

Communicating with those unfamiliar to us does not come easily. The more distant and unacquainted the cultures are the greater the challenge. Therefore, good communication requires the parties to truly understand each others' social systems.

It is important that outsiders understand the behavioural ground rules of the Torres Strait, because if the latter are broken people become offended and communication breaks down.

Islanders' views and meaning systems vary from that of other cultures, although in some aspects there will be similarities. In cross-cultural communication there is always a risk that ideas will be misinterpreted, and this can lead to considerable confusion, misunderstanding, disappointment and even resentment.

There is also the problem of dissimilar concepts of social process. In traditional Islander society both the spiritual and the secular were interwoven, and this is still evident today. However, in European society the two are usually separated.

Compounding these differences are past policies of segregation, paternalism, neglect and isolation which have not been erased from Islanders' minds. Similarly, contemporary policies, considered to be progressive and enlightened by some, do not necessarily enjoy widespread support among the Island communities. For instance, land rights legislation introduced by the

Queensland Government in the early 1990s was rejected by many Islanders. In addition, bureaucratic procedures often do not sit comfortably with the Island fashion or way of doing things.

All of these factors are barriers to effective communication and will need to be overcome if inter-cultural dialogue is to be more productive. Fortunately, there are ways and means of improving communication with Islanders.

Interpersonal Skills

The cornerstones of sound communication are interpersonal skills.

Most people will not care to deal with you unless you can demonstrate that you are sincere, trustworthy, open and honest. Torres Strait Islanders are no different in this way.

It does help to have a reasonable knowledge and appreciation of Torres Strait Islander custom and history. If you have this knowledge you will be better able to empathise with people and issues.

Taking a genuine interest in people without being intrusive helps foster ongoing relationships. Being helpful and friendly is particularly appreciated. Torres Strait Islanders place a good deal of emphasis on courtesy and kindness. This is known locally as 'Good Pasin', meaning good fashion or behaving with a degree of sophistication and charm. Failure in this area can be irreparable.



It is also absolutely essential to tell the truth at all times, no matter how unpopular this can be. Failure to do so destroys credibility which is unlikely to be regained.

Above all treat people the way they want to be treated, instead of the way you think they should be. *Genuine respect for their beliefs, opinions and lifestyle is essential.*

2.1 Communication Techniques

There are a number of techniques that can be used that will help with your dealings with Torres Strait Islanders. To be successful these will obviously need to be used in a sincere rather than a manipulative way. They also need to be practised regularly.

Listening

Listening is most important. This means listening without interrupting. It means listening without being selective and assuming that you know what people are going to say. It means actually listening and not just pretending to listen. Islanders will want to fully explain their position to you and this often takes time. Being attentive and patient while they are informing you will be appreciated. It will also help establish a good relationship.

In situations where communication is sensitive or tense it often helps to be empathetic and to paraphrase. After Islanders have finished talking, you can summarise and repeat what they have told you. By doing this you signal that you are serious about their views and that you have a clear understanding of them.

When introducing an idea carefully observe the response to it. If the idea has little or no support this will generally be conveyed by silence. Sometimes it is difficult not to interrupt and not to finish partially completed sentences. This is partly because some cultures are uncomfortable with silent pauses. It may also be that we are in a hurry to obtain an answer and complete the task. We need to become more comfortable with silences. Allow time for people to think about the idea and for them to discuss it informally among themselves.

Questioning

It is often impolite to ask too many questions. Direct questioning may cause offence and consequently be ineffective. Nevertheless, it is quite important to seek input; but listen carefully to replies to see whether your questions were already answered in the earlier responses given.

It is also important to provide time for answers to be thought about and even talked about. This can take weeks in some consultation contexts.



Language

Whilst English is often not people's first language it is nonetheless widely understood.

As most Islanders have a good understanding of English you would talk with them in much the same way as you would with your friends and colleagues. It pays to quickly make your own judgement on the individual's level of English and adjust accordingly.

Where English is not so strong, you need to consider the choice of vocabulary, rate of delivery, clarity and logical ordering of ideas. The style needs to be understandable, free of jargon and appealing. Do not speak loudly or in a patronising manner.

Occasionally it may be beneficial to use interpreters. In these instances you need to be confident that what you are saying is understood and translated correctly.

These principles also apply to written communication.

