

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Workforce Transformation:
From Caregivers to Direct Support Professionals



By: Perry Samowitz, New York State Region 3 Leader of the Centers for Workforce Transformation

The most important staff in any organization are those who work directly with the individuals with developmental disabilities. They have the greatest impact on the individuals and deserve much recognition and gratitude for all of their hard work. Most of the direct staff want the best for the people they support and try to do an excellent job. Yet the message they often receive from many agencies and the government is that they are direct care workers or caregivers. In New York State, there is a new initiative to transform the workforce from being caregivers to being a direct support professional.

A direct support professional empowers individuals to:

1. *Live a life that is valued by the person as defined by their personal outcome measures and not the personal values of the staff,*
2. *Have more opportunities for desired community involvement,*
3. *Think and problem solve, helping the person to figure out what he/she wants to do,*
4. *Learn new skills that increase independence and decrease dependency on staff, and*
5. *Have increased self-esteem through positive interactions focusing on abilities and not disabilities.*

*Before we examine each of these components of being a direct support professional, let's first look at this example. **How would a caregiver assist a person who is going shopping?** The caregiver would prepare the shopping list, hold it in his/her hand and walk ahead of the person in the supermarket. The person being supported might be holding the basket trailing behind. The caregiver will go to the aisles and collect all the items, dropping them into the basket as he/she goes along. The individual did get to go into the community, but did he/she truly participate? Not really. The task of shopping got done, but not in a way that best supports the person.*

How would a direct support professional do this task? **First, he/she would realize that it is not just important to complete a task but, more importantly, understand that how you complete a task makes all the difference.** If you take this example and utilize the 5 components, the following would occur:

1. *Live a life that is valued by the person...* – The support professional would discuss with the individual what that person wants to eat while perhaps supporting healthy eating habits. Together, they may have made a menu for the week.
2. *Have more opportunities for desired community involvement* – The direct support professional might have gone with the individual to various food stores in the community and explored various food options.
3. Think and problem solve... – **The direct support professional would ask rather than tell the individual what is needed to be done before going to the store.** A food list should be created in a way that the individual can utilize in the store. Perhaps there would be a need to have a picture list to enhance communication and understanding. When in the store, the direct support professional could ask the person to try to find the items. If the individual is having difficulty, the direct support professional could say, “Who could you ask for help to locate the aisle of the item?”
4. *Learn new skills that increase independence...* – Many of the people we support will not become totally independent. Rather, they will still need to have staff supporting them. **The role of the direct support professional is to at least decrease the individual’s dependence on the staff. A key question to ask yourself is, “What part of the task am I doing and could I have the individual learn that part?”** In this example, instead of the staff person asking a worker in the store in what aisle an item can be found, the person being supported could learn to ask. If the person cannot speak, he/she could learn to hold up the picture shopping list and point to the desired item.
5. *Have increased self-esteem...* – *When actually at the aisle, focus on the individual’s abilities. Ask yourself, “What is the least amount of support the person needs to find the item?” When the person locates the item, ask him/her to self-evaluate by comparing the item to the picture or words on the shopping list. **A true support professional understands that part of learning is having individuals check their own work rather than us doing it for them.** Usually when the person finds what he/she is looking for, a big smile crosses his/her face. That is a smile of increased self-esteem.*

Let me give you another example of being a direct support professional for a person who requires more supports. A few years ago, I observed a group of people with developmental disabilities tending to a garden. What I immediately noticed was that the individuals who required less support were busy watering the garden while others who required more support were sitting doing nothing. I particularly noticed a woman who was in a wheelchair sitting up on a hill not participating in the

gardening. I asked the staff to bring her near the hose. The woman had severe cerebral palsy. I told the staff to turn off the hose and hand it to me. I gently placed the hose into her hand and tightened her fingers around it. I tried not to do hand over hand but rather, gently placed one of my hands under her hand that was holding the hose while placing my other hand gently by her elbow. I then asked the others to turn on the hose while gently guiding her elbow toward the plants. She maintained her grip and began to water. At that point a big smile flashed across her face. Her increased self-esteem was evident to all. She was seen as a person with abilities who could gradually be less dependent on staff.

Obviously, each person you support has different capabilities and the amount of support needed will vary.

Here is a challenge. Select one individual that you support. Think of any task that you might do together. Ask yourself, “What part of the task am I doing that the person could possibly learn to do for him/herself?” Then try to change the way you are supporting the person. The outcome of being a direct support professional rather than a caregiver is that the individual will be better able to think and problem solve, will constantly be learning new skills and, most importantly, have increased self-esteem.

About the Author:

Perry has an M.A. in Rehabilitative Counseling from the University of South Florida. He is currently the Region 3 Leader for the OPWDD Centers on Workforce Transformation. He has been in the field for almost 40 years. Perry started as a residential supervisor for YAI in New York and, subsequently, for over 3 decades, was the YAI Director of Education and Training. Perry was responsible for training over 5,000 staff, including direct support professionals and managers. He has created over 50 training videos in the field for both staff and for people with developmental disabilities. The training videos include:

- How to Enhance the Ability of People with ID/DD to Think and Problem Solve
- How to Teach People with Profound ID/DD
- 9 videos for people with ID/DD on Relationships and Sexuality
- How to Work with Adults on the Autism Spectrum
- How DSP’s can empower individuals with ID/DD by “Listening, Supporting and Empowering”

Perry is one of the co-authors of the New York State’s Direct Support Professional Core Competencies Curriculum as well as the PROMOTE curriculum.

Perry has lectured and trained in over 20 states as well as in Canada, Iceland, Finland, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. His expertise is in preparing staff to work with various populations of people with developmental disabilities.

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