

# Indigenous Event Planning: Tips to Hosting a Successful Indigenous Planning Forum

## Event Planning Tips



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**Project Team:**

Lisa Hardess, Amanda Karst, Maria M'Lot, Brendan Mulligan, Shawna Wolfe.

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Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources  
P.O. Box 26092 RPO Maryland  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 3R3  
Tel: (204) 956-0660  
Fax: (204) 956-1895  
E-mail: [earth@yourcier.org](mailto:earth@yourcier.org)  
Web: [www.yourcier.org](http://www.yourcier.org)

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The document is intended to help other organizations or groups as they plan and host a gathering of Indigenous peoples in North America. It is a working document to read, adapt, and build on. The tips suggested here are based on the experiences of the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER) while engaged in the project “Facilitating Action to Address Climate Change Adaptation Needs in Indigenous North America”. This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action.

CIER is a national First Nation environmental non-profit organization based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. For more information about this project and more please visit [www.yourcier.org](http://www.yourcier.org).

While all gatherings will have their own particular needs and considerations, the following topics will likely be important to your planning: Identifying a Location; Inviting Participants; Setting the Agenda; Finding Speakers / Presenters; Logistics; and Follow-Up. Tips to apply to your own planning process on each of these topics are provided below. We hope you find them helpful - good luck and best wishes for a successful event!

## 2.0 IDENTIFYING A LOCATION

If possible host your event on Aboriginal / Tribal land. Many communities have meeting facilities on the reserve or reservation (e.g. casinos, conference centres, recreation centres); hotels are also often onsite or nearby. Identify possible venues based on your event’s specific needs and contact these communities / organizations.

Outline your event needs (number of participants, type of room and room set-up, catering, AV equipment, local cultural events, hotel rooms, etc.) and provide these to the communities that are potential hosts and request quotes for the event. Compare these quotes to consider financial costs, efficiency (e.g. ease for participants getting to and from the meeting each day), travel planning, cultural experiences available, etc.

Hosting an event provides an economic opportunity for the community that is selected. Work together to identify ways to keep funds associated with the event in the community to enhance this benefit. For example: a local person or group who can provide catering; a local dance, singing, drumming group to provide entertainment; local craftspeople who may like to set up at/outside the event; etc.

### **3.0 INVITING PARTICIPANTS**

Aboriginal people are asked to participate in meetings, workshops and events on a regular basis (e.g. by governments, academics), sometimes on topics that are not necessarily a priority for them or their community. Differentiate your event to highlight its value to the participants by emphasizing the topic and format.

Using an invitation and application form is a friendly way to promote your event, demonstrates that it has limited attendance, and requires that people think through their interest in participating before sharing their contact information. An easy way to get people to think about their interest and to ensure that people who have an interest in and/or work on the topic attend your event, is to have applicants answer a few questions (no more than 5) that gauge their knowledge of the topic as part of their application. Distributing the invitation / application form widely through your networks and using social media extends the reach of the information and potential participants.

Assuming your event has a travel budget, ask people to identify the need for travel sponsorship on the application form, as well as the nearest airport to their location. People who do not need travel sponsorship but wish to attend (e.g. government representatives, academics, consultants) will appreciate the opportunity to join the event and that travel funds are being used where most needed.

Once you have identified your participants, find out additional details that will make the event enjoyable for all, including dietary restrictions (e.g. diabetics) and accessibility needs. If you are considering translation, also ask about people's comfort levels in the language planned for the event as part of your planning.

## 4.0 SETTING THE AGENDA

When setting the agenda, work to incorporate the objectives of your funding commitments and the needs / interests of the participants; ideally these were already aligned within your proposal. Consider the methods of sharing information and how these may or may not be a fit with your participants so you can make adjustments for the more effective event.

Include time for small and large group discussions, for questions and answers after presentations. Increase the time slots for group discussions and group work beyond what you believe it may take to get the work done. If these in fact do take less time it will account for any overages in the presentation times, or allow for group reflections at the end of each day.

Some key considerations:

- ✓ Include an opening and closing prayer and welcome to the territory from an Elder. Work with your host community to identify someone local. Ask what is appropriate as a thank you for this person. Oftentimes, this is a paid honourarium and/or a gift and/or thank you card.
- ✓ Include a formal welcoming from the Chief and/or Grand Chief of your host community.
- ✓ Include sufficient networking time, formally through group work, and informally through breaks and lunch hours that are long enough for conversations to start-up. You can also facilitate this by using ice-breakers, partner work, etc. Meeting people from other Indigenous / Tribal communities is often one of the highlights of events for participants.
- ✓ Allow sufficient time for participant introductions. In the group of approximately 50 people, for example, this can take up to one hour.
- ✓ Allow for flexibility in the order of the agenda. You may find that a certain topic will resonate well with the participants and warrant further discussion with the group. However, this may require moving another agenda item to later.

