

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS ELDERS

The crucial role of Indigenous Elders with respect to cultural safety, Indigenous well-being and reconciliation is visible throughout the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action and final report. Increasingly, organizations of all types are recognizing the immense value that Elders bring to projects, events, and services as Indigenous knowledge keepers and community leaders.

Here is a brief overview and important considerations for organizations interested in working with Elders. As with all aspects of cultural safety, humility and reconciliation, these guidelines should be applied relationally and with attention to the specific context of the nations and people you are working with. These guidelines are written through the lens of LPC's core Indigenous values of respect, reciprocity and relatedness.

THE ROLE OF ELDERS IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

From a Western worldview, it is often difficult to understand the role of Elders in Indigenous knowledge systems, governance and communities. Elders are more than community members who have aged, they are knowledge keepers and leaders who have built up credibility within their community over time. In the Western world, credibility commonly comes from institutions; Indigenous knowledge systems rely more heavily on relational credibility from community itself. While a Doctor receives credibility primarily through the institution of medicine, an Elder receives credibility from their relations and specific Indigenous context(s). Culturally safety and reconciliation means recognizing and honouring the wisdom, time and contributions of Elders, as we do Western knowledge keepers (i.e. doctors, professors, other professionals). As with any knowledge keeper, Elders hold expertise that is specific to their experience and relations, the mentors who passed teachings onto them, the cultural context of their nation or community, and the experiences they have lived.

Elders have diverse roles within different Indigenous communities and all types of organizations. In general, Elders carry wisdom, stories, life experience, humour, integrity, grace, respect and cultural teachings. They act as role models, and are skilled at supporting the learning and growth of others, connecting people and translating traditional teachings into new contexts.

Today, elders frequently work with Indigenous/non-Indigenous organizations by:

- Providing openings/welcomings
- Attending and supporting events
- Leading prayers & ceremony
- Facilitating talking circles, education & cultural workshops
- Curriculum or policy development & review
- Advisory support for projects & organizations
- Providing cultural safety and support to people at events, or in general

INTENTIONAL, OPEN AND RESPECTFUL INCLUSION OF ELDERS

We honour the important role, expertise and busy schedules of Elders by including them in an intentional, open and respectful manner. This means:

Plan ahead - Give plenty of notice and start looking for Elder support early in your planning!

Be intentional about how you include Elders in your work. Avoid tokenistic inclusion by asking, *am I doing this to appear legitimate or with integrity and genuine respect for the Elders' contributions?*

Invite respectfully - It is better to ask an elder in private or to reach out via their relations if they do not know you (i.e. a colleague who has worked with them or by making a request with a friendship centre for help navigating to an appropriate Elder).

Open, honest and clear communication means that Elders are empowered to decide if they are interested and capable of supporting a particular activity. Intentional inclusion involves being upfront about your goals for welcoming an Elder and any details, including:

- What type of support are you requesting of the Elder? (see list above).
- Logistical details - time, location, length of the engagement. It is respectful if you are inviting them for a portion of the day to welcome them to stay for the full event.
- Nature of the event/activity - who is attending, goals for the day, topics covered (with attention to topics that may be triggering or challenging due to personal experiences of colonialism).

Flexibility - respect that Elders are important, busy people by understanding they may not be able to support a given event or that plans may need to change.

Accessibility & Other Support - Check-in on if the elder has any accessibility needs for the day or if they require other support.

- Have someone be available as a point-person in case the Elder needs anything or requires any assistance as they are facilitating.
- Be mindful of mobility concerns in your space and reduce risks of exposure to illness.
- Ensure the Elder has transportation to your event and discuss reimbursement or any travel costs associated with their participation ahead of time.
- Check-in ahead of time on if the Elder needs any materials or day-of support.

Caring for Elders - Check-in with Elders upon arrival and ensure they are comfortable. It is common practice for Elders to eat first. Honouring the lives and work of Elders means making sure they have food, water, support, etc.

- Especially if you are dealing with challenging topics, ensure someone checks-in with the Elder after the event to see if they need any support or space to take care of themselves.

Ask the elder how they would like to be introduced - they may wish to introduce themselves.

- Ensure proper pronunciation of their name, the territory & their nation.

Compensation & Appreciation - Elders should be compensated for their time and contributions to engagements. Be clear about compensation and how it will be paid. The First Peoples' Cultural Council currently recommends honorarium of \$125-\$200 for an opening/welcome. The Justice Institute of BC currently recommends the following rates for honoraria: \$75/hour up to 3 hours, \$225 for a half day, \$500 for a full day (up to 6 hours). It is also good to offer a more personal gift, a card and/or thank you in appreciation of the Elder's time and contributions.

Holding space for Elders - ensure the room is set up for the Elder to receive the respect and attention they deserve.

- Prepare you audience as necessary (i.e. if working with youth, ensure they are well behaved and do not expect the Elder to manage behaviours for you).
- Do not have specific expectations for how they contribute, including expectations to speak their language, lead ceremonies or "perform" their Indigeneity in any way.

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