

Service, Support and Success

International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

Engaging Insight: Keys to Person-Centred Thinking

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Let's pretend for a moment that I live in a 24-hour support home. And let's pretend that you work at that home, and you come in first thing in the morning which means that you are responsible for helping me get organized and out the door.

If you were in charge of making sure that I had a hot drink to take with me in the morning, and you wanted to make sure I got what I wanted, you would make me coffee. You would grind the special coffee beans that I really like. You would put a dash or two of cinnamon in the coffee filter, just the way I like it. You would fill my favourite mug right to the brim because I never take anything in my coffee, and I like a full cup.

It may have taken a while to figure out what I like but, if you had taken the time, asked the right questions, and paid attention to my responses, you would have been number one in my books. And if you had shared that knowledge with your colleagues to make sure that I always had the coffee that I love, I would have been thrilled. That is what it looks like to provide best support.

Here's the rub. I recently discovered the wonders of loose leaf tea. While I still enjoy my coffee, I much prefer a nice hot cup of tea in the mornings. I like it made with just the right amount of tea in the tea ball, with water boiled to just the right temperature, and steeped just the right amount of time. Don't bother reading the instructions on the tin – I like it with extra tea in the tea ball, and steeped for exactly one minute longer than is recommended. Oh, and I have a different favourite mug that I like to use for my tea.

So now, at my fictional 24-hour home, I get coffee some mornings. Just the way I used to love it. And I get tea some mornings. It all depends on who is on shift, and if they read the note in the communication book about my new favourite morning beverage.

People change. We try new foods, new drinks, new activities. We like some of them. We don't like some of them. Some get incorporated into our lives. Others get dropped. This change is easy for most of us because we just do it. I bought myself some tea and a tea ball and, voilà, I'm a tea drinker.



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Change is hard for people in service. I don't mean it's hard because they don't like change. I mean it's hard because they often need our assistance to experience new things, and they need us to be responsive to their experience when they do.

That brings us to person-centred thinking.

Person-centred is a term that is used a lot in our field. Employees receive person-centred thinking training. Organizations create person-centred positions. Person-centred thinking forms are developed, and annual person-centred planning meetings are scheduled.

Where I work, we talk about person-centred thinking as providing best support. Not good support. Not over support. Best support. Being person-centred is not an end goal to work towards or a box to tick. Being person-centred is about constantly striving to provide best support while recognizing that best support is a constantly moving target. Best support changes as we learn more about a person. It also changes as the person changes, as they are exposed to new experiences and new ideas. Which brings me back to my morning routine. Best support six months ago would have been to make me coffee with cinnamon. Now best support is to make me tea, steeped a little longer than it should be. And next month? Who knows?

So how do we do this? How can we possibly provide best support when best support keeps changing? And when we work in teams where different employees have different ways of doing things?

Don't expect to find easy answers in this article.

Instead, look for new ideas about changes that can be made in terms of how we approach the work we do every day. Changes in how we think about support, and risk, and routines. Changes that help us move from providing good support to providing best support.

Whose routine is it?

When you think about it, much of the support that we provide consists of routines. Routines in what day a person goes swimming, in what day a person does their laundry, in what they eat for breakfast on a Saturday morning, and what shows are watched on television on a Tuesday night. Routines make things easier because they are predictable. But we are not interested in easier. We are interested in best support.

Whose routine is it? Is it the routine of the person that we are supporting? Do they really want to do laundry on a Wednesday or go swimming every Thursday afternoon? Do they really want pancakes for breakfast every weekend? Is this really their routine? Or is it ours? And if it's ours, then we need to take a hard look at it to see if we can make it less about us, and more about the person we are supporting.

Question everything

Once you start questioning routines, keep the momentum going by questioning everything. Think about the way things are done where you work. Think about where the meds are kept, and how shift changes are done. Think about how your own way of doing things creeps in when you help someone do something. Just because you think it's important to fold clothes a certain way or prepare a meal a certain way does not mean that is the only way to do it. Ask yourself if

the way something is done is really and truly best support. And if it isn't? Then ask yourself what needs to change.

Ask the hard questions

We are often in 'fix it' mode when we work. We prefer to solve problems as soon as they arise, and then get back to the routine as quickly as possible. We have already talked about the importance of breaking routines we put in place that make our own lives easier. Well the best way to change a routine is to ask hard questions. Questions like: instead of taking someone to the mall, what would need to happen for the person to go to the mall on their own, or with a friend, instead of with staff?

Asking the hard questions is scary. Hard questions are hard because the answer isn't readily available. Hard questions usually mean more work. Hard questions involve risk, and moving into unknown territory.

What WOULD happen if, instead of going to the mall with a person you support, you dropped that person off to meet their friend at the mall? Well I can think of plenty of things that could happen. They get lost. They get hurt. They hurt someone. They steal something.

