

Strengthening the Capacities of Support Workers

Lesley Gissane works with Access Incorporated, supporting adults who have an intellectual disability who have had limited family and community experiences due to institutionalization. In this article Lesley addresses those qualities, in addition to money, that are needed to create good support.

There are many “big picture” issues facing people with disabilities – issues of access, funding and government policies. All are very important, but for most people the issue that impacts on them most directly is the quality of their support, and the quality of their support workers. The equation we generally accept is that more dollars equals more support hours equals more support workers equals better quality of life. However this equation is not always reliable.

Increased funding is only part of the solution to bringing about real change in people’s lives. There are numerous other factors that need to be addressed to truly increase the quality of supports for people. It is essential for a service to have a thorough understanding of its role, its limitations and its opportunities. The most important work to be done is determining an individual person’s needs and how a service might help to meet these. This is always done at the direction of the service user.

In addition to this, I believe that there is also work which is important for the service workers to do in order to bring their best selves into their support roles. For me, this comes down to three key areas: education, reflection and mentoring. Throughout my career, I have found that education and development opportunities that are offered in a values-based framework have given me an opportunity to reflect on my role in people’s lives through a greater consciousness about the deeply held values that drive human behaviour. It is necessary for services to create an organizational culture that encourages workers to have greater awareness of their own values and how this affects their work. Without diverting funds unnecessarily to administrative minutiae, it is important to devote some resources to recruiting, developing and maintaining high quality support workers.

Taking time to reflect on one’s role as well as individual responses to people’s needs is crucial. I found this quote by Richard Carlson relevant: "Reflection is one of the most underused yet powerful tools for success. It is a passive way to pinpoint solutions and strategies with the least amount of effort or wasted energy. It's the opposite of 'trying too hard,' of forcing an answer. Reflection is more a matter of allowing an answer to unfold right before your eyes, often with little or no effort on your part. One of the benefits of reflection is that it enables us to get our egos out of the way. In a quiet state of mind we are able to see things clearly including our own contributions to problems, new ways of doing things, and the ways we get in our own way. Reflection allows us to sense our self-imposed limitations and some of the blind spots in our thinking."

Opportunities for reflection allow workers to give consideration to their own internalised values, how their subconscious issues may get in the way of service and for developing the best individual responses for the person they are working with. Indeed, Wofensberger lists consciousness as one of the seven core themes of his theoretical work, stating that “consciousness is preferable to unconsciousness...negative feelings and dynamics should, and usually have to, be made conscious in order to be adaptively addressed.”

In addition to education and reflection I see an important place for mentoring. Many workers could improve and maintain a higher level of support and develop innovative strategies if they had the opportunity to learn from more experienced people. Within the professional counselling model, a percentage of a counsellor’s time is spent in supervision, ensuring that their own issues are not tied up in the therapeutic relationship and seeking advice about appropriate strategies. It is an important and potent mentoring strategy. Perhaps adapting this type of approach for disability workers may help avoid the high level of staff turnover that

many service users have to live with. This in turn might allow for workers and clients to know each other over a longer period of time, encouraging support to go beyond basic needs, and to truly support a person to achieve higher order goals.

My view is that there is no standard set of qualities or responses that will work in a 'one size fits all' approach. It is unrealistic to think that a particular 'shopping list' of values will make for a good support worker. Each individual using a service deserves an individual and innovative response. If there is one universal element it is that it needs to be a collaborative approach, based on a thorough understanding of the service user's goals and desires, and of the worker's role in helping them be achieved. Money is certainly important in the equation, but to convert money into a better quality of life for people requires much, much more.