# Developmental Insights and Observations from Calgary's Shift Project: What We've Learned about Social Change Initiatives

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United Way of Calgary and Area

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**About this Report**
This report draws on *Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence* as a case study to illustrate some of the dynamics involved in social change efforts. It presents learnings in seven key areas:

- Managing complexity reactions
- Building in time for learning and preparation
- Building a knowledge structure that supports development
- Developing multidimensional strategies
- Identifying a niche
- Changing practice
- Changing policy

**About Shift**
*Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence* was initiated by the Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence, in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary. Shift's goal is to significantly reduce domestic violence in Alberta using a primary prevention approach to stop first-time victimization and perpetration. Primary prevention involves taking action to build resilience and prevent problems before they occur. Shift's purpose is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large to significantly reduce the rates of domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts through primary prevention.

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**1.0 Introduction**

Three years ago, in January 2011, I became the Developmental Evaluator (DE) for *Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence*. I was drawn to the project for several reasons. First, I knew it would be an intense and highly engaging initiative. Lana Wells was leading the project, and she approaches everything she does with passion, energy, and intelligence. Second, determining ways to prevent domestic violence (DV) seemed like a terribly important thing to do given the prevalence of DV and the immense suffering associated with it. Third, I knew I would learn a lot from this initiative. In addition to learning about primary prevention and domestic violence, I expected to further cultivate my understanding of social change efforts: What does it take? How does it happen? What are the potential challenges? What do we need to learn to do it better?

As predicted, Shift has proven to be a very fertile learning environment. After three years on the project, our team has a much richer understanding of the developmental challenges and requirements associated with complex social change initiatives. In my role as DE, it is my job to track these learnings and developments. Often this is done on the fly through conversations, emails, notes or brief reports. Occasionally, however, it's helpful to reflect on the initiative in a more formal and structured way. To that end, we undertook a three-year retrospective study of Shift in January 2014. The study involved: 1) Key informant interviews with team members and partnering organizations; 2) A review of select documentation spanning the life of the project (meeting notes, activity logs, funder reports, DE notes, select correspondence, etc.); 3) A two-day learning retreat to process key findings and consider the implications for our work. This three-part process was very productive. It helped to clarify our understanding, consolidate what we've learned, and inform our sense of how to move forward.

While some of the findings from the three-year retrospective were specific to Shift and/or the issue of DV[*], many were generalizable: The challenges and insights we identified could apply to any group that is working to address complex social issues. For this reason, we thought it would be helpful to share our learnings more broadly.

This report draws on selective findings emerging from Shift's retrospective study to highlight key learnings about social change efforts.[**] It also references a range of literature outside of the social sciences, and draws on elements of an adaptive learning framework developed by Ken Low.[1] Ken's framework serves as the basis for the Leadership Calgary program, where I have volunteered for the past ten years. The impact of my long association with his work is evident in this report, where I draw on Ken's framework extensively.

This report is intended for anyone who is working on large social change initiatives. It uses Shift as a case study to highlight learnings in seven key areas. Each section offers a "Takeaway" or brief

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[*] Findings that are specific to Shift have been captured in a separate, internal report.
[**] Approval for this study was obtained through the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

explanation of the broader implications of these learnings for our sector. We hope that by sharing our learnings, we can support the efforts of others to create positive change.

## 2.0 Learnings

In the sections that follow, we explore seven key themes related to social change. These include:
- Managing complexity reactions
- Building in time for learning and preparation
- Building a knowledge structure that supports development
- Developing multi-dimensional strategies
- Identifying a niche
- Changing practice
- Changing policy

## 2.1 Managing Complexity Reactions

The scope and complexity of primary prevention of domestic violence (or any intractable social issue) is, at times, overwhelming. A natural response to complexity is to try to contain or reduce it in order to make it manageable – and, in fact, some form of attenuation is necessary. The issue is not *whether* one simplifies, but *how* – as the authors of *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise* point out.

> *In all lines of work that involve design, planning, leadership, teaching or helping people with their problems, the potential complexity of problems to be addressed exceeds anyone's capacity. Thus, as Herbert Simon argued in putting forth his idea of 'bounded rationality', people must simplify. But people have a choice of how much they will simplify. They can simplify to the maximum that conditions permit, reducing the work as much as possible to undemanding routines. Or they can simplify to the minimum that their knowledge and talent will permit. (And, of course, there are gradations in between).[2]*

The authors go on to say that in order to develop the kind of expertise that supports real diagnostic and design capabilities, "people must choose to address the problems of their field at the upper limit of the complexity they can handle."[3]

For the most part, the Shift team has sought to work at the 'upper limit of complexity' – exploring the issue from multiple perspectives and entry points. For example, my file folder for Shift includes the following 23 content areas – all of which have been investigated by the Shift team to some degree because of their connections to primary prevention of domestic violence: Aboriginal, Alcohol, Bullying, Children who Witness Violence, Community Development, Child Maltreatment, Communities of Practice, Corporal Punishment, Early Childhood, Economic Evaluation, Ethno-cultural, Girls, Healthy Relationships, Home Visitation, Informal Supports, LGBTQ, Men and Boys, Mental Health, Networks, Policy, Prevalence, Programs, and Sexual

Violence and Health. As the quote below suggests, Shift has also sought to approach the issue in a multidisciplinary way:

> *I've come to realize it's far more complex...Understanding domestic violence from a variety of perspectives including developmental psychology, history, anthropology, sociology, epigenetics is complex - viewing this social phenomenon within one world view would make it much easier - however, if I have to understand and think like other professionals including nurses, doctors, teachers, I need to understand their training and theories and ways in which they see the world. Wading through the amount of information from the different sciences to make sense of what do we actually need to do to reduce family violence is complex. – Lana Wells*

While Shift has embraced complexity, the initial impulse was to simplify the issue. This is a classic reaction to complexity – one that most groups experience at some point (and some groups continue to maintain). As Ken Low's *Complexity Shock Reactions* diagram (Appendix A) illustrates, our habits and routines largely blind us to the complexity that exists all around us. Whenever we step out of that narrow corridor of habit and routine, we are likely to experience adaptive shock. Adaptive shock or complexity reactions can manifest in any number of ways, including:

- Confusion and distress
- Conflict and rivalry
- A desire to go back to old ways of doing things
- A narrow focus on operational tasks
- Looking for an expert or guru to tell you what to do
- Looking for an easy solution or recipe you can follow
- The development of new jargon that makes it sound like you're doing something different when you're not
- Naïve fantasy (e.g., targets, goals or plans that don't match reality)

In the early days of Shift, I observed a number of these reactions. For example, the team was initially looking for the *"magic bullet"* – an easy solution to the complex problem of DV. I remember a conversation where someone asked *"Could self-esteem be the answer? Could it be that simple?"* For first few months, the team focused on finding an approach that we could copy or an expert who could tell us what to do. As one informant pointed out three years later, we quickly learned that *"there was no panacea."*