Or perhaps they had a lovely afternoon with their friend? They bought a birthday card for their mother while they were out. They felt empowered because they did something on their own? They decide that next time they go to the mall they want to follow it up with dinner and a movie.

Our job is not to eliminate risk. It is not to protect people from every possible bad thing that might happen. Our job is to make sure that people have the information they need to make their own decisions, and that they have the support they need to be successful. We do a grave disservice to people if we do not allow them the dignity of risk. And we cannot possibly provide best support if we spend our time trying to protect people from risk.

You and I take risks every day. We drive cars above the speed limit, we make unhealthy food choices, and we cross the street without walking to the crosswalk first. Yet in a field like the one we work in, risk is seen as something to avoid at all costs. We have checklists to fill out, and boxes to check before a person is able to stay home alone for an hour. Why? Because we need to prove that we have done everything we can to make sure that nothing bad will happen.

Shift control

Don't mistake enabling risk with independence. The reality is that many people are not able to do certain things for very valid reasons. And independence does not mean that a person has to be able to do everything on their own. It comes down to a person having choice over the support they need to go about their daily life.

When someone is in service, there are so many areas of their life that they have no control over. There are other areas where they do have control, where they have choice in who supports them, and how support is provided. The problem is that the difference is not always evident which means that people often have less choice and control in their lives than they actually could have.

Just because a person you support does things a certain way, makes certain choices or doesn't make others doesn't mean it is what they actually want. It could also mean they don't actually know they have the right to change things up. Or they don't know what other options they really do have.

Experiences are important

When we provide opportunities for people to make their own choices, and when we provide opportunities for risk, things are not always going to work out.

The person may not like something new that we try with them.

The solo trip to the mall might not work out as well as we had hoped.

These experiences are not failures. They are lessons. There is so much value, and so much to learn from them for the next time.

Best support doesn't mean only providing wonderful experiences. Best support means providing opportunities to experience new things, and learning from each experience so that the next one is just that little bit more meaningful.

Dig deeper

The more you know about a person, the better support you can provide. We spend a lot of time with the people that we support, and learn a lot simply by being with them. We might learn that they love apple pie or want to be a pilot. We then make sure that they have apple pie, and we talk to them about being a pilot.

Providing best support means digging deeper. It means asking why, over and over, in lots of different ways, to get to the root of the story.

Why do they like apple pie? Maybe they just like it. Maybe their mother used to make apple pie, and it reminds them of her. Maybe they heard their favourite staff say that they like apple pie so they say the same thing. Maybe it's the only pie they've ever tried, and don't know what other options are out there.

Why do they want to be a pilot? Maybe their brother is a pilot, and they want to be like their brother. Maybe they want to travel, and they know that pilots fly all over the world. Maybe they like the idea of wearing a uniform, and a Tim Hortons uniform would be just as good.

The more layers of the onion you peel back, the more you can understand about the person, and the better support you can provide to them.

And then the next time you serve apple pie, you can take a few minutes to sit with the person and ask them about their mother.

Share what you learn

The amount of knowledge about people that is carried around in the heads of direct support professionals is astounding. We learn so many things about people by working with them every

day that it's easy to assume that other people who work with them know these things too. This is often not the case, and information that you keep in your head leaves when you do.

Sharing information is key when providing best support, and documenting it for future reference is essential. Talk with your team about how you will share, and document important information so that best support is provided consistently, no matter who is working the next shift.

Know your history

Speaking of sharing information, it's not just current information that is important. Knowing a person's history can be key in providing best support. Where did they come from? Did they travel as a child? Do they have siblings? Friends from their childhood? How was their experience in school? After school? Do they have any religious or cultural traditions from their childhood? Were there any favourite foods (apple pie for example) that they remember?

What did they experience growing up? History, good or bad, is the foundation of who that person is. Listen to them. They share themselves through their stories. The people in their past leave an impact even when they are no longer there. Rules that they had to follow at home as children may help explain why it's difficult to convince them to do things differently later in life. When you know a person's history, you are that much closer to really knowing the person.

Knowing a person's history, and sharing it with others who also provide support helps create a richer picture of the person you are supporting.

Good support or best support?

I read once that "the most dangerous phrase in the English language is 'we have always done it that way.' "

That way of thinking ensures good consistent support. Sometimes it actually leads to over support. But we are not after good support, and we definitely don't want over support. We want best support.

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." Maya Angelou

About the author:

Céline works at Mainstream in St. Catharines and wears many hats. She is the Quality Improvement Coordinator, the TAY Placement Facilitator, as well as the Team Leader for the Options Niagara program. Her favourite quote is "the problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished," and she spends a lot of her time trying to turn that illusion into a reality.

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