How Alberta is Eradicating Homelessness through Systems Thinking and Transformation

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Context

Currently, organizations, industries, sectors, and communities of all types are seeking to modernize their systems to enhance performance, improve service delivery, and ensure sustainability. This means extensive transformation: paradigm shifts, radical redesigns, strategic resets and culture re-alignment are the order of the day. Evolutionary change is neither potent, nor quick enough; revolutionary, dramatic change is called for.

Meanwhile, society in general is trying to solve large scale, chronic problems such as family violence, poverty, environmental degradation and homelessness. To quote Charles Dickens: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times… it was the spring of hope… the winter of despair…. We had everything before us, we had nothing before us…"*[1]

Navigating the rushing waters of transformation requires a bold vision and strong systems thinking, as well as widespread change leadership, not to mention a big dose of courage and transformation resilience.

Alberta takes a stand

Homelessness is often viewed as a daunting, if not a wicked problem.[2] Yet, Alberta has shown the way to solutions that deliver results. In contrast with other Canadian jurisdictions who favour municipal approaches, Alberta broke new ground in 2009 by defining an ambitious vision for the *entire* province: *Ending homelessness in 10 years*, instead of simply 'managing' or 'reducing' it. To achieve this audacious goal, Alberta had to dramatically alter the way it thought and acted about homelessness. Here's how it began:

In 2007, then Premier Ed Stelmach set out to capture the state of homelessness, as the problem was escalating. What factors were contributing to its rapid growth?

- *Environmental:* the influx of workers moving to Alberta during economic boom times, combined with insufficient housing, generated a crisis.
- *Systemic:* the Managing Homelessness approach wasn't robust enough to deal with the surge.
- *Individual:* the combination of aggravating circumstances in the environment, mixed with insufficient and poorly coordinated service delivery, pushed more 'at risk people' into homelessness.[3]

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[1] A Tale of Two Cities. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Tale_of_Two_Cities.

[2] Wicked problem. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem.

[3] Alberta's 10 year plan to end homeless: a best practice in systems transformation. (2016). Retrieved August 29, 2016, from http://www.ipac.ca/Publications.

Premier Stelmach concluded that the accelerating crisis would only be resolved through an *Alberta-wide* strategy, with *all* stakeholders working together in an aligned, synergistic and collaborative manner.

Likewise, a new approach was required as the traditional ones, based on *housing readiness*, were falling short. Indeed, requiring that issues leading to homelessness be resolved prior to housing, had proven unrealistic and psychologically unsound. In reality, life on the street worsens substance abuse and mental illnesses, and reduces the resilience to bounce back after falling on hard times.

The cornerstone of Housing First,[4] the selected approach, is that housing is a *pre-requisite* to heal the conditions resulting in homelessness because it provides stability and security. Once housed, clients benefit from a variety of supports to get back on their feet and maintain tenancy. Bottom line: Housing First seeks to provide homes for all… for good. The graphic below contrasts the two approaches:

Figure 1: Housing Readiness model vs. Alberta's Housing First model[5]

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[4] Homeless Supports - Alberta Human Services - Government of Alberta. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness.html.

[5] What is Housing First? (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://www.abodeservices.org/what_we_do/what_is_housing_first.

Alberta had a vision: *Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*, and a new approach: *Housing First*. Now it needed a strategy. Five key outcomes were identified to enhance and reshape the system's capacity:

1. *"Better Information*
   Strong and up to date analytics to track trends and inform decisions: Who becomes homeless and why? Are there predictable patterns to flag or groups at risk to monitor closely? Once housed, who manages to maintain tenancy? How to enhance the success rate?
2. *Aggressive Assistance*
   Housing takes place within a window of 21 days, not more.
3. *Coordinated System*
   Stakeholder organizations and individuals work in synch to achieve the vision.
4. *More Housing Options*
   Low rise housing is spread out through municipal landscapes.
5. *Effective Policies*
   Used for governance, oversight and planning purposes." [6]

To effect such a massive transformation, ongoing stakeholder engagement and mobilization are required. This ensures buy-in, strengthens commitment, fosters innovation and lessens resistance. It's about collaborating *with* stakeholders to find a way forward, instead of dictating a solution *to* them.

