

Elder & Knowledge Keeper Involvement

This infographic provides guidance for engaging Elders, Knowledge Keepers and other cultural leaders in events and programs. It emphasizes understanding their roles, adhering to cultural protocols, fair compensation, and culturally appropriate gifting. Elders' contributions are invaluable, as they are the Knowledge Keepers and spiritual guides who have preserved cultural traditions amidst historical and ongoing systemic erasure. In different communities, these roles might have a range of titles, so one of the learnings is to ask what those roles are in the communities you are working with.





The Importance of Elders in Indigenous Communities

Elders hold a central role in Indigenous cultures as Knowledge Keepers, spiritual leaders, and community advisors. Their wisdom is integral to ensuring that cultural practices are respected, authentically integrated, and passed on to future generations. Elder is a title gifted to the person due to the positive impact they have in their community, their knowledge and out of respect.



Core Principles:

- **Respect for Elders:** Honor their cultural authority and the role they play as living libraries of Indigenous traditions.
- **Cultural Survival:** Recognize that Elders have preserved knowledge despite systemic efforts to erase Indigenous languages, traditions, and identities, such as through residential schooling and colonial policies.
- **Engagement as Leaders:** Elders should be included as active decision-makers and contributors, not just ceremonial participants.



Key Consideration:

- Engaging Elders is not only about inclusion but also about addressing historical injustices by ensuring their knowledge and efforts are valued and compensated appropriately.



Protocols for Engaging Elders



Finding an Elder

- **Community Consultation:** Consult local Indigenous organizations, leaders, or Knowledge Keepers to identify Elders with the appropriate expertise and cultural knowledge for your event or program.
- **Respectful Outreach:** Approach Elders through formal referrals, and avoid direct, unsolicited invitations. Respect their schedules and priorities.



Protocols for Engagement

1. Respect Local Customs:

- Adhere to Nation-specific practices for initiating contact, such as offering tobacco or other culturally significant items.
- Be aware that not all communities function the same and that they have different protocols and teachings (ex. sex, direction or ceremonies, inclusion of female vs male roles).
- Culturally specific inclusion practices may not go along with our colonial definition of inclusion. Be conscious of where you are and what respectful practices are in that community.

2. Clarity of Intent:

- Clearly outline the purpose of the event and the specific role you are requesting the Elder to fulfill, whether spiritual guidance, teaching, or ceremonial leadership.


3. Cultural Safety:

- This might look and feel different depending on the space. Check in with the Elder on what their needs are.
- Ensure the event environment supports their cultural and spiritual needs (e.g., smudging spaces, privacy, accessibility).
- Zero substance tolerance when interacting/sharing a space with an elder.





Roles of Elders in Programs and Events



Supporting Elders in Their Roles:

- **Provide physical comfort**, such as appropriate seating and accessible facilities.
- **Respect their time** by accommodating their schedules and providing breaks.
- **Create a welcoming atmosphere** where Elders feel valued and supported.



Actionable Steps:

- ✓ **Communicate expectations and roles** clearly before the event.
- ✓ **Assign a dedicated liaison** to assist Elders during the event. Greet them at the door out of respect, we provide refreshments and offer any snacks we have for the participants to them. If we are doing an event and giving participants items we would also want to gift the Elders.



Primary Roles:



1. Opening in a Good Way:

- Elders can set the tone for work or celebration together. Inviting an Elder to conduct ceremonies such as event welcomes or openings (and closing where appropriate) is a beautiful way to start a group gathering.

Note: Elders can provide a welcome to a territory, if they are on their home territory, but otherwise **land acknowledgments should be done by the host of the event** before the Elder is invited to speak.

2. Spiritual Leadership:

- Conduct ceremonies such as blessings, smudging, event welcomes or openings (and closing where appropriate) or land acknowledgments (if they are on their home territory).

3. Knowledge Sharing:

- Teach cultural traditions, share stories, and guide discussions on Indigenous ways of knowing.

4. Cultural Advisors:

- Provide insight into culturally appropriate practices, protocols, and decision-making processes.

5. Community Builders:

- Act as mediators and facilitators, fostering understanding and connection between participants.

- ✓ **Providing a space** for them to get ready if they need it.
- ✓ **Supporting travel and accommodations.** This might include ensuring there is parking or picking them up from somewhere.
- ✓ Ensure that you are **allocating enough time** for the Elder to deliver on their role.

- ✓ Ensure we are also inviting them to stay throughout the day and **encourage them to stay, share and learn.**
- ✓ If there is food involved, **ensure that Elders eat first.**
- ✓ **Include Elders in post-event reflections** or discussions to honor their ongoing input.



