

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## The August Issue: Developing Personal Leadership

**By: Dave Hingsburger**

August is an odd month. Summer is well underway and September is looming. The approach to Labour Day, for many, feels like the approach to the ‘real New Year.’ We all remember classes starting and the sense of a clean slate with our notebooks empty, waiting for it all to start. In that spirit, the spirit of new beginnings, people might start thinking about new opportunities, developing new skills for leadership, and about personal growth.

“How do I become a leader?”

“What does it take to move forward in my life?”

“How do I motivate myself and others?”

These are perfect August questions.

This month will look at answers to those questions. Be prepared – you may not like everything that’s on this list!

### 1) Choose to Live an Adult Life

You read that right. Become an adult. Grow up. This is perhaps the most important step towards growing and becoming the person you want to be. We mature physically long before we do emotionally. That’s both wonderful and scary. It can be so wonderful that we don’t want to ever leave the perpetual state of ‘adolescents with potential’ and, before we notice, we’ve become ‘obsolescents without credentials.’ There are many ways to consider what adulthood looks like and how maturity manifests itself. The way we are going to define it here is ‘the realization that sometimes things really are your fault.’

For me it happened much too late but in time to make change. I was driving to an appointment, and I’d been in the car about an hour with about 40 minutes yet to go. I was thinking about an incident that I’d had with an agency that I’d worked for as a staff. I felt that they had treated me badly, unfairly, and that they were all meanies. In a sudden unwelcome and unbidden realization, I

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realized that I'd been a total jerk. That they had every right to have been frustrated with me.

That I had been self-centered. That I thought of them as bullies and me as an undeserving victim. But, that's not how I saw it on the car ride. I realized then and there that I am the author of my own life, I am not a passive participant in it, that I am in deep relationship with my life. Somehow, I had seen things differently, then, as a pouty teenager.

From there I decided to grow up. I decided that if I wanted to be a leader, I had to be able to lead me! I needed to be able to see who I was in relationship to others, accept that every conversation I'm in has at least two parties, and one of them is always me. I wanted, in that moment, to apologize to everyone at that agency and say, 'my bad' or even 'my awful.'

Choosing to be an adult means that you decide to forever hold yourself accountable to yourself. That you will be honest with yourself. That you will commit to accept what belongs to you and deal with the world and others in it as a kind, grown-up, adult.

This is a big step. But it's ultimately rewarding. People will notice the maturity shining through your actions and your interactions. People will begin to see the authenticity with which you accept both praise and blame. Being able to say, 'It's on me, I messed up' is one thing, but following it with 'and let me tell you what I'm going to do to fix that and make sure it never happens again' is something else entirely. Adulthood. Welcome to the club.

## 2) Workplace Harassment Policy: Zero Tolerance

Okay, so let's establish here that we are talking about yourself, your work and your goals. That makes your soul, or spirit, or drive, or will, or whatever you want to call it, your workplace. This means that there is no bullying, no name calling, no verbal or physical abuse. You don't get to do that to you. I once was being served by a woman at a deli counter and I had chosen a medium mango salad with a delicious vinaigrette – sometimes the details are essential to the story – and, when she reached for a container to put it in, she reached for the wrong size. I said, "Um, sorry, I wanted a medium salad." I wasn't upset; a simple mistake had been made. But. Wow. All this time later I can still see her face as it went red, and then she started on herself, she called herself ugly names, she berated herself for making the mistake; she spoke of herself in hateful terms and tones.

Never give yourself permission to be an abuser.

To anyone.

Even you.

Practicing kindness as a lifestyle begins with practicing kindness within. We learn to speak to ourselves in tones of love and acceptance before we can really use those tones sincerely with others. Kindness is an essential part of leadership. People often imagine otherwise, but that's because they see bad examples of leadership all the

time. To be a leader, to be a change maker, to be an influencer, you need kindness and consideration to be the walk you walk, as in my case, the role you roll.

To be able to grow is to be able to make mistakes, be an adult about them, and then move on. Getting hung up on mistakes, spending wasted energy and time on beating up on yourself delays the process. Acknowledge error, evaluate what happened, apologize and move on. This is a journey; don't miss the train because you are behind the station beating up on your heart.

