

Something Out Of Nothing

Z = client/customer



1. Introduction

Written by Judith North

Chris is a disability support worker working for Rocky Bay, a leading disability support Provider in Western Australia. When Chris started the Next Generation Leaders Course his plan was to lead a project that would deliver cultural change amongst his peers.

After spending some time with Chris I learned he is insightful, one of those support staff who is talented enough to see the detail and to understand and see the people he supports as people first (not their disability). He is not distracted by “hierarchical” leadership but instead gets his energy from the “small stuff”, namely the opportunities that present themselves to hold a vision for individual people to have a better life. Chris celebrates the everyday leadership of innovation and change in the lives of people he supports.

Chris changed his project from a standard showcase project delivering large scale organisational change to focussing on the potential of support staff to lead and deliver change in the lives of people he supports and started to gather stories of change. Our work and conversations are focussing on trying to draw the “recipe” from these stories. What are the keys to leading change in people's lives? What does “innovation” look like on the ground and how do we develop and support other support staff to have the ambition, drive and determination to lead change on the ground”?

2. Stories

Written by Chris McCormick

Story 1

The first story is of a young man who has a diagnosis of “low functioning” autism. Imagine being diagnosed as “low functioning”. The label disables and risks training those around him to see “no hope”.

Z has some reading skills (colour names and 2 and 3 letter words mostly). He would point at words for us to read and then he would try. His team chose to interpret this as an eagerness to learn. We chose to focus on his love of colours and his favourite locations and created bespoke reading books with pictures he loves. Concrete things relevant to him like trips he'd taken combined with simple words graduating to simple sentences.

He loves reading these books and over a 3 month period, has learned at least 20 new words which he can now recognise.

Z's eyesight is degrading and by watching him closely we saw that he was experiencing difficulty separating words. Myself and the team leader discussed this and concluded that if his eyes couldn't do that for him, we could. So we started double spacing and bookmarks. Both worked to great effect.

Story 2

While brainstorming ideas for activities during the covid-19 epidemic we were working to imagine ways to assist people we support to get out and about. The organisation has two specialised tandem disability tricycles which our support staff really successfully ride out in the community with people we support however lots of the people we support don't need specialised equipment, they just need access to the kinds of things other people take for granted.

I started to explore the possibility of getting some “regular” bikes for people to use and floated the idea with the team leaders and assistant manager of getting some second hand bikes to trial at our

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main hub. Whilst the possibility and my vision for people to ride dominated my thinking I started to notice bike parts on local verge collections. I started to collect from these roadside piles and rang my friends "hustling" for old bikes. In total I managed to get 6 incomplete bikes and built 4 complete bikes out of the parts. People we support have started using them to ride by the river and at Kings Park and are really enjoying using the bikes.

Story 3

This story is about a preteen diagnosed with "high functioning autism" with one of his goals to be more physically active. The covid-19 pandemic was limiting sporting activities, swimming, zoo trips and other activities. Engaging him in ways that made sense to him and ways that would make him want to be physically active was stretching the imagination of his therapy team, his parents and support staff.

Z loves computers and electronic media devices, less so physical exercise. What we needed was something to ignite his passion and interest to make the exercise secondary but integral.

Myself and Z spoke about some ideas and landed on a Pokémon safari of which he enjoys both the television series and games. I loaned him my iPad, created an account and walked around Kings Park catching Pokémon for a whole afternoon. We built in other skills he needed to work on like time management and social interaction, all of them vital to his growth but secondary to his love of electronics. We walked 7 km in 3 hours breaking a record for him as he tires easily. He was so proud of himself when I told him and his parents of this achievement and showed him the photos at the end of the day.

After co-ordinating with his therapy team we have also started to put together a scrapbook from the photos taken from this and other trips. He is now building his skills of cutting out the photos, gluing them in and adding a comment next to each. This also assists work on his fine motor skills and handwriting which have also been identified as problem areas.

Story 4

The fourth story is about changes an organisation can make. During covid-19 and the social distancing restrictions, some people who use the main Hub's activities could not attend. Lives were shrinking because people couldn't get to us and they were finding it hard to get out at all. The team of support workers who organise these activities concluded that if people couldn't come to our base, then the base would have to go to them. They seconded a van, decorated and modified inside and out and used it to deliver activity bags with art/craft and cooking activities to each person in their own homes. The people we support loved the activities and the van. Staff also dressed up and helped to bring joy and maintain connections to people with a disability in a context where they needed it most.

Story 5

This is a story of improvisation. We have a weekly live music group which a small amount of customers attend as part of their routine. On one particular day the group leader/musician could not attend due to illness. We had 6 customers who were waiting for music as part of their community program and were starting to get a bit distressed. We decided to throw an unscheduled disco. We set up the projector with some so fresh DVD's showing music videos and the disco lights and started dancing with customers. The disco went for an hour and was thoroughly enjoyed by all. And still to this day every time the customers see me I get a big smile.

3. Reflections on leadership in direct support

Don't judge people by a label. "Don't judge a book by its cover". Good support means having fresh eyes. Of course it's important to "read" written information about a person before you support them but care is needed not to use that information as a form of "prejudgement". I've found things in people's written information that's no longer correct, though I trust that the person who wrote it thought it was at the time. When people are described as "behaviours" it can be hard to free yourself from seeing them that way to find the person underneath. I see it as my job to notice and help make these kind of corrections. That's what learning about a person means. It's my job to challenge myself

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and others to get to know a person, make a proper connection and grow our collective understanding of who a person is and can be. Every human being changes every day so it's important that we don't let our organisational "records" freeze people in time, that's not what human beings are.

