

“It’s How You Look At Your Work That Makes the Difference”

Direct Support Workers Consider the Meaning of Their Jobs

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with

Staff from Creative Community Living Services

Creative Community Living Services (CCLS) invests substantially in staff development, including involvement in a series of workshops that consider the ways direct support staff are supported to do good work.* As an extension of these workshops, CCLS South Central Region managers selected direct support workers they consider highly effective and invited them to spend two hours reflecting on their work. Two groups met, one on 17 December 2003 (16 participants) and the other on 18 December 2003 (18 participants). Each group varied in the age of the participants (from early 20's to 50's), the length of time they have worked for CCLS (from several months to more than 10 years), previous experience of work for people with disabilities (from none to extensive), formal education, whether or not they have other jobs now, their direct support role (some are live-in staff, some provide come in support, some work with people on week-ends), and the characteristics of the people they assist. A few more than half of the participants are women.

Each discussion was recorded on large sheets of paper and frequently summarized to assure understanding and allow for corrections or elaborations. Immediately after each discussion, key quotations were transcribed. Quotations have been edited to allow easier reading and checked with participants in the discussion. As I wrote this paper I organized people's contributions into themes, selected brief quotations from both discussions to define the themes, and added my own reflections on what I heard in the discussions.

Thanks to Chris Sarbacher and the CCLS South Central Division managers for selecting participants and hosting the discussions and to Marcie Brost and Howard Mandeville for sustaining the inquiry into direct support work.

*John O'Brien and Connie Lyle
O'Brien (2004). *Find meaning in
the work*. Lithonia, GA: Responsive
Systems Associates

One aspect of the search for ways to build competence, continuity and commitment to positive values in the developmental disabilities services workforce involves building a deeper understanding of the ways direct service workers make their jobs meaningful and satisfying. This paper is based on discussions with direct support workers from the South Central Division of Creative Community Living Services (CCLS), an agency that provides residential services in Wisconsin.

The challenges these workers experience are familiar: a low paid, low status job; anxiety about changes in services for the people they assist and their own working conditions driven by budget cuts and rising insurance costs; demanding schedules; a growing burden of paperwork and regulation; and people with disabilities who face many barriers to good quality life that can sometimes be difficult to deal with. What matters to them about their jobs is the range of satisfactions they derive from their relationships with the people they support and the ways they have found to discover the meaning in their work. One direct support worker summarizes it this way:

It's how you look at your work that makes the difference. If you look at it as a just a list of personal care tasks and household chores for clients who really don't have much to offer, there isn't so much room for pride in your work. If you look at your job as the chance to make a positive relationship with people who can offer a lot if they have the right support, then you find your reason to work right there with the people themselves.

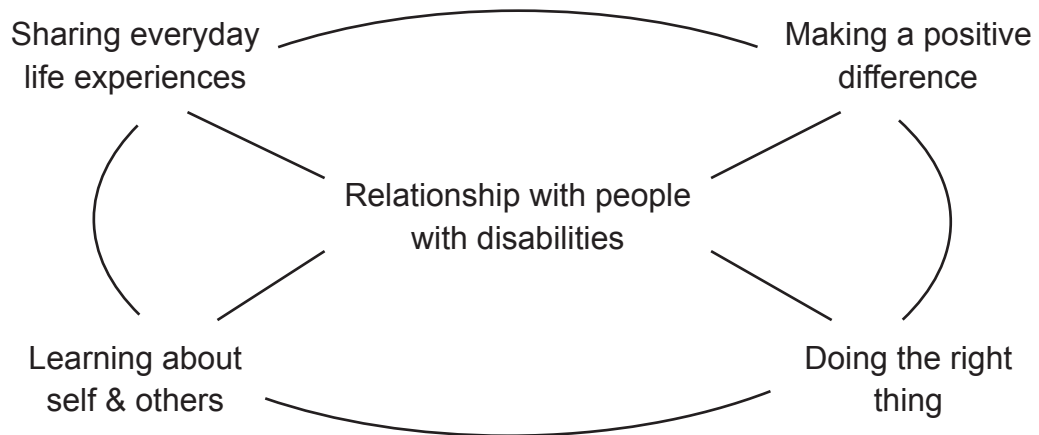
The questions

Direct support workers addressed these three questions.

