



## Wise Practices for Working with Elders Resource Sub-Committee Manitoba Collaborative Indigenous Education Blueprint

The following Wise Practices for Working with Elders were created as a foundational information for post secondary institutions in Manitoba to build and strengthen relationships with Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers and community members. These can be adopted or adjusted for your institutional needs in collaboration and consultation with Elders/Knowledge Keepers. For this document, the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are used depending on the source. Both terms are inclusive of First Nations (Status and Non-Status), Métis, and Inuit.

### **Who is an Elder?**

How do we understand, acknowledge and recognize who is an Elder? What are their roles and responsibilities? When we are asked who is an Elder, we have heard the following: Elder, Elder/Cultural Teacher, Elder/Healer, Knowledge Keepers/Knowledge Holders, and Grandmother/Grandfather. There are most likely other terms used but in Manitoba, these are the most common used in places of learning and within the community in general.

### **An Elder is not anyone that says they are one, and an Elder is not just any older Aboriginal person.**

An Elder is not just somebody that gets old. It is usually somebody who is an example. They usually are people who have overcome a lot in their lives. It is somebody who is respected in the community and it's not somebody who just decides to get the title one day. (Ellerby, 1999)

### **An Elder is a specific type of person who holds certain qualities and maintains a certain lifestyle and knowledge base.**

You have to be completely dedicated to serving the people bringing healing, bringing comfort, bringing consolation, bringing counselling and assistance of other types as well. Elders aren't just focusing on just spiritual matters but could be looking on practical solutions to issues that exist in Aboriginal communities (they are) dedicated to helping Aboriginal people, but as well have an inclusive rather than exclusive view. (Ellerby, 1999)

The following distinctions will help to facilitate the support you will need in your place of learning:

- **Elder:** reflects age and extensive life experience that have lived a long life, presently maintain a healthy lifestyle and possess a wealth of practical knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be related to spiritual things and usually involves expertise based experience. This type of Elder is often consulted, especially in communities for assistance in drawing on local cultural practices and knowledge about a variety of topics like traditional diet, traditional hunting patterns, and traditional child rearing practices. (Ellerby, 1999)

- **Elder/Healer:** may primarily work as a healer who specifically who practices traditional medicine in the form of a ceremony. (Ellerby, 1999)
- **Elder/Teacher:** may be an individual who is primarily a cultural, spiritual teacher and mentor who is a community figure, a spiritual leader, and yet only minimally practices as a traditional healer. (Ellerby, 1999)
- **Knowledge Keepers/Knowledge Holders:** The wisdom of the Elders is central to cultural learning according to Aboriginal perspective. Elders are the “Keepers of Knowledge” and it is their guidance that Aboriginal people seek as they strive for balance in their relationships with the Creator, the natural world, other people and themselves. Each community wishing to establish a program, must turn to its own Elders for guidance. (Western Canadian Framework for Aboriginal and Language Programs – Kindergarten – Grade 12, 2000)
- **Grandmother/Grandfather:** The Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy receives their guidance from a Council of Grandparents. These Grandparents represent each of the seven Aboriginal languages in Manitoba and each Grandparent is referred to as either Grandmother or Grandfather in their languages.

It is important to ask what they prefer to be called: Elder, Teacher, Healer, Knowledge Keeper/Knowledge Holder, Grandmother or Grandfather.

#### **What to do when “asking” an Elder for a request:**

The purpose of this protocol is to assist faculty, staff, and student who express an interest for services of an Elder for events or teachings, such as, workshops, conferences, celebrations, or other gatherings.

Elders have certain gifts and carry knowledge around specific ceremonies: Pipe Ceremonies, Opening/Closing prayers, Sweat Lodge, and Naming ceremonies. Not all Elders carry the same knowledge or gifts.

#### **Why do you pass the tobacco?**

The passing of tobacco is to honor the work or effort that is going into the provision of the request. It is a reminder for ourselves that we need to be an active participant in our own learning and it is a teaching opportunity in terms of how we can use our medicines.

#### **How do you pass tobacco?**

The passing protocol varies from Elder to Elder, from community to community and from Nation to Nation. Generally, the offering is considered an “Ask”, a request, a negotiation, or an exchange to gain something from an elder. The Ask usually requires passing of tobacco, in some nations the Ask may require passing in some other form. For instance, in the Okanagan territory, the Ask requires the passing of an object that is made of copper. Generally, in Manitoba, the offering is tobacco unless the Elder specifies something specific.

There is no formal 'script', the person offering the tobacco will be clear on what it is they want from the Elder. When they approach the Elder with the Ask, the person will hold the tobacco with the left hand, because the left hand is closest to the heart. Some Elders may want you to place the tobacco between each other while the Ask is being requested.

