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The 2 Keys to Power: Responsibility and Accountability

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If you have ever heard the famous line, "With great power comes great responsibility" and have thought about it in the context of our sector, then you know about Key #1. If you have ever thought about the line, "mission accomplished" in the same context, then you know the second as well. When we are asked why we wanted to work in Developmental Services, the usual answer is, "Because I like helping people," or "I want to make a positive difference in someone's life." Those statements in and of themselves are admirable and, in my opinion, necessary for the first steps of being direct support professionals (DSPs). But they are only just that – first steps. They should not stop us from digging deeper into what it means to make an impact. And more importantly, how we make that impact positive.

We have the ability to make a difference as direct support professionals because we have power in every interaction:

- We have it when we make a plan for the day
- When we support with medication administration
- When providing behavioural support
- When assisting with hygiene
- When we say what is for lunch
- As soon as we meet them and long after we no longer provide direct support for them

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In any aspect of social services, there is a power dynamic between service provider and the client/member/participant/supported person, etc. It is a fact that we all know and, for the most part, we are cognizant of that dynamic in our interactions. We also rely on that dynamic to a certain degree for the day-to-day processes to run as planned. In our supportive role, we have a certain degree of authority when it comes to influencing what direction a day will go for individuals who access our services. All developmental service agencies are mandated for that direction, to align with that plan, and accordingly the rights, goals, and needs of supported individuals. Not only is that ethical practice, it is also the law.

Before an agency is even able to begin operations, it must build their policies and procedures with checks and balances weaved throughout, that are guided by legislation. The immense power we are entrusted with demands they are created this way because that is the only way to assure the people we support that we will be responsible.

That is how we make sure we are trustworthy and fulfill Key #1. But how can we ensure that follow up happens? Whether it is having meaningful conversations with people we support, the adherence to a support plan, one of many yearly reviews, disinfecting to make environments safe, or supporting someone with a doctor appointment – there are many roles in organizations and a lot to get done sometimes. Accountability is Key #2. Together, they will ensure that our intent is guided by ethics that do not deviate from the values we must hold.

We are going to talk about how responsibility and accountability become part of the same process to build teams or systems at work. Using ethics-based models to thread these keys throughout, we ensure that the power we hold in our roles is used towards actualizing the inner statement that gets many of us started in this sector: "I want to help people."

Key #1 - Responsibility: In Actions and Communication

The first key is about following our duty to make a decision and take action through movement or communication. The IDEA framework provides a strong foundation through which to determine what the right thing to do is:

- *Identify the facts.*
- *Determine the relevant principles*
- *Explore the options*
- *Act*

From the beginning, in identifying the facts of a situation, we must take ourselves into consideration, and how we will be part of the process. A good example of one task DSPs do that engages every level of responsibility is a visit to the doctor's office:

1. Walk through the front door and start the day
2. Find out or follow up on the plan
3. Gather a supported person's health card, background information
4. Arrange transportation
5. Communicate with who needs to know that an appointment is happening
6. Support them on the visit to a doctor in a way that advocates for their needs and allows them to be part of their own health care
7. Document what occurred
8. Report and follow up on the doctor's instructions

In the above task that many of you have done, there are opportunities to be mindful of our power. Another way to think about it is to consider it our privilege, which is reflected in our actions and communication. Ultimately, how our actions and communication work to empower the people we support helps us accomplish the mission of enriching the lives of people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Action:

In the above scenario, before we even know what the plan is for the day, a DSP makes the decision to show up. Usually, our workplaces are in people's homes, at the hospital, a group home setting, etc. Often, they don't have any choice in the matter about where they will be at the start of their day. If you have ever had a memo sent out about being mindful of bringing in a cup of coffee that you picked up on the way to work, with whatever signature logo and colors front and center (bright red with a brown lid in my Northern case), then that is because it is a show of your privilege. We have the power to act on our wish to grab a cup of coffee on our way into work. Depending on where someone is, or the level of support they require, or the amount of spending money they have, they likely don't have the choice to go out and grab a coffee from

their favourite local spot. Sure, they may be able to get something from a kitchen in their home or in their building, but there is a certain freedom in just walking out the door, going wherever you want to go, and buying whatever you want to jump start your day. And it can be upsetting for people to be reminded that they do not have that freedom.

When you get to the part of the day where you figure out what comes next, it is important to take a step back and make sure that the people that those plans are affecting were informed and, hopefully, had some say. To the best of my ability, I am able to make an agenda for myself, as long as it is in line with the goals and needs of the people I support, and the teams with whom I work. But if I am not checking in with the people those plans are affecting, aren't they really just being told what will happen because I (or my team) had the power to decide what those plans are? There is a balance of course. At the end of the day, we need to look out for people's well-being. If there is a necessity to take action for the sake of people's health, then we have a responsibility to support them with it. If we remember to temper this responsibility with empathy for the person, then we can find a path forward that doesn't leave the person or their needs behind.