The timelines that were initially set out for the project were another indicator that the team was not yet ready to face the complexity of the endeavor. The first press release announced that the project would eliminate domestic violence within ten years. While the aspiration was noble, it did not align with the reality of the situation. (It was also potentially dangerous in that it could undermine the credibility of the project and contribute to a broader cynicism about social change efforts when DV had not been eliminated within that timeframe). The group quickly shifted to an understanding that changing complex attitudes and behaviors is a trans-generational project –

that we need to be working to cultivate healthy relationship skills in this generation's children and youth in order to reduce domestic violence in the generations to come.
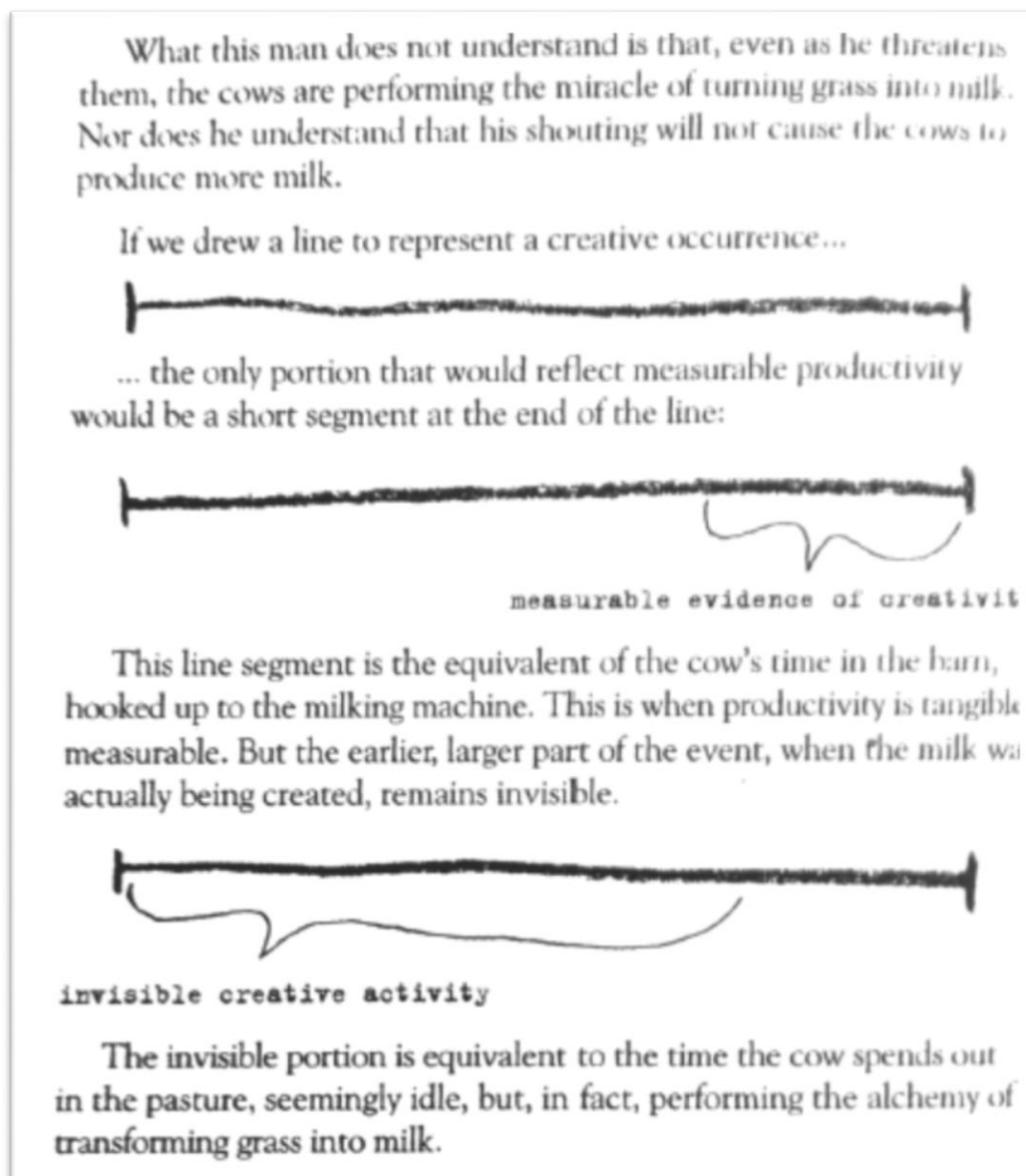
### 2.1.1 The Takeaway

Shift's initial reactions to complexity impacted planning and preparation to some degree because we structured our learning and inquiry around looking for a panacea, recipe, or shortcut of some kind. When we finally embraced complexity, we began to inquire in ways that led to a more substantive and nuanced understanding of the territory we were exploring. Other groups working on complex issues can avoid the pitfalls of complexity shock reactions by understanding how those reactions commonly manifest (Appendix A), and normalizing the discomfort and frustration that is experienced as a result of complexity. Instead of trying to *reduce* frustration, we can look to it as a sign that we are in the 'zone' – that we are working at the upper limit of our ability to manage complexity. We need to make peace with those kinds of uncomfortable feelings and reframe them as positive indicators that we are stepping into the intricacies and messiness of the issue.

## 2.2 Building in Time for Learning and Preparation

In his funny and insightful book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*, Gordon MacKenzie discusses ways to cultivate creativity in large organizations, where bureaucratic constraints and institutional controls often undermine independent thinking and initiative. One of the key reasons that creativity is so often squelched, he says, is that we have an almost mystical understanding of creativity and innovation – we think of it as a natural gift or a sudden 'ah-hah', and fail to see all of the time, learning and preparation that's required. To illustrate his point, MacKenzie tells the story of a business man in a field of cows. The cows are basking in the sun, eating grass and chewing their cud – and the businessman is incensed. Shaking with fury, he yells: *"'You slackers get to work or I'll have you butchered!'"*

"What the man does not understand," MacKenzie writes, is that those cows are in fact busy performing "the miracle of turning grass into milk."[4] MacKenzie compares this to the emphasis that people place on outputs or action – an emphasis that tends to ignore the less visible process of learning and preparation that necessarily precedes any kind of innovation or significant action. He illustrates his point in the following way[5]:

What this man does not understand is that, even as he threatens them, the cows are performing the miracle of turning grass into milk. Nor does he understand that his shouting will not cause the cows to produce more milk.

If we drew a line to represent a creative occurrence...

... the only portion that would reflect measurable productivity would be a short segment at the end of the line:

measurable evidence of creativit

This line segment is the equivalent of the cow's time in the barn, hooked up to the milking machine. This is when productivity is tangible measurable. But the earlier, larger part of the event, when the milk wa actually being created, remains invisible.

invisible creative activity

The invisible portion is equivalent to the time the cow spends out in the pasture, seemingly idle, but, in fact, performing the alchemy of transforming grass into milk.

MacKenzie is writing for the business community, but the nonprofit sector experiences the same pressure to 'look busy' and start producing right out of the gate (the correlate of being hooked up to the milking machine...). Shift was not immune to this pressure: A decision was taken early to 'come out' publicly and position Shift as the go-to source for primary prevention of domestic violence, long before we had really developed any expertise in the area. As a result, there were even more reasons to 'look busy' and demonstrate some value in the first year of the initiative. In my view, this created a somewhat frenetic level of activity (this was echoed in the interviews I conducted, where one of our partners quipped that Shift was *"family violence on speed!"*) – and this sometimes made deeper learning and inquiry a challenge. An alternative would have been

to fly under the radar for the first 18 months in order to develop a deeper understanding of this issue within the Alberta context. This would have given us the space to investigate more deeply, and might have kept the initiative at a more manageable pace. It also would have allowed the us to try things without the pressure of public attention.

### 2.2.1 The Takeaway

As the recent Winter Olympics help to highlight, the quality of one's performance is almost entirely dependent upon the quality of his or her preparation. We would never expect that athletes could perform at an expert level without years of training and development – but we tend to think that we can solve complex problems with a quick scan of best practices. In our fast-paced, outcomes-oriented culture, we need to find a way to build in sufficient time for learning and development. This is *not* to say that learning is separate from action. (In fact, one of my biggest frustrations as a DE is when I see groups spend hours involved in table talk when they have no data points to work with!). Learning and development must happen in tandem with action. However, action must be structured in a way that allows the group to 'fail intelligently' – and this is easiest when the group does not have to manage the expectations and pressures of the public spotlight. Based on our experience, laying low for the first phase of the initiative might allow for greater flexibility, less pressure, and more opportunities for thoughtful action.

