

# Stepping Stones

## ELDER PROTOCOL

### Planning your learning journey

*What is the protocol to follow when inviting an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor to participate in your meetings or events?*



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*There are many ways in which an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor can participate in meetings, events or classroom learning, such as saying a prayer or offering a blessing, sharing their knowledge with students, engaging in consultation, or leading a ceremony or cultural experience.*

### FIRST STEPS



An elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor's perspective and presence can foster inclusion and promote understanding to support our shared journey of reconciliation. Inviting an elder to participate in your meetings or events is an opportunity to share First Nations, Métis and Inuit knowledge, cultural beliefs and traditional practices with the education community.

### WHO IS AN ELDER?

The term *elder* refers to someone recognized by their community as having attained a high degree of understanding of First Nations, Métis or Inuit history, spirituality, traditional language, cultural teachings, ceremonies or healing practices. Elders have worked and studied over a period of time with other elders to earn the right to pass on this specialized knowledge and give advice on personal and community issues. Elders are highly revered and respected role models and mentors for all people. They embody First Nations, Métis and Inuit culture through their words, actions and being.

Gender and age are not factors, nor are they criteria in determining who is recognized as an elder. Some elders may be female. Other elders may be comparatively young in age but very well versed in ceremonial and cultural practices.





*Knowledge keepers or cultural advisors* are persons recognized and identified by elders of the community as being knowledgeable about cultural practices or world views. Rather than being called elders, these people may be referred to as knowledge keepers or cultural advisors.



Generally, it is the First Nations, Métis and Inuit community that recognizes and identifies the person as having acquired and earned the gifts of an elder. Be wary of those who describe themselves as elders without confirmation from the community. As well, it is always best to find an elder who is from the treaty area or Métis region where you are hosting the event. For these reasons, it is advisable to ask the community to identify an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor who has the spiritual or traditional knowledge and gifts appropriate for your request. School district liaison staff, local First Nations schools, band offices, friendship centres and Métis locals may be able to assist in making connections with elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors.

### **How can an elder be included?**

There are many ways in which an elder can participate in meetings, events or classroom learning, such as saying a prayer or offering a blessing, sharing their knowledge with students, engaging in consultation, or leading a ceremony or cultural experience. The important things to consider regarding their participation are appropriateness, practicality and precedent. The inclusion of a significant traditional ceremony, such as a smudge, pipe ceremony or sunrise ceremony, must be planned only in consultation with the elder so as to respect the cultural and spiritual meaning of the ceremony. In these situations, participants must be informed in advance of any relevant protocol.

## **CULTURAL PROTOCOL**

Protocols for approaching an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor vary from community to community. The standard guidelines follow:

**Contacting an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor:** Extend the invitation to an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor well in advance. It is best to meet face to face to establish a relationship and discuss your request. The

telephone can be used to set up a meeting to make a request and to ask about the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor's preferred protocol. It is appropriate to ask the elder ahead of time which type of offering they would prefer and how it should be presented. Allow the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor some time to think about your request; do not expect an immediate answer. Sometimes an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor may not accept tobacco for various reasons and may refer you to someone else.

**Prepare the offering:** First Nations elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors often accept offerings of tobacco, one of the four sacred plants. However, depending on the area, sweet grass, sage or cedar, as well as broadcloth, may be the preferred offering. Some Métis elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors accept tobacco, while others prefer a different gift, such as tea. Inuit elders, knowledge keepers and cultural advisors do not accept tobacco, because it is not part of their traditional practices. In this case, a small gift is appropriate as the offering. Put positive thoughts and prayers into the offering as you prepare it.

**Present the offering:** Greet the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor by shaking their hand and thanking them for meeting with you. Ensure that you have learned the protocol about presenting the offering. When making the request, present the offering in your left hand out in front of you while stating your specific request. If the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor accepts your request, they will accept the offering. The acceptance of the offering is similar to a contract: it signifies acceptance and a commitment by the elder to agree to the request. It also shows that the person presenting the offering is committing to respecting the process. If the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor cannot do what you are asking, they will say so and not accept the offering. They may direct you to other members of the community who are better suited to your request.

If it is not possible to meet the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor in person prior to the event, it is appropriate to ask if you can present the offering to them at the beginning of the event in front of the audience.

