

IN EMPLOYMENT:

Who's Talking the Talk,

But Not Walking the Walk?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

From coast to coast, thousands of human service agencies exist to help people with disabilities. Some are non-profit, some are for-profit. Some are large corporations with million dollar-plus budgets; others are tiny and run on a shoestring. Many have a single focus; helping people with disabilities in the employment arena. Others may assist with jobs, and also provide housing-habilitation and/or other services. And to one degree or another, all share a common rallying cry: "People with disabilities should work, live, and play in the community."

Ahhhh—it all sounds great. They're talking the talk, but are they walking the walk? They tell others to hire people with disabilities, but do *they* hire people with disabilities? These questions come directly from individuals with disabilities who have shared their personal stories of seeking employment at these human service agencies. Again and again, they're told no.

It would be easy to dismiss this issue with a pat answer: these people weren't hired because they're not qualified. And this might be an accurate statement in some cases. But, for many jobs at service provider agencies, little or no experience is required. And when comparing two applicants side-by-side, who would be more qualified: a person with little or no professional experience or a person with decades of experience—a *lifetime of living with a disability*?

Many years ago, while serving on the board of a service provider in our area, several upper-level managers delivered their quarterly reports. The human resources manager shared her information about personnel issues, and she ended with her recommendations, that to ensure diversity, our agency should hire a certain number of American Indians, Hispanics, African-Americans, and so forth. As a board member, I asked why she didn't include a recommendation

on hiring individuals with disabilities. In a huff, she responded, "We're not required to do that—there's no affirmative action in the Americans with Disabilities Act!" As calmly as I could, I agreed with her about the ADA, then looked at her and the other board members and asked, "How can we sit her and preach that companies in our community should hire people with disabilities, but we don't hire them, ourselves?" No one had an answer.

A month or so later, I learned of a job opening in the agency, and thought it would be a great opportunity for "Wendy," a person with a disability who was both a friend and a board member, too. I casually asked the executive director what he thought about Wendy applying for the position. He was silent for a few moments—I could see the wheels turning in his head—and he finally said, "Yeah, that would be great—if we hired Wendy, then we could get her off the board!" Like me, Wendy was part of the "radical" wing of the board, and apparently the exec would have liked to get rid of us. (Wendy applied, but did not get the job and she stayed on the board.)

This brings us to leadership, boards, and more. The by-laws of many disability-related organizations require that a majority of board members be individuals with disabilities or family members. This is an appropriate strategy to (hopefully) ensure that the organization's mission, activities, policies, etc. reflect the needs of the people they serve—and this is all well and good.

But what about staff? There are many organizations that hire *parents* of children with disabilities, and this, too, is good. And many of these parents do not have previous "professional" experience in the field prior to being hired. They have, instead, on-the-job training, life experience, and at least one Ph.D. from

2 - In Employment: Who's Talking the Talk, But Not Walking the Walk?

the School of Hard Knocks! In many cases, their personal life experiences are considered more valuable than the college degree and/or professional experience of other applicants—and they're given a shot at the position. Once hired, they're trained on the specifics of laws, policies, and/or other important aspects of the new job.

Why isn't the same true for adults with disabilities? Why aren't their life experiences perceived as valuable? Most have more years of experience than parents (a 35-year-old woman with a lifelong disability has many more years of personal experience than the parent of a 10-year-old child with a disability). Why aren't applicants with disabilities given the same opportunities as applicants without disabilities?

Ultimately, it seems this is about values, ethics, morals, integrity, and honesty. And it's also about the flip-side: hypocrisy and the age-old, "Do as I say, not as I do."

Perhaps we should look at this from another angle—that of a potential employer. The staff of "Employment Options," an imaginary human service provider, routinely beats the bushes searching for jobs for its "clients" who have disabilities. But none of the staff members have disabilities themselves, right? What unspoken messages are sent to potential employers:

- You want *us* to hire people with disabilities, but *you* don't hire them, so why should we?
- Maybe people with disabilities *are* incompetent like we thought—if they

Setting People Up for Success or Failure?

I've long believed that in the process of trying to find a job for a person with a disability, we inadvertently make the person look incompetent, thereby reducing the chances that an employer would be interested in hiring the person.

Create a similar scenario for yourself: imagine you lost your job, and your spouse, parent, friend, etc. (the "helper") decides to assist in your job-hunting efforts. Your helper goes to the HR department of a business where there's a job opening that's a good match for you, and says, "I'd like to talk to you about my husband [son/friend/whatever] coming to work here..." How would that make you look? Yep, incompetent! The HR department would wonder why you weren't there yourself, right?

Years ago, "Gracie," a middle-aged woman who has a disability shared her personal experience: "I've had lots of jobs—they'd set up interviews for me, and I'd ride the bus, and some jobs I got and some I didn't. And the ones I got didn't last long, cause they really weren't jobs I wanted. So one day, I'd had enough—and I got off the bus and didn't go to the interview. From then on, I got my own jobs, and those are the best jobs I've ever had!"

It's time we stopped keeping people with disabilities in a state of helplessness and dependence, and stop "getting them jobs," and, instead, help them learn how to get their own jobs! Let's help set people up to succeed, not to fail.

were really good employees, you'd hire them, wouldn't you, instead of offering them to us?

- In our company, we use the product/service that we sell/manufacture—we believe in it! You must not believe in your "product," since you don't use it yourself.

The list could go on, and perhaps this represents one of the contributing factors to the shameful estimated 75 percent unemployment rate of people with disabilities. And there are other factors, of course (see box).

"Be the change you want to see in the world," are words of wisdom from Gandhi. If disability organizations want people with disabilities to be employed at real jobs, for real pay in the community, shouldn't they be the first to fulfill that goal? Shouldn't disability organizations be the leaders in employing people with disabilities and set an example for others?

What will it take for disability organizations to:

- Recognize and value the life-long expertise of adults with disabilities;
- Actively recruit individuals with disabilities and provide the appropriate training and supports;
- Do what they ask of other potential employers: see past a person's diagnosis and presume competence.

What will it take for organizations to talk the talk *and* walk the walk—to truly fulfill their mission statements?