Gifting Protocols



The Importance of Gifting

Gifting is a traditional practice that signifies respect, gratitude, and reciprocity. It acknowledges the spiritual and cultural contributions of Elders, reinforcing the importance of their role.



Core Principles:

- **Cultural Relevance:** Gifts should be meaningful and tied to the Elder's cultural or personal preferences.
- **Symbolic Value:** The act of gifting should reflect gratitude for their wisdom and the effort they have devoted to preserving their culture.
- **Respect Local Customs:** Follow Nation-specific gifting practices, which often include offering tobacco or other symbolic items.



Actionable Steps:

✓ Offering Tobacco:

- In many Nations, offering tobacco is a traditional way to request an Elder's guidance. Present it respectfully, often wrapped in cloth or presented in a ceremonial manner.



✓ Culturally Appropriate Gifts:

- Consider items such as blankets, beadwork, or other handmade goods.
- Monetary honorariums are important but should be accompanied by symbolic gifts to honor the Elder's cultural significance.

✓ Presentation of Gifts:

- Present gifts publicly during the event, accompanied by verbal acknowledgment of the Elder's contributions and their cultural significance. It should be noted that protocol and gifts are two different things. Example is tobacco can be protocol; where a gift is a meaningful mug.



What to Avoid:

- ✗ **Avoid generic or impersonal gifts** that lack cultural context.

- ✗ **Do not include items** that may **conflict with the Elder's cultural or personal values**, such as alcohol.



Resources:

[Assembly of First Nations: Cultural Protocols](#)

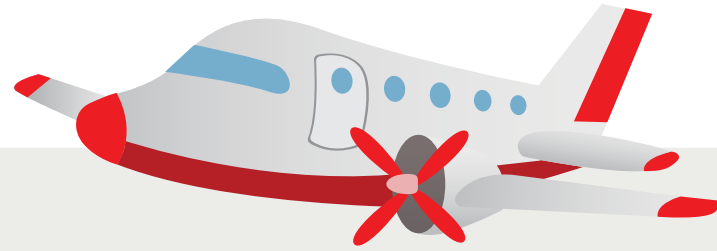
[Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada: Gifting Guidelines](#)



Compensation

Elders must be fairly compensated for their time, knowledge, and presence. Their contributions represent the preservation of cultural knowledge in the face of systemic oppression, making their role invaluable.

- **Premium Payment:** Elders should receive higher compensation than standard consultants or facilitators due to the unique cultural significance of their work and the historical context of knowledge erasure.
- **Financial Compensation:** Payment should reflect their time, preparation, and travel, and include an honorarium that recognizes the cultural and spiritual weight of their contributions. Ask what form of payment they would like (cash, cheque or gift card) to ensure that it is supportive for them.
- **Additional Support:** Cover transportation, accommodations, meals, and any other logistical needs.
- **Symbolic Gifts:** Compensation should also include culturally appropriate symbolic offerings, such as traditional items or handmade goods. Gifts are different than protocol. Protocol often includes traditional medicines and is an opportunity to ask what medicines they would like to receive.



Actionable Steps:

- ✓ **Research Nation-specific protocols for engaging Elders.** Ask what medicine they would like to be gifted. Not everyone wants tobacco. It doesn't need to be a secret.
- ✓ Knowledge of where to get tobacco, if that is what is being given, so that it **comes from somewhere nice**. Mother Earth Tobacco is a website that has resources of where to buy in each region.
- ✓ **Collaborate with local Indigenous organizations** to facilitate introductions.
- ✓ **Budget appropriately** for premium compensation and additional support.



Resources:

[First Nations Health Authority: Working with Elders](#)



Hosting Recommendations for Elders



Creating a Welcoming Environment

- **Ensure accessibility**, including transportation, physical accommodations, and cultural supports.
- **Provide spaces for spiritual practices**, such as smudging or private reflection.
- **Offer culturally appropriate meals**, respecting any dietary restrictions.



Actionable Steps:

- ✓ **Assign a dedicated point of contact** to support the Elder throughout the event.
- ✓ **Recognize the Elder's contributions** publicly and in event materials.
- ✓ **Plan for breaks and flexible scheduling** to accommodate the Elder's needs.



Resources:

[Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#)





Addressing Historical Context



Why Premium Compensation is Essential

The knowledge and traditions preserved by Elders have survived centuries of systemic erasure, including residential schools, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression. Elders' work is a testament to resilience and cultural continuity, deserving recognition that exceeds standard consultant fees.



Actionable Steps:

✓ Acknowledge the Context:

- Educate event participants about the historical significance of Elders' roles and the efforts required to maintain cultural knowledge.

✓ Integrate Education:

- Include reflections on historical injustices in the event program, linking them to the importance of valuing Elders' contributions.



Resources:

[Canadian Human Rights Commission: Indigenous Rights](#)