Finally, sign language and gestures are frequently used to express points of view in the Torres Strait. This usually occurs between Islanders themselves; however, this can be extended to others as relationships grow and improve.

2.2 Consultation and Negotiation Strategies

With regard to consultation, it is crucial to keep in mind that it is a process and that the process is as important as the outcomes. It is therefore a good idea to adopt a systematic approach. Anyone conducting a consultation would therefore need to:

- Be conscious of the dissimilarities between the two cultures' ways of viewing the world.
- Be committed to the process and prepared to devote time and resources to it.
- Understand that the consultation process needs to be open, equitable and flexible. For a consultation to be successful, the people and organisations being consulted need to believe that their participation is valued and respected. These people and organisations would need to be confident that their ideas and input will be taken into account. Failure to do so will generate considerable resentment and cynicism.
- Have a thorough understanding of the nature and origin of the issue, program or problem they wish to discuss.
- Determine who are the appropriate people, organisations and government agencies to contact and the likely ways they will interact. That is, have a good knowledge of the organisational, social and political context. Who will participate? Who will support? Who will resist? Who will oppose? Who will co-operate?



- Provide the people, organisations and government agencies with sufficient information to make the consultation meaningful, valuable and productive.
- Determine what type or combination of types of consultation are appropriate.
- Expect Islanders to be indifferent or hostile to ideas and proposals that are incompatible with their ways of thinking and lifestyle.
- Anticipate questions and issues that are likely to arise during discussions among participants, and outline options for dealing with those issues.
- Continually monitor and evaluate the consultation process in order to improve methods and communication.

When actually discussing an issue, allow the community leaders to pace and manage the meeting. Islanders often prefer to discuss matters in their own language. Be relaxed about this. *The outsider has a participatory role, not a controlling role.* Furthermore, do not expect to resolve issues in one meeting, and do not push for an instant decision. If you push hard you might be able to get a decision but it will be one which community leaders and residents may not regard as binding.

Other general rules to keep in mind are:

- Always be open, honest and sincere.
- Never make any promises you cannot deliver. Explain carefully the constraints within which you work which may mean that recommendations are not automatically accepted even when you fully support them.
- Try not to refuse proposals outright. Advise communities about other opportunities to achieve their objectives and assist them to establish relations with the appropriate funding body.
- Always seek co-operation from the Community Council before going to a community.
- Familiarise yourself with behavioural protocols in Island communities. This will develop over time with patience, good observation skills, and perhaps guidance from a competent person who is familiar with the process.
- Respect religious protocols such as grace before meals and the practice of opening and closing meetings with prayers.
- Respect 'Ailan Kastom' (Island Custom) such as Island adoptions. These have legitimacy in the Torres Strait
- Avoid intruding on significant cultural events such as funerals and tombstone openings.



- Understand ‘Ailan Time’ (Island time) - meetings may not start when scheduled.
- Do not cause anyone to suffer the loss of personal dignity.
- Avoid direct criticisms of particular individuals.
- Be careful with the use of humour; it may be misunderstood.
- Be patient, tactful and discreet.
- Avoid talking excessively, particularly in the company of elders.
- Stick to formal addresses when talking to chairpersons and councillors until given permission to do otherwise.
- Do not be submissive; be organised, professional, confident and helpful.
- Never underestimate the breadth and depth of knowledge in the community and the technical skills available.
- Dress appropriately because poor dress standards may offend.
- Be aware that there are distinct boundaries between males and females and practice appropriate behaviour at all times.

- If in doubt about protocols, ask and find out.

Consultation and negotiation is not a time-specific process. It needs to be recognised as an ongoing and essential component of the policy making process in Islander affairs. It also needs to be seen as a process founded on networks of relationships that require to be continually developed and nurtured. It is important to remember that discussions in informal settings ‘after hours’ may be of as much, if not more, assistance than formal meetings.

It goes without saying that if relationships are to last they need to be based on trust and mutual benefits. However, maintaining relationships in the policy process is not easy; they are often chaotic and explosive. There are also entrenched negative attitudes both of and towards those in public sector positions which compound the problem.

The key to successful consultation is relationship building. The latter can only be achieved by officers developing an empathy with, and understanding of, the socio-cultural dynamics of Islander communities. If officers make themselves accessible and accountable to people and organisations in Islander communities, they will enhance their credibility and help build positive attitudes.