## 2.3 Building a Knowledge Structure that Supports Development

Best practices serve an important function – but too often we try to use best practices like recipes that we can follow with little understanding of how or why they work. That level of understanding doesn't allow for any kind of adaptive flexibility. It's like the difference between trying to get around a new city with a set of directions versus having a map: directions can get you from point A to point B, but only if you follow them exactly. Without an understanding of the road network, you can't modify the route – and if you *do* venture off the path, you'll have to stop and ask for directions again, creating a kind of dependence that is limiting. A map, on the other hand, gives you a relational understanding of the road network, and this allows you to adjust the route or figure out new ones. (This analogy is explored more fully in Appendix B).

So what is the equivalent of a 'map' or relational understanding in our field of work? The table below outlines two approaches to learning: conventional and adaptive learning. Conventional learning is like having a set of directions, and adaptive learning is associated with the kind of relational knowledge structure that supports diagnostics and design.

| Conventional and Adaptive Learning [6] | |
|---|---|
| **Conventional Learning** | **Adaptive Learning** |
| Concerned with acquiring established patterns of thought and action | Concerned with needs and opportunities for creating new patterns of thought and action |
| Quick and relatively easy to learn | Slow and difficult to learn |
| Focus on form | Focus on function |
| Understanding is verified based on whether it conforms with accepted authorities (orthodoxy, scriptures, customs, conventions, etc.) | Verification logic based on accurate understanding of associated causal systems |
| Governed by situational expedience and immediate efficacy *(Will this solution solve our immediate problems?)* | Governed by long-term perspectives and ability to prevent problems *(Will this solution create problems down the road? How could this problem be prevented in the first place?)* |
| Errors carry social stigma | Errors are accepted; lack of persistence to learn from them carries social stigma |
| Motivated by a desire for acceptance and approval | Motivated by a desire to improve the quality and scope of capacities and actions (self and others) |
| Threatened by diversity and change | Intrigued by diversity and change |
| Limited diagnostic and design capabilities<br>• Tendency to fixate on surface elements and invest them with magical significance<br>• Tendency to scapegoat when things go wrong | High level of diagnostic and design capabilities<br>• Digs beneath the surface to identify root causes<br>• Is prepared to identify accepted practices as the cause of the problem, if such is the case |

Conventional learning isn't bad – in fact, it's a key reason for our success as a species. Our ability to copy or acquire existing patterns of thought or behavior via customs, conventions, procedures, instructions, and so on offers significant power because we can master things quickly. However, conventional learning is limited. While it's great for acquiring established patterns of thought and action, it's useless when it comes to creating new patterns (innovation/design) or fixing existing ones (problem solving/diagnostics). The understanding that conventional learning generates is superficial – it tells us what things are and how to use them, but it doesn't tell us how they *function* – so this type of learning offers little capacity for diagnostics and design. To address

complex social issues or create better communities, we need to develop a functional understanding of the systems with which we're engaged.[†]

Developing a knowledge structure that would support a viable approach to the prevention of domestic violence would entail developing a functional understanding of human relationships – of how they work and why they fail. And this would include understanding something about the individual, community, societal, developmental, and institutional factors that support or constrain our ability to develop the capacity to maintain healthy, peaceful relationships in a range of circumstances. Developing that level of understanding requires far more than a narrow focus on domestic violence itself – it requires a broader understanding of human and social dynamics. (The same could be said for addictions, or poverty, or any number of other social issues that we are trying to address – approaches to all of these issues need to be grounded in a robust understanding of human and social development).

Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of support for developing that level of understanding in our culture. Adaptive learning is slow and effortful – and that kind of pace, depth and effort does not fit easily in a world that is dominated by sound bites, elevator speeches, key messages and formulas. This makes our work very challenging. The patterns of behavior associated with domestic violence, for example, do not arise in one simple way or for one single reason. Domestic violence is complex, and our responses need to be equally complex and nuanced – but there isn't a lot of support for that kind of complexity among the institutions we work with. People consistently ask for the 'one thing' that they can do to end domestic violence.

> *So the complexity of family violence – there's volumes written about it but when you're talking to people [like policy makers] who can do something, you can't speak volumes to them. So it's like the moment when [someone] said 'Ok, Lana tell me one thing that the Government of Alberta can do' - that is what people do. [The funder] would say 'What is one thing I can do?' People can't take our 54 recommendations – it's too overwhelming. – Shift Team Member*

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[†] The social housing projects that sprung up in major urban centres in the US in the '50s and '60s offer a good example of the dangers of intervening in complex human systems with conventional levels of understanding. The "Projects" were designed to address the problem of escalating poverty and violence. However, these interventions were based on the urban planning orthodoxy of the day, and this had little to do with how cities *actually* worked. As a result the interventions, while well-intentioned, were a disaster. Poverty increased and violence skyrocketed. In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs writes that the most amazing thing in the "whole sorry tale," is that "people who sincerely wanted to strengthen great cities should adopt recipes frankly devised for undermining their economies and killing them." [21] (Jacobs stands in stark contrast to the urban planners of her day and offers a good example of the kind of inquiry, observation, and discipline that is required to develop the kind of understanding that supports effective development). It's easy to look back and judge the limitations of those urban planners, but we have to ask ourselves whether the interventions we're designing today will someday be looked upon in the same way. There is always a risk of creating more harm than good when we intervene in systems that we don't really understand.

In complex systems, focusing on "one thing" isn't helpful. Jared Diamond speaks to this problem in the context of environmental issues in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed.*

> *People often ask, 'What is the single most important environmental/population problem facing the world today?' A flip answer would be 'The single most important problem is our misguided focus on identifying the single most important problem!' That flip answer is essentially correct, because any of the dozen problems if unsolved would do us grave harm, and because they all interact with each other. If we solved 11 of the problems, but not the 12<sup>th</sup>, we would still be in trouble, whichever was the problem that remained unsolved. We have to solve them all.*[7]

The reality of working in a world of quick fixes is that we will have to grossly simplify complexity in our communications in order to ever be heard. However, even as we capitulate to the need for simplified approaches, we need to be building capacity for adaptive learning – both within the sector *and* without.

### 2.3.1 The Takeaway

Ironically, the takeaway here is that quick takeaways won't get you very far. Quick takeaways are like trailheads – they point you in a direction. But just as you can see very little of the territory from the parking lot where the trail begins, quick takeaways make good beginnings but terrible end points. There's no substitution for actually exploring the territory yourself. And that kind of exploration needs to focus on the development of a *functional* understanding of the systems with which we're engaged. We sometimes confuse form with function, thinking that because we can name something (e.g., "the five conditions of collective impact"), we have it figured out – a human tendency that Marshall McLuhan refers to as "Label Libel."[*] *Naming* a function is not the same as understanding how something works with sufficient depth and detail to intervene effectively. I can name the organs in the human body, for example – I can even name their functions – but you wouldn't let me perform heart surgery with that level of knowledge. An intervention like that requires a deep and detailed understanding of the systems I'm messing with, including all of the interdependencies, potential failure points, and functional limits. The limitations of conventional understanding are obvious when it comes to surgical interventions. They are a lot less obvious when it comes to social interventions. I'd argue that our social

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[*] "McLuhan refers constantly to the human tendency to dismiss an idea by the expedience of naming it. You libel by label....Find the right label for some process, and you know about it. If you know about it, you needn't think of it any further. 'What is its name?' becomes a substitute for 'How does it work?' While giving names to things, obviously, is an indispensable human activity, it can be a dangerous one, especially when you are trying to understand a complex and delicate process. [..] a process is not a thing..." (Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. 1969. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity.* New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., Inc. [Reprint 1971, Delta], 25-26).

interventions are sometimes ineffective (or even *harmful*) because we are operating with conventional levels of understanding. "It may be," Jane Jacobs wrote in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "we have become so feckless as a people that we no longer care how things do work, but only what kind of quick, easy outer impression they give. If so, there is little hope for our cities or probably for much else in our society."[8] Indeed! If we are not working to develop a functional understanding of how individuals, families, communities and societies work, we have little hope of producing the kind of change we seek.

