



GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS ELDERS - A RESPECTFUL APPROACH

PORTAL RESOURCES

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Indigenous Elders play a pivotal role in their communities, acting as keepers of knowledge, wisdom, traditions, and history. Engaging with Elders requires a deep sense of respect, understanding, and acknowledgement of their invaluable contribution. This document outlines guidelines to ensure a meaningful, respectful, and mutually beneficial collaboration with Indigenous Elders.

1. Respectful Engagement:

- **Initiate with Permission:** Always ask for permission before approaching an Elder for their guidance or participation. Their time and wisdom are invaluable, so always ensure they are comfortable and willing to engage.
- **Gift Offering:** It's customary in many Indigenous cultures to offer a gift as a sign of respect when requesting an Elder's time or guidance. This can be tobacco, a blanket, or other culturally appropriate items.
- **Listen Actively:** When an Elder speaks, listen with your whole being. Their words carry the weight of generations and deserve undivided attention.

2. Understand Their Role:

- Elders are not just older community members. They are recognized by their communities for their wisdom, experience, and understanding of Indigenous teachings, history, and practices.
- Their role often goes beyond just providing information. They may act as spiritual guides, counselors, and ceremonial leaders.

3. Cultural Sensitivity:

- **Language:** If the Elder speaks in their Indigenous language, ensure that there's a translator present, if needed. Recognize the significance of their choice to use their traditional language.
- **Ceremonial Practices:** Some engagements might involve ceremonies. Always ask in advance about any protocols you should be aware of, including dress codes, behaviors, or offerings.

4. Time and Space:

- Flexibility: Indigenous understandings of time may differ from Western perspectives. Be flexible and understanding if meetings don't start promptly or take longer than expected.
- Sacred Spaces: Understand that certain discussions or ceremonies may need to occur in specific locations considered sacred or significant to the Elder.

5. Reciprocity: Engaging with Elders isn't a one-way exchange. Consider how you or your organization can give back to the Elder or their community, ensuring a reciprocal relationship.

6. Confidentiality and Permission:

- Always ask for permission before recording or documenting any discussions or ceremonies involving the Elder.
- Understand that some knowledge or practices might be considered sacred or private. Respect any requests to keep information confidential.

7. Continual Learning: Engaging with Elders offers an opportunity for continual learning. Be open to unlearning certain preconceptions and embracing new understandings.

8. Follow-up: After the engagement, take the time to follow up with the Elder. Express gratitude for their time and insights and provide updates on any outcomes or actions resulting from their guidance.

9. Compensation: Recognize that Elders are offering their expertise, just like any consultant or expert. Ensure they are fairly compensated for their time, whether monetarily or through other meaningful methods agreed upon in advance.

10. Building Long-term Relationships:

- Engaging with Elders shouldn't be a one-off event. Aim to build long-term relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual understanding.

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- Regularly check in, offer support, and keep them informed about relevant community or organizational developments.

Working with Indigenous Elders is a privilege that brings with it the responsibility to engage with respect, humility, and openness. By following these guidelines, individuals and organizations can ensure that they approach collaborations with the reverence and recognition they deserve, fostering genuine relationships and deeper understanding.

Next Steps:

Consider reading the “Indigenous Youth: Bridging Traditional Knowledge with Modern Education” Infosheet in [Indigenous Works’ Resource Portal](#).