

From Vision to Action through Planning

Julie van Oosten has been involved in planning for over eight years in a number of roles. She is currently the team leader at Pave the Way, Mamre Association Inc, in Brisbane, Queensland. Pave the Way engage people with disability, their families and friends in planning for the future. They are not involved in service provision, but instead assist with planning, support circle establishment and currently with preparing Queenslanders for the roll out in 2016 of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

In this article Julie reflects why people plan, the benefits of engaging an experienced facilitator and the value of including others in the planning process. Julie highlights the value of remaining grounded in the ordinary and how this thinking is fertile ground for clarity, enrichment and new possibilities.

For people with disabilities, their families and networks, a facilitated planning session can be a very positive experience for all involved. It raises expectations about what is possible for the person to lead a good life and as a result passes on hope, knowledge and authority to the people who it rightfully belongs to - the person at the centre of the planning, their family and those who love and care about them.

In the disability sector the kind of planning we often hear about is planning for service support or funding purposes. Whilst this has its place, at the organization I work for we engage in planning that is family driven and which we refer to as *from vision to action through planning*. In other words, it is planning that, at its heart, is about articulating a vision for a good and safe life for the person both now and into the future. This kind of planning places the person at the center and explores their personal hopes and goals in life. We focus on what is typical for the person's age and gender, but also what is unique about them; their gifts, passions, hopes and interests in life. This is the lens that informs the vision and frames the planning that follows.

Planning can also be a way of thinking that informs every day decisions and actions. To get to this point however, one must know where one wants to go and planning can be an effective tool to begin this journey.

In my work, planning usually involves engaging people in a formal process. For example, a small number of people are invited by the person with disability and/or their family to come together for a few hours. They enjoy some hospitality and together contribute their ideas, perspective, information, or even just a good dose of optimism or creativity.

For many families though, there is a reluctance to engage in a formal planning process. This can sometimes be due to the day-to-day demands of raising a family and/or working that planning can seem like just another task to add to the long list of things to do. However, engaging in a planning session can actually be quite an effective and powerful process for a number of reasons.

Perhaps most importantly, it means setting aside time in the busy-ness of life and dedicating a few hours to stop. To really stop. To stop shuffling the fear of the future to the deep recess of your mind; to stop thinking that you and only you have to come up with all of the answers, or to stop thinking that funding and services alone will provide you with the answers you seek. Good planning is first and foremost about setting time aside and creating a space in order to ask good questions

and involve others in the process. Having a facilitator who can pose good questions that elicit useful answers can be invaluable.

When someone facilitates the planning they can be responsible for the process, including managing time and the group dynamics whilst keeping the group moving in a forward manner. A facilitator can bring impartiality, as they usually do not have the same emotional investment as the family and others who are personally involved.

For others, their reluctance to engage in formal planning stems from thinking that it is a big ask to invite others into planning with them, but in my experience this is not usually the case. Not only do they feel valued and honored by the invitation but they actually enjoy being involved in such a process. For some families, there is not a big network to draw from so inviting people in a one-off kind of way has been a useful approach. Asking someone to come and share their experience or knowledge of something you are considering does not constitute a big ask, just a few hours of their time.

If it is not the right time or place for formal planning then planning can take place on the level of a casual and slightly structured conversation with a friend or other family member about decisions that need to be made. In other words, an 'intentional cup of tea'.

When considering engaging in a formal planning process, it helps to think about the purpose of the planning: what do you want to achieve; what are your hopes and expectations and what don't you want to happen? Once you have thought about the purpose, it is easier to think about who to invite. For example, if your family member is about to leave school and you want to look at what their life will look like after school, it makes sense to invite some younger people who will have more idea of how to operate in a young adult world. A cousin or neighbour who may or may not be directly involved in the life of your family member may bring typical and ordinary ideas as well as a fresh set of eyes.

Inviting others is also an opportunity to create awareness and understanding among people in your extended family and networks. We often receive feedback about how the process resulted in getting everyone on the same page. This is difficult to cultivate without some level of intentionality and you would need lots of intentional cups of tea to try and achieve the same result.

