

The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

Leadership: Boats in the Harbour

By: Dave Hingsburger

Leadership is an interesting thing. Many people see leadership as being at the front, waving a sword or behind, cracking a whip, when in fact, it's nothing like that at all. 'Leadership' is just one boat in the harbor; parked on one side is 'relationship,' and on the other side is 'partnership.' Along the dock, you will also find 'workmanship' and 'citizenship.' In this issue, we will look at ways to improve your chance to grow, develop and stand out.

But first, it's important that you look at your desire for leadership or career advancement. There are natural incentives to move up in any career: more money and more responsibility being chief amongst them. If, in any way, your desire for advancement is a quest for power – over people or other resources – you are doomed from the get-go. Leadership is more about creating environments for others to succeed, and not fearing that success, than it is about advancing you, while stifling others.

That said, let's take a look at ways to stand out, to demonstrate elegance in leadership:

1) Show Up

Yep, first and foremost, when you get to work, show up. There is a difference between being at work and showing up for work. Look at this quote:

*If they praise you, show up and do the work.
If they criticize you, show up and do the work.
If no one even notices you, just show up and do the work.
Just keep showing up, doing the work, and leading the way.
- Jon Gordon*

So just what is 'showing up for work?' Simply put, it's arriving alive. Our work is so important to the people to whom we provide service; they deserve our time and our attention. They don't deserve it because they have a disability – "poor dears" – and they await your kindness. They deserve it because they are your employers, and you've sold your time, and your attention, and your support. But, here's the thing, you need to be able to see the importance of your job, and you need to just do your job.

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Leaders take control of their environment by taking control of their actions. They lead through example and through diligence to the task. This can be so hard to do with all of the distractions that come our way. People say, “Leave your home life at home,” or “Leave your work life at work,” and we all know that this isn’t possible. If you are at work when your child is sick, it’s impossible not to worry. My Grandmother used to say, “There are two ways to worry, you can sit and stew, or you can get up and make stew.” When I was a kid, I had no idea what she was talking about.

I do now.

By bringing your focus to your work, time passes more quickly and more productively, and while you can’t control what’s going on at home, you can control what you choose to do in response to it.

But that’s not the real issue is it? The real distraction is technology which connects us to those somewhere else, and disconnects us from those we are with. I’m not a technology basher; I think it has enhanced the lives of many people with disabilities like myself, but I also think that everything has a place.

And that place isn’t work.

Understand that your workplace is an unusual one; you are there to assist, in the midst of someone’s life, with their wants and needs, with their goals and aspirations, with their desire for dignity and respect. That’s a big deal. It also makes the person with a disability, and I can speak from personal experience here, really vulnerable to you, to how you do your job, to how you approach your role.

Being on the phone and telling someone to, “shush” while you finish a text is a way of diminishing the personhood of someone who lives struggling for equality.

Being on the phone watching a video, and telling someone to, “JUST WAIT, OK” is a way of lessening a person’s sense of self-worth, “I am not worthy of attention.”

Being on the phone checking ‘likes’ on Facebook, and telling someone that you are, “Too busy right now” is an abuse of your power, a theft from your employer and, worst of all, a psychological slap-down of the person you say you serve.

You may have, right now, dismissed what I’ve written as exaggerations. They are not. Your job is to support, your time is paid for, you need to “show up and do the work.”

Leadership means taking your present responsibilities seriously as an indicator that you will take future responsibilities and challenges seriously. Leadership doesn’t mean criticizing others for what they do but demonstrating your character, and your commitment, and your compassion through what you do.

Leadership sets an example.

Leadership maintains a standard.

Leadership means showing up.

2) Making Toast

A friend of mine had a problem. He was so afraid of public speaking that, for him, public speaking included speaking up at team meetings, or at meetings where his voice was wanted and needed. This fear hampered him because his silence was taken as disinterest and lack of motivation, and unwillingness to get involved. None of those things were true. Worse, sometimes, in order to give himself motivation to speak up, he had to make himself angry first. He had to get ready to speak by working himself into a temper. Then when he spoke, it came out angry and resentful. If people listened to his words, they were reasonable, but if they listened to his tone, he was unreasonable. The only reason he didn't lose his jobs was because, one-on-one with other staff and with the people he supported, he was charming and witty and funny. More, he was incredibly attentive to his work and his responsibilities. He told me that he always felt honoured by the work he felt called to do.

The solution? For him it was to join with others who had trouble with public speaking, and again, his goal was not to become a presenter in front of a crowd, but a presenter of information and ideas at a meeting. He joined Toastmasters and confronted his fear head on. He laughingly referred to this as "Making Toast." Within a year, he was promoted to supervisor and within five, he became a manager. No, he has never done a public presentation in the way we think about when we say public speaking – not his goal – but he knows how to speak up at a meeting, he knows how to organize his thoughts, he knows the tone he needs to use.