In this case, multiple stakeholders were engaged: elected officials, religious organizations, citizens, corporations, not for profit agencies, and various levels of government shared their perspectives, provided insight, and offered smart suggestions. Instead of *battling the plan*, they *planned the battle*… together.

Formula

Alberta leveraged a change formula initially developed by Richard Beckhard[7] and David Gleicher[8], and improved upon by Katie Dannemiller[9]. The formula proposes that, in order to effect and sustain change, these sequential components are required:

- *Dissatisfaction with the current state*
  Why change? Why now? This is about understanding context.

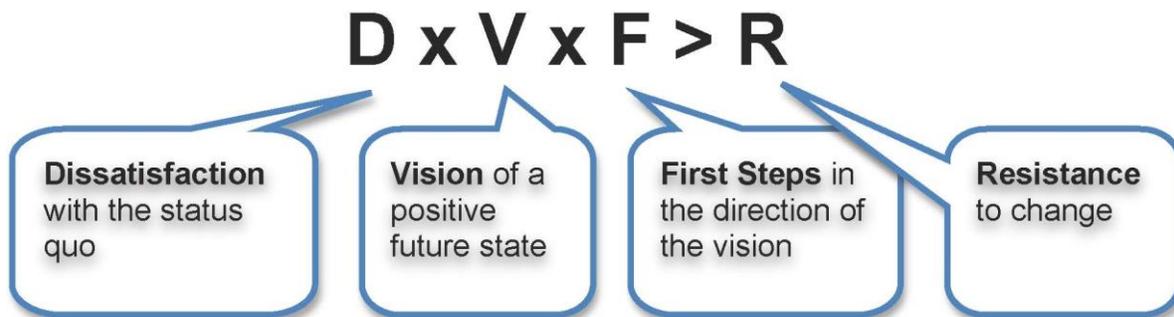[6] A Plan For Alberta. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from
http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14605.html.

[7] Richard Beckhard. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Beckhard.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Who We Are - Dannemiller Tyson Associates. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from
http://dannemillertyson.com/who-we-are/.

- *Vision for the future*
  Where are we going? What will it look like when we get there? It's about envisioning and embracing a preferred future.
- *A clear path forward*
  How will we reach the vision? What strategy will take us there? It's about defining our approach for moving from where we are to where we want to be.

Together, these steps will reduce resistance to change. In other words, increasing the driving forces will neutralize the restraining ones.

$$D \times V \times F > R$$

Dissatisfaction with the status quo

Vision of a positive future state

First Steps in the direction of the vision

Resistance to change

Figure 2: The Change Formula

Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo (D)

Let's face it, change is hard… and transformation, even harder. Therefore, the business case and burning platform for must be clearly articulated and communicated in a compelling way, using a wide variety of arguments:

- Why change? Why now?
- What are the risks (financial, reputational, competitive, ideological…) of changing, and of not changing?
- Since pain and gain drive change, how well understood are the pain and gain drivers?
- What is the strategy for communicating and enhancing the D? How to engage stakeholders in further defining and communicating the D?

Unfortunately, this step is often overlooked, resulting in baffled stakeholders, unable to connect with the vision, because they don't understand the change rationale and the risks associated with the status quo.

Alberta's D

Alberta painted a clear and compelling D, touching on a variety of arguments, and avoiding a *Polarity Rhetoric* (us vs them), as well as a *Not in my Backyard* mindset.

- "Alberta's homeless are ordinary citizens and families; people who are dealing with a physical or mental disability, an addiction, or have simply fallen on hard times.
- Any of us could become homeless if we experience too many hardships in a row. Therefore, it's not a matter of 'us' versus 'them'.
- The state of homelessness worsens conditions like mental illness and addiction. Therefore, it's best to stabilize people by housing them first, then rehabilitation becomes possible.
- The number of homeless people is increasing. Projections could reach 21,000 by 2018.
- The indirect costs of homelessness amounts to around $100,000.00 a year (per person) in terms of interactions with the police, health care, justice, and social work, while the cost of housing the homeless is about a third of this amount.
- A rich province like Alberta should be able to take care of its most vulnerable citizens in a compassionate and effective manner".[10]

Here was the preamble for the D:

"Homelessness can affect anyone. It has many faces…

- The family with children whose household income can't afford rising bills…
- The Albertan with a mental illness, addiction, or physical illness who needs treatment…
- The victim of family violence or abuse, who can't go home…
- The disabled adult with special needs and few resources…

They are all our fellow Albertans. Each of them should have a place to call home, and access to support that will help them keep that home." [11]

These facts and arguments created a burning platform for change, and in 2009, Alberta defined a clear strategy to eradicate homelessness. Watch this inspiring [video](link)[12] about the project's early days.

