

Service Planning

Deborah Naughton works for Community Connections in Townsville, Queensland. In her role as the Lifestyle Facilitator, she works with families and individuals on the planning and skill building to assist them to create authentic lives in their community. Deborah entered the Disability Sector around 8 years ago when she moved to Australia. Before that she was working in Germany for the British Military of Defence, Supporting army families to settle and adjust to living in a different country and cultural.

In this article Deborah shares her insights about what is required to ensure a plan created between an individual and the service in their life will be effective in assisting them live the life they aspire to live.

One thing I have learnt is that very few people have their lives mapped out on a piece of paper – their life plan. Yet having an opportunity to stop and think about what would make us happy and feel that we are living life to the fullest would be something most of us would appreciate.

It is good to remember that planning is just a tool that provides a framework for people to be clear about their goals in life and what it is they want to achieve.

In our small service the planning is individualised to suit the family culture, so planning differs from person to person. That being said, there are some common factors. We have face to face meetings to develop a rapport with people so they feel comfortable in talking about their personal dreams. We feel it is also important to invite family, friends and stakeholders who have an involvement in an individual's affairs and offer a lot of support in that area. We need good listening skills to interpret what is being discussed and through checking with them we can make sure we have correctly heard what has been said. We record the plan in a way which, as well as, helping develop strategies that address their goals and provide us with a starting point, also ensures we are building on existing supports and reflecting the needs and wishes of the person we are working with.

Everyone needs a way to start thinking about how they would like their life to look, so when we start working on a plan I like to offer different tools that suit that individual's needs.

Wendy is a woman I have been working with for a few years now, but when I started working with her on her plan she was overwhelmed and closed down. She had little if any control in her life, she had never really been asked what she wanted her life to look like.

We started by having some conversations about her goals but she was not really clear how her life could look. We used a number of different tools to get Wendy started and as she did not have anybody in her life to help her with her plan, the team at my office helped out. On the table we spread lots of photos of things that we all have that enrich our everyday lives. They were of people enjoying different social activities, different types of relationships, places and material objects. Each person chose around ten photos that had meaning to them and then we went round the table taking about what we had chosen and why. Some people wanted a holiday overseas some people wanted to try new hobbies.

Wendy chose five photos. She said she wanted a kitten, flowers in her garden, money, to learn how to knit and tell the time. She was not asking for very much and this reflected the modest dreams and vision she had for herself at that time.

Wendy went on to achieve her goals within six months so we revisited her plan. This time she created a visual collage which included a house on the beach, beautiful furniture to fill it with, an engagement ring, a wedding celebration and the groom. These types of modelling worked well for Wendy as they helped her to expand her vocabulary. She is becoming more able to articulate what she feels and she has a better understanding of social etiquette and of what other people feel about their lives.

We are now four years on and Wendy has little need for visual prompts when we review her plan and she is much more able to identify goals. Much of this has come from the confidence she gained from the smaller successes. These days Wendy still creates a visual collage using magazine cut outs and she tells me that it motivates her. I feel we would not have got such a successful outcome if we did not use a variety of different tools in the planning process. The richness of the plan comes when you can get a person thinking, talking and believing what is possible for them.

When creating a plan, it is beneficial to take a holistic approach to a person's life, as there are many factors that influence how successful a plan will be. A good example of this is a person's health, for if a person has undiagnosed health issues that are not being addressed this will have a negative effect on their ability to focus on the plan they have developed to achieve their goals.

Another lady I work with often missed out on swimming due to an upset stomach. We discovered she is lactose intolerant and now the connection had been made and she is avoiding dairy and is now attending swimming regularly which is greatly improving her quality of life.

I often work with people who do not have family or friends to offer them support in creating and implementing their plan. In this case there are sometimes legal stakeholders involved and it is important that they are also welcomed to work with the service and understand what that persons plan is about.

Wendy identified that she wanted to find a partner and get married. In this case it was very important to have a good relationship with legal stakeholders, such as the Public Guardian and the Public Trustee. By involving them in Wendy's plan and its challenges it has helped overcome some hurdles and created a safety net around her. This has allowed Wendy to have control and follow her dream but to have safeguards for herself and the service to limit the damage when she has made decisions that have not worked out well.

It is the opportunity to make these decisions that has allowed Wendy to learn, grown and mature. We have been lucky to have some continuity in the people that are Wendy's Public Guardian and Public Trustee officer as we have been able to build trust and work well together.

When starting to implement a plan there has to be some immediate progress. By including small achievable steps successes can be observed and celebrated early on and this gives immediate reward while providing an opportunity for the person to increase their skills.

Once the person has a few successes under their belt it is time to move on to the more difficult goals, but sometimes the timing is not right and we need to put that part of the plan on hold. When there has been a lot of change in a short period it is nice to let it gel allowing the person some time to get used to the changes and that is why it is good to keep reviewing the plan. Celebrating the small successes can make all the difference when you are working on long term plans. There are

often two steps forward and three steps back, but it is the small celebrations that keep people motivated.

Life can often be chaotic and take many different directions. Due to this unpredictability it is important to be flexible and responsive to the person and to recognize what is going on for them. We have a yearly cycle for the plan but we review regularly as this can spark new ideas for some people. Not all plans stay on track and if someone's life takes a completely new direction we may have to start again.

Using Wendy's plan again as an example, we are still working together on achieving her goals, but they have become more complex as she has grown as a person. Although some of the goals have been achieved in some ways, the plan has been revisited and re-written many times to reflect her changing life circumstances. These have included finding a partner and being in a loving relationship for over two years and then dealing with the breakdown of the relationship and the rebuilding of her life again as a single woman.

The reality is that there are some goals we cannot deliver for people, such as partners, relationships and family. It is important to acknowledge that these are important drivers in people's lives and to establish with the person what they can do to move towards these goals. This might include creating opportunities and building capacity in people to be in the right place, at the right time with the right skills. It is like planting a seed. By putting the seed in the most fertile soil with access to sun and water you have given it the best chance of germination.

It is as important to look back at what has been achieved as it is to look forward at what else can be done. It is crucial to revisit the plan to keep it relevant and useful. There also needs to be creativity in the interpretation of a person's goals, openness to opportunities to develop networks in the local community and an exploration of how the person can take up valued roles as this also increases a person's fulfilment.

You cannot expect a plan to run to your timescale it is all about the person and their journey. As a facilitator it is hard not to be pushing to achieve the next goal. I have had to learn to wait for when the person is ready to move forward and sometimes it has been years in the making. This is why it is important to keep reviewing the plan so you do not lose sight of the plan's focus. I believe the continuity of working with the same people over a long period of time has been beneficial, particularly in understanding the history of where the person has come from on their journey and to ensure that they are always moving forward at their own pace.

While having a plan gives a person hope, vision and direction in life, it should be a part of a person's life but not always take the main focus - it is something that is always there in the back ground. There are times when a person has achieved a goal that they have set but need time to consolidate, before moving on to the next thing.

I will leave the last words to Wendy. When I spoke to her about using her story in this article, I asked her how she felt about her life when we started working together. She said "it was crap".

I asked her how she felt about life now and what she thought about the planning process. She said she felt "good inside", "I've improved my skills and relationships" and that planning helps "you see clearly what you can do with your life".