Every Elder is different, some Elders do not except tobacco as an offering but it is important to note that there is an exchange of something that solidifies the request: tea, colored cloth, food or a specific item may be the offering. If you are unsure, talk to the Elder what they require as an offering for the Ask. They will gladly tell you what they require, usually with a teaching. Tobacco offering can be exchanged as a way to say thank you for something the Elder has done for you.

Once the Elder accepts the tobacco, this signifies an agreement between the both of you. The Elder may provide you with additional information or the Elder may have a request for the person offering the tobacco.

Traditionally, Elders and Knowledge Keepers will only accept an offering if the request can be fulfilled. If they cannot, the tobacco will not be accepted and the Elder or Knowledge Keeper will explain why and may refer you to another Elder or Knowledge Keeper who could assist you with the request.

### **Which tobacco do we pass?**

There are different kinds of tobacco: pipe tobacco, passing tobacco and/or ceremonial tobacco.

Pipe tobacco is used for smoking pipes and often the tobacco is flavored or scented and is often in a pouch. Some Elders prefer this type of tobacco. If you are unsure which tobacco to purchase for the offering, you can ask the Elder the preference.

Passing or ceremonial tobacco is usually loose tobacco purchased in bulk. It is often used for prayers and offerings to the fire for sweats or to be scattered on the land, and before medicine harvesting as a thank you to Mother Earth.

When purchasing tobacco to be passed for requests, you have one of two choices:

1. Purchase the tobacco in large packages or plastic tins and then make up the small red cotton cloth tobacco ties. Ensure you ask the Elder if they accept this passing of tobacco.
2. Purchase smaller boxes of already packaged tobacco. They are usually red cardboard boxes, often in circles or hexagon shape. You can wrap the tobacco pouch in colored cloth and tie it with a colored ribbon.

There is no ceremonial imperative around one choice or the other; it is personal preference from the Elder or budget considerations. Many organizations will go with the loose bulk option and will make tobacco ties as a team building experience.

### **How to make individual tobacco ties. You will need:**

- Loose Tobacco or any regular smoking tobacco can be used to make tobacco ties.
- Cloth - you can buy coloured cotton fabric - for tobacco ties the cloth is usually red, unless you are specifically directed to use a certain color by the Elder.

To make a red cloth tie:

1. Cut out a square of red cloth large enough to hold a palm size offering of tobacco, about enough to cover a loonie roughly 4 X 4 inch square.
2. Place the tobacco into the center of the cloth, pull the sides together to make a funnel almost at the center.
3. Tie it off with other remnants of the red cloth or thread.

### **The Importance of an Elder Host**

It is essential that Elders receive appropriate care and attention whenever they've accepted a request for services. Coordination of a host to assist the Elder for the duration of their visit is wise practice. The host/escort is responsible for:

- 1) Ensuring appropriate transportation to and from event, so that the Elder feels safe travelling and can arrive without incident in order to provide services for the college or university;
- 2) Greeting and meeting the Elder upon arrival;
- 3) Taking care of the Elder until their departure (i.e. offer and assist with getting drinks, food, etc.).

The host/escort should be familiar to the Elder. The day of the scheduled visit is not the time for introductions, unless the host is accompanied by someone known to the Elder. Often, Elders have dietary restrictions or mobility challenges. It is wise practice to know this well in advance to ensure you can accommodate these concerns.

### **What to do during the Event/request**

Always provide a host or escort for the Elder attending the event:

- Meet the Elder at the door with a taxi slip.
- Take the Elder into the room; ask if they require anything, water, Kleenex etc.
- When you introduce the Elder include the Elder's name, where the Elder is from and state the purpose of the Elder's visit.
- Do not impose a time limit on the Elder – they know what is appropriate and never interrupt the Elder.
- When food is available at your event, it is respectful that the Elder and his or her helper are served first.
- If your event is held in the evening, wait with the Elder until their taxi arrives to ensure they get into the taxi safely.

Once the Elder has been introduced, the Elder will request that people either sit or stand during prayer, songs or teachings, always respect the Elder's instructions. When the Elder is finished with their teachings, they will hand the meeting back to host.

### **Ensuring that Elder requests are made in the beginning planning phase, not at the end**

Extend the invitation to an Elder, knowledge keeper or cultural advisor well in advance when the event is in its early stages (at least a few months), and then again a few weeks prior to the event.

It is best to meet face to face to establish a relationship and discuss your request. If you can't meet face to face, a phone call is also acceptable in which to make a request and to ask about the Elder'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. Do not expect an immediate answer to your request, allow the Elder some time to consider the invitation.

Inform the Elder if the event includes a reflection on historical events, as these topics may have an emotional impact for which the Elder will want to be prepared.

Inquire with the Elder if they will be travelling with someone, such as a helper or attendant, ask the first and last name of that person and the correct spelling of their name, plus any contact information you may need for them. Be prepared that the Elder may become unavailable should they be needed in community due to unforeseen circumstances.