- “Each person here has agreed that they know the feeling that ‘The job I have assisting people with disabilities is the right place for me to be now.’ The ‘now’ is important: you may move on into other work, but if you do you will move on with memories of having done something that is important to you. **What is it about the job that gives you that sense that this is the right place for you to be working now?**”

- “Imagine a person who may keep on working, but does not experience the kinds of satisfactions that give the sense that ‘this is the right job for me.’ This person experiences the work as kind of like being in a box: it’s just putting in time. It may be no worse than any other low-paid job, but it is certainly no better. If this person keeps working it is more for external reasons than because the work means something to them. **What about the job might account for the feeling that it is just a place to put in time** with very little real satisfaction or meaning for the worker?”
- “Imagine that there is a road that leads to the kinds of work experiences that give you the sense that ‘this is the right job for me’. Then imagine that you wanted to provide some guidance to new workers, people who are just setting out along this road on a journey to satisfying direct support work. Based on what you have learned from your experience, **what advice would you give about how to find the way to meaning and satisfaction in the work?**”

This is the right place for me now



For these workers, direct support work has meaning mostly because of what the relationship with people with disabilities makes possible. They use strong words to describe their relationships with the people they assist: alliance, partnership, interdependency, friendship, closeness, intimacy. Which of these words apply to a particular relationship depends on the chemistry between the people involved; all of them indicate the importance of the person-to-person aspects of meaningful work.

Just because these workers have a clear sense that this is the right job for them now doesn't imply that they plan to stay in direct support work forever. Some can see themselves staying in the work far into the future. Others look forward to finishing their schooling and moving into a professional role, sometimes in services to people with disabilities and sometimes in other fields. Others are interested in moving into a management or clinical professional position. Others have further dreams of travel or family life to explore. Finding meaning in the job does not equal retention. It does mean that a growing number of people will take important learning about people with disabilities and the work of assisting them into new roles and settings. The long term effects of the positive relationships the work allows staff to form can't be known, but they are likely to be good for people with disabilities.

Sharing life: *Everyday life with people keeps my feet on the ground*

These workers build satisfying relationships in the context of a small number of people's home life over weeks, months, and sometimes years. Most tasks and responsibilities involve them spending time with or very near the people they assist. Some of their work time is organized by externally set schedules and routines, but most participants also have time with the people they assist at their disposal. Most time is structured by a familiar rhythm of everyday activities: household chores, shopping, keeping appointments, entertainment, community activity, private time. The periods of difficulty and conflict that people sometimes experience happen within this rhythm.

Direct support workers have at least two important choices about the way that they spend time with the people they assist. The first is the choice to share the activity instead of simply going through the motions required to complete a task.

*Most of what I do is simple. I could do it on autopilot, and sometimes I do. But it's better doing things **with** people, so that we share the activity or the quiet time as the people we are.*

The second is the choice to follow the lead of the people they assist whenever they can instead of imposing their own ways.

*I respect the fact that I am helping people live in **their** home. It isn't my home or the agency's home. There are things that*

have to be done, and some procedures we have to follow, but as much as I can I try to find out and follow the ways of doing things that suit these particular people.

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In a way, we are like a guest in people's homes. They need us to be there, but that doesn't give us the right to take over and do everything our way. Sometimes we have to negotiate, and some things are set by rules or schedules, but it works best for everybody when we make an effort to do things that people want in the way people want to do them.

According to direct support workers who have worked or volunteered in nursing homes or group homes, a service design that allows staff to assist people in their own homes offers important advantages to both staff and the people they assist:

Direct support involves doing everyday things with people you usually come to respect and like, in a way that calls on and builds up personal strengths.

- As people come to feel at home in their own place, it is easier to discover individual differences –especially among people whose movement and communication is very limited.
- As knowledge of individual differences grows it is possible to figure out ways to respond to these differences, accentuating the positives.
- There are always compromises and limits that come from having roommates, but these can be managed better in a small home that people feel belongs to them than in a bigger group or even among two or three people who are treated as “residents” in an agency home.
- There is a much greater chance that people will feel settled and comfortable.
- People have greater privacy.
- The chances increase that people will be active at home and outside their homes.

Choosing to be present and to share the rhythms and cycles and hassles of everyday life and choosing to accommodate to people's preferred ways of doing everyday things opens the way to further satisfactions.

There can be joy in doing simple things together: making dinner, dancing; having a birthday cake.

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Not every day is a good day. Sometimes I'm having a bad day. Sometimes the people I'm working for are having a bad day. Doing the regular things we need to do to get through the day gives us chances to lift each other's spirits.

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You can get to know a lot about a person if you are looking and listening to them while you do routine stuff. The better you know someone, the better you understand them. The better you understand some one, the easier it is to deal with the parts of their personality that are not likable. It makes a kind of positive circle. The work parts of the job are easier the better you know the person you are helping.

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Sometimes it doesn't feel like a job at all. Sometimes I think, "I can't believe I get paid for just being with people and helping them live their lives."

