

**Service, Support and Success:
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**Spinning Downwards: Looking Up
Stopping the Slide Toward Negativity in Human Services**

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For all the talk, within human service organizations, about positive approaches, working in human services can be a less than positive experience! Even in organizations that provide wonderful, thoughtful care, for people with intellectual disabilities, who ‘make home’ for those once shoved to the sidelines of society, who make ‘community’ possible – there can be a disturbing loss of morale and an upsurge of negative thinking. Organizations can become riddled with critical backbiting, character assassins and unhealthy political maneuvering. Many people who leave human services, do so saying, “I loved working with people with disabilities, I just couldn’t stand the atmosphere or the politics.” How can it be that we strive to be positive in one aspect of our job and end up being so negative in another? We need to reckon with the fact that negativity within an organization will eventually transform into negative experiences for people with disabilities. Can angry people ever provide gentle, respectful care?

Don’t you think it’s worth thinking about? I think that it’s time we began to look at how we care for ourselves and each other as staff as much as we care about those with disabilities that receive service. More than that, I think that the positive approach should be more than giving ‘reinforcers’ or ‘planned praise’, it should be about how we comport ourselves with each other and within our teams. It should be a ‘style’ of interaction that, with time, becomes habit. We believe, in the clinical team here at Vita, that creating a positive atmosphere for staff will create a positive atmosphere for people with disabilities. We believe that ‘happiness’ is the

antecedent to positive behaviour – for everyone! We, therefore, believe that you'll all need us less if we all value each other more.

So Why All This Negativity?

It's easy to say 'let's all just get along,' it's easy to suggest that everyone be more positive but it's really hard to do those things. Let me suggest a reason for all this negativity within human services:

Communication and contact happens, most often, in crisis.

Most of us communicate poorly when stressed.

That's it, simply stated. When supervisors meet with staff it tends to be around problems, when behavior therapists meet with teams it tends to be regarding situations of concern. Naturally, the discussions we have are about how we failed, what went wrong and what to do next time.

By necessity we have to debrief when problems happen. Noting that when a staff uses a particular tone of voice, or when staff make a particular kind of demand, or when staff – panicking – forget to follow a protocol, is part of what we need to do. But, while this is all supposed to be instructive it ends up seeming, to staff at least, like blame laying. Imagine how you'd feel if, after being struck by a person with a disability, you feel like you are told that it's your FAULT that it happened at all! Seldomly does anyone even state that, no matter the error that may have been made, you shouldn't have been hit at work. It seems, sometimes that staff are supposed to be concerned about everyone's feelings but their own. Staff don't recognize that while they feel their supervisor breathing down their neck, the supervisors feel management breathing down their neck, and the managers feel the government breathing down theirs! Everyone, in the human service food chain, feels very much like they are going to be gobbled up.

No one does these things on purpose, but we end up managing crises and, in all the tension and anxiety, become short tempered, impatient and, even, angry. Angry people make bad decisions and say mean things. The odd thing is that the source of this is caring, caring for the welfare of someone with a disability! If we didn't care about people, we wouldn't get angry and act like we don't care about people.

That's a sad state of affairs. And the structure is not going to change, we will always have to deal with 'issues' and 'concerns' and 'errors'. That won't change.

So, it's time to turn that around, a caring agency should be ... indeed ... a caring agency. While we can't change the need to deal with crisis, we can look at what we do all the rest of the time. What do we do when we aren't in crisis mode then? We believe that 'happiness' is the antecedent to positive behaviour ! WE believe that everyone can decide to be positive and change how their style of interactions. If we do this on a day to day basis maybe it will seep into how we interact in crisis. That is our hope. Here are a dozen tips for making that change happen:

- 1) Debrief Success: Why are we only interested in getting together to discuss problems? All we learn from that is that we make errors and that we need to fix up what we are doing. What about successes ... why did a certain approach work ... why did a transition go smoothly ... why did the team pull together exceptionally well in a particular circumstance? The answers to these questions will probably give you more workable ideas, more innovative strategies and more insight in how a team works well together than constantly focusing on failure. In my own department here at Vita, we've just gone through a time that should have been, by all predictions problematic and it wasn't. Why? What did we do right? That's the subject of our next meeting. I'm guessing that the tone of that meeting will end up being a bit celebratory, even while we are learning and analyzing and making plans for the future. It's valuable, it's instructive, it's just not often done.
- 2) Solution Orientation: You know when we as staff are sitting around talking to each other, we often vent, giving air to our concerns and frustration, and then we say 'If only they would it would be a lot better around here'. You know that when we are in meeting and talking about those very same concerns and frustrations we often don't offer our ideas and solutions. Everyone loses. The rule needs to be, venting is welcome – only if you either come with possible solutions or are OPEN to hearing and trying some new strategies. Developing a platform that allows for both venting and inventing – that's a strategy for success.

- 3) Put Praise on The Agenda: Have you seen the agenda for most of our meetings. Item one: Problem, Item two: Concern, Item Three: Follow up to previous issue, Item Four: Blame, Item Five: Guilt. Yeah, fun. I remember when going to a staff meeting would tie my guts up in a knot, I know a big knot, and I'd sit there terrified that the spotlight might swing my way. So, we are all supposed to understand a bit about human behaviour – so why don't we practice what we know? Put items on the agenda to acknowledge what's been achieved. Make sure that there is time, always time, for people to shine and to talk about something exciting that's happened. You know it's just as important that Miranda cooked her first meal all by herself as it is that Michael cut himself on a broken glass. Always end the meeting with something either fun – like a team building activity, or positive – like a success story.
- 4) Discuss 'Affirmation' Needs: My team knows something about me. So does my boss. I am a deeply insecure person and have a need for praise and affirmation. I need to be told, flat out, when I'm doing a good job. For years I went throughout my day feeling resentful and under-appreciated. For years I pretended to be immune to praise, or above the need for affirmation. For years I wanted what I didn't get and pretended that I didn't want what I really wanted. I studied psychology for a reason! Now, I tell people what I need. And, surprisingly, people are generous in responding. For me, I assume people want acknowledgement and therefore I just give it. I also ask people who work with me and around me how they feel about getting praise. I don't ask flat out. 'Do you need praise?' seems like a silly and somewhat intrusive question. I just bring up the subject and listen to what people say. I've yet to find someone who says that they don't like acknowledgement, what I do find is people who say, 'I like acknowledgement but not face to face, I get embarrassed, I like it in an email or a note' or 'I like it when the Executive Director hears about my work' or any of a thousand different ways that they prefer to be noted and acknowledged. So talk about it. Be open about what you want, you may end up getting it.