### **Checking in with them and ensuring expectations are mutually understood**

The request to the Elder should be detailed and 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. Talk to the Elder in detail about the responsibilities and level of involvement, and explain why the Elder is being invited. This will help the Elder to consider the time they have and to speak to the topic at hand. Be flexible to developing a plan that incorporates the Elder's advice and any specific needs they might have.

Confirm the Elder's attendance one or two weeks prior to the event. Speak with them 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.

Inform the Elder if the event includes a reflection on historical events, as these topics may have an emotional impact for which the Elder will want to be prepared.

### **Elder's Helper**

Elders may request a support person to assist them to travel/events in order to ensure their health and well-being. In some cases, Elders may be accompanied by an "Elders Helper". This person will have an established relationship with the Elder and will be available to assist the Elder with whatever they may need. Nevertheless, a host/escort should be arranged since the

Elder and Helper likely will not know their way around the location of the meeting/event. Helper's costs should also be compensated (food, travel, accommodation, time etc.).

### **Providing Elders with appropriate space and time to rest and work with medicines (if applicable)**

When inviting Knowledge Keepers and Elders to be a part of your event, always ensure that you provide them with appropriate space and time to rest. A private area or temporary office are best. You must communicate with the Elder or their helper to ensure they have appropriate transportation to and from the event. Always greet them upon arrive and make sure their needs are met until their departure.

Always be respectful of an Elder's limits if they decide they need to rest, even if it means a change to your event's schedule. Ensure your team, organizers, and facilitators are prepared to adapt the event's schedule to accommodate the Elder. If everyone is informed, it will help to prevent confusion about protocols so that the Elder is treated with respect.

An Elder may also require time and privacy to work with medicines. It is important that you look into your office/institution's policy on smudging and if one does not exist, consult with Elders and Indigenous peoples on your campus or in your work place about creating one.

### **Appropriate contact with Elders**

Ensure that you allow an Elder to initiate contact with you. If a relationship is formed over time, the Elder may feel comfortable with you initiating a hug or helping to carry their things. You should never touch their hair, medicines, ceremonial items, or clothing. It is important to build a relationship with the Elder to understand their wishes and protocols. There is a lot of diversity in Indigenous teachings, so you will need to find out what they prefer.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, it has become even more important to ensure we are aware of our contact with Elders. Elders are in a greater risk demographic, so those working with Elders should keep their distance if they have communicable diseases of any kind. While everyone is keeping physically distant, Elders must still be checked in on regularly to visit over the phone and to see if they need any supplies.

### **Ways of Engaging Elders**

There are different ways to engage an Elder depending on the organization or institution. An Elder may be invited to provide a variety of academic and non-academic learning experiences to enrich learning of students across cultures and backgrounds. These learning experiences may include presentation, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, discussion, counseling, teachings, sharing circles, keynote speeches and opening/closing prayers.

An organization or institution may have an Elder-in-residence, and if the organization or institution engages the Elder in an on-going relationship and where the compensation exceeds \$5000 per tax year, this relationship becomes an **employment** relationship.

Otherwise, the honorarium amounts vary, and the following section are guidelines that organizations and institutions use.

### **Honorarium Amounts and Additional Compensations**

The amounts of honorarium as listed below, vary somewhat and there seems to be a range of compensation and additional costs included. There is also remuneration given to an Elder's helper who assists the Elder throughout the event.

- Half day: \$200 to \$250
- Full day (up to 7 hours) - \$400 to \$500
- Special event/ceremony (that might not be longer than 3 hours of their time at the event, but would require them to do pre-event preparation or post-event debrief) - \$400 - \$500
- Elders' helper work exceeds 8 hours per day - \$250
- Elder's helper works for a full day, but work does not exceed 8 hour - \$150

Compensation is also provided for meals, parking, mileage, hotel accommodations, and incidentals if required. Travel arrangements with Elders need to also be discussed to determine the degree of assistance required by the Elder.

### **Gift Considerations**

Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help. It is still acceptable/appropriate to provide the Elder with a gift for sharing their time, knowledge, and wisdom. This gift would be given in addition to an honorarium that would compensate them for their time, travel and efforts.

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### **References:**

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Cultural Protocols & Policies for Working with Elders – Access Program, University of Manitoba

Cultural Resources – Indigenous Student Centre, University of Manitoba  
<https://umanitoba.ca/student/indigenous/protocols-and-policies.html>

Elder and Cultural Advisor Honorariums or Fee for Service – Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology

Elder and Knowledge Keeper Protocols at ACC – Assiniboine Community College

Protocol Regarding Elders and Traditional People and Activities – University College of the North

Red River College Indigenous Student Support 2019-2020 Process Manual