

Service, Support and Success

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Deeply Frank: Getting Serious About Person-Centered Thinking

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For most of us, our days and weeks are made up of routines. Most of us leave our homes and regularly go places such as the local coffee shop, mall, aquatic centre or comic book store. One of the reasons we go to these places is because they are a comfortable place to hang out. Comfortable because we know the routine. We know where the entrance is, where we like to sit and where the washrooms are. More importantly we know the atmosphere. We know what people wear and how they act. As soon as we walk in, it feels familiar and comfortable.

When we take people we support to one of their comfortable places, we all slip into our comfortable routines. They're happy, we're happy, easy peasy.

What about if things change? What do we do if someone we support decides that they want to take a college class? Or join the local gym? How can we help them turn the unfamiliar into the familiar? How do we help them learn the routines and the social norms of this new place so that they can feel comfortable?

Let's take the gym for example. If you are supporting someone who has never gone to a gym before, there's a lot more to it than simply going with them to sign up for a membership. There is an entire community to figure out. Where are the change rooms? What are the social norms in the change room? Do you bring your own towel? Lock? What do people wear? What's the appropriate distance to stand when you want to be next for a machine but don't want to make the person using the machine feel rushed? Don't forget to wipe down the machine after you use it. You want to listen to music? Earbuds are fine. Singing out loud to the music isn't.

A Challenge to Think Differently

A new experience like the one mentioned above challenges us to think differently about how we provide support to someone. When we are faced with a new situation at work, we apply our current philosophy and way of thinking to the process. Yet more established routines we have with people were developed using older ways of thinking that may have been great in their time but are outdated now. We would encourage people to take the lead when signing up for their gym membership, yet

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we may still fall into old habits at the coffee shop when we order and pay for that same person's drink. At the gym we may encourage the person to spray and wipe down their own machines after they use them, yet we still clean off the table for the person at the coffee shop before we head back to the car.

New experiences are a great reminder of what our role is.

As direct support professionals, it's important to make sure that we are in this field and in our roles for the right reasons. It is important for us to recognize and remember that simple things we do every day have a significant impact on the type of culture we create and on the type of message we send. Whether we acknowledge it or not, these things also have a significant impact on the lives of people we support.

Some decisions we make, intentional or not, can create a culture of hierarchy and status.

Having certain washrooms designated as 'staff only' immediately establishes a sense of inequality in an organization. Having codes on certain doors and giving some people the codes and not others is another way. Staff bringing their own dishes or cutlery to work and making it clear through their words and actions that they won't use the same dishes and cutlery as everyone else doesn't help either.

Other actions can create a culture of respect and equality where the lines between staff and people supported are blurred.

Remember, just because people need support doesn't mean that there aren't many different ways to provide it.

If you are going to a restaurant with someone you support for the first time, take a few minutes to talk about it beforehand. How will you two handle the situation? Is the person able to read the menu and order on their own? Would they like you to review the online menu with them beforehand and choose what they would like to order? Will they want assistance to order the food? If so, how would they like you to do that? Taking a few moments to figure this out before you go in ensures that you both know what to expect, and it can make things much more natural when you're in the restaurant.

There are many things that we just do naturally. They are part of our job and we don't even question them. For example, if the person you are with at the restaurant needs help cutting their food, it would be perfectly natural for you to cut it. But what if there was another way? What other options would there be if the person needed support but didn't want to look like they needed support?

Why not ask the restaurant to pre-cut the food for the person? That way it happens in the kitchen and, when the meals come out, you can both pick up your forks and dig right in.

It's little things like these that make the difference between people living a service life and people living a more natural one.

Superficial Frank or Deep-Down Frank?

I think it's safe to say that we all know that person in our service who greets us every day with the same greeting of, "When are we going for coffee?"

And it's also pretty safe to say that we usually respond with a smile and a "Someday."

That person – let's call him Frank – is much more than that daily question. Yet it's easy to walk in every day, say 'hi' to Frank, answer his coffee question with a 'someday' answer and move on. Before you know it, it's ten years later, both you and Frank are a little older and a little greyer, and neither of you know any more about each other.

There's superficial Frank and then there's deep-down Frank. Which one you get to know is entirely up to you and the choices you make every day.

The answer isn't to take Frank for coffee every time he asks. It's that you should find a way to change the conversation.

Speaking of conversations, have you ever thought about how we really get to know people? I know many of my coworkers really well. I know about their kids, their favourite foods, how they drink their coffee, their Christmas traditions, and what will make them laugh when they are having a tough day. How did I learn these things? By being around them. By listening, observing, asking and remembering. It takes time and, as I learn new things, I am constantly adding new information to the database in my head.

Yet when we have a new person that we are supporting who we need to get to know, we are often pressed for time. We need to start providing support quickly so we learn as much as we can as fast as we can by asking them questions. What's important to you? What are your goals? What do you need help with? What are you good at? It's such an odd way to build a relationship when you think about it. I'd never do that with a colleague or a new person in my swim group. It's unnatural. Yet we do it with people we support all the time and expect that they will answer our questions simply because we ask them.

