

TOOL 5

Dealing with the challenges of engagement

Engagement with Indigenous Peoples can present a diverse range of challenges for the operational staff of mining companies. Some of the most common challenges include:

- dealing with negative legacies and perceptions
- managing community expectations about projects
- language and other communication challenges
- maintaining focus on engagement over time.

It is also essential that companies appoint and retain staff members who understand these common challenges, and are appropriately experienced and qualified.

This tool provides some strategies and tips for dealing with these challenges.

Dealing with negative legacies and perceptions

Indigenous communities that have had past negative experiences with mining are likely to view new proposals to mine with suspicion or possibly outright hostility. Indigenous Peoples who live in geographically marginalized areas where large-scale resource extraction is still possible (forests, potential farmland, rivers for hydropower, mineralized mountains, plains, tundra, etc) are also often suspicious of “outsiders” coming onto their land or territory.

A further complicating factor for a large mining company is that initial exploration and development or operations may have been undertaken by a previous company that may not have operated to the standards expected today. Prior negative experiences in the relationships between government and Indigenous Peoples may also contribute to an understandable initial hostility to mining companies.

If companies encounter such negative legacies, they should:

- Show respect for the culture and customs of local people
- use a trusted intermediary, such as an indigenous community organization, a religious group, a civil society group or an NGO, to facilitate initial meetings and the exchange of information
- provide people from the community with the opportunity to meet and interact with senior management, and the CEO in particular
- be prepared to acknowledge and apologize for past mistakes and seek out opportunities to remedy any legacy of past sociocultural and environmental damage (eg by restoring damaged cultural sites, filling in abandoned drill holes, re-vegetating disturbed areas)
- be open and honest about the risks and benefits associated with the project
- highlight that the company has standards, processes and practices that make it accountable for its environmental, social and health performance and inform communities about how they may be involved in these processes
- find out what historical commitments may have been made (eg by an exploration company or joint venture partner) and, wherever practical, honour those commitments
- listen carefully to how communities respond to information provided to them and to the questions they ask. This will help to highlight areas of potential misunderstanding.