## 2.4 Developing Multi-dimensional Strategies

Strategic planning sessions are *de rigueur* in our sector. However, in my experience, good strategy cannot be developed in a single session. As Jim Collins points out in *Good to Great*, strategy is based on deep understanding – which rarely involves formal meetings and flip-charts:

> *You can't just go off-site for two days, pull out a bunch of flip charts, do breakout discussions, and come up with a deep understanding. Well, you can do that, but you probably won't get it right. It would be like Einstein saying, 'I think it's time to become a great scientist, so I'm going to go off to the Four Seasons this weekend, pull out the flip charts, and unlock the secrets of the universe.' Insight just doesn't happen that way. It took Einstein ten years of groping through the fog to get the theory of special relativity, and he was a bright guy.[9]*

Strategy develops as understanding develops – so good strategy requires a team of alert, inquisitive, committed, hard-working people who are constantly attending to emerging challenges and possibilities, and using what they've learned to manage threats and exploit opportunities. Strategy is open-ended: as the team moves forward, they are better able to identify all of the elements that can potentially impede or aid in achieving their ends, and figure out ways of working on each of those fronts.

Shift offers a good case study of how multi-dimensional strategy is developed over time. Early in Shift's inquiry into evidence-based approaches to primary prevention of domestic violence, the Fourth R (an evidence-based program designed to cultivate the attitudes and skills associated with healthy relationships in youth) was identified as effective. In fact, it was the *only* evidence-based intervention we could find associated with primary prevention of domestic violence\*, so we made it a cornerstone of our approach. We advocated for increased investments and support from the Government of Alberta in order to implement the program in school jurisdictions across

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\* Shift defines an evidence-based program as one that: (1) has been identified as a model or best practice program, meaning that it has been repeatedly demonstrated to be effective through studies using good methods, a reasonable sample size, and an experimental, "gold standard" or a quasi-experimental design with the results published in a peer-reviewed journal; or (2) may be considered a promising program, meaning that it has been demonstrated to be effective in at least one study meeting the above criteria.

Alberta, and hired a Coordinator to support implementation. But we didn't stop there. As our understanding of both the program and the factors that influence healthy relationships developed, so did our strategy. To this point, the Healthy Youth Relationships Strategy includes multiple synergistic activities aimed at addressing key barriers and enablers with a variety of groups, including individuals, families, organizations and systems (See *Healthy Youth Relationship Strategy*, Appendix C). The process of developing operations on all of these fronts took three years, lots of learning, and the cultivation of relationships in multiple systems. None of this could have been accomplished by pulling the team together at the beginning of the project and plotting out a strategy at a planning session.
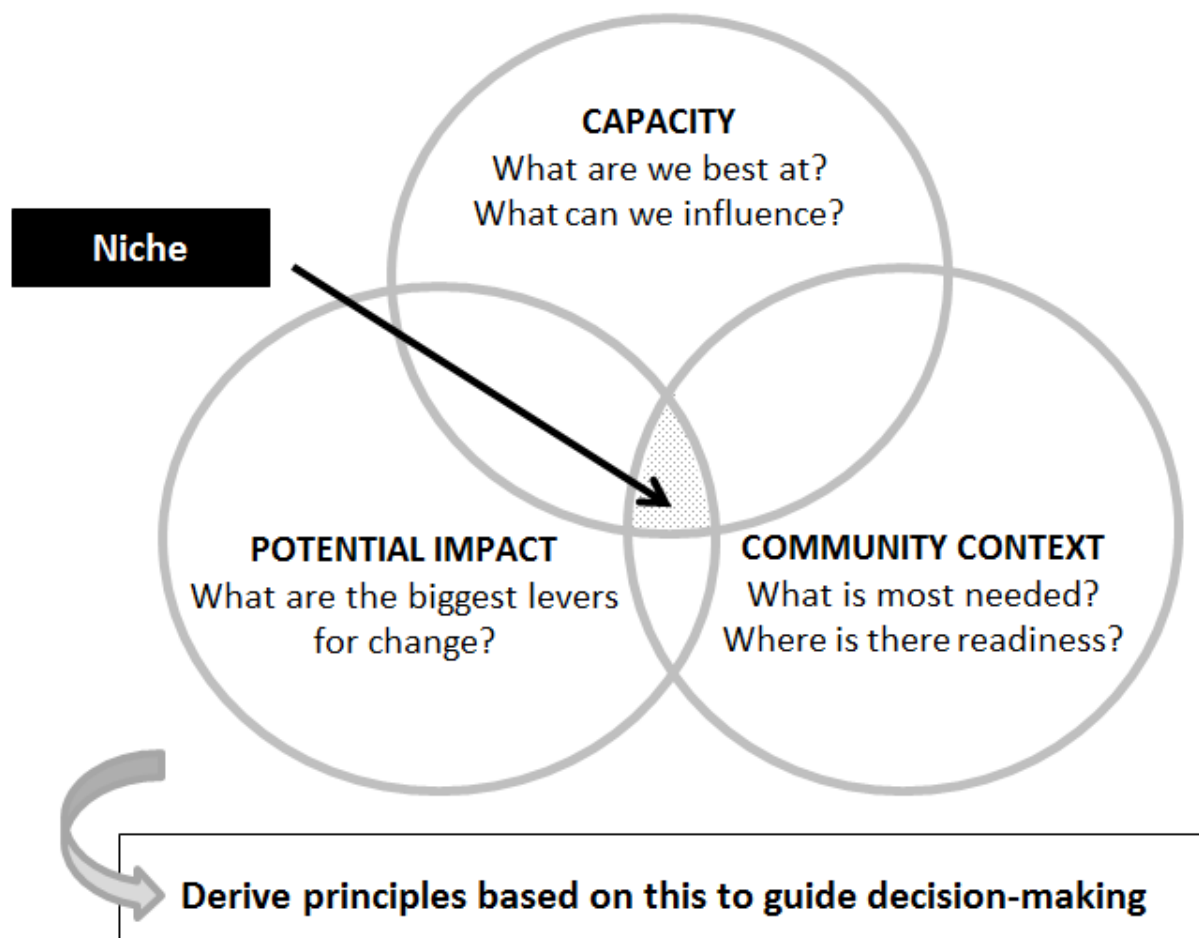
### 2.4.1 The Takeaway

The complexity of our approaches should match the complexity of the issues we're trying to address. For this reason, a good strategy will consist of multiple synergistic activities aimed at addressing barriers and enablers at various levels, including individuals, families, organizations, and systems. This kind of approach can only be developed through ongoing observation, inquiry, analysis and synthesis. Good strategy comes of being curious and persistent. It requires mapping out causal relationships and emergent opportunities in real-time. Strategic planning, therefore, is an ongoing process, not a formal event.