Communication:

Throughout the whole process of the doctor's appointment mentioned above, there are probably a lot of words being said *about* a person. There are certain areas that require a conversation to take place about a person's care in which they may not be able to participate. However, we should be determining how a person *can* participate, and how we can provide accommodations to make sure they are included in a conversation to the best of their ability. We can give up some of the control that we have by allowing others to have their say. When you give choice, you can help people to build skills and confidence – this is where advocacy meets empowerment. However (yet another thing that we have the power to do), it is crucial that we do this by making sure we are communicating with and about someone in the way they would like to be communicated with (sign language, their primary language, with assistive technology, etc.). This is particularly the case with people who live with sensory loss. One thing that has worked for me has been the use of physical cues. For example, a person living with vision and hearing impairment may benefit from physical cues such as a stethoscope to indicate that they have an appointment with their doctor coming up.

When working with people, it is our responsibility to communicate according to their needs, and we must use our power to make their environments as accessible and inclusive as possible. Language is a component of this that cannot be ignored. To be an inclusive environment, it is important that everyone in the environment understands what is said. As a person who grew up in a home where I did not learn my native language, I have some direct experience with this. All I can say is that, when people who are a part of your support network intentionally choose to speak in a language that you do not or cannot understand when you are within ear shot, intentional or not, the exclusion that is felt is not a nice feeling. Isolation is an issue that many of the people we support face, and there are many mistakes we can make in our actions and communication that can perpetuate it. But the solution is simple. We can still respect our diversity while making an intentional choice to communicate according to the needs of the people we support. The ability to communicate in multiple languages or in multiple ways is a power, a great one that is to be admired. Being responsible in this context means understanding that words matter. Communication affects more than just who it is directed to, especially when it is about someone else. In someone's home, at their bedside, or in the community, this is one of the ways we can use our power to connect people.

Another way that our communication has the power to drive people away is by not being careful and considerate in the content of our words, especially when we are attempting to build rapport with people. Unfortunately, false promises are something that the people we support deal with regularly. As DSPs, we sometimes find ourselves in conversation threads where we struggle to

balance between honesty and our wish for the people we support to be happy. I once knew a man who loved to be involved, helping to execute plans for the day. I am still learning and have made some errors of my own by not being careful of the impact my words can have. Before the pandemic and when day programs had a different model, I often had the opportunity to team up with a man named Mike to complete activities or provide assistance around the day program. Occasionally, there would be an opportunity for a pre-planned community outing with a group of people from the day program. When Mike and I had those opportunities, he was quick to add another stop to the trip itinerary, and I was always happy to oblige if we could. He had a deep admiration and respect for anyone working in emergency services who wore a uniform. A frequent request was to stop by the police station to say, 'Hello' to officers at the front desk. This particular day, I answered as usual saying it would be no problem, as long as we finished the original purpose of the trip first for the other people involved. I was transferred to a different location soon after my conversation with Mike. The outing continued as planned; however, they did not go to the police station, and Mike was upset about it later in the day. I felt awful and still do. However, I now realize that I had made more than one mistake that day. I could not keep my promise to Mike. I also did not communicate my promise with the colleague that took over for me. I assumed that Mike would have a conversation with the new support staff, but this new person had never met Mike, so Mike did not have enough trust in them to feel comfortable asking in the first place.

A little bit of communication goes a long way. I had the power to make sure things went differently that day. There was an opportunity to ensure the input of the person I was supporting was respected and taken into consideration, but I failed to use my power to uphold the responsibility to support Mike. Taking a step back and looking at the issue from a larger respective, I was not accountable to his support needs and the overall goal of the organization.

Key #2 Accountability: Building a Culture and Balances or Checks

Accountability means who is responsible. Whose job is it? A comic book fan might wonder if it is Spider-Man's or The Avengers' job to take care of the issues that pop up around them. We may not face the same problems that they do but, as direct support professionals, we are all here for the goal of supporting people. We have probably asked ourselves that same question of "Whose role is it to assist?" in certain situations. Luckily, we have systems in place that clarify who is accountable. These systems usually present themselves in strategic plans, policies, and procedures, or simple task lists for the day. The IDEA decision making model assists with determining how to take action on our responsibilities.

We can also use the IDEA decision making framework to decide how we determine accountability. What should it look like? We know it should be in place in terms of who is responsible but in order for accountability to be more than just a checkmark, two concepts should be adopted:

1. A culture of accountability should be created for the health of the working environment and for the benefit of the people we support.
2. Having checks and balances that are empowering, guidelines for DSPs, leadership and stakeholders ensures that there is follow through for accomplishing shared objectives.

