



# CHANGING CONTEXTS

A primary prevention approach to working  
in male dominated settings

PRESENTER: ELIZABETH DOZOIS,  
M.A.

CONTRIBUTORS: Lana Wells and Melissa Innes

*Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence  
Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work*

*Fellow, School of Public Policy  
Director, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence  
Co-Founder, Shift2learn*



presents:

# Innovations in Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Trauma- and Violence-Informed Health Promotion

*A NATIONAL CONFERENCE*

Oct 1–2, 2025

# WHO WE ARE



Action-based primary prevention research hub in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary (est. 2010)



Advancing primary prevention through policy, systems, and practice to promote gender equity and prevent harassment, violence, and discrimination.



Collaborating across sectors to create sustainable, large-scale change that prevents violence and advances equity.

*To learn more: [preventdomesticviolence.ca](http://preventdomesticviolence.ca)*

# WHY WE CREATED A NEW PRIMARY PREVENTION WORKPLACE APPROACH



1. **Behaviour Gap** – Limited evidence on how to effectively change men's behaviour.
2. **Workplace Blind Spot** – Little research on leveraging male-dominated spaces such as workplaces (for primary prevention).
3. **Current approaches not effective for engagement** – Studies in the Global North show that gender-transformative approaches are ineffective at engaging men.
4. **Attitudes vs. Behaviors** – Most studies measured attitude shifts, not sustained behavior change.
5. **Ineffective Training** – One-off bias, harassment, and diversity trainings don't work
6. **Access Barrier** – Men were not attending violence prevention programs.
7. **Backlash and Resistance** – Previous efforts to engage men in gender equity and violence prevention created significant pushback and sometimes made things worse for women.

1) O'Connor et al., 2020; 2) Roche et al., 2016; Stergiou-Kita, 2015; 3) Kato-Wallace et al., 2019; 4) Conner & Norman, 2025; Verplanken & Orbell, 2022; Bohnet, 2016; Bohnet, I. (2016). *What works: Gender equality by design*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; Dobbin & Kalev, 2017; 6) Casey et al., 2013; 7) Flood et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2024



Dozois & Wells, 2020



<https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/our-work/men-and-boys/engaging-men-learning-collaborative/>

# THE ISSUE

High rates of domestic, sexual and family violence due to:

- Paramilitary structure & power hierarchies
- Organizational culture
- Gender imbalance
- Underreporting and retaliation
- Unaddressed PTSD
- Weak accountability mechanisms



# HYPOTHESIS

*If we equip 25% of a male-dominated work area, through key influencers, with the skills to **promote prosocial norms** and disrupt harmful ones through their everyday actions and words, **these behaviours will spread** through the network and influence the group's overall behaviour, making its members more likely **to act in equitable, respectful, inclusive, and non-violent ways** in their relationships at work, at home, and in the community.*

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does our approach **build healthy, non-violent relationship skills** among research participants in male-dominated settings, and if so, how are these skills applied to foster healthy, non-violent relationships?
2. Does our approach shift organizational culture in male-dominated settings to **promote respect, equity, inclusion, and violence prevention**, and if so, how?



# OUR APPROACH

- 
1. Explore feasibility & fit
  2. Orientation and relationship building
  3. Consultation and interviews
  4. Identify key influencers and tipping point within specific setting
  5. Design for a specific context & structuring the learning sessions
  6. Deliver learning sessions - discussion- and scenario-based facilitation
  7. Ongoing coaching, Email boosters
  8. Evaluation

# UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE APPROACH

This study was approved by the University  
of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics  
Board (REB20-1020)