### 2.5 Identifying your Niche

As a Community Action Chair within the University of Calgary, Shift occupies a bit of a no-man's land because it sits between academia and community, between research and practice. So it's not surprising that the issue of identity has been a sticking point during my tenure with the project. For the first couple of years, the tension between maintaining an identity associated with the academy and one associated with the community was problematic, with Shift sometimes vacillating between the two. Even now, the pull towards a more academic approach is strong, with stakeholders sometimes feeling that Shift should be doing primary research (despite acknowledging that this is not a Research Chair and Lana Wells' interests and skills are more compatible with systems change than with academic research).

At Shift's learning retreat in January, I presented a visual to help sort through the issue of identity or niche. The model below loosely echoes Jim Collins' Hedgehog concept, except that it focuses on capacity, impact and community context[*]:

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[*] In *Good to Great and the Social Sectors,* Collins adapts his Hedgehog Concept (initially developed for business) to include the following three elements: *What are you deeply passionate about? What can you be best in the world at? What drives your resource engine?* In my estimation, these elements are overly focused on the agency itself, and not on external realities such as community context and potential for impact. For this reason, I have developed my own version.

**Niche**

**CAPACITY**
What are we best at?
What can we influence?

**POTENTIAL IMPACT**
What are the biggest levers
for change?

**COMMUNITY CONTEXT**
What is most needed?
Where is there readiness?

**Derive principles based on this to guide decision-making**

When Shift worked through this exercise (see *Appendix D*), we were able to turn our "in-between" state into a strength: Shift is uniquely positioned to play a critical role in bridging research and practice/policy. This, in fact, is our niche. Our activities should therefore focus on: 1) helping to build capacity for community services and supports to deliver evidence-based interventions, 2) working with government to develop evidence-based policy and investment strategies, 3) helping the academic community to partner more effectively with community so that 'real life' priorities and contexts are better reflected in the research literature.

Bridging the gap between academia and community is something that Lana is well-equipped to do because it aligns closely with her capacities and skills.

> *I feel like a conduit in some ways. I am trying to translate knowledge to practice, to action - especially around large complex social patterns. If we can understand what key researchers and thinkers have studied and apply it to policy and practice change - I think this brings value to social change...when I hear information I'm always trying*

*to figure out how can we move that information to a change in practice and actions. So it's just how my brain processes information. – Lana Wells*

*I really firmly believe that Lana's niche is around the knowledge transfer piece. You know, she is uniquely positioned to do that. I think she does that differently than anybody else. She's well able to bridge that… – Shift Team Member*

### 2.5.1 The Takeaway

Before we identified and explicitly articulated our niche, it was easy to be pulled in multiple directions – some of which were unlikely to pay off in any significant ways because they did not align with our capacities, the community context and/or the biggest levers for change. Identifying your niche, and deriving decision-making principles based on that niche, is an important part of developing a strategic approach to community change efforts.

### 2.6 Changing Practice

Moving research into practice is a key focus for Shift – and we've learned a lot about how to change practice in the three years of the initiative. Below are a few of the key insights we've gleaned.

1. **Will and Skill:** When we seek to change practice, we often place an inordinate focus on knowledge – thinking that if we simply 'educate' providers and policy makers, that will suffice. Contrary to popular belief, knowledge is *not* power. It's necessary, certainly, but not sufficient (as anyone who 'knows' they should eat better or exercise more can tell you…). Changes in behavior require intentional and operational capacities as well – or will and skill. Because practice change requires far more than just changes in knowledge, it must involve a more holistic approach – one that supports organizational development, capacity building, buy-in, culture change, systems change, and on-going coaching and support. In other words, moving research into practice requires a change management approach:

   *The thing is you get everyone around the table agreeing to a vision, but then they have to go back to their systems or groups and that's where I think implementation falls down. If you had a change manager actually work individually with each leader to help them process what the research and information means to their system – [that would help], because it's easy at a round table to commit. But then when you have to go back to your organization and apply the learning and think through what it means to your own system, to your own practice, that is difficult. So a good change process would have a leader, plan of action, along with people responsible to support the change process. So I feel like I do a lot of that – coaching, guiding, providing advice to support the change we seek. – Lana Wells*

2. **Readiness:** A number of times, Shift has had to alter the direction of a project once it was already underway because we did not accurately assess readiness. In many cases, the will was there (which certainly gives you something to work with) but the operational capacity to make it happen was not. Changing the project mid-stream created a few challenges for the funders backing the project (although we were fortunate to have funders who understood the emergent nature of our work). We have since learned that any project designed to change practice must include an assessment phase – one that involves actually working with the organization closely enough that you are able to assess potential barriers and enablers in terms of organizational culture, leadership, and capacity. Funding an exploratory phase allows for flexibility and creates the understanding necessary to know what will need to be included in subsequent phases of development.

3. **Patience and Persistence:** Knowledge doesn't 'transfer' straight across. What we see, hear, understand and pay attention to at any point in time is entirely dependent on our circumstances – on the set of challenges and opportunities we are trying to manage. So a first step in creating change is understanding how others are making meaning – what their priorities are and how they're making sense of things. This gives you a starting point to work with. You then need to be patient and persistent in your efforts to build the understanding, will and skill that support practice change. One of the most productive relationships that Shift has had is with a key bureaucrat in the Provincial Government. In a recent conversation with Lana, that bureaucrat noted that she just reread a paper that Shift developed early in the initiative, and it made sense to her in a way that it hadn't when she had read it a year previously. She said she was now ready to move on some of the recommendations. *"Yeah,"* Lana said, *"that's because you're at a different place."* That 'different place' was the result of intense development work – a year of phone-calls, emails, and meetings – to cultivate a deeper understanding of the issue. Supporting this kind of change takes enormous patience and persistence, but an ongoing investment in capacity building usually pays off.

4. **Resistance:** All change will be resisted by *someone* – even if the cause is good. At the start of our initiative, we thought 'Who could argue with investing in primary prevention of domestic violence?' As it turns out, anyone who is afraid that a focus on primary prevention will divert funding and attention from DV crisis intervention services is likely to be opposed – even if they support primary prevention in principal. A key part of change management involves understanding and anticipating the community's priorities, interests and fears. If you don't, you're likely to be blind-sided.

5. **Insider Knowledge:** When Shift wanted to create changes within school jurisdictions across Alberta, we immediately hired someone who had worked in the school system for a number of years – both in the classroom and at a systems level. We intuitively knew

that if we wanted to change the behavior of educators, we needed someone who actually understood that system and the on-the-ground reality of teachers. Similarly, when we wanted to work with the Provincial Government, we cultivated a relationship with a bureaucrat who could offer her wisdom on timing, feasibility and approach. Without her, we would have pushed the wrong things in the wrong way. Instead, we managed to influence investment practices and policies around primary prevention. Customization for each system is critical, and this is only likely to be effective if you are working with someone on the inside.

6. **Institutionalizing Change:** One of Shift's challenges in working with large systems (education, health, etc.) is the high level of turnover and change. It's very frustrating when you've invested a considerable effort in developing relationships and building capacity, and all of that is wiped out in the next 're-org':

> *Working with that system, it's always in chaos, there's new people in the position every six months to a year and that is the reality of that system. Yet we're trying to do this long term systemic change. So you can get lost and feel hopeless or you can just keep having those meetings and keep bringing the people up to speed and doing the work. I think there's a tenaciousness to social change, you have to stay the course. – Lana Wells*

While there is no substitute for personal relationships and individual capacity building, it is important that that's not the only level at which you're working. Ultimately, you also need to find ways to institutionalize change. This is one of the reasons why Shift has been working, not only with individual schools, but also school boards and the Ministry of Education. Eliciting broader institutional support for integrating social and emotional learning into the curriculum will help to ensure that the practice changes we have been supporting are not vulnerable to a change-over in teaching staff or school leadership.

