



Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Someone is No One. Someday is Never

By: Crystal Lynn

A person receiving services (the term 'member' will be used hereafter) approaches a staff supporting him in his home and says, "I want to go to the movies." Staff looks up from a pile of paperwork and responds, "Yeah, that sounds nice. Someone can take you soon."

While driving down the highway, a member sees a sign for Great Wolf Lodge and, with excitement, points it out to the staff saying, "I would love to go there!" The staff smiles and says, "Sure, we can do that someday."

These are common dialogues between members and staff. On the surface it seems harmless, but it can actually be quite damaging. In the field of service provision to people with disabilities, we've talked about the importance of supporting individuals to make choices. We've talked about the hazards of saying 'no.' What we need to talk about now is the tendency to – and the danger of – non-committal responses.

What Is Being Said and What Is Being Heard

What are staff saying in situations like those above? There are many possibilities: I don't have the authority to make that happen. I don't have the ability to approve programming funds. I'm not working that day and don't want to upset the other staff. I don't know what the schedule is for the weekend.

The 'Yeah, sure, someone will do that, one day' response lets us off the hook. We avoid making promises we don't know that we can keep. We avoid potentially frustrating the staff working that shift. All the while, we also avoid actually saying what we've been told not to say: – 'no.' It's the response that allows us to maintain our authority as staff, ensuring that the member never finds out that we don't actually know what to do.

What the member is hearing: Someone is no one. Someday is never. They know they have been dismissed. They know that the chances that their request will be forgotten are high.



Hands

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The 'Non-Commitment' Comment

This form of non-commitment stemming from staff's uncertainty can result in what are commonly referred to as 'behavioural issues.'

The member begins to 'perseverate.' They ask repeatedly about the movie, and begin questioning staff. They begin engaging in 'verbally aggressive behaviour.' They display signs of high anxiety and frustration. It may lead to withdrawal and depression.

Let's put this into a different perspective. What if you walked into Walmart, approached a staff and said, "I am looking for the movie *Real Genius*." A fair enough request, but the response you receive is, "Yeah, someone can help you with that," and the staff returns to organizing the shelves.

The staff wasn't rude, they didn't say 'no,' but are you satisfied? How do you feel? Dismissed? Frustrated? Angry? Sad?

How do you respond? Do you repeat your request? Do you raise your voice to demonstrate your frustration? Do you seek out another staff, or perhaps the manager, to complain? Are you likely to ask that staff for help again? Unlikely.

And What About Dreams?

If the member's relatively easy to accomplish goals are dismissed, the chances that they will trust someone with the goals that actually matter to them are small.

When we share our dreams, we become vulnerable.

A life where you are afraid to dream, because you are afraid that they will simply be dismissed into the vagueness of 'someday, someone,' becomes a life void of goals and is catastrophic beyond words.

The goal here isn't to make us all feel like failures as staff. It is an attempt to illustrate that the responses we receive from members stem from normal and valid emotions, emotions that you or I would have in a similar situation. It is an attempt to inspire you to take the steps that can create meaningful change.

Under Pressure to have the Answers

As staff, we often feel pressure to have all the answers. But we don't. It's actually impossible for anyone to have all the answers. When we are 'put on the spot,' and we don't have the answer, that pressure kicks in and we 'redirect' away from uncomfortable conversations, or give a non-committal response. When did dreaming about goals become a problem we need to redirect?

Redirection was intended to assist a person to de-escalate. To temporarily change the focus from something distressing so emotions can return to a manageable state so that problem solving can be facilitated. Redirection is no longer being used as a de-escalation strategy, but to shut down communication that is too difficult or uncomfortable for staff.

I am not suggesting that we need to become perfectionists or that we need to ensure that we are omnipotent. Rather, let's use these situations when we don't know the answer as teachable moments. Demonstrate that real people don't have the answers all the time, and that it's okay. When we try to be perfect, we are not only setting unrealistic goals for ourselves, but we are modeling an unrealistic expectation for the members. They will never be equal with staff; they will always be beneath staff, if we continue to present ourselves as infallible.

