

Service, Support and Success

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Howdy Partner - Direct Support Professionals and the Skills Needed to Navigate the Various Partnerships which Come with the Role

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“Direct Support Professionals” is a relatively new term. It’s brought with it an increasing respect for both the work that you do and the skills that you have. What comes with the word ‘professional’ is a new approach to how you work, as an individual, and how you work as a team. It asks you to step back, for a second, from everything you do, and look at it from a new perspective. As a working professional, you work in partnership with others on your team. Teamwork, then, is simply a partnership of people who carry out a function. Seeing the ‘team’ as a group of ‘partners’ is much healthier than simply seeing the team as a group of people randomly thrown together who are then expected to get a job done.

A direct support professional once said, long before the term was coined, that they felt they didn’t work with a team; they worked in one big dysfunctional family. When asked what she meant, she said that the roles the people took on, over time, ended up leading to constant and inevitable conflict. That the issues that came up in the team were always about each other in the team choosing sides, shunning others, blame seeking and blame flaming, and, of course, sabotage. She said that the people they served were simply background to the drama within the team.

We’ve thought about that often over the years as we both provided consultation to a number of teams. While it wasn’t always as bad as was initially described, we both noticed that there was a lack of people understanding their roles as partners within a team. In fact, there are many partnerships that direct support professionals have to navigate – they are in partnership with their supervisor in regards to both their performance but more importantly about their personal growth, they are in partnership with the team as already mentioned, they are in partnership with other professionals, they are in partnership with families, and they are in partnership with the people that they serve.



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We spent some time taking a look at what comprises a good partnership. Let's look at the basics first. These are important in every single partnership you have, including with your spouse, your kids and, maybe surprisingly, with your doctor, your pharmacist and others in your support team. They are the five 'c's of partnership:

- ✓ Communicate
- ✓ Co-ordinate
- ✓ Co-operate
- ✓ Collaborate
- ✓ Connect

Let's take a brief look at each of these:

Communicate

First let's look at what communication isn't. It isn't gossip or back biting or constant complaining. Communication is the transmission of ideas and information. It involves one of the first skills we learned in the playground: sharing. Keeping information to oneself may make someone feel important, but it also sets up another to fail. Communication works best if everyone is focused on everyone winning. We work with people with disabilities, communication games, communication hoarding and purposeful miscommunication will end up hurting the people we support. Communication that flows well between a team that has partnered with respect will serve people with disability with a similar respect.

Coordinate

First let's look at what coordination isn't. It isn't simply assigning tasks and expecting them to be done. It isn't making a list and ticking off responsibilities. A partnership approach to coordination notices two things right off: direct support staff are already busy and direct support staff, because they work with people, will always have emergencies and disruptions that mess up their plans. We know this going in. So coordination is a process of sitting down, planning and looking at the tasks, as well as working through who will do what based on interest and skill, not on availability. It means planning for disruptions before they happen by developing strategies for what to do when it all goes to heck and a person feels swamped. It's giving every person a 'life saver' before they get in the raft. A coordination meeting should have everyone leaving feeling both inspired and protected. Knowing that every partner in that team has your back is a powerful motivator.

Cooperate

First let's look at what cooperation isn't. It isn't grudging support that once given will be complained about for the next several lifetimes. It isn't resentful sharing of time and resources. Cooperation is where partnerships are tested. The goal, the idea, the thing strived for will only be reached if people are willing to actively participate. There is a Kenyan proverb: sticks in a bundle are unbreakable. That's a lovely image isn't it? The fact that we all work in human services, providing support and care to others, makes the need for free and friendly cooperation important, all the planning and coordination and collaboration mean nothing if people, on the ground, at work, refuse to cooperate with each other. This is partnership's weak link.

Cooperation requires a generosity of spirit that can be learned with practice. Every team needs to be made up of partners who are willing to care as much for each other as they do for the people they serve. We've all demonstrated every day that we care – we have the ability, we just have to learn to make that caring bigger and better and stronger.

Collaboration

First let's look at what collaboration isn't. It isn't someone standing at the front of the room delineating problems and solutions. Collaboration is loud, is noisy, is full of laughter. Collaboration is wild imaginings running smack into sensible suggestions and turning into brilliant ideas. Collaboration usually starts a process but we've put it later in the list for a reason. Nothing ever works exactly right the first time out. There are hiccups and there are unconsidered contingencies that crop up. This is when collaboration really needs to happen. Coming back to regroup and throw the floor open to honest discussion about what's working and what's not, about what solutions might be. This is not coming together to carp and complain and criticize. Things go wrong. Get over it. Now put your minds together and work them. It's surprising what comes up when people actively think together.