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Lots of life is about pretty basic activities and cycles. The people I serve don't make conversation about abstract topics. They have few words and most of those words are about ordinary things. They help me to live more in the moment and to enjoy the repetitions of life.

Making a difference: *Each day I have the chance to make a real difference in somebody's life*

Direct support workers spend time with people because the people need them there. The need may be for help with specific tasks that a person can't do in a typical way, but often there is a more general need for someone to assist the person to structure their time or be available in case a situation comes up that is beyond a person's ability to comprehend or manage adequately. People depend on the assistance of direct support workers to have good days and good lives.

There is a satisfying demand for staff to make full use of their talents and abilities.

This job has the flexibility to let me use all of my strengths.

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I have a chance to use my life experiences to benefit other people.

Some of the satisfactions of dealing well with the ways people depend on direct support workers are simple and embedded in daily routines.

The smallest things can have a positive effect. Helping someone buy their favorite juice can brighten the day.

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I often think about the people I work for when I am not with them. I see something and think “[Person’s name] would really enjoy this.” It’s great to give people the chance to get more of what they enjoy.

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I don’t call off this job unless there is absolutely no way I can make it in. I know that people count on me to keep their world moving in a good way.

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With my encouragement and help, people have gotten a lot more active in their communities.

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People’s choices about everyday things –and bigger things too– depend a lot on what choices I offer, and what information and encouragement I provide, and how I go about giving help. If I do my job in ways that give people less chances to make choices and use the skills they have so that things are quicker and easier for me, I take something important away from them, even though the tasks get done. If I discourage people from going out or trying something new because I’d rather stay in, I take something important away from them, even if nobody complains.

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People can get into real difficulties, and for some people that happens a lot. The way I spend time with people when things are ok builds up a relationship that makes it easier to defuse difficult situations.

The contrast between past living conditions and what the people experience now gives workers the chance to do the right thing.

Other satisfactions come from helping people go for important changes in their lives.

I get to help people define and work to reach their own goals. Not goals that somebody else assigns to them, but their own goals.

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I believe that people have a right to their dreams. I feel good when somebody tells me their dream. It would be really wrong –kind of a violation of the person– to ignore or laugh off their dream.

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This job gives me the chance to help people discover avenues to display real talents that otherwise would be left under the rug.

Doing the right thing: *I'm doing what I'd want done for me*

Many of the people these direct service workers assist have lived in institutions or larger local facilities. Their biographies show that they are vulnerable to having the details of their lives controlled by staff who don't recognize them as people equal to themselves and who hold very low expectations of their abilities. And some people still struggle with the consequences of living for an extended period in an impersonally controlling setting.

Some people have family members with disabilities and some can imagine themselves benefiting from the kind of support they provide.

I want my brother [who lives in another state] to have the kind of care I'm giving.

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It's a Golden Rule thing: I like to be treated the way we treat people here.

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This agency makes it pretty much possible for me to do for the people I support what I'd want done for me if I was in their shoes.

Some of these direct support workers have worked or volunteered in facilities that did not expect or support the kind of relationships that

they experience now. Others have learned about how it used to be for people with disabilities. The contrast between past living conditions and what the people they support experience now reinforces a sense that the job gives them a chance to do the right thing.

Before our agency served them, some people didn't have a lot of things I take for granted: like privacy, a comfortable place to live, a chance to make choices. People get held back when they have to live without those things; they grow when they have them.

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I get to make good relationships with people who don't have many people in their lives.

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People need the stability that comes from having people they can trust. I can be one of those people.

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I'm a roommate. Sometimes we just sit up late together and talk about just anything and nothing. I think times like that are as important for all of us as any of the tasks I do.

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My job fits my personality: I'm a social animal and this job is all about relationships.

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This job has extended my family circle. The people I support have become part of my family's life, not just my life. And some of their families have become part of our family's life too.*

So does helping the people they support deal with prejudice and exclusion in a positive way.

My job helps people break down stereotypes, cross boundaries, and overcome barriers to taking part in community life.

*CCLS values these relationships and assures that safety concerns are dealt with adequately and staff are appropriately scheduled and compensated.

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Advocacy is an important part of my job. Society needs exposure to the people I support. They have important benefits to offer people who don't know them yet – and I get to help people meet and understand each other.

Learning: *I have discovered many things I wouldn't have known if I didn't have this job*

As these workers describe it, direct support involves doing everyday things with people you usually come to respect and like, in a way that calls on and builds up personal strengths. These two phrases might seem contradictory: what is so demanding about doing everyday things –including fun things– with people you like? The tension captured in this question defines the space for learning from the job.

People depend on the assistance of direct support workers to have good days and good lives.