Taking Responsibility

Take responsibility for your messages.

Be real.

Be human.

Be fallible.

When you are asked a question and you don't have the answer. Admit that you don't know the answer. Be real, be human, be fallible. Part of being human is continuously learning, continuously growing. Being a good staff doesn't mean you have all the answers. Being a good staff means you have the skills to find the answers, and that you then teach those skills to others.

Use the opportunity to model and practice problem-solving skills.

Problem Solving: Step by Step

So how do you problem solve? Well, timing is important. Problem solving takes time. Learning and practicing a skill takes time. Make the time. Set a time to sit down and work through a plan.

First, make sure you and the member are on the same page about what the problem actually is. You want to go to the movies and you need help making that happen? To ensure you are on the same page, you need to put aside the obstacles that come to your mind for a minute and listen. What movie? When? With whom? Engage in conversation. Nurture the dream, encourage the dream to grow. Avoid falling into the trap of focusing on your problem, and stay focused on what the member is saying.

Next, help the member identify the ways they can achieve their goal by asking questions. Be honest about the steps that are required. Be sure, however, that you are not voicing them as reasons the goal can't happen, but as steps that need to be implemented. Ideally, the majority of the ideas need to come from the member. It is incredibly empowering when they know that the solution came from them.

Third, help the member think of ways to complete the steps. Engage them in their own programming; ask questions, even if you do have the answers. Teach independent skills. Teaching a new skill is harder and more time consuming than simply doing it yourself, and time is limited. Remember the long-term value of the skill. You must use some self-restraint and resist providing the answers.

What We Own, What We Don't

This is harder than it sounds. We must continuously remind ourselves that this is the member's problem, not ours. We don't own it. A solution that we think is best may not be what is best for the member. Only the person with the problem can decide on the best solution. Personal values, beliefs and most importantly feelings need to be taken into account, and no one knows those better than the one to whom they belong.

By owning their problem, by taking responsibility for their problem, we are hindering their independence. After all, what does it mean to be independent? Being independent means finding your own solutions, making mistakes and learning from them. Some of the best lessons we learn in life are the ones we learned the hard way. The ones we learned by experiencing the natural consequences for ourselves, not through the advice of others. To be clear, the suggestion is not that we should allow members to implement strategies that have potentially dangerous consequences. But there is tremendous value in being given the dignity to make errors.

Maybe you think that the haircut a member wants won't look good. Maybe you even know that it won't look good. Shouldn't they be allowed the opportunity to try and find out for themselves?

Finally, put it all together in a clear and manageable action plan. Remember to be respectful when you do. Don't assume that the member knows how to reach their end goal, but don't assume they don't either. Again, ask questions. "So, you said you need money to go to the movie. How much do you need?" (Perhaps they need help to find out the price of a ticket) "How will you get the money?" (Perhaps they need to plan a trip to the bank)

When the member is first learning the steps to problem solving, the process will take practice. Luckily there are many opportunities to practice. So, practice often. Start with small problems and gradually apply the steps to larger and more challenging ones.

This process may be hard for the member, especially if they are used to staff solving their problems for them. Give them feedback on their progress. Attend to their efforts and point out their successes.

Write It Down

And, as with all things, we need to document it. Document the action plan so that other staff can continue to support the plan after your shift is over. Far too often there have been extremely negative results from not documenting the action plan. Perhaps the next staff comes in and the member says, "Guess what? I am going to see a movie this Friday." If the staff on the receiving end of that statement has no information, they may tell the member that there is no such plan and the resulting confusion can quickly lead to frustration and escalation.

If you are the staff receiving such a message, it is important not to assume that the member is lying or attempting to manipulate you. Ask questions, gather information, talk to other staff, and seek clarification. Consider all possibilities.

In The End

By taking responsibility for our messages, by being real, by being human, by being fallible and teaching problem-solving skills, the member obtains the dignity to own their own lives.

About the Author:

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