

Clarifying the "Engaging" in Engaging Men An Overview

While a lot of effort and attention is being spent to “engage men” in addressing, responding to and preventing gender-based violence, the term has not been defined in any specific or concrete ways. There is some vague idea, often, about what it might mean for men to be engaged, but without a clearer understanding of what we mean by “engaging”, we’re often left with a lack of clarity in terms of goals, objectives and related activities.

There seem to be at least five distinct but often overlapping goals that people are referring to when they use the term engaging men (with some of the questions that frequently arise in that goal area):

- 1) Engaging men in presentations.
How do we generate men’s interests in educational presentations or workshops? How do we stay accountable while also engaging men through or around their defensiveness? How do we engage men in the presentations that may lead to their further action and involvement?
- 2) Engaging men in events or activities.
How do we increase the number of men at our events? How do we increase their level of participation at these events? Do we develop events specifically for men? How do we do so without distracting from the efforts to provide supports and engage women?
- 3) Engaging men to respond.
What is men’s role in responding to incidents, or to be in support of women and men who are victimized? How do we best encourage men to step into these roles?
- 4) Engaging men in social change efforts.
How do we most effectively recruit men to be engaged in efforts to change social norms? In ways that are accountable to and supportive of women’s leaderships?
- 5) Engaging men in leadership.
How do we effectively support men to step into leadership roles in terms of this work? How do we encourage men's leadership while also supporting and nurturing women's leadership? How do we develop men's leadership without also (inadvertently) encouraging men to "take over"?, in other words, how do we support men's leadership that supports, rather than supplants, women's leadership?

By clarifying what we mean by men being “engaged”, it becomes easier to develop the tools and resources to be able to effectively engage men in these ways.

Engaging men, regardless of in what way we’re seeking to engage men, begins with a position of assuming men want to be engaged in these ways, rather than a starting point of feeling like we have to convince men to be engaged. Men know when they’re trying to be convinced of or to do something. Like most of us, a sense of trying to be convinced tends to trigger an almost automatic defensiveness or at least resistance. If we approach men as if we assume they want to be engaged, we eliminate this dynamic.

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Specifically, here are some suggestions for ways to engage men in these categories. (NOTE: what is provided below is just an overview. The full list of ideas and recommendations about ways to effectively engage men in these areas is available at www.rusfunk.me/male-engagement):

1) Engaging Men in Presentations

Effectively engaging men in presentations requires thinking about men's relationship to gender-based violence and ways to use that relationship to guide the content and influence the conversation. Most presentations seem premised on men as potential victims, or men as potential perpetrators...with some attempts to engage men as preventionists. For most men, none of these fit their understanding of, or relationship to gender-based violence. For most men, their relationship to gender-based violence is as a friend or loved one of someone who has been victimized. If this is a premise, then the content can be framed for men that engages them from this position. Content can be designed to explore the possibility that if they are friends and loved ones of women or men who have been victimized, then they are also likely the friends and loved ones of men who have perpetrated. A discussion of what this might mean can deepen their relationship to these issues, thus encouraging them to become more deeply engaged.

2) Engaging Men in Events or Activities

Similarly, engaging men to attend an event or activity should attempt to engage men based on their relationship to gender-based violence. Take Back the Night, for example, should have content and messaging related to men as friends or loved ones, and men's roles in empowering women or men to speak out.

It's also most helpful to conceive of these one-time events and activities as points of entrée rather than a stand-alone event. Additional events or activities can easily be attached to a TBTN, or organized within a short period of time that encourage men to continue and perhaps deepen their "engagement".

3) Engaging Men to Respond

Let's start by assuming that most men want to know how to be as supportive as possible but have very limited knowledge or experience about how to do so. Traditional masculinity positions men to respond either through violence, or by rescuing -- neither of which are particularly helpful, nor are these responses experienced as supportive by the women or men who have been victimized. Engaging men to respond begins by answering some of their core questions and encourages them to better understand how they can best be of support.

4) Engaging Men in Social Change Efforts

Social change, for a lot of folks, is a rather intimidating proposition. It feels huge, and overwhelming. Engaging men to take on some kind of social change efforts begins by clearly defining what they might be able to do that are within their reach (both in terms of activities that don't require great deal of time, energy or expertise; and those that are within or at the edge of their comfort zone); while also explaining how doing what they're being asked to do can have a meaningful impact.

5) Engaging Men in Leadership

Traditional manhood conceives of leadership as a solo-position: there is *the* team captain, *the* man on the white horse, etc. Exploring leadership as a collective process (which is not foreign to men) that has a variety of roles invites men to be more involved in leadership in any of a number of ways, as well as opens up the ways that men can engage in leadership that is responsive and accountable to, and supportive of, women's leadership.