While they come to see those they assist as “just people, like anyone else”, recognition of similarity can be an achievement, not an obvious fact. At first meeting, and until there is enough shared time to get to know them, some people are obviously very different from the people the worker is used to. Their ability to communicate with words may be or seem very limited. Their physical movements may be restricted or unusual. They may experience or be at risk of a variety of physical maladies such as pressure sores, or difficulties with digestion, or problems swallowing. Their capacity for self-control may be different or less available to them. Their emotions may be more volatile or more troubling. Their ability to learn concepts or skills without systematic assistance may be limited. Their capacity to form an understanding of things and make judgments may be constrained. Any of these differences can be amplified in negative ways by a history of being excluded, put down, controlled, and deprived of effective assistance.

The ways that people are obviously different lead to labels like “mental retardation” or “mental illness” or “developmental disability” or “traumatic brain injury”. These labels reveal far less about the person than they seem to, but it can be tempting for a direct support worker to substitute abstract knowledge of a label for specific knowledge of a particular person in their home and community. These labels send a socially powerful message of difference, and it can be tempting for a direct support worker to use this message of difference to justify an impersonal and controlling approach to the person.

Under these conditions, overcoming initial reactions to obvious difference and setting aside the veil of labels to see and appreciate an individual person with the same sorts of desires as oneself and one's friends and the same rights as any other citizen represents important learning.

Before I took this job, I never really knew anyone like the people I work for. It was a revelation to discover how many ways they are just like me. I sometimes feel bad that it took coming to work here for me to understand this. It's a pretty basic thing.

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The differences are really obvious. What I have learned is that you can't really understand the differences until you understand the ways we are similar. Until you recognize how much you are like the person you are helping, your help will be sort of a put down.

The day to day closeness of the work allows those who are willing to learn more about themselves and to improve their ability to respond to difficult situations.

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This job demands self-exploration. I had negative attitudes about disability that I didn't even know were there. Maybe I still have some, but fewer than before I really got to know people.

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The better I get to know a person, the less I see disability.

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Finding out what some people experienced in institutions showed me that there are big social problems that get kept under cover. For most of my friends, this is the way it was for me: an unknown history lived by unknown people.

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I've gained a lot of respect for what people have endured. Rejection. Prejudice. Discrimination. People coming and going in their life. Even abuse. And mostly they come through it willing to keep on with life, willing to reach out and get to know me.

Life with people can be demanding. The rewards of relationship in any situation where people have to share a considerable amount of time and personal space come with ups and downs of mood and conflicts and irritants. And life with people who depend on you for necessary help day in and day out can amplify the ordinary demands of being together. Most participants in this discussion assist a small group of people, and there can be competing demands on their time and attention and conflicting preferences to deal with. The work of assistance is almost always shared with other staff, and responsibilities to other staff can require that some tasks be done before or instead of others and that people meet the demands of a schedule. Some people with disabilities find it easy to go with the flow of routine (at least most of the time); others do not and protest, sometimes with non-cooperation, sometimes with anger. All of this happens at home, usually in a situation that the worker can't leave without disregarding their responsibility.

The day to day closeness of the work allows those who are willing to learn more about themselves and extend their ability to respond to difficult situations.

I have become less afraid.

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I am more open and accepting.

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I've discovered some things about myself and the ways I can be hard to deal with. Sometimes –I hope not too often– my worst self shows up for work. I am glad that the people I support accept me for who I am, enjoying the good parts and forgiving me when I need forgiving.

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I have become a lot more patient. I am willing to stick with people instead of running away.

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I used to think there was dependence (not so good) and independence (good). I have figured out that interdependence makes a much better way to understand what I do. What I do is needed, but that need is met in an interdependent relationship

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I have learned about admitting my limitations. When I was starting out I worked with a person who intimidated me. (That wouldn't be so today. I understand myself better and I am stronger now, but it was true then.) It was really hard to admit to myself that I couldn't do what this person needed. And then I had to get up the courage to tell my manager. I'm glad that I could admit what I couldn't do and move into working with another person without quitting or feeling punished.

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When things get tough, I am less reactive and more thoughtful about what might be going on and what the alternatives might be. This is knowledge of myself that will be helpful to me down the line, in my own life and in whatever kind of work I do.

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I am a lot better at dealing with conflicts.

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It's no secret that this is a pretty low paid job. Lots of people don't value our work because they don't know what people with disabilities have to give. I've learned not to care about what people who don't know and don't want to know think about my job. In a way, I've gotten more independent of other people's judgments and a lot better able to decide for myself what is really important in my life. I feel like I've gotten to know things about life that some of my friends who look down their noses at my job don't know.

