

4.2 Formal Meetings

It is unwise to organise a formal meeting if you are not known by anyone in the community.

It is vital you establish and then maintain credibility in the community, or you must have contacts in the community who can give you guidance on how to go about organising the meeting without offending important people and community leaders.

Find out whether other government agencies have established networks (e.g. Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Centrelink; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs or other state agencies). You may be able to tap into existing processes.

You will need to identify those groups in the community who are spreading information and whose suggested solutions are generally accepted. Meeting agendas are more profitably discussed with these groups.

Planning the meeting

When you plan a formal meeting, consider the following:

- Introduce yourself prior to setting up a meeting by:
 - Telephone;
 - Letter; and/or
 - Personal introduction.

(NB With remote communities, telephone contacts are preferred to letter, and personal visits are preferred to telephone.)

- Decide whether the meeting needs to be formal or informal (be guided by advice from the community; community contact; or go-between as to which is best);
- Explain why the meeting was initiated:
- Agenda;
- Date and time;
- Who will be attending; and
- Send any information out beforehand.
- Venue - if indoors (and if applicable) be aware of the different levels of comfort zones for participants e.g. ventilation; heating; room layout; atmosphere etc.;
- If possible use the local community hall or resource centre; or
- If outside - possibly under a tree or near a river; be guided by your networks and/or Aboriginal contacts.

(NB Be aware of possible costs e.g. paying for the hire of the hall; refreshments etc.)

- Be punctual; and
- Take minutes, which should include:
 - purpose of meeting;
 - time and place of meeting;
 - who attended; and
 - what was decided.

Don't run a public meeting yourself. Leave this to the Aboriginal leaders. They will indicate when you are to speak. Don't interrupt or correct the speaker when they are introducing you. If there is a vital need to correct something, do it without embarrassing the other person when your turn comes.¹³

When to hold a public meeting

Meetings are not the usual way communities reach agreements. Meetings are used to confirm that agreement has been reached. Actual decisions occur outside the meeting process. Therefore, you should treat the meeting as an information giving exercise.

However, be aware of exceptions, where some communities or agencies may use the meetings not only as an information gathering forum but will use the meeting to make decisions and advise you of outcomes as such.

Timing for holding the meeting must be convenient for those who attend. You cannot expect people to assemble when it is convenient for you. People in the community have their own tasks to do, and these are important to them. Also consider the following:

- When visiting a wet community (has a canteen), morning visits are usually more productive;
- Pension pay days, or wages pay days are usually shopping days and are therefore not convenient;

- There is also a cultural practice called "Murrie time". In non-Aboriginal culture this is seen as tardiness or lateness. In Aboriginal culture it is related to a different concept of time and values where there is much less pressure to be "on time"; and
- The number of meetings is determined by the outcomes your organisation and the community desire. That is, meetings could be a one off event; incremental or ongoing.

When speaking at public meetings

You should not use public meetings to extract information or make final decisions on issues, so you will therefore need to:

- Avoid cross examining any person about their opinions;
- Avoid asking a person about the source of information;
- Avoid being too blunt with any situation where there is need to correct what another person has said;

¹³ Fuary, M. (1985), *Communicating with Torres Strait Island People* (Modelled loosely on John Von Sturmer's 1981 article *Talking with Aborigines*, [A.I.A.S. Newsletter # 15 New Series, May], (p. 2) Paper presented at the Cross-Cultural Communication Seminar, organised by the Department of Children's Services, Cairns, May, 1985.

- Avoid personal names and references (eg “Well John over there reckons this is a good idea.” or “I heard people in the community say this is a good idea”);
- Avoid direct criticism;
- Avoid causing anyone to suffer the loss of personal dignity; and
- Practice being indirect and develop the art of distancing yourself from an idea.

How people pay attention at meetings

Generally speaking an Aboriginal audience contains more people talking and more people moving about, than would a non-Aboriginal audience. A new non-Aboriginal teacher at Milingimbi was surprised to discover while

- talking to the students later that restlessness in the audience while he was telling a story did not necessarily mean that they were not listening.

Asking questions at meetings

- You should not expect too many questions from people at public meetings. The reason for this is that in Aboriginal society, it is bad manners to be too curious or inquisitive.
- Aboriginal people resist answering too many questions because it goes against their idea of independence and privacy.

- Don’t make assumptions - and clarify throughout the process.

- Do not pose hypothetical questions. Aboriginal people deal in practical real issues.

