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As I write this enews MP's in the Canadian House of Commons are debating whether or not to adopt an anti-bullying motion in the wake of the tragic suicide of 15 year old BC teenager Amanda Todd, who took her life as a result of cyber-bullying which then spread to her being bullied at school.

Last week I had an audience member approach me after a session to ask if I thought that a character on the TV show "The Office" was bullying another character. The reality is that TV and other media normalize bullying and violence. The power of media, and its influence over all of us, particularly our children, is immense.

Eradicating bullying will not be easy, but I believe it is possible. Each of us has a challenge in determining how we can be part of the solution. Starting the conversation is the first step.

"Respectful" Joking

My book, Road to Respect, starts with a chapter entitled "Choosing to Walk the Talk." "Leading the Change" is the final chapter of the book which starts with this quote by Albert Schweitzer:

"Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."

The importance of a personal commitment to respect and leading by example are central themes in the book, practices I have worked hard to personally integrate in my life. I mean, if I am going to inspire others to be respectful and live up to my reputation as, in the words of one of my clients, "The Respect Lady," it is fairly critical that I "Walk my Talk."

I certainly have the intention to align my behaviour with my values. At the end of the day however, as Canadian Human Rights Laws illustrate, it is the outcome that matters.

Last month I attended a meeting of my local CAPS (Canadian Association of Professional Speakers) chapter. I have been a member of CAPS since 2005. I have been on and off our local board and have developed a lot of relationships with other chapter members. I feel quite safe and comfortable at these local events, surrounded by friends and colleagues.

Two of my CAPS colleagues were among the presenters at the event. During the first presentation one colleague shared a story about an online event she had created with another of our CAPS colleagues, a male colleague I know quite well and consider a friend. He was not at the event.

She told us that while she considered the overall event to have been a success, there had been a few things that had gone wrong. There was a high level of multi-tasking required on both their parts, and with everything going on, her partner had neglected to press the button that would have allowed the event to be recorded.

**Before I realized it I piped up and said something like
“well, that’s not surprising. Multi-tasking? He’s a man.”**

A number of people laughed. A male friend and colleague that was seated behind me grabbed my chair and said “and what is it that you do again,” which caused more laughter, from me and others. Another male colleague called out “She’s Baaaaccck” recalling the famous phrase from the movie Poltergeist. More laughter.

After a minute the speaker resumed and I, quite honestly, didn’t think about my comment again: that is until later that day as I reviewed the notes I had taken at the meeting to develop my action plan.

My first thought was that it was no big deal. Of course it would be understood by everyone that I didn’t mean anything by it. It was just a joke.

The subject of joking comes up a lot when I am doing respectful workplace training. Sometimes it is a comment about how “this means we can’t have any fun at work anymore.” Other times it is a question about whether we can tell jokes at work. Is it ok

to tell an “off colour” joke if everyone is ok with it? That has come up so many times I have designed a scenario around it.

My standard response goes something like this. Yes we can still tell jokes at work. However, we do need to be aware of who is around. And as a rule we want to avoid jokes that target people on the basis of personal characteristics that are protected in law: e.g. gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

I talk about the fact that even if people laugh, that doesn't mean that they are comfortable with the joke, or that they don't find it offensive. It just might mean that they'd rather laugh and be considered part of the group, than be the person who speaks up and spoils everyone's fun.

The problem with “off colour” jokes, I often continue, is that they serve to reinforce stereotypes, stereotypes that form the basis for prejudice which gives rise to discrimination. It is a lot easier to identify and deal with overtly discriminatory behaviours and comments than it is to deal with “micro” behaviours like jokes. Unfortunately micro-behaviours, often accepted as “cultural norms” serve to perpetuate norms of inequality.

As I continued to think about my comment, the only conclusion I could come to was that I had made a sexist comment, a potentially offensive and insulting remark, in a public forum. The chance that at least one person there found that comment offensive was probably pretty high.

And what about the individual I made the comment about, someone who, as I shared above, I consider a friend and colleague. How might it affect our relationship if he heard about it, or worse, if he had been there to hear it himself?

The most painful realization for me was that rather than set a respectful example, I had modelled the kind of disrespectful behaviour I am interested in eradicating.

Not my proudest moment.

Do I regret having made that comment? Absolutely. Do I wish I could have a “do over”? You bet I do.

Former professional golfer David Feherty once said "It's how you deal with failure that determines how you achieve success." In this case I failed to walk my talk, to align my behaviour with my values. Rather than beat myself up, as many of us do in such circumstances, I decided to be compassionate: to forgive myself and figure out how to learn from the situation.

One thing this incident reinforced for me is that my impulsive nature is still very much alive and well. My Mom tells a story about how when I was 5 years old she got me all dressed up to go to a party. I was decked out in my party clothes, white socks and shoes, waiting for my Aunt to pick me up. When she arrived, I was so excited that I ran right across the lawn rather than on the paved path to the street. By the time I got to the car my white shoes and socks were filthy and reeking of the manure that had been laid on the lawn that morning.

I counsel my clients to develop emotional detachment: to think before they speak. This was a great reminder for me to ensure that I remain thoughtful and vigilant at all times, so that I can model the respectful behaviour I want others to emulate, particularly when I am around others in whose presence I feel comfortable and safe.

There is an old expression about familiarity breeding contempt. While I am not sure that my comment displayed contempt, familiarity with the people and the environment did influence my behaviour. I felt relaxed so I kind of "let go."

This incident allowed me to gain a fresh insight into the reality of the challenges we face in creating and maintaining respectful environments. I have a renewed empathy for those that engage in behaviour, often inadvertently, that feels disrespectful to others.

I would like to extend an apology to all of my CAPS colleagues who were present at the meeting and might be reading or listening to this article. If I did offend any of you, I sincerely regret that.

Trust me, it won't happen again.