### 2.6.1 The Takeaway

Anyone seeking to support practice change needs to be in it for the long-haul because it's not going to happen just because we offered a workshop or disseminated a report. We can learn a great deal about supporting changes in practice from the principles of Change Management, which go well beyond communication or education to consider the kind of ongoing learning, coaching, processes, and supports that help to cultivate readiness, buy-in, operational capacity, and socio-cultural environments that support the practices we are trying to move towards.

### 2.7 Changing Policy

Shift has had a significant influence on the Government of Alberta's (GOA) policy framework around family violence, *Family Violence Hurts Everyone: A Framework to End Family Violence in*

*Alberta.*[10] We also helped to get government funding for programs and supports related to primary prevention (e.g., funding for the Fourth R; funding to train home visitation nurses on domestic violence). None of this would have happened by simply making the research available to the government. These gains were the result of a very productive relationship between Lana Wells and a key bureaucrat within the Ministry of Human Services.* This partnership was mutually beneficial. In addition to receiving timely and well-researched information, the government had ongoing access to Shift's expertise:

> *I know Lana and I probably talk a couple of times a day. For me one of the things was, you know, the processing back and forth, sounding things off each other and helping inform the direction of the strategy. We had lots and lots of meetings, sitting down with different pages up on the computer, on the wall … so it just was a really positive working relationship… – Provincial Government Bureaucrat*

Shift, on the other hand, benefitted from having an ally in government – someone who really understood the ins and outs of the GOA and could advise us on our timing and approach.

> *I think a big win is [our contact's] personality. She has been in government for 30 years, she is well connected and well liked. She has lots of experience and has been part of several large scale social change initiatives, she's very well respected. … So she knows how government works.  And not only that, she's kind and treats people with respect. She is also realistic about how to support social change. – Lana Wells*

Timing is critical when it comes to influencing policy, so having someone on the inside who can help to you to know when to nudge, push, tread carefully, or back off is terribly helpful.

> *She's the first person to say you know 'Patience!' [or] …. 'We've got to let that one lie for a couple of years.' So she knows when to go forward, when to go in. – Lana Wells*

Working with government takes enormous patience as the institution does not typically move quickly. A draft of the Provincial Framework, for example, was completed in the Fall of 2012, but the document was not publicly released until November 2013. In addition to all of the checks and balances that can slow the process down, there are also political realities that create timing issues. So policy change will always be more of a marathon than a sprint. This kind of work also requires an ability to know when (and when not) to compromise. Governments are always dealing with a range of considerations, and research evidence is only one small piece of the deliberations.

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* This relationship was one way of countering the 'one-thing' syndrome discussed in *3.0 Developing a Knowledge Structure that Supports Development*. Lana worked with this key bureaucrat on a day-to-day basis to help her develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of family violence.

Another key learning is that policy change (or in this case, the Provincial Framework) is a starting point, not an end point. Ensuring that the policy or strategy is executed in a meaningful way requires ongoing work on behalf of those who advocated for the change. Shift will need to continue to work with the Government of Alberta over the coming years to support implementation, learning and course correction.

### 2.7.1 The Takeaway

Changing policy requires a deep understanding of the governmental systems you are trying to impact, so that you have some sense of the best timing, entry point, and approach. The only way to gain this kind of understanding is to work closely with those on the inside. In the words of one key informant *"It's all about relationships."*

### 3.0 Conclusion

Shift's journey over the past three years has yielded a number of insights about the developmental challenges and requirements associated with complex social change initiatives, including the following:

1. *Complexity shock reactions:* Complexity can be overwhelming. Understanding the various reactions to complexity can help us manage our responses and ensure that we are developing a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the systems with which we're engaged. Instead of trying to reduce frustration, we should take it as a positive sign that we are engaging at our edge.

2. *Building in time for learning and preparation:* In a world of "just add water" learning, we grossly underestimate the time it takes to develop an understanding that supports effective interventions. This isn't to say that learning is separate from action. Sitting around a table talking for a year doesn't get you any further ahead – you have to actually *try* things. However, having the time and space to challenge our assumptions, test our hypotheses, develop our understanding, and fail intelligently is critical.

3. *Building a knowledge structure that supports development:* Too often we intervene in complex systems with only a superficial understanding of the various elements. The type of knowledge structure that supports development is *relational* rather than nominal (where the parts are named, but the functions are not really understood) or procedural (a set of instructions that must be followed exactly).

4. *Developing multi-dimensional strategies:* Good strategy will consist of multiple synergistic activities, and be based on a detailed and nuanced understanding of challenges and possibilities – and this kind of approach can only be developed through ongoing

observation, inquiry, analysis and synthesis. For this reason, strategic planning is an ongoing, open-ended process, not a formal event.
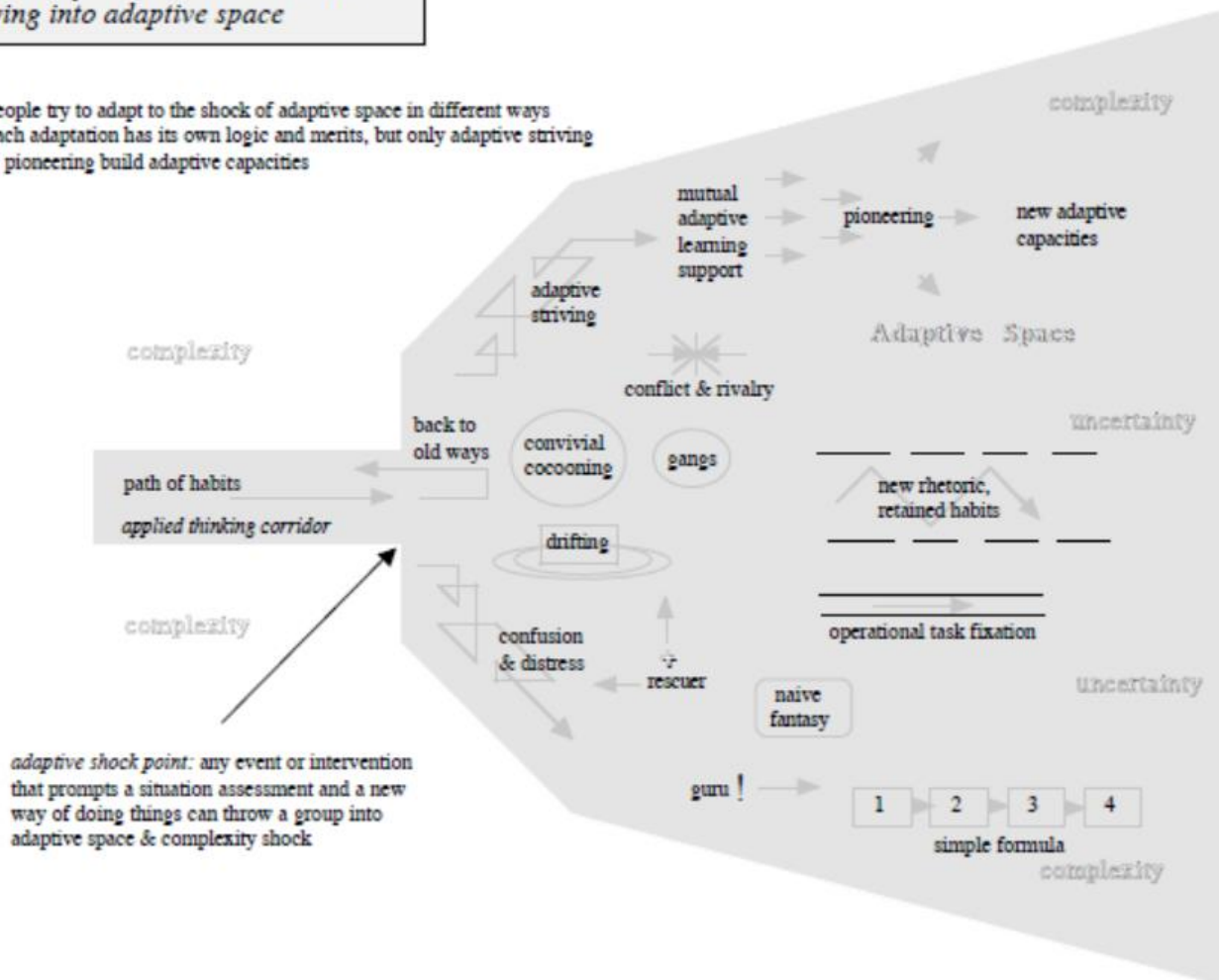
5. *Identifying your niche:* In order to move forward in a disciplined way and not be pulled in too many directions, it's helpful to have a clear and detailed understanding of the initiative's purpose or niche. This understanding can be developed by exploring the following three areas: 1) Capacity – *What are we best at? What can we influence?*; 2) Potential impact – *What are the biggest levers for change?*; 3) Community context – *What is most needed? Where is there readiness?*

