

Impact Summary

Strengthening Men & Boys Change Lab

Where It Started

Women of First Light (WOFL)/ the East Hub is the strong group behind this Change Lab. Grandmothers identified the need to focus on strengthening foundations for leadership in men and boys and exploring the traditional Wabanaki frameworks that would support this.

Six members of the East Hub and one member from the West Hub came together to teach and introduce men and young boys to leadership. All members contributed to the group in different ways, according to their experiences. This included women, an Elder, younger people in the community, people who work with men, and people who have experience of manhood from outside of the Wabanaki community.

The group designed an informal inquiry with close and trusted community members to carry the exploration forward. The intention was that the learnings could be delivered in terms of “practices” that could then be shared with Righting Relations and beyond.

How It Evolved

Members explored how they might support more men to have the courage to change practices. One of the youngest members of the Change Lab was supported to run a men's circle outside the Change Lab. They had some success, but in the middle of the COVID pandemic, it proved difficult to run the circles online.

An inquiry on traditional practices started with conversations with different members of the Wabanaki community. There were difficult moments in defining who to talk to, how to ask the questions, and learning about the power of questioning people and sensitive and culturally appropriate ways to be curious. The difficulties were fed by the fact that there were no frameworks or limits to what was going to be asked. However, continued conversations led the group through the process.

Impact

The Change Lab became an important support group for people who work with and support men and boys to have healthy relationships. Members gained support from each other, discussed best practices amongst themselves, and provided emotional support to be able to continue doing this difficult work. People working with men are more isolated than those working with women, since there are so few of them doing the work and there are also few support programs for men. Therefore, the support

and mentorship that members provided to each other filled a large gap, and played a critical role in emphasizing healthy gender relationships.

A lot of understanding emerged from the inquiry. Most of the learnings sit at the intersection of cross-cultural contexts of sharing knowledge and experience. A deeply personal journey of understanding was had by the West Hub member who led the inquiry, which highlighted the influence of European history on society's current understanding of leadership, and especially leadership in men. These learnings highlighted how in the European context, leadership is primarily an individual endeavour that only certain people decide or have the capacity/privilege to take on. For more collective societies based on the commons, leaders are part of those commons, and everyone is cultivated to be a leader and leaders are grown as part of the community.

Learnings

There is always a lot to learn when it comes to asking questions, as this has often been done in extractive ways through research. The member who led the inquiry shared the significance of bringing people together to reflect about best practices in men's leadership, and what they can do to support men's leadership.

"I realized the power of asking questions. Through asking questions and holding this knowledge, I developed relationships and a sense of responsibility [to this project]."

Group dynamics were also an area of learning, as one member did not have the same background and experience as the rest of the group. This meant that group time and capacity was swayed to share teachings and delve into the meanings of the teachings for one member. This was sometimes challenging to balance when other members already knowledgeable about Wabanaki traditions and practices wanted to focus on supporting and mentoring each other.

The violent and difficult history of colonization was a central learning point for the non-Indigenous lead of the inquiry. Understanding history helped him to better approach building relations and undertaking activities. The collective trauma of colonized culture was explored through learnings around sovereignty, matrilineal governance systems, Indigenous governance, and how they exist in a colonized context.

Bringing healthy leadership practices back was emphasized as a holistic and intersecting pursuit. One which goes far beyond individual pursuits and is about bringing the whole Indigenous systems back to mainstream ways of living in community.

Where to Now?

The inquiry report has been given to the Change Lab members for feedback and discussion. Next steps are to:

- Identify simple follow-up actions from the report,
- Continue the conversation between men, about manhood and masculinity,
- Provide ongoing support and mentorship for young men and women who are leading groups for men