Building a Culture of Accountability:

Everyone. That is the answer. To build a culture of accountability is to promote that accountability is shared at every level, across every staff within an organization. It is one in which everyone knows their role and works together as a team to be problem solvers. What it is not a culture of accountability is:

- "finger pointing or blaming"

- "the person supported is the problem"
- "hoarding decision-making authority" (power in other words)

When we are using our power towards creating shared accountability, the people we support get to be able to be surrounded by a goal-oriented support network. In order to create shared accountability, we all need comprehensive policies and procedures, strategic plans, visions, and mission statements. In contrast to the above, a culture of accountability is:

- Believing in all people
- Facts
- Problem solving
- Learning

If the mission is to support individuals to make meaningful connections, and achieve their hopes and dreams, then everyone in that individual's support network is accountable for that. To the full extent of our role, we are accountable to carry out the mission, and be a part of problem solving, and empowering each other to be more and do more. Part of that process is ensuring mistakes are learning opportunities and that support for each other is built into the infrastructure of our working environments. It has to be said, however, that support can look different to different people. In a culture of accountability, we acknowledge this and take this into account, as we work towards a common goal. Ultimately, it means that it is the duty of every person in an organization to be proactive and innovative in addressing issues in a way that is in line with the relevant ethical principles, values, facts, and goals. Organizations must make sure to update strategic plans every three to five years and ensure they keep current with updates on values and best practices within the developmental service sector. Whether it is in an organization or a broader network of support, following through on responsibility in a way that is consistent with these plans, values, and ethics is not something that should be done in isolation. It cannot be stated enough that, because of the power each person supporting an individual holds, everyone is accountable.

Checks and Balances:

Everyone being accountable does not mean that no one person can be held accountable when actions are taken that are not for the benefit of individuals living with IDD. It only means that we are aware of what the goal is and, when an issue occurs, we are looking at it from every angle and tackling as many of the roadblocks as we can. We all need to account for our responsibilities to make a positive impact. Yet sometimes, the issues we face pile up and create a whole slew of things to deal with. Having things under control happens through the processes of the systems in which we work. Documents such as plans of care, behaviour support plans, Individual Service Agreements, and policies and procedures are meant to be living and breathing documents that grow with organizations and best practices in the sector. Documentation is the cornerstone of accountability.

Especially when the time comes to account for the progress or accomplishment of goals and tasks, it is very easy to end up in a scramble to complete something and present something that is a rough fix with a bow tied on it when, in reality, not much progress has been made. Before getting to that point, having guidelines in place is important to ensure that processes for checks and balances make sense, and that information on what needs to be done is shared. It is so easy to take control away from others in order to ensure that everything is ok. Down the road, however, that is a path that leads to a cycle of last-minute scrambling, burnout, and missed deadlines. The solution is to give power back to DSPs, their teams, and the people we support. By having the power to be more invested in processes within organizations, people will be able to see their value, feel more valued themselves and become active participants within them and eventually, the conception and implementation of them. When these guidelines need to be revised or reviewed to ensure that they are working towards the benefit of individuals, we must

know that this a job that we all share. At the end of the day, when checks and balances within the processes of an organization make sense and are widely understood, they empower DSPs to feel confident in their roles and responsibilities when working people living with IDD.

Conclusion

In any role where vulnerable people are being supported, guidance on how to utilize our power and privilege is needed to ensure that we can keep people safe.

Being responsible and being accountable are often thought of as the same thing, however, an understanding of the words and the role that they play empowers us to provide quality supports. Many of us have come from diverse backgrounds and entered the sector at different times, in different environments, and sometimes with different expectations placed upon us. But we all started with one purpose, "To help and advocate for people." With the core tenant of this sector to be 'person centered,' responsibility and accountability provide a roadmap that we can follow to make sure that the intentions we start out with transform into a skillset that is purposeful and decisive in the pursuit of that goal.

About the Author

Erick Dominguez is a manager for residential supports at New Leaf Living and Learning. He began as a part-time direct support staff before becoming full-time and eventually a part of a management team. Thanks to many great mentors at the organization, the focus from the start of joining the team at New Leaf was to develop competencies in person-centered support through being responsible and accountable. He writes this article with the hope that it provides similar guidance to any person who wants to join the Developmental Service Sector.

References

Daniels and Sabin (2002), adapted by Gibson, Martin, & Singer (2005). *IDEA: Ethical Decision-Making Framework - Trillium Health Partners, https://trilliumhealthpartners.ca/aboutus/Documents/IDEA-Framework-THP.pdf*, Regional Health Project 2013.

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