

# CLOSING THE GAP

## ENGAGING WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIANS



## What is good engagement?

The Australian Government has recognised that without genuine engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians it will be difficult to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage. This means embedding good engagement principles and practices into our everyday work.

Good engagement underpins a commitment to re-setting the relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and involves building cultural awareness, connections, capacity and trust, and promoting dialogue.

Engagement can be defined as any process that involves the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in problem solving or decision making, and uses community input to make better decisions.

Engagement is respectful. It is not an afterthought or last-minute add on, but is an integral component of policy and program development, service design and delivery processes. Good engagement is an ongoing process: it sets the example of good democratic practice and it builds capacity rather than disempowers.

In the context of the Closing the Gap, engagement is about two things:

- the relationship between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and
- the way we work together to get things done.

The following examples demonstrate what good engagement looks like and provide tips on how to embed these practices in all relationships with Indigenous Australians.

The following outlines what you can do to embed good engagement practices into your work.

### Cultural awareness

- Learn about the history and culture of the people with whom you want to establish a relationship.
- Ask questions of those around you, who may have background or more experience of the particular Indigenous culture with which you may be working.
- Question and test your assumptions.
- Don't rely on stereotypes or generalisations.
- Look for differences AND similarities between your culture and that of the people you want to get to know.
- Take the time to do your agency's cultural awareness or cultural appreciation training.

### Connection building

- You can build relationships by building trust and commitment, encouraging participation, and developing inclusive and respectful processes.
- To maintain these connections, maintain contact, even when there isn't a work-related issue to discuss or a problem to solve.

- You only get out of a relationship what you put in.

### **Capacity building**

- To build capacity, identify and access resources to assist Indigenous people to realise their own goals and joint goals.
- Support Indigenous people to effectively engage with government.
- Recognise and acknowledge contributions made by Indigenous people.
- Recognise the capacity of Indigenous people to participate in the development and implementation of programs and policy.
- Listen to what Indigenous people tell you about outcomes they want to achieve.

### **Trust building**

- To build trust and trustworthiness establish processes that engage and inform people, and which encourage cooperation and collaboration.
- To maintain trust, focus on the needs and expectations of Indigenous people, and ensure that differing needs are recognised and addressed where possible.

### **Promoting dialogue**

- Encourage people to talk, to discuss ideas and opinions openly and respectfully.
- This means actively listening to people and clearly and openly discussing ideas and opinions.

### **Other information sheets in the series**

- *Issues to keep in mind – Part 1 Cultural awareness*
- *Issues to keep in mind – Part 2 Visiting communities*
- *Steps for engaging effectively to work together and build productive partnerships*
- *The engagement spectrum*
- *What are the principles underpinning effective engagement?*