While it is true that one can be a leader by setting an example, voice really matters too. Being able to speak up in a calm and rational tone is vital. My friend is not alone in using the equation 'anger = motivation.' Many people are.

Speak when you are angry – and you will make the best speech you'll ever regret.
- Laurence J. Peters

There are many strategies to deal with this fear of speaking at meetings. Foremost is the belief that your voice doesn't matter.

No one listens to direct support professionals anyway.

No one cares what I have to say.

They will do what they want anyway.

I don't have the expertise to give an opinion.

I could get in trouble for what I say.

Some of these may be true from time to time but, in most cases, it's a way to cover up your own fear, hiding it from yourself.

But here's the thing, you have lots of expertise in supporting an individual because you work so closely with them. You bring a lot of experience to the table. Your voice can stop others from making serious mistakes in service to a person with a disability. What you know is invaluable; you may have to push to be heard, but it's invaluable. Taking the time to learn how and when to speak up in meetings will be a skill that will serve you and the people you support well. It will demonstrate your caring, your observational skills and your organizational skills. And, of course, it will make it clear to everyone that you've shown up prepared and ready to participate.

Notice that these are all skills.

Skills need to be learned.

If you don't want to take time to make toast and join a group, practice in your everyday life by speaking up when people ask you what movie you want to go to see, or where you want to go for dinner. Organize an event and be present and participate. Speaking in a group is speaking in a group, it's that simple. Practice the skill with support or do it in a self-directed way. Just get started.

3) **Get Involved**

One of the surest ways of developing in your career and preparing for career advancement is to volunteer to participate in committees or activities in your organization. Now be careful here. You don't want to volunteer for everything; you want to volunteer strategically. Know what you are good at; separate from what you wish you were good at. You want to volunteer at things that you know you have interest in and skills. Volunteering for something outside your skillset can set you up for failure. No one wants that.

If something interests you, but you don't presently have the skills, be transparent, "I'd really like to learn about that but don't know a lot right now. Is there room for someone who's willing to work hard and to learn at the same time?" Now, you are good to go. You've been honest, you've been accepted, now 'show up.' Do what you said you were going to do, be prepared for the meetings, read the background material if it's been provided. Ask the chair of the group if there is anywhere they'd recommend you get more information because you are there to both help and to learn. This is one of the best ways to indicate to your supervisor and your team that you have come to work, and you've shown up.

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.
- Aristotle

Volunteering to work on committees and to participate in the life of an organization is looked on favourably when someone is reviewing a resume. So, write it down! Put it on your resume as soon as you start participating. Updating your resume as you go along will serve you well, particularly as memory doesn't always serve us well.

4) Politics

With every work environment in the world comes office or team politics. Sometimes, it feels like we are all working in one big dysfunctional family! Doesn't it feel, sometimes at work, that you are in an un-filmed reality show? The bedrocks of office policy are gossip and jealousy. These two things can destroy teams and, as a result, end up disrupting or decreasing the quality of support to the people we serve. When a team is focused in on itself, and not out on the work you are doing, NO ONE is showing up. And that's simply dangerous.

“Be less curious about people and more curious about ideas,” was advice given by Marie Curie. She's got a really good point here. Focus on what you are doing, how it can be done better, talk about these things with your colleagues, detach yourself from the gossip brigade. When I became a supervisor for the very first time, I discovered that I was suddenly out of the flow of gossip.

I missed it for a couple of days, but then I realized that what I missed was the drama of it, the rush of feeling 'in' while others were 'out.' What I missed was the judgements I felt free to make because others made them too. What I missed was the social aspect of gossiping. But, I didn't miss the gossip. After a few weeks, I felt blessed to simply not know what was being said about others. After a few months, I regretted some of the things I said about other people – people who would be hurt by my words, people who would be hurt by our attitudes.

I didn't get in this business to hurt people.

Any one.

Including those I work with.

When you turn your back from looking in and begin to look out at the work you have to do, the people you have to serve, you will begin to have Curie's approach; you will become curious about ideas and approaches and things that need done. Things that your hands and your ideas can make better. It's powerful.

You don't need to rebuke others; you just need to not need to participate in hurtful behaviour. And, of course, you will be able to show up!

Summary

Developing personal leadership is hard. Many of the suggestions above involve work, and courage, and willpower. But nothing's free. If you want to get where you want to go, you've gotta get up and go. I meet so many direct support professionals with such awesome skills, who I know would make a great contribution to this sector. I've written this in dedication to their dedication at work – I hope it helps them, and you, grow.

About the author

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