*Financial contribution from*  
Avec le financement de



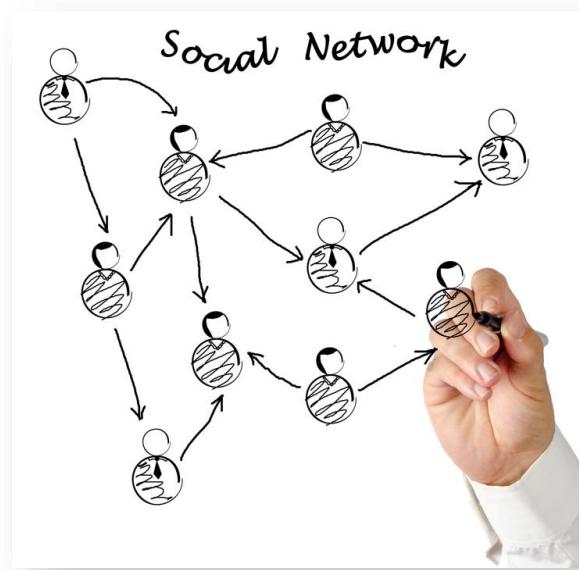
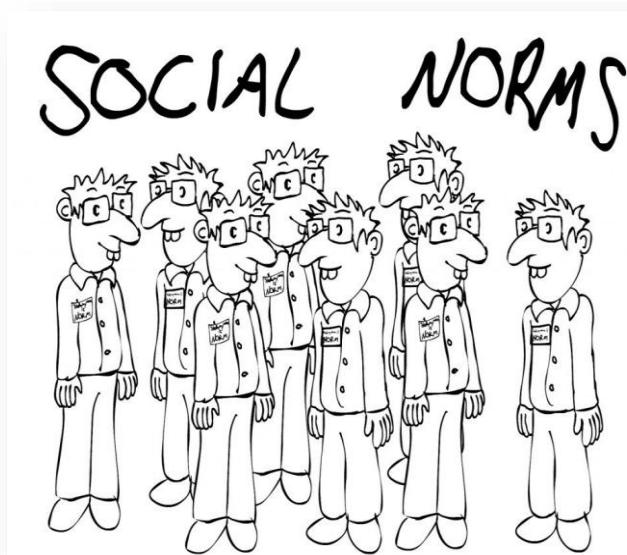
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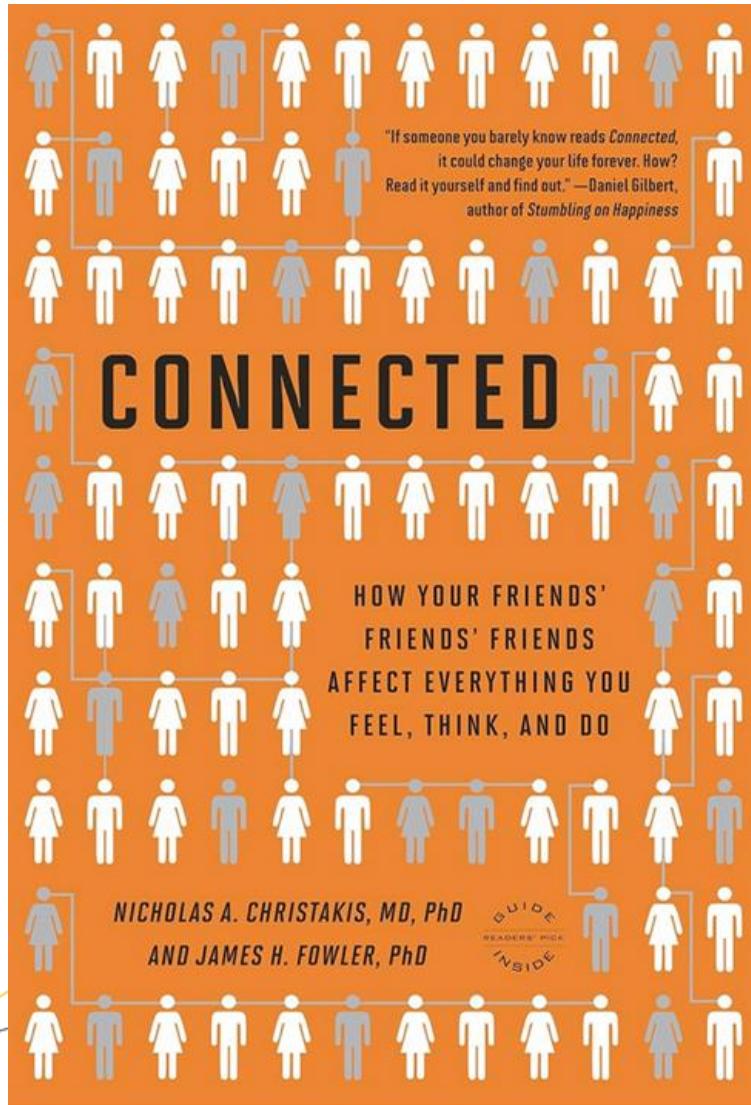
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# SOCIAL NORMS & NETWORK APPROACH

The approach is based on the idea that behaviours are socially contagious – i.e., they travel through social networks.





