

If I Knew Then What I Know Now: Getting Off to a Good Start as a Support Worker

By Peter Leidy
www.peterleidy.com

I hear it over and over. I heard it fifteen years ago. Ten, five, yesterday. When I talk to direct support staff that have been around for a while, who have made a commitment to keep doing this work, most of them say it in one way or another:

I wish I knew then what I know now.

The first days and weeks on the job are filled with unknowns. Some mysteries just come with the territory, and we can never “know” it all. But I wonder about all the unknowns that are unnecessary—that are unknown because someone forgot to mention something, or key information was neglected in the orientation or initial training. Or, as often happens, was mentioned—once—along with so many other things, and not spoken of again.

It’s important to acknowledge that relationships take time; and a lot of what we learn about another person (and our place in his or her life) happens gradually. No one can possibly inform a new employee of everything they need to know right up front, because much of the learning and experiences that will unfold over time have to do with the relationship that is only just beginning.

It takes time to get to know someone, and it takes time to learn a new job. The question is, how long should it take—how long can we *afford* for it to take—for a support worker to learn some basic and important information about the new job, the new employer, and the person being supported?

Support workers who have made a commitment and stayed a year or two (or ten or twenty) are a valuable resource for new staff. But are they tapped for their insights and knowledge? Here are some ideas from direct support staff about how to help someone get off to a good start. Consider these, and think about what *you* would add:

Have multiple teachers. Rather than learning about the person, the job, the agency from one or two people, arrange for a variety of people to help bring a new staff member on board. This could include the person supported, family members, friends, other direct support staff, as well as middle or upper management. There may be many people who carry the story of the person—let’s benefit from their knowledge.

Have access to “the files.” Direct support staff often feel left out of the information loop. A person’s written record, flawed though it may be, is part of the information available about the person’s history, life experiences, and who they are now. While too often this record is deficit-oriented and excludes an account of a person’s gifts and capabilities, it can seem to those on the front lines that they are not important enough to

be allowed to review it. Managers sometimes say that this is because “we don’t know how long they’ll be around.” But wait—part of keeping someone around is helping that someone feel included and well informed!

It is worth considering how the person’s records could be instructive for new staff. To review this information with someone who knows the person well could offer the opportunity to talk over things like labels (what they do and don’t tell us) diagnoses, relationships, the person’s “placement” history, etc. There could be a conversation about where this person’s experience lies in the history of disability services--for example, “What might it have been like in 1946 when her family faced the choice of institutionalizing her or keeping her at home without enough support?” There are many other topics that a guided review of someone’s records could address.

Have a mentor. For all the talk about the benefits of mentoring, surprisingly little is actually done to promote it. It requires a small amount of time and effort to make it happen, but most people involved say it is well worth it. Imagine if (or remember when) you were a new employee. Wouldn’t it have been helpful to have someone designated at the same “level” who could act as a guide or resource person for you, to help you learn the ropes?

Create opportunities for me to talk about what I’m learning.

Feeling supported helps people stay when the going is tough. Staff should be invited to ask questions and to talk with others, including *but not limited to* their supervisor. It is helpful for new staff (and for the person they are supporting) for their supervisor or someone else to check in with them in the beginning. When Mark was working his first weekend with Paul and Andy, his supervisor called a couple times simply to check in and see if Mark had any questions. A few minutes of time on Saturday and Sunday made a big difference to Mark.

Emphasize and support teamwork. The best work gets done when individuals have a sense that they are a team member. You may have noticed that corporate America has realized this, and now sales clerks at some big-box stores have the title of “Team Member.” Teams are big for a good reason: in many types of work, we work better when we work together. In our work, too often staff feel isolated. It doesn’t have to be that way. Recently a long-term direct support worker told me: *“You need to feel like you are part of a team...if your supervisor is not supporting teamwork, and the concept of a team, you need to speak up. When you don’t feel part of a team, it doesn’t feel right, and more things tend to go wrong.”*

Tell me it’s okay to not know everything. One staff person said, *“Looking back, I realize how little I knew at the beginning. There were some things that I could have and should have been informed of, but I guess my supervisor forgot...or maybe she didn’t know. I felt like it was expected that I should know more than I did. I hesitated to ask because I didn’t want to seem incompetent. But now I know that there’s a lot you can’t know right away. I wish someone had told me it’s okay not to know everything.”*

One agency's direct support staff* are devising a concrete way to help new staff get off to a good start: a tool to elicit information from departing direct support staff in order to capture their knowledge and experiences about the person(s) being supported. Here are some of their questions, and then a few more I would add:

- *What do you know about Martha's personal/family history?*
- *How does Martha express herself?*
- *Do you have any specific suggestions to improve communication with or about Martha?*
- *Are there any special interests or hobbies that you've learned are important to Martha? What role can staff play in helping Martha pursue them?*
- *What personal characteristics or tendencies of Martha do you think it's important for a new person to know about?*

To this list I would add:

- *Who are important people in Martha's life?*
- *Have you noticed any newer relationships that you think Martha might like support to pursue?*
- *What have you learned about Martha's daily rhythm?*
- *Do you have any suggestions about improving Martha's support?*
- *Looking back, what would have been helpful to know when you started working with Martha?*

Taking the time to gather this information benefits both Martha and her incoming support workers. It also shows respect to the outgoing staff, who too often are not asked to share their knowledge and ideas.

Consider your workplace, and your own experience doing this work. What questions would you add to the above? What would *you* like to have known more about in the beginning? What can you do today or in the near future to share your unique and important perspective about someone you support?

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