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It's hard being the responsible person: being accountable to the people you support and to the organization for making sure that people get what they need. And doing that without falling into acting like people's boss or feeling really superior to them is pretty challenging.

The agency organizes its services to permit as much choice and individualization as possible and there is congruence between what staff find meaningful and what managers define as important.

Support for the work: *This is a good organization*

The question –“What gives you the sense that this is the right job for you?”– is open ended. Participants might have talked more than they did about the satisfactions and challenges of organizational life. Instead, almost all of the comments focused on satisfactions and confirmations made possible in their direct relationships with people with disabilities.

There were several explicit statements about the organizational qualities that participants value:

I am treated with respect by the managers. This makes a really nice change from being treated like crap in the retail job I had before.

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This is a good job for me because there is no homework. I don't have a briefcase full of stuff to do after I leave. I can trust the other staff to make sure that people get what they need when I'm not there.

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The schedule works for me:

- *I'm going to school and the night and weekend hours fit in.*
- *Late at night, when all the work is done and everybody else is asleep, there is time for me to read and study.*
- *It's great to be able to be with people through a whole weekend.*

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We are part of a team. I may be the only staff person with people sometimes, but I know that help is there when I need it. When I get stuck, my co-workers and managers work with me to figure out what to do so that things work out as well as possible.

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The managers really understand what the work is like. They have been where I am. They know the kinds of issues I am facing and they have good ideas about options, based on experience.

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The managers really like people with disabilities and are as committed to them as I am. They'll pitch in and work directly with people; not just when there is a problem, but sometimes just because they enjoy the involvement.

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It's ok to be committed to people here. We're encouraged to get involved and to help people have as much of what they want as we possibly can. What's good for the people we support comes first.

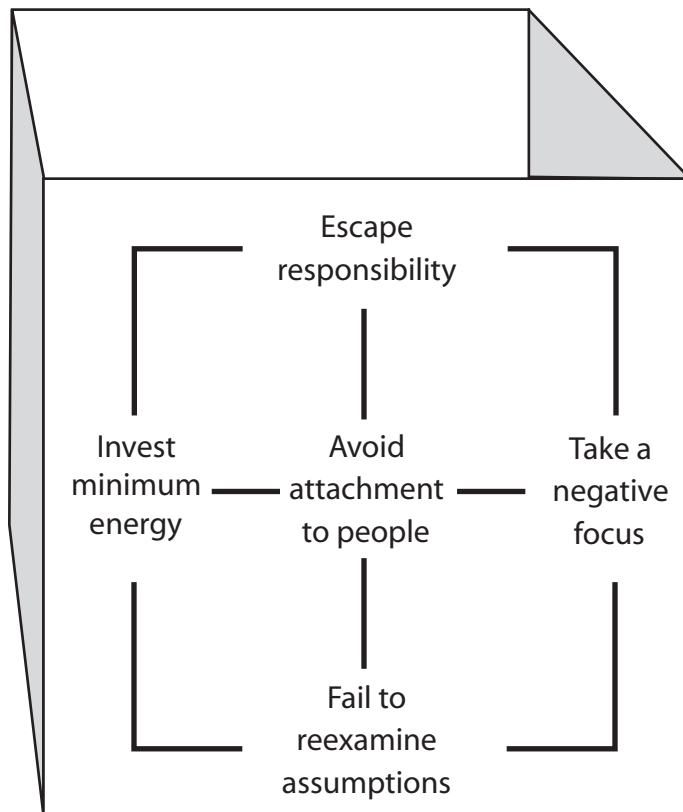
Two features of the agency contribute substantially to the satisfactions its staff can experience in their work. Perhaps these two conditions for good relationships went without much discussion because they are simply the way things are for participants. First, the agency organizes its services to permit as much choice and individualization as possible. It does not operate large group settings and works with people with disabilities to discover and respond to what is most important to them in their living arrangements. Second, the satisfactions staff experience mirror the values of the agency's management. There is a congruence between the issues that staff struggle with to find meaning and what the agency defines as important. The agency values staff who make personal commitments and stand up for what they think is right for the people they support. The agency values the effort to find a balance that leaves people as much autonomy as possible while supporting their need for structure.

Many discussions about assuring retention of direct support workers include a focus on teamwork and responsive supervision, but listening to these staff describe the meaning they find in their work leaves me wondering if these discussions are often too abstract. Meaning for these direct support workers seems situated in particular organizational conditions. Some approaches to providing and managing services allow different satisfactions than others. Direct service work in a larger or more regimented group home differs in important ways from work in settings that are set up to match people's preferences as much as possible. Direct service work in an organization whose managers work at a distance from the people the agency supports and who value compliance and risk avoidance differs in important ways from work in organizations whose managers model direct engagement and primary

concern for dealing constructively with the risks involved in expanding people's choices and opportunities. Direct support workers can form respectful relationships under almost any organizational conditions, but meaning may be easier to find in agencies that deliver and value a more personalized approach to service than in agencies that impose the problems of larger groupings and discord between what management values in action and what deeply satisfies workers.