Christakis & Fowler, 2009

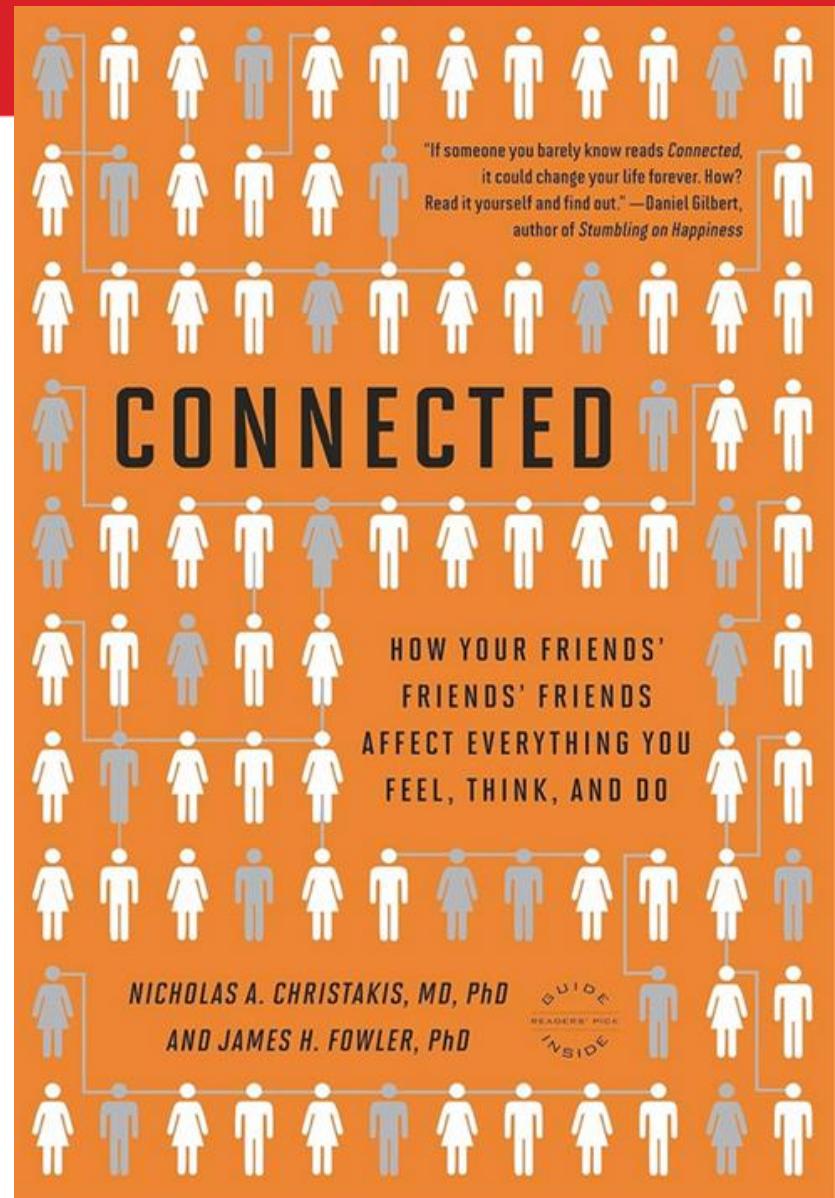
The **“Three Degrees of Influence” rule** in social network theory emerged from the research of Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler

The core idea is that: **Our behaviors and emotions can influence others up to three degrees** — meaning your friends' friends' friends can be affected by your actions or mood.

Their work explored how things like obesity, smoking, happiness, violence and loneliness can spread through social networks.

# WHY THIS MATTERS TO OUR APPROACH?

- Behaviors are **socially contagious**
- Small interventions can create **ripple effects**
- Changing the skills and behaviours of key individuals (influencers) in a network can shift **social norms, and this can change other people's behaviours**



Christakis & Fowler, 2009

# SOCIAL CONFORMITY - BRAIN GAMES



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6kWygqR0L8&t=48s>



# WHAT IS OUR APPROACH TRYING TO DO?

- We're working to **promote prosocial behaviours** by equipping key influencers to lead by example and positively shape how others behave.
- At the same time, we're focused on **disrupting harmful behaviours**, so they're no longer seen as normal or acceptable.
- Both efforts send a powerful '**signal**': They say, "This is how we behave as a group — and this is how we shift norms and culture for the better."

# WHAT WAS/IS NORMATIVE BEHAVIOUR IN POLICING?

\*\*\***Contest culture masculinities** describes a form of masculinity centered on competition, dominance, and proving one's worth through toughness, control, and status.

This mindset often discourages vulnerability, collaboration, or equitable relationships, instead prioritizing rigid gender norms and aggressive behaviors. In such environments, individuals may feel pressured to assert dominance or conform, fostering toxic cultures and contributing to conflict or violence.



# IN THE CONTEXT WE WERE WORKING IN

- Bravado, inability to ask for help
- Aggression, bullying, and physical intimidation
- Sexual harassment
- Gender discrimination
- Social humiliation (e.g., if someone makes a mistake)
- Culture of ‘we eat our own’
- Using each other to get ahead
- Inability to manage conflict in effective ways
- Fear of retaliation (e.g., for reporting sexual harassment)

# AN EXAMPLE OF 20 WAYS THAT SERGEANTS CAN SIGNAL SAFETY & BELONGING

**1. Listen to your members.** Active listening is a skill that we can all continue to develop further. It includes: Giving the speaker your full attention; staying off your phone/smart watch during the conversation whenever possible; asking clarifying questions; being aware of your tone and body language; being aware of how your power/authority might impact the interaction; checking with them to make sure you understand them correctly (e.g., you might summarize what you heard).

**2. Model humility.** Admit when you don't know vs. pretending you always have the answers. Ask for help when you need it. Do something the boots do that they don't expect you to do (e.g., wash dishes, clean up the report room, help to unload members' cars at the end of shift).