Inviting others into planning usually adds a richness and energy that is difficult for families to achieve on their own, but involving others may at times present some challenges. Some of the challenges arise when people do not look beyond the person's disability to who the person actually is and subsequently may not have imagined a typical and ordinary life for them. Unfortunately a person's disability is often used as the dominant lens through which they are viewed. These are the views they have inherited from a society where the common practice is still to view people with disability as 'other' and send them away from their communities, their families, and their ordinary life in order to get support. Therefore it is important when planning not to focus solely on the person's disability or the challenges they experience

In the planning context I see the role of the facilitator therefore, is not to just manage a process but also to model ideas or a way of thinking that will subvert this disability or 'other' lens to enrich the planning process. The facilitator can pose questions and frame them to reorientate people's understanding of how disability is understood by them and in the world. I'm not suggesting the facilitator impose an agenda of their own; this is about giving a perspective that people are too seldom exposed to. The vision, if typical and ordinary, gives weight to this authority and this then can frame all of the questions and answers from there on in.

There are numerous planning tools and processes, with varying degrees of complexity, that have been developed around the world. At my work we use a simple process, which is sometimes modified in consultation with the person and their family. As mentioned earlier we refer to planning as: *from vision to action through planning*. We start the session with the question 'what makes a good life for someone of the person's age, gender and culture, in this particular community'. We then spend time on thinking about who the person is, their unique interests, gifts, passions and challenges in life. Time is spent articulating a vision for a desired future based on this information. From here goals are set based on the vision. Finally, each goal is unpacked, to work out what actions are required, by whom and by when. A planning session of this kind usually takes about 3-4 hours and often families review the plan a year or so down the track.

After many years of planning with families, I know that no two planning sessions are ever the same, as they reflect the unique hopes and expectations of the person and their family and the ideas contributed by the group. One of my mottos is 'no-one knows as much as all of us'. Involving others can be full of surprises for everyone involved.

Recently I facilitated a planning session with a family and their 11 year old son who I will call John. This particular session reminded me of the importance of involving one's networks, at a time and place that is convenient to them (usually a Sunday and in the family's home we have found), to imagine the best possible life for the person. It also reinforced to me the importance of the facilitator setting the scene to ensure the group can imagine typically, creatively and better. In preparing the group for planning I anticipated that some people may be looking at John through the lens of his disability, so I began the planning session with a simple question:

'What does a good life look like for a typical 11 year old boy in your community?'

The group didn't hesitate to answer: playing Xbox, sleepovers, sports, paper runs, visiting relatives, going down town, or up to the water tower, were a few of their responses. I would wager, that if I had asked this question but replaced 'typical' with 'disabled' they would have imagined the usual segregated services offered to people with disability. By asking a question about a typical life you could see the fear of not knowing shift to the confidence and delight of indeed knowing. This group knew a lot of boys John's age and knew how they spent their time and they eagerly embraced this different way of thinking about John. When planning for what is typical and ordinary, one's informal networks can be more easily welcomed to participate in a meaningful way.

I then asked the group to bear in mind this typical vision for a good life in the process of planning for John. John could do all of those things if he wished - the only difference is he would require support to do some of them. Some of that support can be from support workers and some can come from family and friends.

This particular planning session crystallised for me how proposing an alternative view about disability can assist a shift in thinking. The process we undertook changed the way these family friends saw John and the life they could imagine for him. It seemed to me to be a truly uplifting experience for all of those involved - to imagine this real life, not some segregated second-class version of a life. The magic was not so much in the ideas themselves, but the opportunity it provided for the family's networks to understand John, the young boy, outside of his disability. After all, too often the lens of disability can make life more complex than it needs to be. In addition to changing the group's perception of John, it also gave them an opportunity to play a part in his life. John has paid support workers to assist him and his family, but this was not about support, it is about a typical life for John loved and surrounded by his friends, family and community.

John's family was overwhelmed by the simple process and the ordinary lens we used, as their planning experience up until then had only been with services, resulting in plans based primarily on his support needs. Services can play an important role in the lives of people with disabilities, but as they are usually orientated to working out support arrangements to be provided by the service itself and usually with very few resources, the planning can be rather limited. The plan the group fashioned using this ordinary lens better prepared them to see where the service fits with their plan, not the other way around.

It is helpful to bear in mind that planning, while extremely helpful, is also just a tool. It is a tool to help you clarify where you want to go, what you need to get there and to give you confidence about the decisions you make along the way. Your vision is the most important component of your plan and it will be the compass to keep you on track. If I have learnt anything during the course of this work, it is that many of the good things that happen in life are not necessarily set out in a plan itself, but arise from the journey the person is on in pursuit of their vision. Once you know where you want to go, you can choose whether or not to embrace the many unexpected opportunities that will present themselves along the way.