

Impact Summary

Non-Profit Sector Change Lab

Where It Started

Back in early 2020, when the pandemic was still just whispers and murmurs, there was a human rights gathering in Caroline, AB. At that time, some of the participants in attendance, who all happened to be members of Righting Relations (RR), were going through distress in the nonprofit organizations where they worked, and they connected over those shared experiences. After the event, that spark was still there, and about six months into COVID lockdown, the group started to come together as a small working group discussing toxicity in nonprofits. This is what became the Non-Profit Sector (NPS) Change Lab.

How It Evolved

The team started with a survey to get a sense of what was happening in the non-profit sector through the lived experience of RR members who also worked at non-profits. Change Lab participants were remunerated for their time as part of a deliberate intention to be truthful to the ethos of Righting Relations and the change lab itself.

The survey results made it clear that many RR members were going through a tough time in their own workplaces, which raised the question, "What do we need to address within the non-profit sector as Righting Relations?" At the same time, Righting Relations had incorporated as a non-profit, creating an opportunity to apply the learnings from members' experiences outside of RR to conversations about structure and governance happening internally.

When pulling the results from the survey together [into a report](#), the team clearly saw the path forward. People who participated understood the importance of the sector,



and were committed to transforming their workplaces and contributing to radical social change. Furthermore, one member had a vision of facilitating using this knowledge, and advocated for going beyond a report and building a tool that people could engage with. This is what led to the creation of the [Non-Profit Sector toolkit: Addressing Toxicity in Non-Profits](#). The first step in making this knowledge relatable was the creation of visual representations of the research report; an Edmonton-based artist also commissioned three pieces of art.

To make the toolkit a reality, the NPS team first met in-person for a weekend to immerse themselves in story-sharing and conversations about turning the report into a practical toolkit. The team also developed their understanding of white supremacy and its manifestations in the non-profit sector, while imagining alternative ways of working in

the sector. Working in-person was important because it gave room to build relationships and have deeper conversations.

Throughout the project, the team was influenced by and able to actively respond to events as they happened. The impact of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, for example, laid the groundwork for conversations about the ways that white supremacy infiltrates systems and institutions, including non-profits. Later in the project, as the toolkit was in the final stages of production, the US National Labour Commission released a ruling making it illegal for severance packages to be dependent on signing a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). This supported a section of the toolkit that discussed the way that NDAs are commonly used in negative ways in the non-profit sector to silence workers. Having the flexibility to work in real-time allowed the Change Lab to connect and engage with relevant events that were actively impacting folks working in the sector.

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFORMING THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

Addressing Toxicity in Non-Profits



That time and flexibility also meant that the information, activities, and reflections could “cook” and come out the best version of themselves. Several iterations of the toolkit were shared with different members of Righting Relations, including the National Steering Committee (NSC), the grounding agency in the West Hub, and the Gender and Sexually Expansive Change Lab (GSE). The work evolved in constructive ways as a result of that engagement.

Impact

Team members shared that while folks might not relate to every page of the toolkit, there's never someone who doesn't see something of their experience in it. Workers and volunteers at all levels of the non-profit sector resonated deeply with it, while for some NPS change lab members, the work offered validation, support, and a chance to work through the trauma of their experiences.

Responses from the groups who were given early access to the toolkit were all extremely positive, and helped to build up an audience that was actively anticipating the launch of the completed toolkit. The early access groups, particularly the NSC and GSE, noted the importance of centering the learnings and activities within the toolkit in conversations about governance and operations within Righting Relations.

There has been a lot of uptake and interest in the NPS toolkit and the reflection sessions that accompanied the toolkit. This includes being referenced by the Pathways to Decent Work project by the Ontario NonProfit Network (ONN), expressed appreciation for the resource from partner organizations, and colleagues referencing

the toolkit for their own organizational development. The toolkit was also shared in many newsletters including, ONN, Edmonton Senior Coordinating Council, West Broadway Community Organization, Westminster Housing Co-operative, and the Rainbow Resource Centre.

Reflecting on the internal Righting Relations discussions based on the toolkit, members noted that all participants interpreted the learnings in ways that were relevant to their experience. This included members with experience working in international NGOs who noted how the toolkit was a valuable insight into the realities of the non-profit sector in Canada.

Change Lab members have also shared the impact that the toolkit has had on their own facilitation practices:

"I've had [other educators] comment on my methods, and I talk about them as anti-oppressive practices: these are principles that show how you can do things in a more equitable way. So for me, [the toolkit] has sharpened my way of speaking about white supremacy and inequitable or oppressive approaches, and showing that these aren't just theories out there." - Eveline

Learnings

Change Lab members reflected positively on the evolving working relationship amongst the team - they developed a rhythm of working together, growing, and maturing their relationships throughout the project.

"The strength of that group, and what I think was really neat about us coming together, was... we didn't come together and be like, we must do XYZ. We were like, 'Okay, we have a rough idea for why we're coming together, but we also need to figure out who we are, where we're going, what exactly we want, how we're going to consult people, and talk to people, and hear people.'" - kēr

Sticky points included an experience of trying to welcome a new member relatively early in the group's time together, which led to tensions and conflict. The takeaway was that knowing who to bring in is a difficult thing, as is knowing when and how to bring them in. One member noted that "things we learned throughout the process are to properly ground yourself, know your direction, know who you are, and don't throw in someone who isn't grounded in the work because that can really disrupt the dynamic."

Working across timezones was also a challenge; navigating members' jobs and family commitments meant that work typically happened between 6 and 10pm, but with time zone differences of up to 2 hours, that could still be tricky. Team members were also aware of the balance between meeting frequently enough to stay on top of things and meeting too often, intruding on folks' time for rest and reflection and potentially contributing to burnout.

Overwhelmingly, members of the Change Lab expressed the value of the project as a means of building relationships based on trust, and even creating new facilitation partnerships. These connections have also supported members when navigating tension in other parts of Righting Relations, with one member noting that, "In this team,

we have created a shared language and understanding that allows us to discuss and understand difficulties and solutions in similar ways."

Where to Now?

The question of where the NPS change lab goes next is still a live one: as the funding wraps up, there is still the sense that there's an opportunity for the work to continue through offering facilitation to other non-profit organizations as they engage with the toolkit. This raises the question of capacity, resources, and how that changes the nature of the work: the demands of coordinating that kind of outreach go beyond what a voluntary team would or could be expected to cover, but a team member expressed being torn between bringing the work into the scope of a paid staff member and the beauty and benefits of a more grassroots approach.



One recommended next step is to pilot facilitated conversations within Righting Relations and administrative partners, creating opportunities to engage with the toolkit and challenge white supremacy and colonialism within our network. The caveat is that someone outside of the organization must facilitate these conversations to ensure neutrality - in RR's case, the coordination and advisory teams could play this role.