

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR  
 THE INDEPENDENT



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## What Does it Mean to Take Women's Leadership Seriously?

Published on Mar 1, 2019 — in Featured/Opinion — by Amanda Bittner

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**W**omen are being asked to “Lean in,” to work harder, faster, stronger, smarter, to work a “Double-Shift,” to improve themselves so that they have “what it takes” to compete with men. What all of this advice misses is that women have been doing these things, and more, for a very long time. *Women are not the problem* when it comes to their absence from politics, from boards and commissions, and from holding the reigns of Fortune 500 Companies.

Women show up. Prepared. They already are working harder, faster, stronger, and smarter. The problem is that they get blocked at the door, in the hallways, they don't get offered a seat at the table, they face **glass ceilings** and they face **glass cliffs**.

None of these are things that can be fixed by being talked at by men who have helpful "tips and tricks" on how to get along well with others.

If we want to fix things, we need to actually **do something** about the barriers that women are facing, in the workplace, in society, and in the way politics works.

On Wednesday the government organized a "Women in Leadership Conference" at the Convention Centre downtown. Those who were invited were told that it would run from 9 am to 2 pm, but were given no more information about the plan before they arrived in the morning to register. Nearly 400 women from the province of Newfoundland and Labrador showed up at this event, with no itinerary, even though it is extremely difficult to take 5 hours off in the middle of the day, because they wanted to talk about women, leadership, politics, business, and all kinds of other exciting topics they anticipated might be on the docket.

The event was a who's who of women in the province: lawyers, doctors, volunteers, students, TV personalities, members of government, prominent business people, artists, filmmakers, ship-builders, civil servants, and folks working for non-profits. Even two days later I can't get over the luck the government has: to be able to assemble this many brilliant and capable women (and men) into a room on such short notice and with no advance info about the content is a mark of how much appetite there is for talking about equality in the province, and how willing folks are to drop everything to meet up with people they don't know to talk about how we can make our beautiful province a better place for all.

I'm an extremely busy woman—I'm a mom of two young kids, I work full-time, I volunteer on a few boards, and frankly I don't have enough time in my day to feel like I'm doing a decent job at any of the things I'm responsible for. And yet, I too was willing to clear my schedule and show up without knowing what I was about to do. (My husband had to clear his schedule in the end too, because our 5 year old was home sick with a fever and we decided the event was important enough for TWO of us to miss five hours of work so he could stay home with our son while I attended.)

The event had so much potential. And in many ways it was great. I got to meet really cool people. I got to chat with people I already knew. And I got to talk in person with people that I normally talk with only online, which was a real treat. We need more opportunities like this to network and to talk politics and society: it benefits us all, especially women, who don't normally have as many chances to drop everything for a chit chat with folks they don't know.

In many ways, though, the event missed the mark, and this has me worried about the future of governance in our province. There was a lack of diversity in speakers; it would have been nice to hear more from folks with disabilities and women of colour, for example—what does leadership mean when you don't "look" like a traditional leader?

But the biggest miss? Government assembled a group of brilliant women to talk about leadership and *didn't actually ask us to talk to them*. One of the reasons that it's important to have women in leadership roles is to **improve the diversity of ideas** and solutions to problems. The province is in a desperate state. Let's be honest, the legislature is not producing any real solutions. The government had a chance to talk seriously with some of the brightest minds in the province, and instead, we got mansplained by a **Dale Carnegie** operative on how to make small-talk with strangers. This was an example of why gender-based analysis is necessary for every policy and action, at the start of the process, not at the end.

Know your audience, people.

The women in this room did not need help with how to remember people's names and did not need to hear about the Dale Carnegie guy's wife's career or about Dwight Ball's mom and family. Women are not just moms, wives, daughters, grandmothers, and aunts. Women are women. The women in that Convention Centre ballroom came with an appetite to talk seriously about leadership, about problems and solutions, and instead many left insulted, frustrated that they had wasted their precious time, and wondering what government was even thinking.

In the aftermath of the event, **Minister Haley apologized** for the Dale Carnegie mansplainer, but in her apology she indicated

that “none of the women” they tried to get to deliver the session were available. This is a classic response to being called out for [#allmalepanels](#) and all-male boards and all-male events: we can’t find women who say yes.

Let’s unpack that for a second.

Nearly 400 women said yes to showing up without knowing what was about to happen. Women cleared the decks to be at this event. Women are not saying no. Women are saying yes. In this case, it was government who didn’t bother to even try. Many of the women in that room could have done the job better, and many of the women who attended are master-networkers. These are people who did not need to be talked at. They needed to be listened to and taken seriously.

Taking women’s leadership seriously means asking for women’s input and then implementing their suggestions. It means funding women’s start-ups, their electoral campaigns, their inventions, and their initiatives. It means that (less qualified) men need to step aside sometimes in order to give the platform to a woman who knows more and will do an excellent job. It means that we need to change how we recruit—we don’t just say, “there aren’t any women who will say yes”—but we work harder to find them and to convince them to join the table. And it’s not just men who are making these mistakes. The Minister demonstrated on Wednesday that even she didn’t fully understand her role in furthering the Status of Women in our province.

Ensuring more women leaders in the province isn’t going to happen by talking at us. We are talked at by well-meaning men (and women) every day. We sit patiently while it happens and then move on. Women need systemic change. Women need real opportunities. Women need to not grow up being told by the people they love that men are better. Women need to not be beaten in their homes. Women need to not be threatened on the streets. Women need to have gender-based harassment in the workplace taken seriously by colleagues and especially managers. Women need to be paid salaries that reflect their work. Women need to be promoted when they deserve a promotion. Women need childcare. Women need paid maternity leave. Women need men to take parental leave. Women need sponsors and champions.

The big kicker here, and the thing that we often forget, is that [men need women to get these things too](#).

Everybody is better off when women are better off.

Society needs to recognize that the default way in which we operate right now [systematically holds women back](#). And we need to recognize that the status quo is bad for all of us. It means that we’re missing important voices and insights at the decision-making table, and it means that we’re missing an opportunity to make things better, faster.

The good news is, all of this can be fixed, and the government has started to make some strides in the right direction. [Paid domestic violence leave](#), for example, is a good thing. But we need more from government. The Premier announced on Wednesday that the new Minister is a [stand-alone minister](#), meaning she’s responsible for the Status of Women and no other portfolio. This is excellent news, and it means that she has more time to learn, more time to talk to her (very smart, talented, and highly educated) staff, and more time to seek advice from women leaders in the province. She’s met a lot of them now: they were at her event, and they sat patiently and kindly while they were talked at and talked down to.

I’m sure these brilliant women would be open to meeting again, and to talking to her about real stuff that will help the province move forward. They just need to be asked for their expertise. They need government to recognize what many of us already know: [#womenalsoknowstuff](#). Let’s ask them for help and let them lead the way.

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