

# What We Can Learn from the “Wall of Moms” Movement to Improve our Workplaces

## *8 Ways to Reinforce Community, Values and Common Purpose in Working Relationships*

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I work as a conflict resolution practitioner and “workplace conflict capacity-builder”. I am a strong advocate of workplace community building and I consider myself and to be a multi-partial (rather than impartial) support to all members of my institution. I am also a leader in a department of gifted and diverse human beings. I know that when tough issues arise, a foundation of community will support sustainable resolutions and lasting collaborations.

In our current political and pandemic culture, I have been thinking about how our workplace communities can be compromised because of distance and differences. In response, I have been seeking alternative ways to engage with my colleagues in order to reinforce our sense of workplace community and common purpose. This July in Portland Oregon, amidst the violent encounters between protesters and police, there appeared a “Wall of Moms”. This Wall of Moms initiative and the impact that these Mom-identifying persons have had in response to anti-black racism, has me wondering how individuals can be mobilized to build community despite distance and differences. I am inspired by the momentum, commitment and organic unity of these Moms and believe we can learn elemental lessons from this “Mom movement”.

I have heard many comments like, “If we all just did what our mothers taught us. we would have a better workplace”. I have also heard colleagues point to the poster, “All I really need to know, I learned in Kindergarten” as a way of demonstrating the core values of respect and civility that sometimes get lost or go missing along the way, in our work days. I have agreed with these comments with varying degrees of enthusiasm depending upon my mood.

The Wall of Moms movement taps into the core values of courage, compassion and service to others – values that are often associated with maternalism and are very helpful to access when guiding our individual responses during difficult times. To be clear, I am not purporting that Moms are a homogenized group of individuals who hold the same values. I am, however, suggesting that when we think of Moms we often reflect on values of care, protection and community.

In the context of this reflection, it is important for me to say that I acknowledge and believe that it is unfortunate, if not tragic, that these white Mom activists are being recognized and applauded in a way that black Mom activists, who have been doing courageous work for a very long time, have not been heard or legitimized. I also know that there should be a great deal of dialogue centered around allyship and what it should look like. For this moment, however, I am reflecting on the Wall of Moms call to action, the identification of a common purpose, and the means by which community has been achieved in a remote, and divisive world. Today I ask, “What we can learn from Moms?”

### **1. Name and directly address discomfort to build workplace relationships.**

How often do persons responsible for others (managers or supervisors) engage in conversations with the people they are responsible to about values and needs in the workplace? How often do leaders ask, “What value(s) need to be practiced or witnessed by you to be satisfied in your

work?" Is it autonomy? Collaboration? Respect? Or order? What happens in you when this value is not honoured? How can I (or we as a team) best support you when times get tough? When you are feeling disconnected from your work, do you need space and a bit of time for reflection? Do you need a go-to person to debrief with? I suspect these discussions happen annually, at best in a performance appraisal perhaps. Deep discussions about values and needs result in deeper understanding and deeper reciprocal satisfaction. Can we learn to discuss needs before you need to access supports? Most importantly, how can we create an environment where we are celebrated and encouraged to talk about value needs and our own struggles with unmet needs?

## **2. Instead of responding to crisis, why not prepare for it?**

The Wall of Mom movement founder, Bev Barnum, spoke of regret for not having paid attention to important political issues up until the protests. Instead of trying to understand who we are in crisis, why not prioritize discussions about topics such as racism, gender based violence, and discrimination against Indigenous persons in the workplace in order to develop a foundation for deeper discussions when we are faced with community or organizational crisis? Additionally, there are the issues of harm and violence in the broader community which are also experienced in our homes and the homes of colleagues. As such, these are very important discussions as well.

## **3. Create a sense of communal responsibility.**

The Wall of Moms "are not leading chants or marches" they are "responding to whomever is holding the megaphone." Can we symbolically hand the megaphone to members of our workplace community? Are there ways that we can share the responsibility of creating a community? Think about sharing this responsibility by having a different member of your department reach out to each member asking what is important, in this moment, to be included on a staff meeting agenda. Sharing the responsibility of creating meeting agendas, rotating discussion facilitation and minute taking creates a shared sense of communal responsibility.

## **4. Eliminate power when possible; Leverage power when necessary.**

The Wall of Moms movement purports to have no hierarchy. The Moms are equal members committed to a single cause. This lack of hierarchy seems to create a sense that each person is responsible for their own "call to action". At the same time, these white Moms recognized their inherent power and privilege and used it to leverage this cause and embolden the movement. There are times in work groups when minimizing power and hierarchy serves to bolster creativity and ignite solutions. I would suggest this is the case in strategic planning sessions. There are other times when power and privilege needs to be harnessed by those in charge. I would suggest this is the case in cultural improvement initiatives.

## **5. Establish a common value.**

These Moms believe that caring for vulnerable persons is an essential part of who they are. Why don't we stop, reflect and ask each other: "What would you like to see happen in the workplace that is outside of what is required? What personal important values would you like explored or practiced? Individual answers will vary but perhaps you can identify a common value and build on it. For example, your work group may identify customer service, or stewardship, or equity as an important value. Explore ways to promote and celebrate collective common values and bring people together to focus on positive, collective dialogue.

## **6. Create alternative means to display or move your values forward.**

Interestingly, these Mom's donned "uniforms" that sent a message of unity. They dressed like "Moms", in (as expressed by Barnum) going-to-Target jeans and commonly agreed-upon yellow tee shirt. Can you build community by expressing common values or purpose in creative ways? If your area/department has a common value, why not post it in one format or another as a visual reminder of who you are?

## **7. Create a collective, common purpose project that falls outside of your usual workspace.**

Do you have a group of people who are committed to protecting the environment? Are your colleagues interested in learning more about allyship, technology based violence, screen fatigue? Create a plan or a project that addresses the need. Perhaps you create a strong recycling campaign or collectively review a book or article. Always remember to recognize and honour the fact that individuals will have different levels of commitment to any initiative.

## **8. Engage others in your workspace by identifying like-minded people to further discussions**

We all need allies. The Wall of Moms engaged with dads to help with the movement. Are there like-minded people in your workplace, outside of your core colleagues, that share some values or align with your areas goals/deliverables? Can you engage with others to build an even larger community that believes in the power of getting to know each other and prioritizes relationship building? The Wall of Moms had 30 attendees the first night they gathered, 150 the next, and, as of the end of July, there were almost 20,000 participants.

Lastly, accept that we should not be reaching for perfection; we should simply strive to be better. "Remember: extend the same kindness you give to others to yourself, and the same kindness you give to yourself, to others." (Mary, my Mom.)

## About the Author



**Dawn McDermott**, Senior Advisor of Dispute Resolution and Support for Wilfrid Laurier University, has a 25-year history of working with people and organizations in crisis, implementing community programs and developing institutional supports for people experiencing marginalization, victimization, harassment and discrimination. During her tenure as the Executive Director of Windsor and Essex County, Dawn was a member of the Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, and a team member appointed to conduct the Domestic Violence Safety audit of the Windsor police service. She co-created and implemented a group treatment program for female political torture survivors. She initiated the creation of a multicultural liaison coordinator position in partnership with the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County to support individuals with immigrant and refugee status that were at high risk of experiencing violent crime. Dawn is a mediator, a Crucial Conversations “train the trainer” and a Mental Health First Aid trainer. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in communication studies and sociology from the University of Windsor. Most recently, Dawn completed her LLM through Osgoode PD at York University.

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