Enhancing D Tips

You know that the status quo will not lead to a successful future; now, you have to convince others. Here are some tips:

- Build a compelling case for change from a *variety of viewpoints*: financial, social, ideological, environmental etc.… to cover all the bases.

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[10] Alberta's Challenge. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from
http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14602.html.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Housing First. (2010). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5qi4sBwy6U.

- Paint a *graphic pictur*e of what will/could happen if the status quo persists
- Speak to the heart, as well as the head.[13]
- Provide *evidence*: For instance, ask experts to estimate costs if the current state continues. Analyze current practices and results to identify why the usual way of doings things may not be working, and identify best-in-class examples that you can implement as a proposed intervention.
- Adopt from a *win-win* perspective: create greater affinity for your proposed solutions by highlighting mutual benefits, common goals, or similarities with the people involved or recipients of the change

Vision (V)

The present is not working, so where to now? Vision sets the direction for a successful and sustainable future. An unrealistic vision, much like an over-stretched elastic band, may push an organization beyond its limits, and efforts will break down. A weak vision, much like a loose elastic band, provides insufficient tension to make it worth achieving. On the other hand, a clear, bold, compelling vision paints an attractive picture of the future landscape. It creates the right amount of tension to connect current efforts to the future, acting like a North Star.

Alberta's V

Here's the Housing First Vision:[14]

"Homelessness is unacceptable in a province as prosperous as Alberta. No Albertan should be forced to live on the streets or remain in a shelter for an extended period of time. Albertans have the resources, the creativity and the compassion to effectively address homelessness in their communities.

For a province built on great achievements and innovation, and a people who don't shy away from big challenges, the Secretariat has set a bold vision: *Homelessness is ended by 2019*.

There may still be emergency shelters available for emergency assistance, but people will be re-housed into permanent homes within 21 days."[15]

Watch this insightful video about how Edmonton implemented the vision: It's about ending homelessness… for good.[16]

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[13] Seijts, G., & Farrell, G. O. (n.d.). Ivey Business Journal. Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/engage-the-heart-appealing-to-the-emotions-facilitates-change/.

[14] Setting The Vision. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14604.html.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ending homelessness, for good. (2009). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZcBvoEiOQU.

V Tips

Tips for creating a powerful vision:

- Paint a vivid picture of the desired future so people can feel it and touch it.
- Clarify why the vision is desirable and why now
- Create a vision that strikes people as 'the right thing to do' for the greater good of the community and the long term
- Leave room for stakeholders to enrich the vision to foster ownership

First Steps (F)

Mapping the way forward serves as the blueprint for change, the governing intelligence to guide your efforts. These steps are the 4-5 key priorities that, together, will deliver the vision. Their logic must be sequential and easily explained to a non-initiated audience. In other words, the governing intelligence must be explicit: how do the steps fit together? How do they reinforce each other? Why is the order important? To avoid at all costs: the laundry list of seemingly unrelated steps…

Essentially, the steps are the strategy's DNA.

Alberta's F

The government decided on an 'aggressive assistance strategy' to:

- "Provide emergency response services to individuals and families who fall into homelessness
- Help re-housed clients achieve housing stability
- Prevent homelessness from occurring." [17]

Therefore, these steps formed the core of the approach:

1. *House*
   A home provides stability and safety. Housing is the pre-requisite for the other steps.
2. *Diagnose*
   Identify the root causes of homelessness. Are people dealing with job loss, a crisis, health problems or more challenging issues like poverty, addiction or mental illness?
3. *Restore*
   Once causes are identified, appropriate interventions such as employment counseling, life skills training, mental health or addictions treatment, counseling, or other services are provided for treatment.
4. *Support*
   Varying types of support are offered to help people maintain tenancy, and eventually progress from totally assisted, to partially assisted, to autonomous housing. While reaching

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[17] A Plan For Alberta. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14605.html.

autonomous housing may not be possible for all, these steps, to date, have proven effective in preventing the majority of those housed from going back on the street and reducing homelessness.

