

Guidelines for Working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Elders

In First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, Elders and traditional teachers [1] play a prominent, vital and respected role. Elders and traditional teachers are held in high regard as they are the knowledge keepers. [2] They are leaders, teachers, role models and mentors in their respective communities, who sometimes provide the same functions as advisors and professors.

Purpose:

Elders [3] are, on occasion, invited by the Federation, labour councils and unions to share in the opening/closing of events, speak to meeting participants, participate on committees, take part in interviews and provide support, guidance and spiritual help members and allies.

The purpose of this document is to establish protocol and guidelines for working with Elders, to ensure consistency in:

- Extending invitations;
- Respectful care;
- Providing honoraria and compensation for additional costs.

Guidelines:

Decide on the intended purpose of the Elder's role. Your union's Indigenous Circle can help guide the process of approaching an Elder and can assist in making initial contact with the Elder.

Questions to ask:

- Name of Elder
- Spelling of name
- How they should be addressed
- Contact information

Extending Invitations (how to make a request)

A request should be sent well in advance when extending invitations to Elders. Here are some guidelines on how to extend an invitation to an Elder in person:

Offer Tobacco and/or Gift

For **First Nations or Métis Elders**, tobacco^[4] is one of the four sacred medicines, and it is offered when making a request. The offering can be in the form of a tobacco pouch or tobacco tie (loose tobacco wrapped in a small cloth). There can also be cedar offerings. This will depend on the nation.

The tobacco pouch or tie should be prepared by the person making the request. As the pouch or tie is being made, it is good to think about what you are asking for and put good thoughts and prayers into the offering. When making a request, offer the tobacco by holding it in your left hand (in front of you), state your request (be specific), and if the Elder accepts your request, place the tobacco in their left hand. (Refer to the Tobacco Offering Protocol for guidelines on how to make a tobacco tie.)

Inuit Elders do not expect tobacco offerings because traditionally it is not part of their customs. A small gift may be offered in the same token as one would make a request to a First Nations or Métis Elder. Place the gift in front of you and state your request, the Elder indicates acceptance of your request by taking the gift in their hands.

The exchange of tobacco/gift is much like a contract between two parties, where the Elder is agreeing to do what is asked, and the one offering is making a commitment to respect the process. Ask the Elder if there is anything they need for the event.

If the Elder cannot fulfill your request, contact your union Indigenous Circle to assist in recommending another Elder.

Invitation by phone or email

When contacting an Elder, remember that a phone call is better than a letter. Elders often rely more on the spoken word than the written. However, many Elders accept email requests. If you are making a request to an Elder by phone or email, let the Elder know you have tobacco or a gift to offer when you see them, then make your request.

Follow-up

If the Elder agrees to accept the request, you must follow-up with a call a few days before the event to ensure they are still available for the occasion. Be prepared for the possibility they may be unavailable if an unforeseen circumstance arises. In this case, contact the community again and ask for their advice on inviting another Elder.

Respectful Care

Ensure to coordinate a host/escort for the Elder. The host/escort is responsible for:

- Ensuring appropriate transportation to and from event;
- Greeting and meeting the Elder upon arrival;
- Taking care of the Elder until their departure (i.e. offer and assist with getting drinks, food, etc.).



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In some cases, Elders may be accompanied by an “Elder’s helper.” This person will have an established relationship with the Elder and will be available to assist the Elder with whatever they need. Nevertheless, a host/escort should be arranged since the Elder and helper likely will not know their way around the event venue.

Photographs, audio and/or video recordings are often not acceptable when an Elder is conducting a spiritual ceremony. Explicit consent must be received from the Elder before any recordings are taken. Often Elders will carry sacred items, such as pipes, quill, eagle feathers, medicine pouches etc. – do not touch these items unless they give you permission.

In respect of the Elder, always ask permission and seek clarification if there is something you do not understand.

Honouraria and Compensation for Additional Costs

Honouraria

If the Elder accepts your tobacco/gift it is customary to provide another gift afterwards to show appreciation for the knowledge they shared. Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help and guidance; contemporary gifts can be practical items such as towels, blankets, tea pot and cup set, etc. In addition to this offering, it is also recommended that a monetary gift, in the form of a honourarium, in exchange for their assistance, be provided. The intention of offering a honourarium is to give what you can. Ensure their gift and honourarium are ready at the time of the event.

When the Elder has completed the ceremony, thank them and their companion. Ensure they are guided to the quiet room and offer the honouraria at that time, not in front of the audience/group. Once they are ready to make their way home, usher them to the front door and ensure their transportation is cued up.

Compensation for Additional Costs

You must make travel arrangements with the Elder or someone working on their behalf in scheduling their activities. Additional costs incurred by the Elder, such as parking, mileage, meals and accommodations, should be reimbursed.

