

# Changing Policy Through a Multicultural Lens



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## Direct Action Organizing Model with Native American Communities Requires Cultural Adaptations

### Introduction

The application of a multicultural “lens” is a key principle of W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s work. In keeping with this commitment, School-Based Health Care Policy Program grantees have focused on diversifying their boards and considering the different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of their constituencies when preparing communications materials and conducting policy work. Now that the work of “field building” is growing, some grantees have been considering how this multicultural lens applies to the work of engaging diverse community members in organizing and other activities that impact policy.

Reflecting upon and honoring the differences among people prior to community outreach and engagement is vital to our policy work. To effectively work with people whose cultural backgrounds are different from our own, we must contextualize our models, approaches, and materials according to their values, traditions, cultural norms and preferences.

This article is the first in an occasional series entitled “Changing Policy Through a Multicultural Lens.” Here, we examine the *Direct Action Organizing* model and how it can be adapted to be effective with Native American communities. Use of this model has been encouraged as a key organizing tool for affiliates by the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care. The article was based on the observations of Aaron Carr, former program director of 4 YOUTH “Reaching Native American Youth Through School-Based Health Care,” a project of the New Mexico Assembly on School-Based Health Care. The content will be most beneficial to readers who have a basic understanding of the *Direct Action Organizing* model.

### Challenge

How to apply the *Direct Action Organizing* model to successfully organize Native American communities to impact policy.

### Creative Solution

To achieve *Direct Action Organizing* goals, we must contextualize the model so the approach to the work embraces cultural and political differences that are unique to tribal communities and sovereign nations.

## Cultural Adaptations

Informed research of local tribal governance and cultural traditions, coupled with extensive discussion with tribal members, must be at the core of the planning process for organizing efforts within Native American communities. Prior to initiating organizing efforts or convening communitywide meetings on tribal lands, the following cultural adaptations of the *Direct Action Organizing* approach should be considered:

- **Partner organizing efforts with a Native American facilitator who is knowledgeable about tribal customs and values to co-lead the process.** Every sovereign nation and tribal community has its own set of values, traditions, and beliefs. Non-Native American facilitators of *Direct Action Organizing* should partner with a tribal facilitator who is knowledgeable about cultural norms. The Native American facilitator will provide the cultural and political context unique to his or her tribal affiliation. One example is the distinction that is made between financial poverty and cultural poverty (loss of language and culture) in many Native American communities. A facilitator without local knowledge of this philosophy could risk placing a focus on “poverty levels” that could be considered as disrespectful by not acknowledging cultural values.
- **Plan the organizing process based on informed research of local tribal governance and cultural traditions.** Tribal communities and sovereign nations have a unique governance structure. This structure must be honored when designing a process for implementation of the *Direct Action Organizing* model. To do so will require detailed planning and active input and feedback from tribal members. To understand political relationships, ask questions such as, “Who are the traditional and nontraditional tribal members with familial or clan ties to a specific stakeholder—positive, negative or neutral?” Facilitators must create space and opportunity in meetings for participants to comment and provide feedback. Silence does not necessarily indicate that people are in agreement about what is being said. Honoring tribal traditions, such as opening a meeting with a prayer by an elder in his or her native tongue will help set the right tone for the meeting. In addition, keep the decision-making process well-paced by allowing ample time (even weeks) for issues to settle and become local priorities.
- **Review the curriculum and all terminology to ensure maximum sensitivity.** Language can be helpful in bridging the gap between the traditional values of a community and the benefits and resources offered through *Direct Action Organizing*. The work requires cultural respect and avoidance of language that could be misinterpreted as confrontational. Examples of terminology from the model that may need to be examined with tribal members and possibly replaced include terms like “targets,” “demands,” and “altering the relations of power.” There may be an opportunity to replace inappropriate terms with tribal lexicon or traditional language.

### KEY GOALS OF *DIRECT ACTION ORGANIZING*

The Midwest Academy, one of the leading progressive organizer training centers in the United States, teaches an organizing model—*Direct Action Organizing*—that enables citizens to actively participate in the democratic process.

There are three fundamental goals of *Direct Action Organizing*:

1. Win concrete improvements in people’s lives.
2. Make people aware of their own power (by winning victories).
3. Alter the relations of power between people, the government, and other institutions by building strong, permanent local, state, and national organizations.

*For more information on Midwest Academy and Direct Action Organizing, go to [www.midwest-academy.com/training.html](http://www.midwest-academy.com/training.html)*

- **Develop a “Tribal” Strategy Chart.** Contextualize the planning process for *Direct Action Organizing* by adapting the Midwest Academy Strategy Chart to reflect tribal traditions and values. Examples of potential additions to the chart could include but are not limited to: ceremonial or religious considerations; Institutional Review Board processes; religious and governmental hierarchies; tribal connections; cultural methods; and tribal historical considerations (such as historical trauma, tribal relationships with state and federal governments, etc.). The revised chart will not change the goals of the *Direct Action Organizing* model but instead will complement its concepts, while keeping tribal norms paramount. The chart should be reexamined with each community to take into account tribal diversity. Key to implementing this chart will be the recognition that it will take a more extended period of time to conduct organizing with Native communities.
- **Engage tribal elders.** Once research has been conducted and thoughtful reflection has been applied to adapting the organizing process, it is crucial to meet with tribal elders prior to initiating any organizing activities. The engagement of elders to solicit support and guidance will help alleviate any potential tensions and conflicts in moving forward. Depending on the tribal nation or community, elders may require varying levels of involvement.

## Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, there is not a specific “one size fits all” approach to working with and authentically engaging diverse constituents in policy work. Instead, the unique norms, values, traditions, and needs of each cultural group—whether Native Americans, other racial or ethnic groups, or even youth—must be carefully considered prior to engaging in the work.

Anytime we work with individuals from a culture whose values, perspectives and expectations are different from our own, we must keep an open mind and acknowledge that there is much to learn. Part of this learning may present us with mental and emotional challenges on many different levels—our norms and what we know in our culture may be completely questioned by another culture.

We will continue to track and share the learnings and experiences of the New Mexico Assembly on School-Based Health Care and 4 YOUTH “Reaching Native American Youth Through School-Based Health Care” as they pursue organizing efforts with tribal communities and the Navajo Nation. In addition, we welcome your stories and experiences with diverse cultural groups to incorporate into future articles.

*For more information on the School-Based Health Care Policy Program, go to [www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org](http://www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org) or [www.nasbhc.org](http://www.nasbhc.org)*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Organizing for Social Change, Midwest Academy Manual for Activists, 1994.

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