# AN EXAMPLE OF 20 WAYS THAT SERGEANTS CAN SIGNAL SAFETY & BELONGING

**3. Support mental health.** Debrief calls regularly; ask how they're feeling after difficult calls; initiate wellness debriefs by contacting Peer Support; encourage members to access Psych Services. Make it safe to talk about mental health by modelling that yourself.

**4. Don't gossip.** Maintain confidentiality and try not to talk negatively about others. Gently shut down gossip among your team and get ahead of it by sharing factual information when possible.

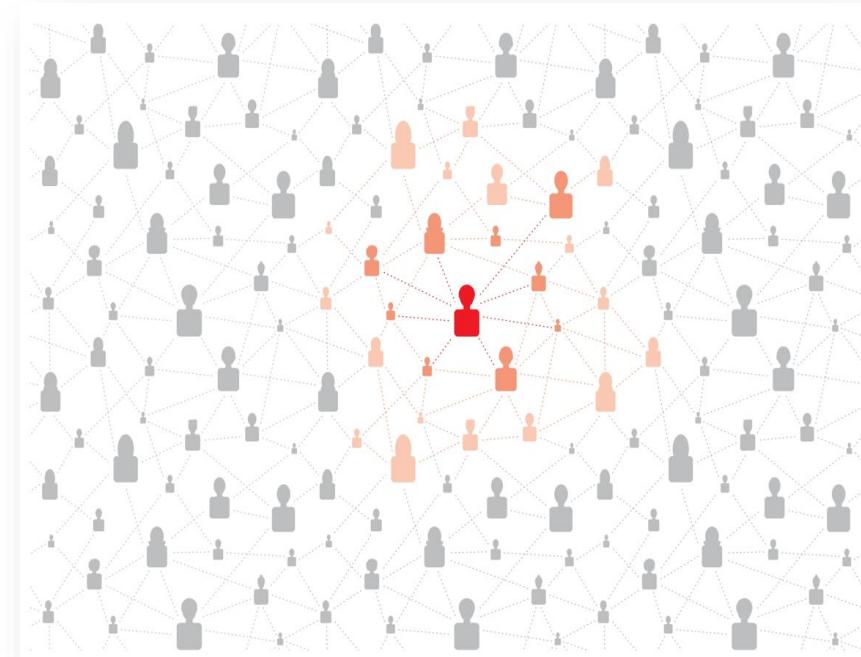
**5. Treat mistakes as learning opportunities.** Use 'calling in' and coaching approaches vs. ridicule or blame. Support members to learn from their mistake and then move on (i.e., avoid referencing old mistakes).