- ✓ Ensure agenda topics build-on and flow from one to the next. This will make it clear to participants what they will come away with after the event. Each day should also take on a similar format.
  
- ✓ Make the agenda a good mix of presentations, group discussions, and group work. This will ensure participants are engaged during the event.

## 5.0 FINDING SPEAKERS / PRESENTERS

When you came up with the idea for the gathering you are hosting, you likely had at least a few key speakers in mind. Contact these people early to confirm their participation since the people who often come to mind as key presenters are often busy and in demand. If they are not available ask for suggestions for other presenters on the same topic that they know and can recommend from within their networks.

Draw on the participants themselves for presentations on local issues. Conferences do this regularly, through calls for proposals, and in this way gain valuable information from presenters the organizers might otherwise not have asked to share their experiences. Many times, Indigenous people are asked to participate in meetings, workshops, and gatherings where they are 'talked to' and 'taught how' to do something. While there is often an important capacity building element to these events, there is also very definitely knowledge and experience among the participants that should be shared.

To identify potential presenters, include relevant questions in your application forms and then follow-up with individuals to learn more about the information people would like to share and how it aligns with the topics, the agenda and the purpose of your gathering. As participants may have varying English literacy levels, follow up by phone to give people an opportunity to tell you about their work, and not only to write about it.

When you have selected your presenters, provide them with an outline of what you would like them to present as well as a timeframe. Offer opportunities for people to present in ways that best meet their needs and convey their information. Not all presenters will be familiar with – or

want to use – PowerPoint style presentations. A digital slideshow of photographs, presentations with handouts, songs, and simply talking about the work can be suggested as other acceptable forms of presentation.

## 6.0 LOGISTICS

Travel planning and booking flights take time. Start early and involve a travel agent if possible.

- ✓ If using a travel agent, it is a good idea to get a secondary contact as well. This will ensure you will always be able to get in touch with someone should your primary agent be away for various reasons. Likewise, it is important to provide the travel agent with a secondary contact for your organization.
- ✓ Try to avoid booking travel during the summer months, as many people are often away/out of office, which makes it harder to get in touch with them. Should your event require bookings happen over the summer, you will need to be more active in assisting the travel agent with getting in contact with participants.
- ✓ Provide your travel agent with a list of participants and their contact information.
- ✓ It is important to have an end date for when all flights need to be booked by. This will ensure that costs are kept to a minimum. This date will need to be regularly communicated to all participants so that they take advantage of booking flights in advance.
- ✓ Keep in regular contact with your travel agent i.e. get an update on bookings every week or every Monday. This might need to be on a daily basis, especially as the end date nears.
- ✓ If participants will be traveling internationally make sure people know they need to have a current passport to be able to attend the event.

- ✓ Create a 'Welcome Letter' or similar document providing the background information people will need to feel comfortable with their travels and the general outline for the event. Information you may need to include here is: local transportation (from the airport, from the hotel to the venue), meals (which are included, where to purchase food), hotel reservation information (including deposit required for the room as people may not have a credit card for this), start and end times of each day, additional activities available (cultural events, group outings), etc.

## 7.0 FOLLOW-UP

Solicit feedback from people to learn about the successes and challenges with the event, as it actually took place. Prepare a written evaluation to use at the event for immediate feedback. If possible, also follow-up with people afterwards to learn about how they used the information, connections, etc. at home (e.g. online survey sent via email to the group).

Ask permission of the participants to share their names and contact information with the group so that people can easily connect with each other after the event. Ask for this in advance and provide it in their event package. Alternatively, prepare this and send it out as soon as possible after the event.

Ask participants how they would like to stay in touch with each other. This can be done as a group discussion, a question on an evaluation form at the event, or a question in a follow-up survey. If possible, identify ways that are cost neutral or otherwise doable that allow people to meet as a group. This could be regular teleconference calls, regional meet-ups, email lists, etc.

Share the materials from the event (e.g. worksheets, presentations) and results of the event (e.g. reports, photos, etc.) with people via email and online on your organization's website.