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— TRAINING —



Leadership, Regardless of Title In the Disability Field

by Julienne Verhagen

Enough with all the conceptual, theoretical guff about “Leadership” in the workplace. It’s time for the practical!

3 Ways To Be A Leader In Your Workplace, Regardless Of Your Title:

1. Be friendly – Get to know your people (staff, clients, families)
 2. Be generous – with your attention on others.
 3. Be brave – and inspire others to be brave.
1. Be friendly and get to know your team. It makes sense that the one thing top performing teams seem to have in common is a sense of psychological safety. They know each other and can occasionally be vulnerable with each other. That’s how they then know that they’ll be supported if they make a mistake, can count on each other in hard times, and they see each other as 3 dimensional human beings. To create this someone needs to start by getting to know each other, then, at appropriate times, sharing some personal anecdotes or some vulnerabilities. Let people get to know you. Then they will share with you, and before you know it there’s a big pile of gratitude among you, more compassion, more willingness to help out and less quick to compete, put down ideas or ignore signs of needing support.
 2. Be generous, with your attention out to others. You don’t have to be the teacher (or the “teacher’s pet”) to give out ticks. Acknowledging the work done by others and encouraging self-regulated team spirit is a huge boost to any workplace. Everybody has some goal that they’re working towards at work, even if it’s just to get through the shift! I love post-it notes myself – I get all different colours and shapes – and I leave 1 or 2 of them around each day – “Thanks to whoever cleaned this up for me” or “Brilliant job whoever made this cupboard so neat”, or “Thanks to Jenny for playing this game with client A”. Or a note in Jim’s pigeon hole to say I was sorry for his loss, and hope he feels better soon. Not only does it help the team feel appreciated but I find it helps me stay in an attitude of gratitude. In essence it feels nice to be nice!

So, whenever you can give a compliment, help out, acknowledge or promote a colleague with a task, a goal, an idea or something that’s important to them – you are giving them a win. It also helps to build those relationships

3. Be brave and inspirational. A vision – a common goal – is what unites all teams. This is obvious in the medical profession and armed forces where they can easily find themselves in a life and death situation. We don’t tend to see as much “office politics” or “personality conflicts” here. Why, because it would seem ridiculously petty in the face of such urgent and important goals – such as to keep someone alive.



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When you're working in a multi-functional team you can create a sense of purpose with fun, serious, direct or indirectly relating goals – and by putting deadlines on them – this can create a sense of pace, unitedness and urgency. Pick a cause, an event or an occasion and let's get involved!

Then there are the specific, improvement goals to promote. I recommend you write a list (either on your own or with some colleagues) of all the little things that you feel you could do differently with your person with disability. Do you make the effort to get them to answer their own front door? Are they actively involved with making dinner at night? Does everyone in the group home or family sit down to eat dinner together each night? Is there a birthday coming up soon that you could organise a surprise party for them?

Have a movie night at home – with popcorn and PJ's or themed food for the movie that you're watching. It would cost very little, be huge fun, and can make a regular Friday night a whole heap of fun.

And there's no reason why you can't bring academic or learning aspects to your client activities. Could you up the communication and knowledge of the group – and introduce games such as Trivial Pursuit, bingo, scrabble and or even good old Ker-plunk? All great games to stimulate the mind. Plant some herbs/flowers in pots as an activity, and water them each day with plans for what you'll do with the veggies/herbs/ flowers once they're grown.

Do you take one or two people off to do the shopping each week, using the opportunity for socialisation, life skills, handling money, increased exercise, increased choice and increased interactive involvement in their own lives – or do you just order everything online and get Coles or Woolies to deliver? Ordering online is certainly less hassle – and home delivery is great, but it wastes such wonderful opportunities to have one-on-one times, “normal” shopping experiences and outings. If you took your clients to do grocery shopping once a month it would be such a great thing.

So, do a brainstorm of all the things you would like to do to improve the standard of what you do with your clients. Make a list of all the good ones, and then choose one or two to start with – preferably ones that will have the biggest impact – and get alignment that everyone will work towards doing this over the next, 2- 4 weeks. Do you really need major top brass approval to do any of these small things? Probably not. (What's that saying? It's better to ask for forgiveness than wait for permission!)

So, as I teach in our **Impressive Leadership Program**, one of the most fundamental criteria for success in the 21st Century workplace is Leadership Regardless of Title. (It's your job to advocate for those in your care.)

You see – as disability support workers it's your job to advocate for those in your care. It doesn't matter whether you're a casual worker, full time care-giver, a once-off volunteer, or lifetime family member. You do need to use wisdom, of course. When is the right time to speak up? Which battles do I choose to fight, and how far do I take this? My only advice here – as I grapple with this one myself – is that as long as you have a guardian heart – to speak for them (not yourself) then come hell or high water (and you have to be prepared that both might come at you at full force) you have to be prepared to stand strong and face it.

Late last year a disturbing story hit the nightly news of a disabled man living in a group home who was sent to hospital, and “died” in the presence of physicians 3 times before eventually recovering from his condition. He had become so seriously ill from being on a huge drug cocktail. A concoction so toxic that his body had no hope of processing it and releasing the pollutants from his body, resulting in his gallbladder turning fully gangrenous.

