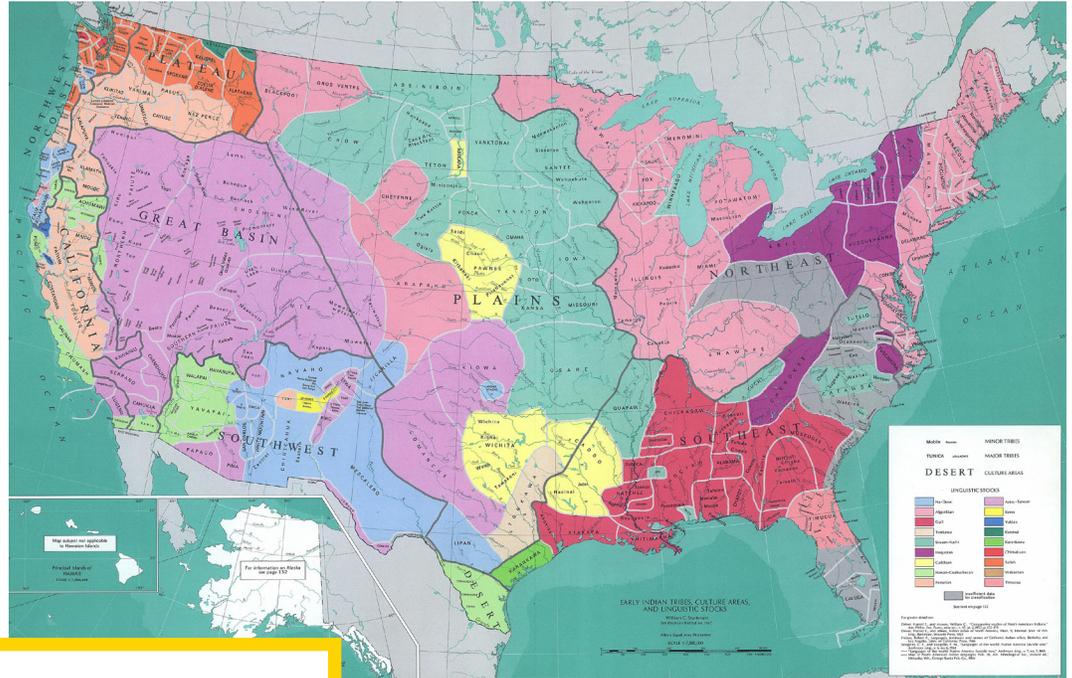


THINGS NOT TO SAY



## *Things **Not** to Say to American Indian Coworkers*

If you asked Rick Waters, National Director of Tribal Partnerships for the University of Phoenix, how he classifies himself, he'd say, "I am Cherokee American Indian." If you asked the same question of Reverend John Norwood, Tribal Council member and Principal Justice for the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation, he'd say he's "Nanticoke-Lenape American Indian." So what's the proper way to address American Indian coworkers? It depends on whom you ask, but one thing they all would agree on: to be the most accurate, identify the tribe first.

"We are more closely identified with our tribal origins," says Norwood. "It's like asking someone from Europe what they are. They would answer 'French' or 'German.' It's the same idea here. When someone asks me what I am, I give them my tribal reference."

Societal concerns over the proper way to address American Indians are not new. You may hesitate over calling someone an American Indian rather than a Native American, though our sources prefer American Indian (after their tribal identification). But what else might you say that would be offensive? Take a look at these 11 things you should NOT say to an American Indian colleague.

### ***"Hey, Chief"***

Unless the person you are addressing is actually chief of a tribe or nation, and you are aware of that fact, calling an American Indian "Chief" can be insulting. "When you reference someone who is Indian and use the term 'Chief' out of context, it's like saying the same thing as referring to a Black person as 'Hey, Sambo,'" says Waters.

## National Native American Heritage Month

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### Things NOT to Say to American Indian Coworkers *(continued)*

#### ***“Squaw”***

While there are different opinions as to the exact meaning and origin of the word “squaw,” that doesn’t give you free license to use it with American Indians, male or female. The word is believed to have come from the Algonquian Indian term for “woman,” but it began taking on derogatory meanings as early as the 19th century, and many now see it as a reference to a woman’s sexual organs. “Squaw, with most Indian males and females, is offensive,” says Waters.

#### ***“How Indian are you?”***

Just as you wouldn’t ask a Black person how “Black” he or she is, it’s insensitive to ask how Indian someone is. “This is something you don’t ask people in general, but for some reason, people feel they have the license to ask Indians, ‘How Indian are you?’” says Waters.

#### ***“Hold down the fort”***

In a general context, “hold down the fort” simply refers to leaving someone in charge. But when said in reference to American Indians, it may be interpreted to mean “watch out for the Indians.”

“Historically, forts in America were built to hold back the Indians,” says Waters. “This implies that Indians are always on the ‘war path.’”

#### ***“Do you live in a teepee?”***

There is a misconception that all American Indian tribes once lived in teepees. But different tribes lived in many different types of structures. The Pueblo Indians of the Southwest lived in a complex multi-residential structure made

of adobe. In fact, Indians still inhabit the Taos Pueblo, estimated to be about 1,000 years old. As for teepees, the tribes that did live in them haven’t done so for generations, for the most part. And while it would seem outrageous that someone would consider asking the question “Do you live in a teepee?” even in jest, apparently this does happen.

#### ***“Pow-wow”***

Waters describes a pow-wow as a social gathering for ceremonial purposes, and many tribes still hold them on a regular basis. Using this out of context to refer to a meeting or a quick get-together with an American Indian coworker trivializes this tradition and could be taken as offensive.

#### ***“Climbing the totem pole” or “Low man on the totem pole”***

In corporate America, the phrase “climbing the totem pole” may be used to refer to someone advancing in his or her career. But it’s a myth that there was a specific hierarchy in importance to images carved in totem poles, vertical sculptures mainly associated with tribes in the Pacific Northwest. “When saying that someone is at the top or bottom of the totem pole, this can be perceived as insensitive because there is no ‘bottom’ in the same sense,” says Waters. “This comment isn’t necessarily offensive; it is, however, insensitive.”

#### ***“Indian-giver”***

“Indian-giver” is a derogatory term for someone who gives something away and then asks for it back. It was coined during the struggle for land when settlers came to the new world. Many

tried to “buy” land with trinkets from various tribes of American Indians, who at the time “had no concept of land ownership,” according to Waters. “In their conversations with settlers, [American Indians] did not understand that they were signing over the land.”

#### ***“That’s a nice costume”***

Traditional American Indian regalia is very expensive and also bears heavy religious significance. “A costume is something you wear when you are portraying something that you are not,” says Norwood. “But when you wear traditional dress, you are making an expression, you are expressing who you actually are and who your ancestors were. So first, to call it a ‘costume’ is to misrepresent what it is. Secondly, it lessens its significance to the point that anybody feels like they can put it on.”

#### ***“We’re all immigrants”***

Norwood says it is insulting to hear this phrase in reference to Americans. “This is not true,” he says. “It denies the existence of the indigenous people of this country. My ancestors were here for thousands of years prior to the first Europeans.”

#### ***Crediting the “discovery” of America to Christopher Columbus, the Vikings or some other European group***

How could someone “discover” a place with a population that had thrived for millennia? Says Norwood: “This continues the racist error of a Eurocentric worldview that is still taught in our schools and celebrated with Columbus Day—which is no celebration for American Indians.”