

Bringing Who We Are to What We Do

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Who are you?

Think about that for a minute. When have you been asked this before? Or should I say, *have* you been asked it before? It seems to be an uncommon question. Roger Daltrey sang it over and over in the Who's *Who Are You*, but he wasn't asking you or me.

When we meet someone we often start with "What's your name?" and proceed from there. What do you do, where are you from, have you read any good books lately – all of which may help us begin to learn who someone is.

Yet "Who are you?" is a wonderful question. I like the simplicity and the possibility in those three words.

Who *are* you?

How do you identify yourself? Imagine an assignment where you were asked to fill a page answering that one question. What would you say? Perhaps you would consider who and what is most important in your life, and how that connects to what's inside of you. What makes you feel most alive? Fortunately, these questions have no wrong answers, and there can even be many answers for each of us.

I've been curious lately about how this question relates to our work. Do we bring who we are to our jobs? In what ways? Does your job allow you to be who you are, or do you check your real self at the door and put on your job self? And what are the limits to being yourself at work? (Because surely there are some.) I wonder how we strike a balance on the job between being who we are *outside* of work and being "professional."

I heard someone in Georgia say that one of the reasons she loves her job is because she feels a sense of being "at home" in her organization. It is a good match for her, a work environment where she feels comfortable and where there is room to be herself. One example: she can wear open-toed shoes and blue toenail polish, unlike in the corporate world where she once was headed. For her, there is not the expectation that she "check" herself at the door.

Many support workers I've listened to say their work with people with disabilities allows them to live their values in their job. That who they are and what they believe to be important are reflected in the good work they are doing. Some might even experience author Frederick Buechner's definition of true vocation: "Where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." And further, some say that what they bring – their true

self, their gifts, their unique personality – is not only accepted, but even *sought out* by those around them at work.

But others have a different experience. Some direct support staff say that, despite believing in the importance of their work, there are few opportunities to share what they bring with them to their job. Sometimes this is because they are isolated in their work. No one is around much to ask the “Who are you?” or even “How’s your family?” or “How’s your dog?” Others find that there are plenty of people around, but the organizational culture does not invite or encourage more than “This is the job you are expected to do.” I would bet that these are the people most apt to be keeping their eyes open for a different job.

I want to clarify that I am not talking about, say, a situation where service coordinator Brian, an accordion fanatic, is encouraged to play his accordion every day at work. Or where support worker Mary, a Rush Limbaugh fan, is permitted to listen to his program each day over the objections of the person she is supporting. There are limits to what we may bring to – or do at – work.

But, (and this is a big but) isn’t it possible for Brian and Mary’s employer to recognize their interests, talents, beliefs and see them as important to Brian and Mary? And maybe even find occasions from time to time where Brian can share his musical gift, and Mary could engage others in a political dialogue?

Can we respect, honor, even celebrate our differences? Can we get to know each other and appreciate the rich diversity in our organizations? Brian loves the accordion. Maybe I don’t, but Brian does. Mary likes Rush Limbaugh. Maybe I don’t, but I’m not Mary.

So we have Brian and Mary. And Jennifer who is a gifted seamstress. And Paul, who is gay, and Pam the baker, and Denise, whose great-great grandmother was a slave in South Carolina. They all have perspectives or talents or gifts that are not only important to who *they* are, but which may be important to others around them.

Then there’s Carl, an artist. Not long after he began working for his supported living agency, his artistic gift started to become known. “Artist” would probably show up near the top of Carl’s page-long answer to “Who are you?” Carl’s agency values this part of who he is, and although hardly any of his job duties relate directly to art, the agency encourages Carl’s artistic sense to come forth in his work, in many ways: offering his perspective with some people he supports in *their* art work, displaying pieces of his art at the office, lending his talents to agency projects.

Carl does not make his living as an artist; he makes it as a support worker. Still, he is an artist, and his agency understands that everybody wins when Carl weaves the artist in with the support worker. Everybody: Carl, the people he supports, his co-workers, and the organization.

Carl says he appreciates that he can be himself at work. In fact, he is grateful, because he knows it is a rare experience. He found a match, a “home” like the woman in Georgia. He is valued for the work he does and for who he is – for being the only Carl there. And this is a primary reason why he has remained in his job for seven years.

If Carl is right in thinking this is rare, can we “de-rarify” it? We’re all too familiar with the workforce crisis. Pay is low. Status is low. Turnover is high. So it serves us well (“us” being people with disabilities, their families and friends, the service system and the community) to consider the reasons why some staff beat the odds and stay in their jobs longer than average.

I’m beginning to think that one reason is that, together with their employer, some support workers have figured out how to more fully integrate who they are with what they do. And I think we can learn from them.

What do YOU think?