2

## WE WORK WITH 18-25% OF A NETWORK



Centola, 2021



# THE TIPPING POINT

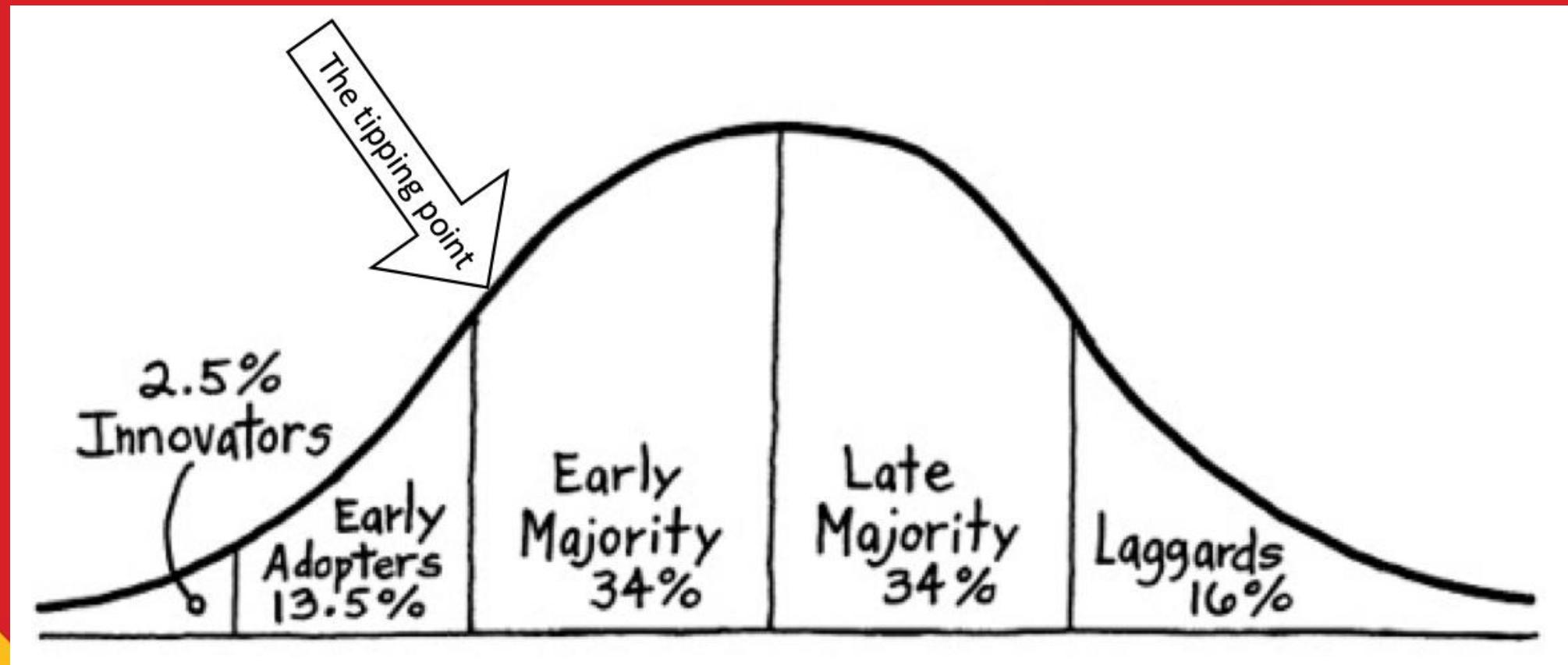


Image: <https://the-media-leader.com/attention-revolution-crossing-the-audience-measurement-chasm/>

3

WE WORK WITH INFLUENCERS,  
NOT ALLIES



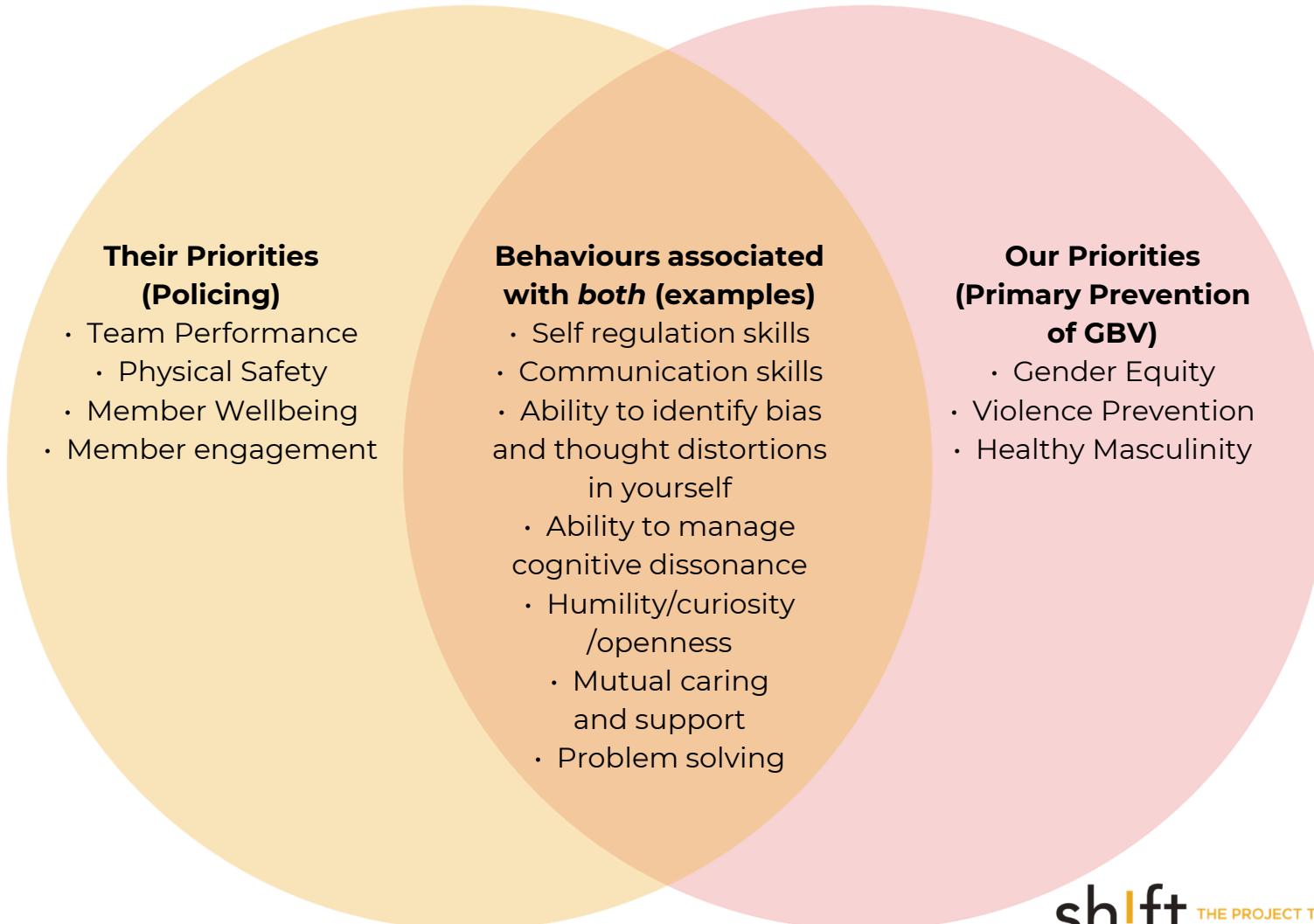
4

## WE START WITH *THEIR* PRIORITIES, NOT OURS

(To reduce resistance, backlash, lack of engagement)



# FINDING THE SWEET SPOT WHERE PRIORITIES OVERLAP



5

## THIS APPROACH IS CUSTOMIZED, NOT STANDARDIZED

We adjust our content based on the needs and culture identified in each work area.