Just putting in time

How might direct support staff keep themselves from the satisfactions that these workers experience? As positive relationships are at the core of meaningful work, avoiding attachment is the key to experiencing the job as just a place to put in time. What makes the difference is how direct support workers think about their work and how much of themselves they invest in the people they assist.



Escape responsibility

Offering direct support means having people count on you. Some responsibilities are straightforward, like showing up on time. Others are more complex, like providing the structure and support a person may need to stay safe without dominating their life. There are important consequences for people in the way direct support gets done, and some people experience responsibility as a burden, especially when many decisions need to be made without a manager present.

Some people don't want responsibility for decisions that affect other people. They want somebody else to be on the hook for any problems that come up.

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Some people are afraid of people's depending on them. They draw back into just doing the minimum tasks that are required and want somebody else to tell them exactly what to do and how to do it.

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Sometimes there is resentment of a person just because they need help. A staff person can feel like, "Nobody really cares about what happens to me; where does this person get off expecting me to take care of them?"

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Bad things can happen to the people we support. If you are close to someone you feel some of that hurt along with them. Some people don't want to cope with that.

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It's hard for some people to admit to feeling fear or resentment. They try to wall themselves off from bad feelings and wind up walling off positive feelings too.

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Sometimes foresight is a problem. You can learn to think through at least some of the consequences of different decisions, and that helps you see what you can control and what you can't control about a situation. But some people don't see this as something they can or should learn.

Negative focus

Workers who emphasize the negatives in their situation experience less satisfaction than those who practice looking for capacities and opportunities.

When you look at this work as just a job, its easy to dwell on the low pay and low status that society offers us. You can say to yourself, “Nobody else values what I do, so why should I?”

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It’s hard to live up to our principles, especially when budgets are getting tighter. Someone can always find ways that our organization does things that are inconsistent with what we say. If you don’t decide to either bring the problem up for a solution or accept that we’ve done the best we could and we need to move on, you can get cynical about the agency.

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The people we support can sometimes be demanding, and difficult, and unreasonable, and really hard to get along with (just like anybody else). They do have real limitations and there are a lot of barriers to their living the lives they want. If that’s what you look for and talk about all the time, you’ll feel stuck and defeated. Nothing will seem worth trying to change and people won’t even make small steps forward.

Untested assumptions

Some staff hold assumptions about the work that get in the way of forming relationships that allow them to find meaning.

Some people just can’t see past the labels. They don’t work to get to know and understand the real people in front of them because they think they know all they need to know when they see the schedule of tasks to do.

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Some people don’t see the ways people can change if they have encouragement and opportunities.

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It can be hard to notice and really feel good about small positive changes.

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Some people come to their job with the idea that they are going to “save” or “fix” people. If they don’t re-think that idea they will get disappointed –maybe even mad at people for refusing to be fixed or saved. It’s not so far from expecting to save people to feeling like nothing you do makes any real difference, so why try?

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The people we support can react to situations with emotions that don’t seem to fit what’s going on: maybe anger or violence; maybe acting really immature. You can get caught in taking things too personally and reacting back instead of looking for other ways to understand and respond to what’s going on.

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Some people won’t look for help and support from co-workers and managers when they need it. It’s like they think there is something wrong with you if ask for help.

Low investment

Commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of people you respect and want to know better sets a much different tone for the job than investing a low level of energy in going through the minimum required motions to do prescribed tasks does.

You get out of this job about what you put in. If you are a low energy worker, you won’t get much.

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When you do not find things about the people you support to be interested in, you won’t be stimulated by them. The job will seem boring, time will hang heavy, and shifts will seem to go on forever. It doesn’t really help that much to just withdraw and do your own thing or watch tv. The answer is to get more involved in making positive use of the time you have together. It doesn’t always have to be serious or goal directed, this job lets you find fun times with people if you are open to them.