Connect

First let's look at what connecting isn't. It isn't an email. It isn't a text message. It doesn't involve either LOL or WTF. Connecting is actually, physically, in the real world, sitting down and talking together in a room. There are so many risks when working on something together that words in emails will take on a different tone, because they are in print, than they would when spoken. Taking the time to actually sit and talk, connect with one another is important. It renews the partnership. It reminds you of why the partnership is valuable. It allows you to freely experience the pleasure of working together with another person or with other people. It matters. Make time.

OK, those are the basics.

Now let's look at some specific things that are needed in the various partnerships a direct support professional finds themselves in.

Working in partnership with your supervisor

- 1) Your supervisor has two main responsibilities in their relationship with you. One is tough – it's about performance feedback and suggestions for change. No one likes doing this, no one likes hearing it. This will be hard to do, but it's best sometimes just realizing that they don't like giving negative feedback or asking for performance change, and they probably slept poorly before their meeting with you because they were worried about how it would go. We're all people here. But let's talk about the other responsibility – they have a responsibility to work with you on your personal growth goals. Where do you want to be in five years? What would you like to learn? What skills would you like to develop? These are important questions to ask yourself. Don't end up frustrated that you haven't grown if you've never established a goal! This is your responsibility. With every supervisor I have had, this is Dave speaking here, I have told them that I need two things: I need praise and encouragement. I need to know when I do something well. I need to be told. I like and need reinforcement for the work I do. I also need to have goals that I want to strive for, I need there to be room in my job for the pursuit of those goals.

It's simple, that's what I want. And you know how I've gotten these things, I've asked for them. I know supervisors can't read my mind ... a fact that I am eternally thankful for.

- 2) Boundaries matter. Your supervisor is your supervisor is your supervisor. Sitting down to 'gossip' with your supervisor may seem harmless but, if it's about the other staff, it's not gossip, it's back biting, it's trying to curry favour, it's trying to establish yourself in a different kind of relationship to your supervisor. It's ok to be friendly, but it's also important to remember that there exists a power relationship between the two of you. All you have to do is get drunk with your supervisor and say something that you wouldn't say sober – the next morning that 'friend' you had a drink with is now a supervisor who heard what you said.

Working in partnership with your team

- 1) Starting at the starting point, you are all here to provide the best, the most excellent, the awesomest service possible to people with intellectual disabilities. You are all here because you care and want to make a difference. It's important to first acknowledge that, no matter the differences between you, all of you have a heart that beats to the rhythm of direct support. People with intellectual disabilities often don't have the luxury of choosing who will work with them. They are left to the mercy of good fortune to have good people who will form a good set of team partnerships. You should understand the vulnerability that they experience because YOU don't have the luxury of choosing the people you are going to work with but, here's the difference, while people with disabilities hope partnership happens, you can actually make it happen. Partnership is an act of will between willing people. Remember how you relate to each other will impact on the people you serve. Without question.
- 2) Read the mission statement for your agency. This matters. As a group you work together and you represent your agency and are the only way that the agency has of fulfilling its mission and creating its vision. As a group, talk about how you want to be perceived by the people you support, by the families who love them, by the community who looks to you for example of how to 'be' with someone with a disability, someone with a difference. Your team, and the partnerships that arise within that team, needs a vision for itself and a vision of itself. It can be an inspiring conversation to have. And it's the best place to start in forming a viable partnership.

Working in partnership with other professionals

- 1) As two professionals who have consulted to numerous teams over the years, we recognize the very important role the direct support professional plays in supporting the work that we do. We rely on you for so many things to help us do our jobs. You provide us with information about the area of referral, observations you have made about the behaviour of concern, as well as background information about the person's life prior to our involvement. As we regularly say to teams, "Don't make us look stupid." Without the information we receive from you, we are unable to make informed and viable treatment recommendations. You collect data for us – we know how much everyone loves those checklists and charts. We also rely on you to implement treatment recommendations, to review Safety Plans, practice self-regulation strategies and engage in role plays – I'm sure many of you didn't know acting was part of the job description.

- 2) We aren't the only ones who rely on your observations and expertise. Other professionals such as doctors, dentists, psychiatrists, etc. do as well. While it is very important that the voice of the person you support be heard first and foremost, these professionals also rely on your observations about medication compliance, symptoms, pain, behaviours, etc. The importance of having a direct support professional who knows the person well supporting them at appointments with professionals has been stressed in previous articles. Any professional's recommendations are only as good as the information they have available to them. We know that it is a sad fact that direct support professionals sometimes aren't recognized as true partners and as integral members of the treatment team. We both believe that is changing, the existence of the term 'direct support professional' didn't exist only a few years ago but it is taking hold because it more clearly states your role and, with that, the demand for a voice at the table.

