

National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women in Canada

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Date	6 December 2017
Location	Max Bell
Speech, Session	Problems and Agendas

Guiding questions: What drives the different agendas of: governments service delivery agencies; academics; research institutes? What strategies can help get issues onto the agendas of governments? What strategies can help align civil society work with government agendas?

Good morning everyone! I am so pleased to be here.

I want to thank Allan and Max Bell for inviting me to talk about how to connect the agendas of researchers, service delivery agencies, and government.

This is an area I feel very passionate about.

Before I get started, I would like to acknowledge that today is December 6. And on December 6, 1989 at L’Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, 14 women were killed, simply because they were women.

Canada has established December 6 as a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, and I would like to dedicate today’s comments towards ending violence against women and girls.

Now, since I only have 10 minutes to dig into some very complex questions – I hope to share a few practical strategies that you can apply to your own areas of work.

But first, some context.

For the past 6 years, I have been at the University of Calgary, focused on advancing a **primary prevention agenda** to stop violence through an initiative I lead called *Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence*.

While Shift is located at the University of Calgary, it is ‘virtually’ situated in the middle of government, the academy and the community, in what we like to call ‘the sweet spot for social change’.

The reason for locating our initiative in the “in between” space of these three sectors was intentional and strategic.

We believe that preventing domestic violence – or advancing any social change for that matter – requires a comprehensive approach that targets social and cultural norms, structures and institutions, policies and practices while building the will and skills of individuals which means we (social change agents) need to create opportunities and environments where people can learn, adapt, and change.

HOW we do this, of course, is complex and hard work.

I believe that relationships are at the heart of effective policy and systems change.

Creating transformational change – whether through practice, programming or policy changes – is grounded in relationships based on mutual respect, the ability to translate complex concepts to different audiences, the skills to cultivate motivation in others to want to change, and the creation of safe learning spaces.

As agents of change, we need to ask ourselves:

- Are we open and transparent in our work? Or are we acting out of fear or insecurity?
- Is it ‘my way or the highway’ or are we open to other perspectives?
- Are we willing to come to the conversation with the possibility of others being right?
- Are we open to being wrong?

What I have come to learn, is that not only is everyone’s experience valid – it’s actually essential to moving any idea forward. And often, our detractors help us strengthen our case or position.

In 2010, when I came into this position, family violence prevention was NOT a priority for the provincial government. The funding and policy mechanisms in place were geared towards crisis intervention programs - not primary prevention.

So what did we do?

- We established strong, authentic relationships with key policy makers and politicians.
- We dug into their world; their policy processes, their discourse, their values, their ideology.
- We conducted research to understand best and promising practices; and we analyzed other governments’ violence prevention plans from around the world to understand how Alberta compared.
- We also worked closely with community leaders throughout the province to understand what was happening on the ground.
- And because of the political climate, we partnered with economists and built a business case. We conducted an economic evaluation on the costs of violence against women in Alberta and analyzed the cost savings of investing in primary prevention.

All of which culminated into a partnership to develop the “**Family Violence Hurts Everyone: A framework to end family violence in Alberta**”. The policy was released at the University in 2013.

And in 2014, \$29 million *new* dollars were committed to the implementation of the framework.

One of our key learnings through that experience was that we needed to dig deep - to not only understand government's explicit goals, but their implicit ones as well. We needed to really understand the system in order to identify both entry points for change, as well as pockets of resistance.

We had lots of wins.

Primary prevention –stopping the violence before it starts was a key theme and strategy throughout the policy framework.

Engaging non-violent men and boys in violence prevention became a priority.

Investing in healthy youth relationships along with preventing dating and sexual violence in post-secondary schools and campuses was another win.

It was an enormous leap for the Ministers and the policy makers at the time to acknowledge gender inequality as a root cause of violence against women.

Why did we have this success?

It was because of our strong relationships, our ability to translate concepts and ideas to different audiences, and our facilitation skills around holding spaces for people to have difficult conversations without losing face.