Watch this powerful [video](#)[18] about a formerly homeless person who now wants to help others.

F Tips

- Choose big strategic pillars
- Organize them in a logical, cohesive sequence
- Explain how steps, individually and together, will deliver the desired outcome.
- Clearly identify linkages between steps and how they fit together
- Test the approach by presenting it to various stakeholders
- Listen to their feedback and integrate their suggestions into the approach
- Present the fine-tuned approach again and seek approval
- Make sure the stakeholders can explain it in less than two minutes in a way that makes sense to the listener

Resistance (R)

The beauty of the Change Formula is that it is versatile: Using it pre-change will help you create a better strategy. Using it post-change will help you identify levers for diminishing resistance, and continue applying the model to drive even more change.

Alberta used a number of levers to reduce resistance:

- To mitigate the *Not in my Backyard* mindset, Alberta wisely chose to avoid concentrated 'ghettos', and distributed low rise housing through various cities' neighbourhoods
- To minimize misunderstandings, a multi-pronged communication approach was used, involving a number of approaches and media
- To foster engagement and reduce apathy, Alberta offered a number of avenues for participation: corporate sponsorships and advocacy, citizen furniture banks, volunteer opportunities, new roles etc.

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[18] Affordable Housing vignette: Gordon. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14635.html.

Conclusion

Housing First projects have experienced unprecedented success:

11,332 homeless Albertans have been provided housing and the supports that will help them remain housed.
Approximately **91%** of Housing First Clients have remained housed in the current fiscal year. Approximately **73%** of Housing First Clients have remained housed since the beginning of the plan.
3,837 people have 'graduated' from Housing First programs, meaning they have achieved housing stability.

*Reported changes in utilization of public systems among housing first clients: **Health**:	Clients on AISH **1,500 13.2%** Clients on Alberta Works **4,910 43.3%**
Interactions with EMS: > by **57.5%** Emergency Room visits: > by **52.7%** Days in hospital: > by **68.2%**	Clients on Employment Insurance **297 2.6%** Full Time Employment **989 8.7%**
Justice: Interactions with police: > by **58.2%** Days in jail: > by **84.0%** Court appearances: > by **48.3%**	Part Time Employment **658 5.8%** No income **1,770 15.6%**
Presenting Issues (self-reported by clients at program intake) Mental health issues **5,129 45.26%** Substance abuse issues **5,466 48.24%** Physical health issues **5,180 45.71%**	In 2012-13, use of Government of Alberta-funded temporary shelter space decrease by **5.3%,** compared to before the Plan came into effect (2008-09).

Table 1: Housing First Statistics from Alberta's 10 year Plan to End Homeless: A Best Practice in Systems Transformation, published in 2016.[19]

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[19] Alberta's 10 year plan to end homeless: a best practice in systems transformation. (2016). Retrieved August 29, 2016, from http://www.ipac.ca/Publications.

The Alberta Government now has proof that the Housing First approach works, and has learned a lot about how to implement it. Alberta's 10 year plan to end homelessness is now part of the ongoing government business. Challenges remain with long-term priorities, such as poverty reduction, housing supply and prevention.

OVERVIEW   PLAN   IMPLEMENT   EVALUATE   SUSTAIN

Figure 3: The Canadian Housing First Toolkit was developed to assist other Canadian communities that are interested in adopting the Housing First approach. [20]

About the Author

Françoise Morissette has been a facilitator at Queen's IRC since 1994, and was made a Fellow in 2006. She played a key role in developing and implementing the Queen's IRC's Organizational Development curriculum intended for OD practitioners, and teaches on the *OD Foundations* and *Coaching Skills* programs.

As a consultant, Françoise is a major contributor to the field of Organizational Development, with a focus on leadership, systems transformation and talent development. Using a wide range of interventions, she helps individuals, organizations and communities enhance their leadership capacity and boost their ability to perform. With HR expert Amal Henein, CHRP, Françoise wrote *Made in Canada Leadership*, the product of a large research project, focusing on leadership excellence and development from coast to coast. In 2015, Françoise co-authored a major case study on how Alberta is eradicating homelessness through a provincial system transformation strategy.

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[20] Canadian Housing First Toolkit. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2016, from http://homelesshub.ca/solutions/housing-first/canadian-housing-first-toolkit.

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