6. *Changing practice:* Changing practice requires significant time and effort – it's not something that results from a single workshop, article or brochure. If we are serious about changing practice, we need to invest in ongoing coaching, mentoring and support.

7. *Changing policy:* Changing policy is difficult unless you are partnering with someone on the 'inside' – a bureaucrat who can help you to refine your timing and approach.

Social change is a bit like parenting – there's no formula or manual that can fully prepare you for the reality. It's something you have to learn as you go. However, engaging with a community of others who are on the same learning journey can be very, very helpful. We hope that by sharing the developmental challenges and insights that have emerged in the course of our project, we can contribute to the learning of others who are working to create positive change.

**Appendix A: Complexity Shock Reactions**

## Complexity Shock Reactions
*- moving into adaptive space*

- people try to adapt to the shock of adaptive space in different ways
- each adaptation has its own logic and merits, but only adaptive striving & pioneering build adaptive capacities

complexity

mutual adaptive learning support → pioneering → new adaptive capacities

adaptive striving

Adaptive Space

conflict & rivalry

uncertainty

back to old ways

convivial cocooning

gangs

new rhetoric, retained habits

path of habits

*applied thinking corridor*

complexity

drifting

operational task fixation

confusion & distress

rescuer

naive fantasy

uncertainty

*adaptive shock point:* any event or intervention that prompts a situation assessment and a new way of doing things can throw a group into adaptive space & complexity shock

guru !

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

simple formula

complexity

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**Appendix B: Map versus Directions**

*The following excerpt is taken from a manuscript for a book (still in draft) that I am currently working on with Ken Low. The analogy helps to illustrate why the practice of adopting best practices as a kind 'recipe' or set of directions is no real replacement for developing the type of knowledge structures associated with adaptive learning. The analogy was developed by a mathematics teacher named Richard Skemp, who distinguished between two kinds of learning: rules-based learning (what I've called 'conventional learning') and adaptive learning, the kind of rich conceptual development that supports independence, flexibility, and the development of new knowledge.*

Imagine you've just landed in a city that you've never visited before. You ask the guy at the car rental place how to get to your hotel. He gives you directions: *Head down the highway. Take exit 431. Follow that road around a bend, then take a right. Turn left at the post office. At the next light, make a right. The hotel is just down that road on the left.* If his directions are accurate and you don't make any mistakes along the way, you'll arrive at your destination. But going from Point A to Point B is about all you can do with a set of directions. If there are traffic delays, or if you suddenly decide that you'd like to stop at some nearby attraction before heading to your hotel, you can't modify your route. And if you take a wrong turn along the way, you'll be lost and will have to stop and ask for directions again.

Now imagine that the guy at the car rental counter gives you directions, but he also gives you a map. He shows you where you are on the map and outlines the route to the hotel. You now see Point A and Point B, not in isolation, but in the context of the road network. Think about the power that gives you. If you take a wrong turn, you can figure out how to get back on track without relying on directions from someone else. You can also modify your route. Better yet, you can plan *new* routes. With a map, you have greater independence. You don't have to ask the concierge for directions every time you leave the hotel.

Conventional learning, Skemp explains, is the equivalent of following a set of directions to get from Point A to B. It involves "learning a number of fixed plans, by which pupils can find their way from particular starting points (the data) to required finishing points (the answers to the questions)."[11] There is "no awareness of the overall relationship between successive stages, and the final goal. And … the learner is dependent on outside guidance for learning each new 'way to get there.'[12] You can appreciate how this type of learning would limit any kind of flexibility and potentially create dangerous path dependencies.

Adaptive or relational learning, on the other hand, "consists of building up a conceptual structure (schema) from which its possessor can (in principle) produce an unlimited number of plans for getting from any starting point within his schema to any finishing point. [13] Just as a map gives you more flexibility than directions can give you, adaptive learning supports greater adaptability and
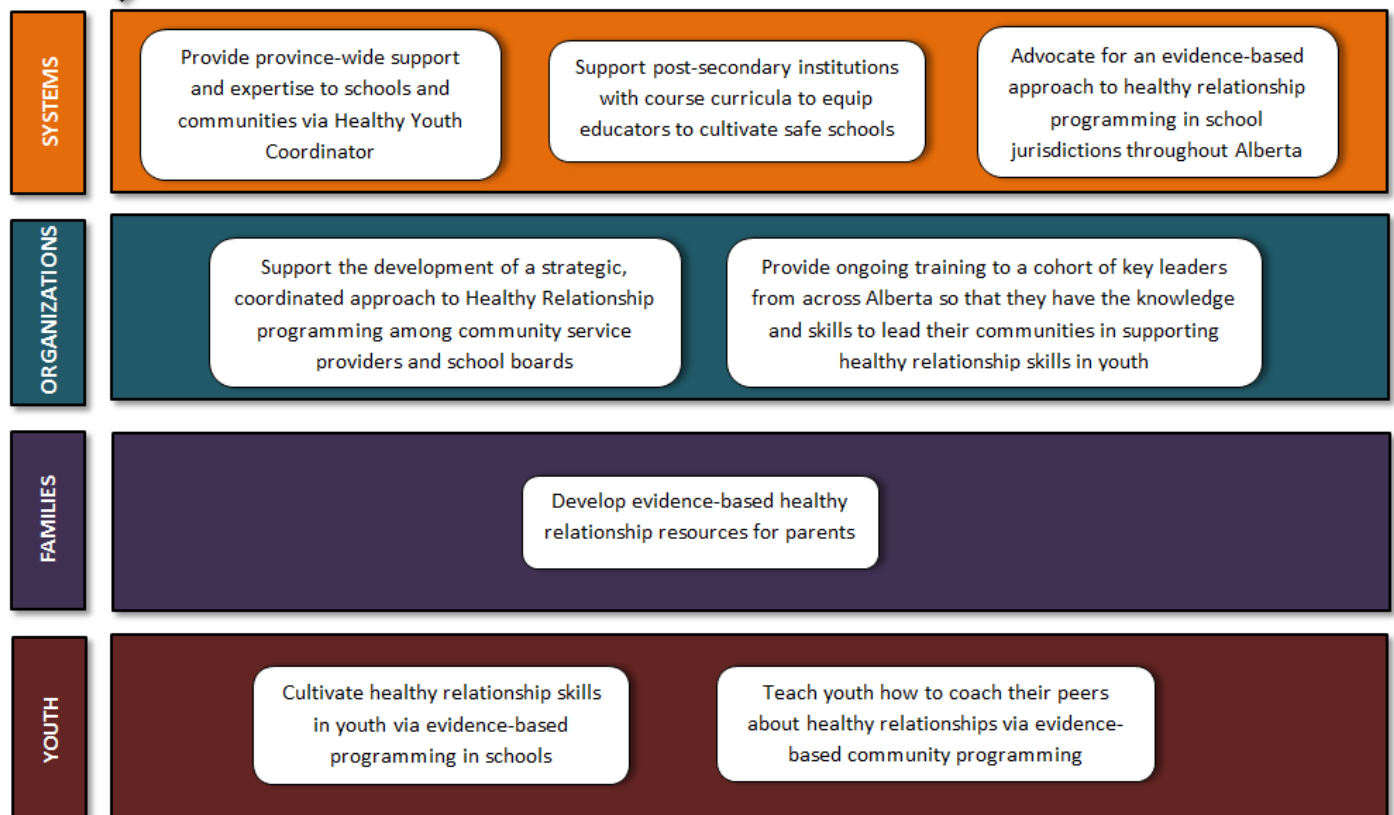
independence. It reduces path dependency, supports customization, and makes it possible to devise new routes.