# 6

## WE USE FRAMING DEVICES THAT ARE MORE LIKELY TO ENGENDER ENGAGEMENT

We frame our work around psychological safety and belonging or in words that matter to them!



# WE FOCUS ON CHANGING BEHAVIOURS RATHER THAN ATTITUDES

We care about preventing behaviours that cause harm.



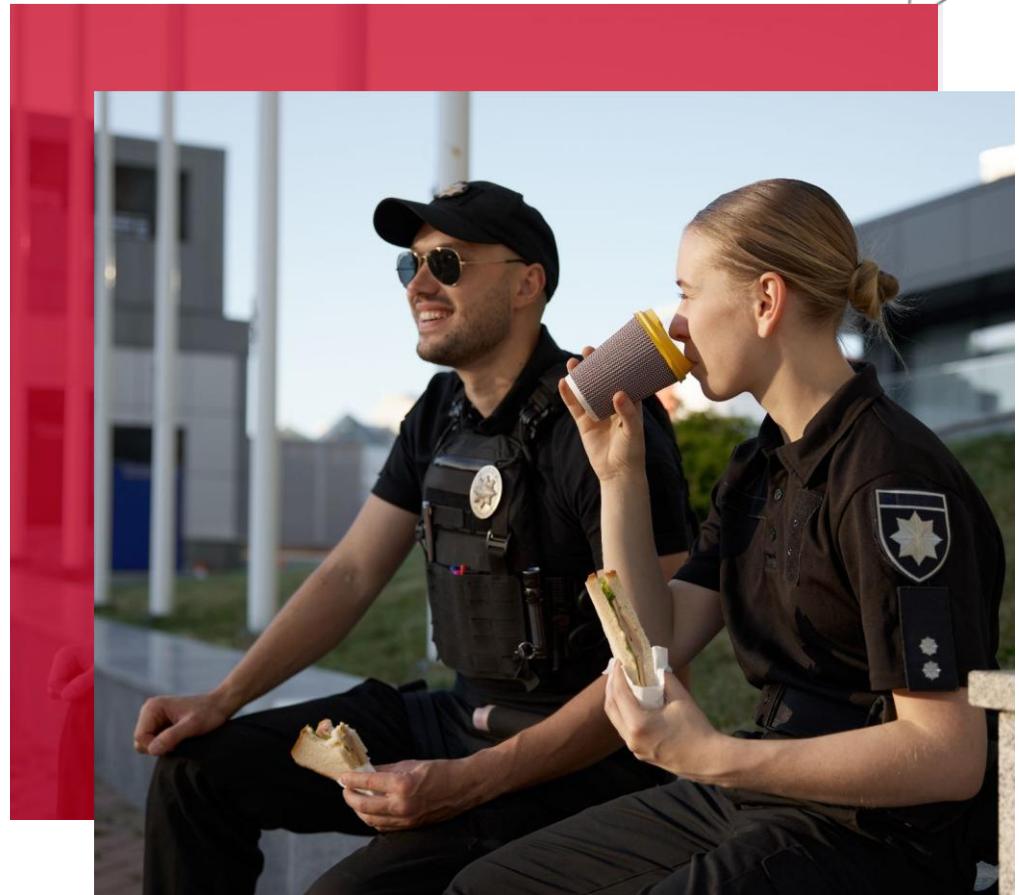
## WE INVEST IN KEY INFLUENCERS BY:

- Equipping them with rank-specific scripts, behaviors, and activities
- Guiding them through realistic scenarios
- Helping them practice disrupting violence and discrimination
- Helping them practice prosocial behaviours to model to others (signals)



# FACILITATORS WORK WITH PARTICIPANTS TO:

- Rehearse effective responses to everyday situations
- Build confidence in modeling prosocial behaviours
- Create safer, more respectful environments in their spheres of influence
- Teach how to disrupt violence (it takes moral courage)



# DISRUPTING PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOURS

- Disrupting sexist, racist, homophobic jokes, comments, innuendos with peers and direct reports
- Disrupting malicious gossip and/or rumors among peers and direct reports
- Intervening when witness to bullying, harassment, incivility