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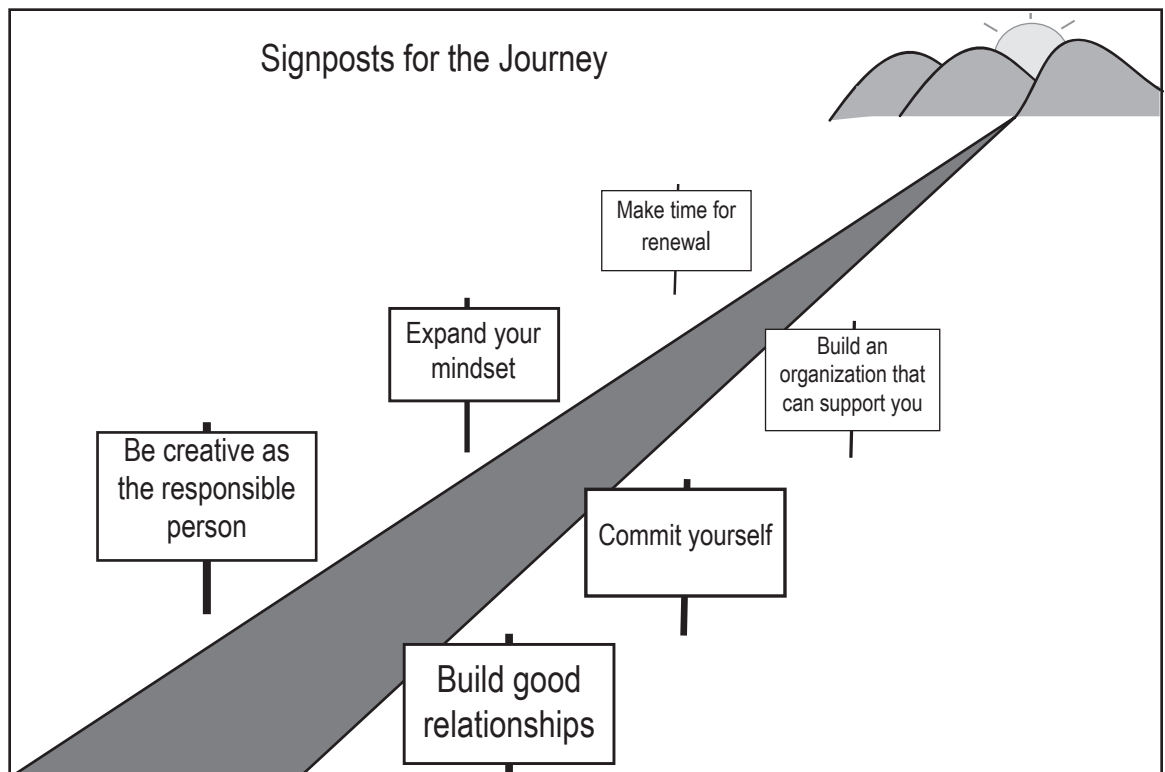
Some people seem to be tired the whole time they are at work. You can find things to do with any of the people we support that will wake you up and get you moving; but you have to take responsibility for making things happen.

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You can get caught in a negative spiral: what you are doing with the people you support doesn't stimulate you, so you blame them for it by thinking they are too limited to do anything interesting with, that makes you bored and tired, people read that from you and draw away into their shells, that makes them less stimulating and more tiresome to spend time with. Imagine what it must be like for the people with disabilities to get through a shift with somebody like that.

The Journey to Meaning

Participants reflected on their experience to identify how they find or renew the meaning in their work. They captured their methods in the form of points of advice to staff who are just setting out on the journey to satisfying work.



Build good relationships with the people you support

Attachment to people is the way to satisfaction in the work.

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Talk and listen to people as equals. Don't talk down to people.

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Putting the person first rather than putting yourself first doesn't make you inferior, and it doesn't mean you have to act like a doormat. It means that you remember that you are there to support a person to have a satisfying life. Remember, you are coming into their home. In lots of situations you need to be the one who adjusts and adapts to the person before expecting the person to adapt to your ways of doing things.

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A service design that allows staff to assist people in their own homes offers important advantages to both staff and the people they support.

Even if you've known someone a long time, don't presume too much, especially when you are predicting how the person will respond to new experiences. People can respond to new opportunities differently –and lots of times better– than you think they will.

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Allow people time and room to develop.

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Each of our lives has ups and downs, ebbs and flows. People need us to stick with them through all that they experience.

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Talk through annoyances; don't let them build up and poison your relationships.

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Believe that people who don't use words can think, and want to communicate with you.

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There will be times that you will anger, or disappoint, or hurt each other. Find ways to get through them.

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Keep finding out more about people by listening to them and by listening to people who know them in other ways (like family members or staff from a long time ago).

Be thoughtful and creative about being “the responsible person”

Being the responsible person doesn't mean controlling. Notice and count on the person's competencies. You don't have to be the “alpha cat”.

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Listening and figuring out how to assist people to have what they want in their lives is the most important job.