Getting to know a person should be a natural process not a scripted one. The pace in which that happens should be set by both parties, not just us in our rush to make sure we have ticked all the boxes.

It will take time to get to know Frank and work beyond the "When are we going for coffee?" question. Is it worth the effort?

Get back to your roots

I recently read a book written by the CEO of a large organization. In the book he explained that he felt the organization had lost its way. He wanted to bring the organization back to its roots and remind employees of the philosophy upon which they were originally founded. He began with the organization's mission statement. He fleshed out the different parts and then took pictures of things they do every day to reflect how they meet each part of the mission. He included quotes and stories from people who use their service to explain the value of the service and how it impacts them. When he was finished, he took all these photos, quotes and stories, and put them up around the walls of a room. He played inspiring music. Employees were invited

in and they walked around slowly looking at the photos, and reading the stories and the quotes. He had reminded them of their mission and how it affects the lives of people in ways they couldn't begin to imagine. He reminded them what they were really there to do and that, when they do it right, it really does make a difference.

As direct support professionals, our mission is to support people. It is not to protect them. It is not to think for them or make decisions for them. It is not to create an environment where the lines between employees and people supported are drawn, and where decisions are made to make our lives easier.

We should take the time on our own but also as organizations and as a sector to get back to our roots. To remind ourselves why we are here, and to remember how little it takes to impact someone's life, positively or negatively.

Why do I think this is a good idea? Or a bad idea?

When we hear a new idea, we often have an immediate response. Sometimes our response is: "That's a bad idea," and other times we think, "It's a good idea."

When someone suggests an idea you don't like, ask yourself why you don't like it. If you didn't like the earlier suggestion about asking a restaurant to pre-cut someone's food, ask yourself why. Is it because you don't want to inconvenience the restaurant? Is it because you don't want to make a fuss? Is it because it's just easier to cut it yourself? Or perhaps you feel that it is your responsibility and not the restaurant's. Own your reaction and then try to figure out what it would take for you to go from 'that's a bad idea' to 'that's a good idea.'

When your response to something is 'that's a good idea,' again, ask yourself why you feel that way. If you liked the idea of taking your organization's mission statement and really reflecting on what it means, ask yourself why? Do you like it because you think it would be a good exercise to do? Because you think your organization needs to remind itself what it's there for? Or perhaps because you'd like to learn more about how your organization really does impact others? Own your reaction and build on it so that you keep moving forward.

If you are in this field for the right reasons, the idea of moving forward, challenging ideas and trying new things should be exciting. The idea of doing the same routine with the same person over and over should set off alarm bells.

Don't take the easy way out

There used to be a running joke in our organization that we could tell what staff had been working the morning shift at the house by what the people living there looked like when they left the house. When one employee in particular worked the morning shift, all the men were clean shaven, in nice clothes. The ladies had their hair brushed and looked good. Other employees said that they encouraged the men to shave themselves, even if they didn't do a good job. They encouraged people to put on clean clothes and brush their hair but didn't force it. On those mornings, people left looking much more disheveled.

Many a discussion was had at the house. Some argued that having people go out poorly shaven with un-brushed hair made them stand out in a negative way. Others argued that people should be encouraged to do the best they can but that we can't make them do things they don't

want to do. Still others pointed out that perhaps it wasn't a question of not wanting to do it at all. Maybe the person doesn't see the importance of taking the time to look nice or perhaps they simply don't know how.

Which side of the argument resonates with you? And more importantly, why?

There's validity to both sides, and which side of the fence we sit on has a lot to do with our own experiences and our own personal priorities. But the fact that we knew who had worked the morning shift simply by observing what the people in the home looked like that morning is telling. It's a clear example that illustrates how the way we choose to do our jobs and the things we prioritize have a direct impact on the lives of the people we support, whether they know it or not.

What would you do?

Would you ensure that they were clean shaven and well dressed before they left the house every day even if it meant that you took a more active role in helping them get ready? Or would you encourage them to get themselves ready in the morning no matter what the end result might be?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. What is important is that we never stop thinking about and questioning how we do things. What we did yesterday may have been good enough yesterday, but that doesn't mean it is good enough tomorrow.

At the end of the day, it's not about us. It's about the people we support. How we choose to provide that support can make a world of difference.

About the authors:

Céline Parent

Céline works at Mainstream and wears many hats. She was wearing her Quality Improvement Coordinator hat when this article was written. "Your life begins at the end of your comfort zone" is a quote she takes very seriously and her work and personal life are a constant adventure as a result.

Tammy VanderWier

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." As Person-Centred Thinking Coordinator, Tammy challenges herself and everyone else at Mainstream to live and work by those words knowing the impact they can have on people's lives.

Elizabeth Wedderspoon

Elizabeth is a Resource Facilitator with Options Niagara and one of Mainstream's Person Centred Thinking Coordinators. The quote "It is a terrible thing to go through life thinking people are the sum total of what you see" really resonates with her.

Answers to FAQ's about the journal

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