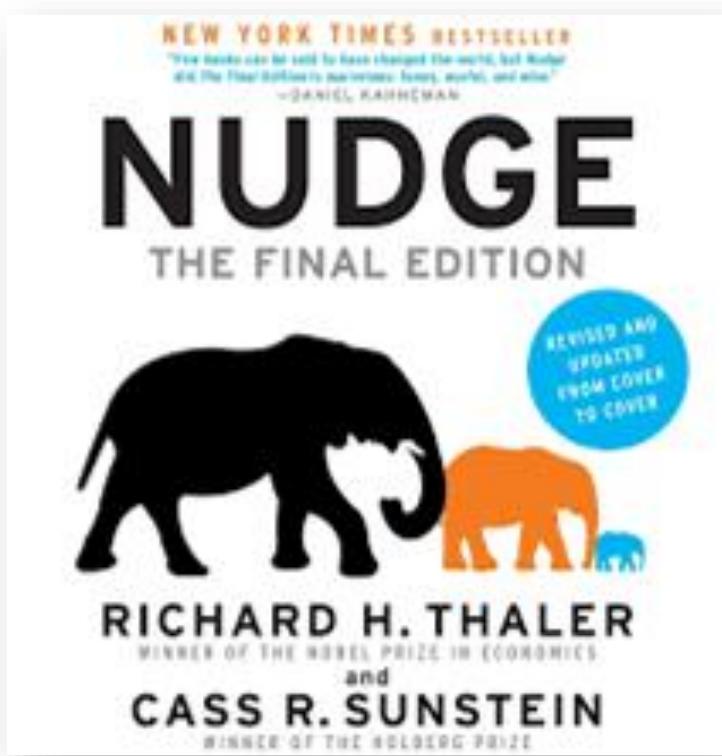
# MODELLING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR INCLUDES SUCH THINGS AS:

- Signalling safety & belonging (20 ways)
- Managing conflict in ways that signal safety & belonging
- Handling mistakes in ways that support learning, no shame and blame, calling in
- Giving feedback in ways that reduce defensiveness, support learning, and signal safety & belonging
- Setting expectations with peers and direct reports



# WE USE NUDGES AS A WAY OF PROMOTING CHANGE

We believe small interventions can have outsized impacts.



Thaler & Sunstein, 2021

# WHAT IS A NUDGE?

A nudge is a **small contextual shift** that has the potential to change behaviour without changing the choices available.

Nudges are suggestive, not coercive. They point to a particular choice by changing the way environment is structured or the choice is framed.

“Choice Architecture”



Source: [https://cdn-images-1.medium.com/max/1600/1\\*OLD7ac0m0JhsB5vbC2WS7Q.png](https://cdn-images-1.medium.com/max/1600/1*OLD7ac0m0JhsB5vbC2WS7Q.png)

# NUDGE DESIGN IS BASED ON HUMAN DESIGN

Nudges are based on **how we work** as humans (i.e., based on our biases, natural instincts, etc.)

They make the desired behaviour

- easier
- more appealing, and/or
- more acceptable

## Opt In vs. Opt Out

Where the default is set and its influence on our decisions

### Rate of Organ Donation by Country

#### Individual Must Opt In

NETHERLANDS	27.5%	
UNITED KINGDOM	17.2%	
GERMANY	12.0%	
DENMARK	4.3%	

#### Individual Must Opt Out

AUSTRIA	99.9%	
FRANCE	99.9%	
HUNGARY	99.9%	
PORTUGAL	99.6%	
POLAND	99.5%	
BELGIUM	98.0%	
SWEDEN	89.5%	

Adapted from Johnson and Goldstein, Science, 2003



# BENEFIT #1

Nudges are **less likely**  
**to trigger status quo bias**  
and therefore less likely  
to trigger resistance.



# BENEFIT #2

Nudges are usually **easy** to implement.



## Coffee Fund

Coffee or Tea (with or without milk/cream): \$1.00

Milk/cream only (in your own coffee or tea): 50 cents

Please put your money in the red tin.



# BENEFIT #3

Nudges can have an **immediate and dramatic impact** on behaviour.



# LANGUAGE NUDGE

## ► Desired Outcome

Increase the percentage of female sworn members in Calgary Police Service

## ► Nudge

Use feminine-coded language in recruiting messages



Images: <https://join.calgarypolice.ca/process/>

# LANGUAGE NUDGE

**SEE YOURSELF IN US. COME SERVE OUR COMMUNITY WITH US.**

We are looking for caring, passionate, service-oriented people (f/m/x) who reflect the diversity of our community. Join our team. Calgary needs you.