The *challenge* with adaptive learning is that it requires far more time and effort than conventional learning. A cognitive map or knowledge structure takes much longer to both teach and learn. (In that sense, it's less like being given a road map that you can immediately make sense of, and more like developing a cab driver's understanding of the city). Paradoxically, however, it's ultimately a more economical approach. In the same way that memorizing the directions to 30 or 40 different locations would be taxing, memorizing rules absent of any functional understanding can become burdensome. A cognitive map or knowledge structure, on the other hand, allows you to derive any number of plans or routes – far more than the number of routes that you can memorize separately.[14]

**Appendix C: Shift's Healthy Youth Relationship Strategy**

## Healthy Youth Relationship Strategy

sh!ft
THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**In partnership with CAMH, Shift is working to increase capacity at multiple levels…**

**SYSTEMS**

Provide province-wide support and expertise to schools and communities via Healthy Youth Coordinator

Support post-secondary institutions with course curricula to equip educators to cultivate safe schools

Advocate for an evidence-based approach to healthy relationship programming in school jurisdictions throughout Alberta

**ORGANIZATIONS**

Support the development of a strategic, coordinated approach to Healthy Relationship programming among community service providers and school boards

Provide ongoing training to a cohort of key leaders from across Alberta so that they have the knowledge and skills to lead their communities in supporting healthy relationship skills in youth

**FAMILIES**

Develop evidence-based healthy relationship resources for parents

**YOUTH**

Cultivate healthy relationship skills in youth via evidence-based programming in schools

Teach youth how to coach their peers about healthy relationships via evidence-based community programming

**To ensure that young people have the skills to develop and maintain healthy relationships, so that…**

**The next generation can live a life free from domestic violence**

## Appendix D: Niche Exercise

**Shift's Niche: Shift can play a unique role in bridging research and practice/policy in the area of primary prevention of domestic violence.**

**CAPACITY (What are we best at? What can we influence?)**

- Convening, connecting, and motivating others
- Influencing policy makers and community leaders
- Summarizing research in accessible ways
- Identifying strategic relationships and potential synergies between people, projects, policy, and research
- Uniquely positioned to bridge research and practice because we are an Action Chair in an academic setting



**POTENTIAL IMPACT (What are the biggest levers for change?)**

- Policy, legislative, systems, and community change to:
  - ✓ Support positive home environments and reduce child maltreatment
  - ✓ Integrate Social-Emotional Learning (SEL into education (and promote SEL across *all* sectors and professions)
  - ✓ Address gender norms that contribute to DV
  - ✓ Support healthy community norms
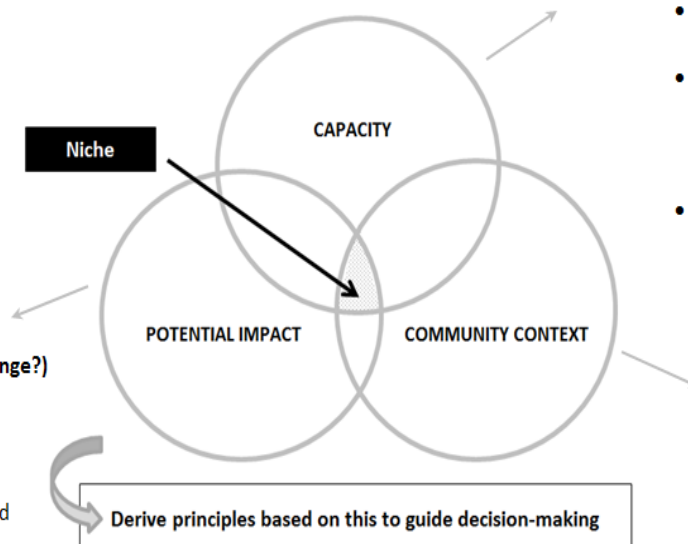
**COMMUNITY CONTEXT (What is most needed? Where is there readiness?)**

- Evidence-based practice (and research to support that)
- Social & Emotional Learning integrated across sectors and professions (educators, social workers, etc.)
- Healthy cultural and gender norms

**This includes 1) building community capacity to implement evidence-based practices and policies, 2) influencing research priorities based on community-identified needs and priorities.**

## ENDNOTES

[1] Ken is the founder and president of the Action Studies Institute (est. 1983), dedicated to mapping out the dynamics of adaptive intelligence in human systems and pioneering the development of a new discipline – *human learning ecology.* The driving motivation behind this research is the need to understand the underlying causes of adaptive and maladaptive development and behavior in individuals, organizations, societies, and cultures. The research draws on successes and failures of human learning and activity across cultures, sectors, disciplines and periods of history. The patterns of emerging adaptive intelligence found in the human story provide a structure for *the human venture*, a disciplined framework for understanding human progress, folly and resistance, including the systemic adaptive challenges facing humanity at our time and place in history, and what it will take to meet them. Ken's framework is captured in a book of maps entitled *The Human Venture & Pioneer Leadership Journey Maps*, 13th edition (Calgary, AB: Action Studies Institute and Leadership Calgary, revised in 2013), 58.

[2] Bereiter, C.; Scardamalia. 1993. M. *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*." (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court), 20.

[3] Bereiter, C.; Scardamalia. 1993. M. *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*. (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court), 20.

[4] MacKenzie, G. 1996. *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace.* (New York, NY: Viking), 64.

[5] MacKenzie, G. 1996. *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace.* (New York, NY: Viking), 64.

[6] Adapted from: Low, K. 1993. "Levels of Understanding" in *The Human Venture & Pioneer Leadership Journey Maps,* 13th edition (Calgary, AB: Action Studies Institute and Leadership Calgary, revised in 2013), 58.

[7] Diamond, J. (2005). *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed.* New York: Viking Penguin, 498.

[8] Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (Reprint 1992, New York, NY: Vintage Books), 7-8.

[9] Collins, J. 2001. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't.* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers), 112-114.

[10] Government of Alberta. 2013. *Family Violence Hurts Everyone: A Framework to End Family Violence in Alberta.* http://humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/family-violence-hurts-everyone.pdf

[11] Skemp, R.R. *Mathematics in the Primary School.* (London, England: Routledge, 1989), 15-16.

[12] Skemp, R.R. *Mathematics in the Primary School.* (London, England: Routledge, 1989), 16.

[13] Skemp, R.R. *Mathematics in the Primary School.* (London, England: Routledge, 1989), 16.

[14] Skemp, R.R. *Mathematics in the Primary School.* (London, England: Routledge, 1989), 47.