In the situation reported, the amount of contra-indicated and high dose medications given for months on end to this man were so dangerous to his physical health, and no doubt totally debilitating to his mental faculties, that he became deathly ill. Even if each drug was legitimately prescribed and administered, as claimed by the provider - where was the observance of this man's health by those paid to look after him?

Where was the leadership to ask, every time the drugs were being given: does this seem right? Every time this man was incoherent or in pain – where was the support worker informing the manager or his parents that something wasn't right? Or getting a doctor or locum to check him out? There are many disturbing aspects to this story, raising many unanswered questions, but every single disability support worker in that man's group home, in my opinion, neglected to show any leadership or advocate for their client.

You see your gut feeling, your intuition, your knowingness is very powerful and usually spot on. These are when you need to act – and take a stand. You all have opportunities to have an impact on a person's life – to make a difference, and to create great connections – just by being you, really listening to them, and taking action! This is leadership.

Here's a basic list of some of the commonly regarded essentials to leading a team:

1. Model the way! Don't like gossip amongst your team, then don't gossip about the team! Want them to prioritise their tasks, then you get all your work done on time. Want them to get stuck in and help with any job that needs doing, then you demonstrate that you're doing the same.
2. A vision for the organisation, and your specific team
3. Clear, real and honoured core values for everyone to embody
4. Being on the front foot with updates, maintenance and preparing for major changes
5. Clear and transparent communication that's optimistic in nature and is backed up with action that reassures staff that you have their back.
6. A healthy variety and consistency or reward and recognition for deserving staff

Did you know that every commercial airline pilot signs responsibility – with a pen and paper – for the plane and all souls on board before every single flight they make? If you lead a team, I really want you to think about this. If you had to sign on the dotted line – every day – for the physical, mental and emotional safety of every member of staff and every client under your care – would you feel confident that your record would be unblemished?

You see, it's all about encouraging and inspiring others to do their very best – and especially in our caring, teaching, helping, professions, the flow on effect of that isn't just to sell more product, or make more money. It's to significantly improve a person's life – to help them achieve their full potential – and we have no idea what that potential really is – until we try.

We do not inspire others by showing them how amazing we are. By being big and loud. Sometime this is what's required, but it's not the end goal. We inspire people by showing them how amazing they are.

And we not only have to drink this concept in and absorb this ourselves, but we then have to let our staff and supporters drink this in so that they can in turn direct it on to their clients.

Our collective people who need us, whether they just need a helping hand, need disability support, aged care needs, dementia support, refugee help, homeless dignity, understanding for those going through anxiety and depression, grief – or kids navigating their parent's divorce, new single parents work out their new existence or teenagers just trying to grow up. Regardless of who we're spending time with – it's often the little things that make a big difference. Quietly, gently – listening to people's wishes, giving them space to just be – without needing to explain or fake smile or 'man up'. This is where you can be a leader.

This all starts with the fact that we can't inspire them unless we know them, who they are and how they work. You don't have to be the manager to get to know your colleagues, and inspire them with how awesome they are, and how they could totally get on board with your idea to help someone else (or improve systems or routines) to improve the lives of the clients you work for. It takes leadership.

As a disability support worker or official carer of another person, it's actually your job to do this, and it strikes me as an interesting twist of fate that – I guess due to family commitment – it's often those who don't get paid that are the fiercest advocate and proponents of this. But it's time for those who are paid to step up and take on this aspect of the work as well.

For all those whose workplace that they lead is their home; i.e.: every mum or dad - your staff being your partner and/or other kids – as well as the disability support worker's that support your person with disability – your office is the study and the board-room the dining room table – it really isn't that much different.

**“...Treat employees like they make a difference,
and they will...”**

Jim Goodnight: American billionaire and long-standing CEO of SAS – a
statistical analysis institute



LEAD BY
EXAMPLE

6 Tips to keep your family operational for the long haul.

1. **Create and hold everyone** to your core values as a family. These can be a guiding force when all else seems out of control.
2. Find, train and hold on to the best support workers – to increase stability, privacy, and quality for everyone in the family
3. Feel confident – having goals that you're working towards provides assuredness, momentum and that bit of extra energy when you need it the most.
4. Share the load. You are a parent, not a slave. Delegate tasks, teaching responsibility and leadership while also giving yourself some work-life balance
5. Essential respite – Everyone needs a break at some point! You need it, they need it – and it can be a really positive experience for everyone. There are options out there!
6. Balanced time with all the family – nip issues in the bud, reconnect with your kids, and enjoy your relationships with each individual in your family circle

To summarise – when managing others – in the workplace or home – it's really about prioritising the time to spend mentoring, nurturing and ensuring quality control with your team. You can be a leader no matter what your title or amount of experience is.

Every person has the opportunity to lead with their client – by helping them to take the lead. That's the real nature of a leader – helping others shine.

So remember, be friendly - be generous - be brave. There are times when your thoughtfulness, and your small kindnesses, can literally change a person's life.

Make each opportunity count!

If you'd like to know more about the **Interactive Care** certification course you can download our flyer or **contact us** for more information.

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