Now please know – we submitted a comprehensive violence prevention plan where in the end, maybe 30 - 40% of our recommendations were taken up.

This is a long game. This work, takes time.

So what drives the agendas of the different sectors?

A social system – whether government, community or a research organization – is really a set of relationships designed to achieve a certain purpose.

And each of these systems has their own explicit purpose along with many implicit goals.

Using an **inquiry-based approach** to understand the components of the system – like their structures and learning processes, their history and language, their values and ideology allows us to either adapt our ideas to fit within their unique context or to identify entry-points for change.

A colleague of mine, Elizabeth Dozois used the metaphor of working with systems is like becoming a horse whisperer. We need to understand the horse, build trust, understand what the horse is afraid of, and work with the horse so that it does not freak out – because when we are afraid we can't learn.

Regardless of which sector you are working with, it's critical to take the time to build relationships, learn about their context, map their structures, learn their discourse and understand their perspective of the social problem. Learn what they are afraid of and become a horse whisperer.

Another example of using this approach can be drawn from my work with the United Nations that culminated in June 2017 with me moderating a Human Rights Council Meeting to debate a new resolution I worked on that would significantly change the conversation at the international level around the role of men and boys in violence prevention and advancing gender equality.

How did this happen?

In early 2015, the Canadian Mission in Geneva called me because they wanted help in shifting the discourse from *men as perpetrators* to *engaging men and boys as stakeholders and co-beneficiaries* in stopping violence against women.

What did I do?

I became a horse whisperer.

- I read relevant UN documents and conventions and reviewed countries and states (in the Global north) violence prevention plans so I could understand *their* understanding of the issue compared to the science.
- I learned about their structure and systems, history and discourse.
- I spent lots of time with key leaders and influencers to listen to their desires and fears around the issue and the barriers to change.
- I tried to make complex concepts accessible, relevant and interesting to each audience,
- I created safe spaces for people to have difficult conversations around the tensions of this approach.
- And throughout the years, I sent key articles and briefs to the internal champions to support their work.

The last question I was asked to address was, “what strategies can align civil society work with government agendas’.

I have experienced several strategies that have impact.

The first is taking a social network analysis approach, as research has shown that memes, messages, attitudes, behaviours and norms are transmitted through social networks. So understanding who the key influencers are within any group or institution you are working with will help influence and embed change.

The second is creating safe learning spaces- whether through community of practices or learning collaboratives or change collectives. These social labs need to be well designed, well-structured and led by skilled facilitators so people feel safe to learn, adapt and change.

Lastly, I think having strong leadership is critical – style matters. Likeability matters. Charisma

matters. Communication-skills matter. Whoever is leading the change work needs to be a great listener, self-aware and love nurturing the power of others. They also need to be comfortable with other people's discomfort. [PAUSE]

One of the core principles of this work is 'readiness'.

In my experience, the sweet spot for social change feels like there is a gravitational pull; a palpable energy, where there is so much excitement and potential.

If those elements aren't there, take a step back and reflect on why – sometimes instead of “leaning in” we need to “step back”.

Perhaps there is more ground work to be done. Maybe the wrong leader is in the position (believe me I have waited out many Deputy Ministers or bureaucrats). Often, when there is a position change, I have come back to find there is leadership, readiness and momentum.

[CLOSING REMARKS]

So... the imperatives: Become a horse whisperer by...

- Taking the time to understand the system or organization you are trying to influence - learn about their values, their language, and their worldview.
- Lead the change in partnership - without ego (which means we are responsive, adaptive and nimble).
- Identify and work with key influencers – both formal and informal – as they will be the leaders transmitting the message or behavior throughout their networks.
- Create learning initiatives where people feel safe and challenged to unlearn and learn.
- Stay laser focused and be tenacious.

I want to thank you for our time together and I hope some of the lessons I discussed encourage a robust discussion.