

Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor Protocols

Part of that journey of reconciliation is fostering and promoting inclusion. Inviting an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor is an opportunity for them to share their knowledge, cultural beliefs and traditional practices with education communities, organizations, and associations. They are all teachers within and beyond their communities. Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors are not self-taught individuals as their knowledge comes from years of mentorship and teaching. They have been gifted with this knowledge and have permission to share these learnings and teachings with others.

Who is an Elder?

The term 'Elder' is bestowed to an individual, by their community because of the spiritual and cultural knowledge that they hold. The term does not refer to one's age, but rather the level of spiritual, language, cultural, ceremonial, and traditional knowledge and practices they hold. Elders have worked and studied over a period with other Elders to earn the right to pass on this specialized knowledge and are highly revered, respected role models, and mentors for all peoples. They embody their culture through their words, actions and being. Elders are well versed in ceremonial and cultural practices.

Who are Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors?

These are persons recognized and identified by their communities as being knowledgeable about cultural practices or world views. Knowledge Keepers have been taught by Elders, senior Knowledge Keepers or Leaders. They hold traditional knowledge and teachings and have been given permission to share these teachings with others. A Cultural Advisor is a teacher of culture. They hold knowledge that has been shared with them by more experienced Elders or Knowledge Keepers. They will often take on an advising role but when asked, will share knowledge about culture specific to their cultural group.

Cultural Protocol

Protocols for approaching an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor vary from community to community but there are some basic guidelines to keep in mind:

- Extend the invitation well in advance. It is best to meet in person but if this is not possible then a phone call is best, followed by a confirmation email. This will ensure that your needs are clear. This will also allow you to ask about protocol, introductions, honorariums, and confirm the topic, date, and time.
- Elders accept offerings of tobacco in the form of a package, pouch, or tobacco tie. Although it is not required, most Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors will accept tobacco as a gesture of respect, generosity, and reciprocity.

- When making the request, present the offering in your left hand out in front of you while stating your specific request. If your offering is accepted, then this signifies acceptance and a commitment to fulfill the request.
- If it is not possible to meet the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor in advance, then it is appropriate to ask if you can present the tobacco at the beginning of the event in front of the audience.
- Prior to the event or presentation, contact them to confirm their attendance and to review the event details. Ask if there is anything that they need you to provide or if they need transportation to the event.
- Recording of spiritual ceremony is not acceptable. Ask for consent before taking photos or video.
- Participants should be advised if the event includes a smudge. Participation is always optional. Depending on the ceremony, participants may require additional information in advance, such as appropriate dress for women.

Gifts and Honoraria

The purpose of a gift and/or 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 amount of the honorarium and if there are travel, accommodation, or meal costs to cover. When determining an honorarium, consider the significance of the event, the type of ceremony, and the amount of preparation and presentation time required. There are no specific amounts for an honorarium as it will vary depending on the situation and any additional out-of-pocket expenses to attend the event.

The Learning Journey

Involving Indigenous community members in meetings and events promotes understanding and honours cultural diversity. Building positive productive relationships with each other requires that we practice appropriate cultural protocols when making requests from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Cultural Advisors.

Fostering and developing relationships with Indigenous peoples takes time and dedication. Including cultural experts provides an authentic cultural experience that cannot be achieved through other modes of learning. This is the learning journey we must take to promote cultural understanding and work towards reconciliation.

Nothing About Us Without Us

‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ is a phrase commonly used to communicate the idea that Indigenous-focused policy and program development should be Indigenous-led or co-created with them, as recognition of Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and

autonomy. This approach will ensure that the work is grounded in an Indigenous perspective, follows appropriate protocols, and better addresses the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities.

Tobacco Tie Offerings

Tobacco - Asemaa



The first and most important protocol when making requests of a First Nations Elder or Knowledge Keeper is making an offering of asemaa (tobacco). Asemaa, was the first gift of medicine that was given to us by the Creator. It is used when asking things of others, making offerings of thanksgiving and for use in prayer and traditional ceremonies. Tobacco is also put down on Mother Earth, when a tree is cut down, when an animal/bird is killed, when rocks are taken for the Sweat Lodge or when picking medicines. It is done as a way of showing our appreciation for that which was taken.

Historically, First Nations people have always believed that everything in creation has a spirit, and they hunted for food, shelter, clothing, never for the sport of it. Tobacco offerings taught the people from early childhood to always be respectful and to always show your gratitude to the Creator, to the spirit of the animal, to the spirit of the tree, to the spirit of the rock, or to the spirit of the medicines. Through our peoples' shared belief that everything in creation has a spirit and is not to be taken for granted or exploited in any way, we are taught to show our gratitude for all these things. Tobacco offerings are a sign of respect and genuine appreciation for everything in Creation.

Tobacco offerings may also be made for a special intention, for someone who is ill or someone who has passed on into the spirit world, or for our Elders, our ancestors, or the youth. Tobacco offerings are always made at ceremonies or as an offering to the water, tied to a tree, thrown into a fire to deliver a message, or smoked in a pipe by a pipe carrier.

When you attend a Powwow or wherever there is a sacred fire, you may make a tobacco offering to the sacred fire to send a message or to say miigwech (thank you) to Mother Earth and the Creator. The smoke from tobacco is believed to be the most direct pathway

to the spirit world. It carries all thoughts, feelings, and prayers from the holder to the Creator.

Making Tobacco Ties as an Offering

When you are seeking advice or information from someone you may give that person a tobacco tie. You may also give a tobacco tie to someone to show your appreciation for something they have done for you or for the people. Always store your tobacco ties in a place of reverence and respect. Never just toss a tobacco tie in a junk drawer, it is sacred.

The custom of presenting a tobacco tie is an act of respect for invited Indigenous guests. It is important to honour their presence with the gift of tobacco. Ideally, you are using traditional tobacco, which is not for commercial smoking. Locally, you can find this sold at various Indigenous stores. If this is not available, then commercial loose tobacco, sold in pouches, can be used.

There are many ways of presenting tobacco.

- Preparation begins with ensuring that you are drug/alcohol free and in a good state of mind.
- Only prepare ties if you are not on your Moon Time.
- Ground yourself with the intention of gifting this tobacco in a good way.
- Use a 4-5-inch square of red cotton cloth and place a small amount of tobacco at the center of the cloth.
- Then bring all corners together as you focus on your intent so that you ‘capture’ your message within the bundle.
- Tie the bundle closed with a narrow ribbon, yarn, or a cloth strip.
- Think about why you are preparing this tie and who it is for.

Each guest should receive a tie. Explain to the tobacco why it’s going to be presented and what is expected of the recipient. Hold it in your left hand as that’s the hand that is closest to your heart.

When presenting, always remember that tobacco comes first. Introduce the guest and then present that tobacco tie from your left hand while explaining why it is being offered. This can be simple, such as, “I am offering you this tobacco tie for... the opening and closing prayers... the opening prayer... the smudging ceremony... your guidance with... sharing your knowledge with us today...”

When tobacco is given for a personal or private request it is best done in person to allow for discussion. The Elder will either accept the tobacco or provide a reason why they cannot accept and fulfill the request.