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Our job is to assist people, not run people's lives. Respect and a good relationship are the foundation for being responsible for another person's health and safety.

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Just because people need support or structure for decision making doesn't mean you get to take over. It's easy to impose the first solution you can think of. And it can be hard to let go of your solution if a person doesn't go along with it. People react badly to having their choices taken over. And lots of people don't like being told “it's for your own good” with no other information. Find ways to guide people in thinking for themselves.

§

Build on what people do know and can do. Everybody can participate in some way.

§

Look for ways to balance situations rather than taking over. Sometimes it's you (or the schedule) that needs to have something done now. Find ways to negotiate these situations: “If you help me do this now, then I will...”

§

People's desires and opinions matter. If something seems really important to a person but you don't agree, take time

to answer a couple of questions before you react with “no”. Can you and the person find some other way to get what the person wants that is safer or more acceptable? What is the potential harm: is this really dangerous for the person or just inconvenient for me?

Commit yourself

Give yourself to the people you support and the situations you find yourself in.

§

Expect, embrace, and enjoy challenges. See yourself as a cooperative problem solver.

§

Look for ways to use your strengths, talents, and interests on behalf of the people you support.

§

Work on increasing your flexibility by learning new skills.

§

Make sure this is what you want to be doing. Decide: “This is where I belong.”

§

Help people find goals that are really important to them and encourage and assist people to move toward them.

Expand your mindset and check your attitude

Your attitude can change almost anything. You always have some control over how you take what’s happening to you.

§

Don’t be surprised if you discover prejudices in yourself; prejudice is common in our society. Do be willing to re-think and find ways to change your experience of the people you hold a prejudice about.

§

Keep an open mind, especially about what good things are possible for the people you support.

§

Look for positives, especially when you are feeling down or cynical. They are there.

§

Notice when you are on autopilot –just going through the motions of the job. If this lasts very many days, it's a sign that you need to re-energize.

§

Be open to give-and-take. You can be both a learner and a teacher.

§

See the people you support as important teachers. Ask yourself: "What have I learned from this person lately?"

§

These workers build satisfying relationships in the context of a small number of people's home life over weeks, months, and sometimes years.

Keep finding ways to look differently at difference. Some differences that seem negative or undesirable are abilities in disguise. Some abilities are hidden behind labels and low expectations.

§

Don't get stuck in the impossible mission of saving the world.

§

Don't get stuck in the self-defeating belief that nothing you do can make a difference.

§

See how quickly you can catch yourself making negative assumptions about the people you support, about yourself, about our organization. See how many ways you can find to check out and disprove those negative assumptions.

Make time for renewal

Take time away when you need it, Sometimes a time as short as a couple of minutes can be enough. Sometimes you need a much longer break.

§

Renew by thinking about what you are learning from your work.

§

Use some of your time to reflect in conversation with others or just in your own mind.

§

There are lots of different kinds of satisfactions in the work. Look for new ones.

§

Don't be afraid to step back and think about your work.

§

Make time for your feelings and for reflecting on your feelings, especially after something upsetting or very difficult has happened that you have had to stay on top of while it was happening.

§

If you find yourself feeling isolated, ask yourself: 1) how can I bring my relationship with the people I support alive? 2) Who can I reach out to among my co-workers or managers?

§

Look back over what you have been doing and ask, "If it was me, or my sister, or my father getting what I have given over the past week, how would I feel about it? What would I have wanted done different?"

Build an organization that can support your work

Find co-workers to trust. The best way to build trust is to be trustworthy: do what you say you will do and tell the truth.

§

Stop to notice and appreciate co-worker's and manager's investment in people.

§

Don't do it alone. Back up is available. If you are scared, or stumped, or stuck you can get help from managers and co-

workers. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." or "I've made a mistake."

§

Sometimes a match just doesn't work. Instead of just quitting, ask for help. It doesn't have to be a matter of blame –for you or the person. Maybe there are different ways for you to approach the relationship. Maybe you would work very effectively with a different person.

§

Celebrate the different benefits the differences among us staff bring people. Our different ages and cultures mean we can offer different positives. People need the energy that youth can bring; they also need the warmth that those of us who are older can bring.

§

Watch how much time you spend in negative gossip about the people we support, about co-workers, about the organization. If there is a real problem, find a way to work on it. Negative gossip can be a killer.

As these signposts demonstrate, direct support workers need not be victims of low status, poorly paid work. Their relationships with those who count on them for assistance provide opportunities to do meaningful work given that they are treated fairly by service organizations that honor and provide practical support to their relationships. That their work merits greater status and better compensation is obvious from their understanding of what they do.