Working in partnership with parents

- 1) They aren't your family. The people you support are the people you support. You may care deeply, but you aren't family. Everyone knows what it is to have parents; we all have complicated relationships with our own; why would we expect that parents of adult children with disabilities don't have equally complex and even messy relationships with their children? So you need to drop the judgement. Even if you disagree with something that the family did in the past, like institutionalize their child, remember the past is called the past for a reason – it was a different time and they got different advice from different professionals. Let it go. Realize that you are one in a thousand staff they have met over the time that their kid has been in service. It's your job to win their trust, not their job to give it. So remember to begin at the beginning at proving that you are there to help, not judge; to support, not lead; to listen, not ignore. Learning to establish yourself as trustworthy to families is one of the most important skills for success as a direct support professional.
- 2) Facilitate communication, don't take it over. Sometimes, not always but sometimes, a person with a disability becomes disconnected even from families they see on a regular basis. Why? Because well-meaning direct support professionals insert themselves into that relationship. When you are telling stories about someone's accomplishments or adventures, there's little left for them to say. Let them talk. Help them plan what they need to tell their parents. Parents need to hear about growth and development and about accomplishments from their children. They will recognize the adulthood of their child only if you act like a direct support professional not an excited teenaged babysitter. If the person you support doesn't speak in traditional ways, work out a way to keep the person included in all conversations, don't talk over them, around them or about them without considering them as a participant. Learn how they communicate in their own unique ways and build on that, use their communication and respect it as an individualized language. You can learn a lot by listening with the eyes. Demonstrate respectful care by practicing equality even when it isn't immediately evident.

Working in partnership with the people you serve

- 1) In every partnership there are a variety of roles. One of those roles is 'leader'. Many people with disabilities have never experienced the position of 'leadership' in their own lives. This is where your partnership begins. You don't know better how they should live their lives. You don't know better what they should want to eat, to watch, to do. You

don't. There is a boundary. This is You. This is Not You. Remember that. Teach self-advocacy, teach the person you serve to stand up to you, to speak up for themselves. Real partnership with someone with a disability is not possible if you lead and they follow.

- 2) You are working with a person. You are working with a person who has a disability. It's important to understand both of those things. When you hear slogans like focus on the person not the disability ... push that idea to the side. People matter. Disabilities matter. Everyone experiences disability differently. And disabilities will affect how someone is seen and treated and understood. Keeping in mind that you are working with someone who is a member of a devalued minority who will experience prejudice because of their difference, will keep you sensitive to the life the person is living. They have to live with their disability, which they will do surprisingly well, but they also have to live with the social prejudices that come with disability, which can be difficult to bear. So, support the whole person, and part of that person is the disability that they live with. It isn't a shameful secret never to be spoken of ... it's simply a different way of being, a different route on the path to pride. Be willing to walk from shame to pride with every person you serve.

Well, that's all from us for now ... except ...

Angie and I want to talk to you about our partnership. We've known each other and worked together pretty much constantly over the last 25 years. We met recently to talk about the newsletter and through collaboration we've decided we wanted a change to the look of the newsletter. You will be seeing the result of that conversation with the new design of this issue. Bigger than that, we received a letter from one of our readers who said they didn't like us calling this publication a 'newsletter.' They felt that it might be considered less important information because it was targeted for direct support professionals. Dieters have newsletters and supermarkets have newsletter and cat fanciers have newsletters. This, they said, was a publication giving professional information to people dedicated to a profession. They suggested that it be called: The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals. Angie and I talked about this a lot and finally, after looking up the definition of 'journal,' determined that our reader was right. So ... welcome to the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS. That's how partnerships work ... people talk ... people listen ... things change.

Award

Dave and Angie were recently recognized at the Ontario Developmental Services Human Resource Strategy Forum as Leadership Award recipients. This award acknowledges and celebrates organizations and individuals who embody the very best qualities and practices in service provision to persons with a developmental disability. Dave and Angie were recognized for their leadership role in producing 'Supports, Services and Success: The Direct Support Services Newsletter' which was identified as a valuable resource for direct support professionals. The newsletter which they have been co-editing since 2012 has obtained international readership across 134 countries and is being used by colleges, universities and service agencies as instructional material (See photo on next page)



Photo Description: Angie and Dave at the Ontario Developmental Services Human Resource Strategy Forum

Answers to FAQ's about the newsletter

- 1) The newsletter is intended to be widely distributed; you do not need permission to forward. You do need permission to publish in a newsletter or magazine.
- 2) You may subscribe by sending an email to dhingsburger@vitacs.org
- 3) We are accepting submissions. Email article ideas to either the address above or to anethcott@handstfhn.ca
- 4) We welcome feedback on any of the articles that appear here.