### 3) Acknowledge your Privilege

The moment you begin providing service to a person with an intellectual disability, you are part of a privilege dynamic. It may be hard to see, it may be that a wee bit of privilege gets mixed up with a wee bit of prejudice, and then bad stuff happens. As a disabled person, I live in a world that was not designed for me and my wheels. I also live in a world that doesn't yet attitudinally acknowledge me as an equal and a full complete human being. People intrude into my life all the time. If I am sitting alone, someone will always stop and ask if I want them to find my staff. If I am unloading a grocery cart someone will come along and simply start helping. This may look like kindness but, to many of us, those of us with disabilities simply wanting to live our lives, it's toxic. It's like a constant message from others that they are well and we are helpless. It's like inflicting on us, even in quiet moments, the revelation that they are independent, and we are not.

You have probably sat at a table discussing a person with a disability and either said or heard said, "I just don't understand it; the behaviour just doesn't make sense; I would never do something like that, like, ever!" To that I say, "Good for you." To that I'd think, "What do you have to do with it? Why are your experiences even being discussed? Have you any idea of the path that someone with a disability has journeyed on?"

Privilege gives you the power to think that your reality is everyone's reality. You get to sit in judgement of someone else's life because you think your life has been education enough. Trust me, it hasn't. Take off your 'those-coloured' glasses and really look at 'those' people. See the similarities but also acknowledge the differences. See others for who they are and understand that their path may have been very different than yours. For a person with a disability who has spent 50 years on a reinforcement program that taught them that smoking was a sign of achievement, of worth, of value – taking cigarettes away as punishment (which you would never do right?) is an attack on selfhood.

Develop the understanding that it's a privilege to serve and support people who have their own hopes and dreams and goals. To have someone tell you their dream and then ask you to help them on their journey is an intimate ask and a profoundly rewarding experience. That's the privilege that develops into leadership.

When you can step away from yourself as the model for other people's lives, when you can see that what is needed is not your judgement but your character, you will be noticed. People will be asking you, "What's your secret?"

#### 4) Praise is the most Critical Feedback

Beating yourself up, as we spoke about earlier, is not feedback. Feedback is something that allows you to learn and grow. Reflection is one of the most important tools you have in your toolkit for growth. Reflecting on a situation or an interaction can be a powerful thing when combined with the ability to see success and to acknowledge error. We've talked about how adulthood is linked with the ability to accept responsibility. Paired with that is the ability – and oddly this can be even harder – to accept your own strengths and successes.

I would find it easier to sit here and write three things about me that I'd like to change than I would to write even one thing about me that I'm proud of.

I need to get over that.

And maybe you do too.

The ability to praise yourself is tough because if we ever did, out loud, we'd be told that we were smug, or we were self-congratulating, or we were full of ourselves. The secret is, unless you are with someone who you love and trust and who knows you are working on becoming (becoming can simply be a life goal, a constant state of becoming), then ... don't say it out loud.

We know that praise works to reinforce the behaviour of others. Um, then, why wouldn't it work on us? I know that, when something I've tried has gone well, I get this positive buzz inside that tells me 'good job,' which hearing from another doesn't match. Don't get me wrong, the praise of others is great but, if it's not matched with a sense of accomplishment inside, it's meaningless. So learn to evaluate and praise yourself when you've done well.

The thing about praise is that it can seem so powerless. If you've ever had an evaluation where every single thing you did well was acknowledged and praised, but one area for improvement was mentioned in passing, I'm willing to bet that you left that meeting stewing over the one thing that needed improvement, completely ignoring the praise you received. That's why, when you are recognizing and taking responsibility, you need to do so in a whisper and, when you are giving yourself deserved acknowledgement, you need to SHOUT.

The coolest thing is that what's in comes out. Anyone who's partied hard in their life knows that this can be an unfortunate experience but, in this context, it means what you learn to do within becomes natural when you do it in the real world.

Positive people bring positive energy. A co-worker of mine said to me today, "There are two kinds of people. Those who give energy. Those that take energy." And that's true.

Those that give energy and positivity are those who are sought out. So don't be afraid of giving yourself a heaping dollop of praise when you deserve it. Praise changes behaviour. Yours and those around you.

## Summary

This is the first of a two part article on growth, development and the coming of the ‘real’ New Year. So head into September with new goals. We’ll finish this topic up in December. Here’s to adulthood, responsibility and new journeys.

## About the Author

Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed., is the Director of Clinical and Educational Services for Vita Community Living Services, and is a well-known speaker, writer and consultant on the topics of disability, sexuality and self-advocacy.

## Answers to FAQ’s about the journal

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