- 5) Share Success: Every year, when the annual report is done, agencies look at all the accomplishments achieved and the goals met. Lovely. But often those people who contributed to those accomplishments and who actually worked on those goals have no idea about the way their work fit into an organizations success. At Vita our Executive Director has started writing a monthly update to all staff, telling them of what's happening, sharing successes and establishing goals. This is simply a personal note that lets everyone know what everybody should know. Allowing people to feel part of what they are actually part of simply makes sense. Being informed means feeling included. Sometimes the math is just that simple.
- 6) Keep Praise Positive: we can be so uncomfortable with praise that we end up giving 'backhanded compliments' and offending rather than praising. 'That's great, you're not late for a change,' isn't praise, it's veiled criticism. 'You know that's not a half bad job,' isn't praise, it's demeaning. Praise should be a reason to mention the success, nothing else. I recently had someone say, 'You know, normally, I can't relate to what you write, I think it's mostly just silly, but this time I kinda liked it.' They went away feeling like they'd been Ms Polly Positive, I went away wishing we'd never had the conversation. If it's good, it's good, you don't need to qualify it down.
- 7) Avoid insincere flattery: One agency I worked with, years and years ago, decided to go all positive. We were encouraged to praise everyone about everything. It was a bit overboard. We all were so desperate to win the bosses approval – a gold star from the boss is still powerful – that we ended up confusing flattery with praise and nothing grates more than insincere, untrue, praise. It feels manipulative and false, probably because it is. So make sure that you are praising or positively noticing something real, some actual achievement.
- 8) Let it Flow: Often staff are concerned or annoyed when they don't get enough praise and recognition from their supervisors. Interestingly, they often don't think that maybe their supervisor could use a kind word of acknowledgement too! If praise is going to flow and work properly within an organization it has to be about 'performance' and about 'attitude' not

about ‘position’. Everyone needs to be told they are doing a good job, those who supervise and those who are supervised.

- 9) Praise Yourself: A study a long time ago noted that people’s internal language, to themselves about themselves, tended to be really, really negative. In fact, eighty percent of the time that we had internal dialogue about ourselves, it was critical, negative and really quite nasty. Oddly, if we were hired to be care providers for ourselves, we’d be fired for verbal abuse! So begin the practice praise within. Begin to notice something you do well and don’t wait for acknowledgement from another – give it to yourself. Learn to see the good in you and you’ll find it easier to see the good in others.
- 10) Become Intentionally Positive: Let’s face it, we live in a society that thrives on negativity. I’ve never been pulled over by a police officer and congratulated for driving well. No one has ever turned to me on an elevator and said, ‘Good Hygiene!’ Face it we go to parties to gossip about people afterwards. It’s easy to be negative and we get lots of attention for it. So, to be positive, at least at first, there has to be an intentionality about it. For individuals and for teams. I think agencies should challenge their teams to try, really hard, to be intentionally positive for a whole month. To really work at it, to pay attention to positive happenings and comment on it. To tell positive stories of people we support and the people who support the people we support. Be. Intentionally. Positive. After a month, I’ll bet people are willing to keep it up, keep it going.
- 11) Avoid habits: Being positive needs to be a habit – but the expression of positivity should be wildly creative. Praise is nice, so is a note, so is an email, so is buying someone a coffee, or making time to have lunch together. Little things that show each other that you value the working relationship you have. It’s nice that it isn’t always about ‘performance’ sometimes it’s just because we are ‘in this together.’ By keeping it always fresh, it maintains a sense of excitement and reality.
- 12) Just do it. It’s really that simple.

How To Use This Information:

Well, there's a couple of things you can do. The first one, you've done. You read it. Maybe now you should look over the list and see the ones that really strike you personally. Note how you may be able to change, or how you may be able to affect change. Then, try it out. Be a model for others. The other way this can be used, is to make this brief article the subject of an upcoming staff meeting. Talk about it. Talk about the kind of team you want to be and the kind of relationships you all want to have. Even in teams where there is now a negative history, look at changing history – it's been done before. Challenge each other to start noticing, emphasizing and commenting on positive performance, kindness in action, and thoughtfulness. People want to be noticed by their supervisor, but they also value the good will and good opinion of peers. Avoid the temptation to think it's hopeless. It's not. Really. It's not.

Remember as a team, that when one member shines, you all shine. Supporting each other's strengths increases the odds that you all win, you all benefit and more than that people with disabilities will get the best of all of you. They say that there is no 'I' in TEAM. To us TEAM stands for 'To Each A Moment' ... so give each person their moment to shine.

So there you have it. A few ideas for how to stop the slide into negativity. I think it's time that we pledge ourselves to be as positive with each other as we want to be with those we serve. It's time that we recognized that we all, by the virtue of our work, our commitment and our passion do something amazing every day. We make community for people with disabilities – so maybe we need to make community for ourselves as well.