**Describe the request:** The request should specify the purpose of the event; who will be attending; the exact date, time and location; and the time frame you have allotted for their participation. This will help the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor to consider the time they have and to speak to the topic at hand. Ask the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor what gift and/or honorarium and expenses they require to participate in this event. Be open to developing a plan that incorporates the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor's advice and any specific needs they might have. Inform the elder if the event includes a reflection on historical events, such as the KAIROS Blanket Exercise or residential schools, as these topics may have an emotional impact for which the elder will want to be prepared. If the topic might trigger strong emotions for those in attendance, make sure an appropriate support person is present at the event.

**Confirm the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor's attendance:** One or two weeks prior to the event, contact the elder to confirm their attendance and review the event details. Ask the elder if there is anything that they need you to provide or if they need transportation to the event.

**Recording:** Photographs or video recordings are often *not* acceptable when an elder is conducting a spiritual ceremony or providing cultural teachings. Elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors may have different perspectives on photographs and recordings; however, explicit consent *must* be received from the elder prior to *any* recording being made.

**Ensure comfort:** It is important to make the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor feel welcome when they arrive, and to make sure that they are properly hosted throughout the event. Ensure proper introductions, offer them a comfortable chair, and serve beverages and food. It is important to check on their comfort throughout the day.

**Preparing the audience:** Be sure to prepare teachers and students in advance on how to show respect for elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors. Consider teaching participants to greet the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor in their language. Remind participants to be silent and observant in order to provide full attention to the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor's presentation. Do not interrupt when the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor

is speaking, turn off cellphones, and photograph or record only if permitted. Participants should be advised if the event includes a smudge with smoke. Depending on the ceremony, participants may require additional information in advance, such as appropriate dress for women. Consider providing background information to participants, including parents/guardians, prior to the ceremony or cultural experience.

## GIFTS AND HONORARIA

The purpose of a gift and/or an honorarium is to acknowledge and show appreciation for the sharing of knowledge and personal time provided by the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor. It is appropriate to ask the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor what honorarium they require. When determining an honorarium, consider the significance of the event, type of ceremony and amount of time required by the elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor. If in doubt, seek advice from the local community. Gifts and/or honoraria should be presented after the presentation on the same day. Some recommendations are

- a blanket (a Pendleton blanket is reserved for very significant events);
- a gift; or
- a gift certificate, cash or cheque.

Because a monetary honorarium may have tax implications, consult your jurisdiction or organization's financial guidelines. There are no standard or specific amounts for an honorarium because it will depend on the situation. It is a good idea to ask community members for advice on an appropriate amount.

### Payment of expenses

In addition to gifts or honoraria, elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors must be reimbursed for their out-of-pocket expenses to attend the event. Expenses include kilometrage, parking, accommodation and other costs associated with travel. If hotel accommodation is required, it is best for the host to reserve and pay for the room in advance. Depending on the activity, elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors will be accompanied by their helper, and the helper's honorarium and expenses must also be paid. On the day of the event, discreetly provide information about how to submit travel expense claims.

## NEXT STEPS



Involving First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members in meetings, events and classroom experiences promotes intercultural understanding and honours cultural diversity. Elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors can share their knowledge and stories to enrich learning across all grade levels and subject areas. Building positive, productive relationships with local community members requires that teachers practise appropriate cultural protocols in approaching elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors.

Fostering and developing relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit elders, knowledge keepers or cultural advisors takes time and dedication. Including an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor provides an authentic cultural experience that cannot be achieved through other modes of learning. Most students and teachers will have limited opportunity to learn from a First Nations, Métis or Inuit elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor through traditional teachings, so these activities can help to promote cultural understanding and reconciliation.

Elders are to be treated with great respect. They are held in the highest esteem in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities because they are the traditional teachers. Educators who connect with an elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor are serving as ambassadors for the profession as a whole. It is important to engage in respectful relations with elders, knowledge keepers and cultural advisors, and to treat them with deference and in a spirit of learning. When in doubt, show humility, demonstrate respect and ask questions.

## Continuing Your Learning Journey

- a) How are you engaging with First Nations, Métis and Inuit elder, knowledge keepers and cultural advisors to support the development of First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge?
- b) How can you establish an ongoing network of support that includes local First Nations, Métis and Inuit elders, knowledge keepers and cultural advisors?



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*Stepping Stones* is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association **Walking Together Project** intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to meet the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Foundational Knowledge competency in the *Teaching Quality Standard*.

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For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca).

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