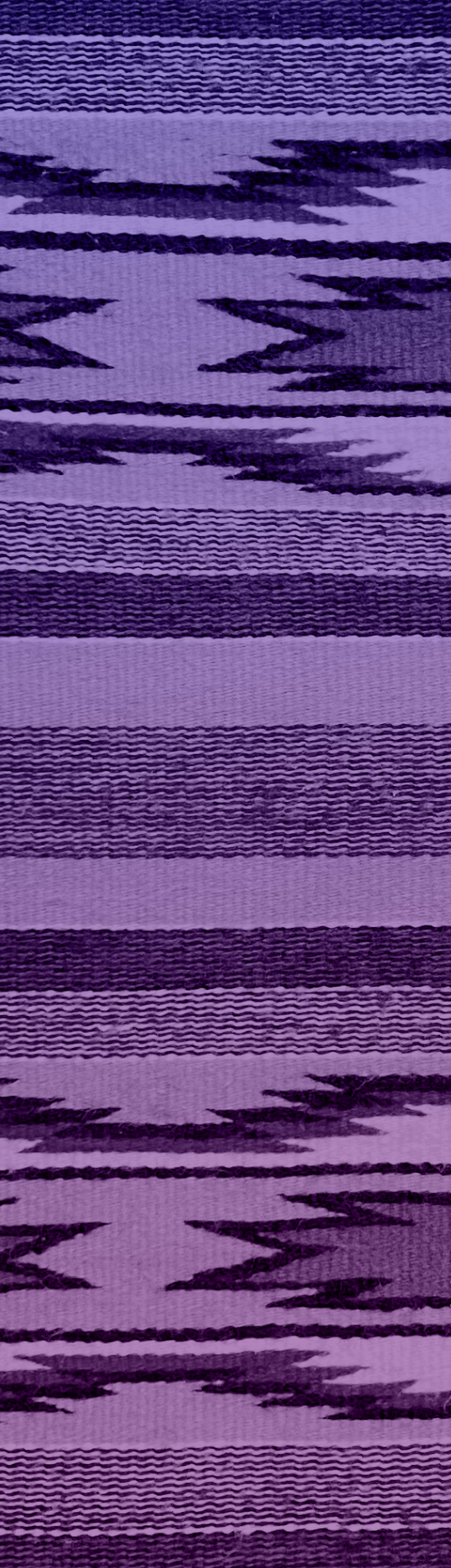


## Culture

- » **Name reference** – While Native Americans prefer to be referred to using acceptable terms like American Indians, First Nations people, or Indigenous Americans, the best practice of determining a proper nomenclature for a specific tribe is to consult with them on their preferred terminology.
- » **Religion/Spirituality** – Not all tribes practice have the same beliefs. Each tribe has a unique philosophy of customs and practices and oral history. Although creation stories may be similar, there are many differences in tradition, cultural ceremonies, and oral history among tribes. Spiritual leaders commonly referred to as shaman, medicine people, or traditional healers, still exist today and practice traditional rituals that date back thousands of years. Ceremonies are significant to tribal members and should be respected.
- » **Tribal Elders** – Elders are considered wise individuals and should be addressed and thanked during all interactions. A common custom in addressing tribal elders includes thanking them for the opportunity to speak before them and for the knowledge they have provided.
- » **Taboos** – American Indian tribes have many traditional taboos, particular people, places, animals or things that are not be discussed or disturbed. Discussions of deceased people are very sensitive for many American Indian cultures.

## Communication and Consultation

- » **Addressing Tribal Leadership** – Tribal leadership are highly respected individuals within the tribe and formal titles such as chairwoman, chairman, president, or councilmember should be used to address them.
- » **Communicating with Tribes** – Each tribal chairperson is considered the sole spokesperson on all external tribal engagement. It varies from tribe to tribe, but any official correspondence should happen from a top-down approach.
- » **National Historic Preservation Act Section 106** – Section 106 of the NHPA requires federal agencies to consider the effects of federally funded or permitted projects on historic properties and consult with federally recognized tribes to identify, assess and mitigate impacts.



- » **Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act** - Requires any federal agency or entity that received federal funds to repatriate any Native American funerary objects, sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, and human remains to the appropriate American Indian tribe, Native Hawaiian Organization, or Alaskan Native Organization. NAGPRA ensures tribal consultation for inadvertent discoveries in identifying, recording, and removing human remains and cultural items from federal land or federal projects through appropriate repatriation measures.
- » **Invocation** - A traditional practice of many tribes to bless a gathering before it begins. An Invocation is considered a sign of respect to all attendees and elders of the tribe.
- » **Gift-giving** - American Indian philosophy places a high value on gift-giving and sharing prized possessions. The exchange of gifts is a long held tradition within tribal communities used to recognize the status of the individual the gift is being given to as well as to strengthen and solidify social, cultural, and economic ties.
- » **Storytelling** - A staple of American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian oral traditions. Many tribes engage in storytelling ceremonies or meetings where elders of the tribe will speak at great length.

Sidebar Photo: A traditional Navajo rug design.