LEARN MORE

Feminine-coded word

Inclusive language

Image: <https://join.calgarypolice.ca/>



# FEMININE-CODED LANGUAGE



Image: [https://www.newcops.govt.nz/sites/all/themes/newcops/images/NewCops-FB\\_share.jpg](https://www.newcops.govt.nz/sites/all/themes/newcops/images/NewCops-FB_share.jpg);  
<https://www.cityofmadison.com/police/jointteam/>



Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9psIloYmCc>

# THE RESULT

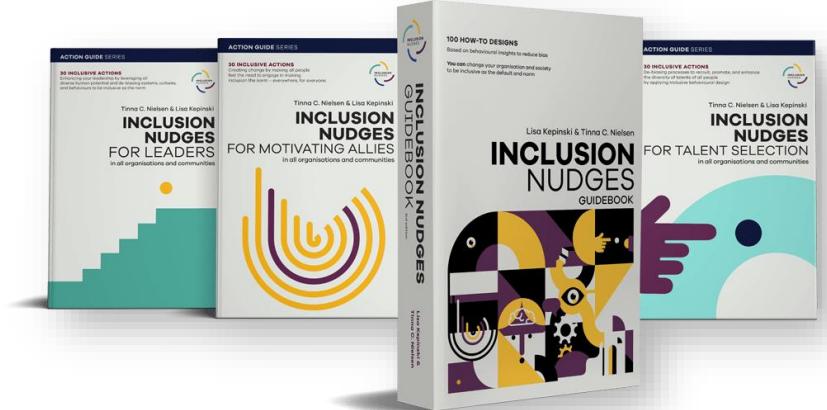
**Female** officers - ↑ 34%

**Indigenous** officers - ↑ 23%

Officers of **Asian heritage** - ↑ 87%



# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



[inclusion-nudges.org](http://inclusion-nudges.org)



[biasinterrupters.org](http://biasinterrupters.org)



# THIS IS A BOTTOM-UP VS TOP-DOWN APPROACH TO CULTURE CHANGE

We work with leaders at all levels to enable them to support the cultural shift; however, it is frontline members who drive change.



Image: <https://join.calgarypolice.ca/process/>

# EVALUATION RESULTS (2020 - 2025)

# DATA COLLECTION METHODS

A developmental evaluation approach was applied, using mixed methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative data throughout the project, including:

1. Journaling
2. After-action reviews and structured debriefs
3. Participant observation
4. Anonymous feedback forms
5. Qualitative interviews & Surveys 6 months post intervention

# PRELIMINARY RESULTS: KEY INFLUENCER COHORTS

- **14 cohorts** across six workplace settings  
(achieved tipping point in 4/6 settings)
- **157 key influencers** received  
training/capacity building through  
customized learning sessions
- **135 research participants** consented  
to giving us feedback on the approach



# PRELIMINARY RESULTS: POST-PARTICIPATION QUESTIONNAIRE

- **90%** reported increased understanding of the importance of psychological safety and belonging in the workplace
- **88%** reported increased ability to recognize and mitigate own biases
- **90%** reported more aware of workplace dynamics related to inclusion
- **92%** reported increased ability to self-regulate
- **86%** reported increased confidence and skill to model prosocial behaviours
- **89%** reported increased confidence and skills to disrupt problematic behaviours

# PRELIMINARY RESULTS: 6 MONTH POST INTERVIEWS & SURVEYS

- **69%** modelling prosocial behaviours in the workplace
- **52%** disrupting problematic behaviours
- **71%** state improved psychological safety and belonging in the workplace

# PARTICIPANTS STATED:

***“There has been a change in [our district] that is just about palpable. Not only did our folks value the training, they actually use the tools.”***

***“I have increased confidence to address bullying and harassment and nip it in the bud.”***

***“The session helped me to understand what I can do better to create safety and belonging.”***

***“Depending on the situation, I’d use these strategies to call someone out right away or [intervene] one-on-one.”***

***“I reflected back on incidents I didn’t handle well and developed new strategies for the future”***

# LESSONS LEARNED

- 
- 1. Framing matters for male engagement:** Positioning the intervention around shared priorities like psychological safety, team cohesion, or operational excellence increased buy-in, even from those who might not initially prioritize gender equity or violence prevention.
  - 2. Social norms drive lasting change:** Behaviour change is more likely to stick when it is reinforced and rewarded within a person's network, making a social norms and network-based approach key to fostering non-violent, equitable behaviours.

# LESSONS LEARNED

- 
3. **Embed micro-actions in daily life:** Behaviour change strategies are most effective when they reflect the context and everyday interactions and operational routines, rather than being delivered as isolated, one-off activities.
  4. **Go slow to go fast:** Spending time (e.g., attending parades, ride-alongs, officer trainings, district barbeques, meetings) helped us to: 1) build trust and credibility, 2) frame and customize the content so it resonated, 3) understand the system so that we could make meaningful recommendations for changes to policy and practice.

# FUTURE DIRECTION

1. Testing *The Signal System™* in a Canadian tourist destination's hospitality and tourism sector to explore how it can be adapted for other workplace settings.
2. Commercializing approach and content for sustainability.

**TO LEARN MORE**



**<https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/our-work/workplace-culture/>**

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Questions or Comments

LANA WELLS • [lmwells@ucalgary.ca](mailto:lmwells@ucalgary.ca)