Leadership close to people means being aware of the small things. It's in the detail. It's about the ability, willingness and imagination to see, pick up and run with the small things that show and grow potential. Seeing past a disability to find people who are "differently abled" is our job. It is up to us to show people they are seen, noticed and understood and if they are not, then they can at least see that we are trying. One of the themes through these stories is believing in someone, taking pride in what they can do, so that they can find pride and belief in themselves.

Leadership is about adapting. We have to adapt our language, expectations and ways of working to honour the people we support. So as in story 1 and 3 the important thing was finding topics that capture the imagination of the person we support. Learning then just becomes incidental to a person's passion. Isn't that the way it works for all of us? Good support means meeting someone "where they are at". There's an art in getting the balance right. Too much support disables people, too little support disables people. Finding the right amount of support means creating a "doorway" that has just enough room to enable a person to express themselves and then holding the door open as the person chooses to walk through at their own pace.

Creativity, imagination and "thinking outside the box" are all important leadership skills in the work we do. There's an almost "accidental mindset" that takes the mind to a default list of standard activities for people with a disability. Those activities can become the "go to" for people who get support. If we do what we have always done we will get what we always got. Story 3 is a story about holding a vision for and with someone and then finding ways to get there.

"Passion" is a leadership attribute. Past studies tell us that people follow passion and inspiration first (leadership) and direction (management) second. The issue in story 3 is about learning to use another person's passion to ignite your own motivation. Or maybe it's just that the passion of the people we support can inspire us and enable us to follow (making them the leader), if we can see passion for what it is. Once you spot another person's passion you adapt your way of working to that. It's also possible to combine two passions. Theirs and yours. So, if my passion is helping people and I get clear about that as my goal I come alive when I am achieving that. Simple things like smiles, feedback from family and peers give a sense of purpose, joy and self-worth. That combined energy builds connection. People we support get to teach us about their passions so committing to that and bringing those to life is a blast. I get as much as I give. I get more than I give. What a person's passion is, the subject, doesn't matter. Connection is the vision and the fire.

Leadership is not a lone journey. It's a shared journey, by its very nature we are only leading when there is something to lead and others involved. Servant leadership is a particular leadership approach. It means traveling alongside others, people or communities, and deploying yourself in pursuit of their best interests. Nothing in this context is defined as "mine or yours". As I see it if in story 3 the person needs an iPad and I have one then I share. The journey is critical, "possession" or "ownership" is not. We use what we have available to us to get people to where they want to be. In story 3 I also used my "fit bit" to count steps. I didn't make a big deal of it, I just used the total number of steps to celebrate at the end. It's interesting them to think about how the metrics and what we choose to count impact on the people the data is about. I wanted data that would allow us to celebrate and be proud. It's really hard to live a life being the recipient of advice. "Your health data shows us you need to improve your physical health" – in other words we are telling you what's good for you. We didn't do that. We threw ourselves into his passion and then celebrated the health data as an end by product.

Stories 4 and 5 are all about the need to have and maintain connections and the leader's role in making that happen. In story 4 we had all the current COVID-19 safety standards covered, we were socially distancing, we were doing everything "required" of us but what we wanted was to distribute friendly faces to connect with people and say "I am still here". Maintaining connection was paramount, how to do that safely was a puzzle to be solved. Staying safe was a challenge that could have got in the way of our purpose. Connection with our customers is one of our basic purposes and

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the leadership qualities and ideas that got us out into the community to see and connect with our customers showed the qualities of courage and trust.

In story 5 we were driven by an abhorrence of the opposite to our purpose, fear that people we support would be lonely, and we just used our initiative to find ways around the challenges that would prevent us from finding solutions. Spontaneity in a crisis like COVID is vital but stretches us to think on our feet, draw on past experiences, see the world and routines that keep people safe, well, connected and really know how to work with the people we support. After that just getting clear about what you want to achieve (“maintain connections and routines and avert loneliness”) and throwing yourself at it without fear, believing your best is good enough is better than best. What we learned through stories 4 and 5 was about the resilience of the people we support and we learned new things about ourselves too.

We use supporting documents to guide our work. They are vital to the quality of our work. They can't cover everything and they certainly can't cover a global pandemic that no one was prepared for. When life catches us off guard leading means feeling free to make decisions, staying calm and radiating that to others and remembering ours and others passions. The better we know people we support the easier it is to navigate when circumstances are out of the ordinary. Even without a global pandemic there are times in everyone's life when the “sign posts fall down” and we lose our way and it feels like there's no way through the dark. In those circumstances our job is to see a tough spot and enter the space as best we can. As long as we are brave enough to stay connected with our customers during the unexpected or in difficult situations, we can work with people to find old and new signposts to find a way out of most problems. It's not always my job to “fix things” or the customer's job to “fix things” as there is not always a solution for life's hardships. It's great when we can find a way out of difficulties together but sometimes the courage just to stand beside another in a difficult space and say “I am here” is enough. That's leading too.

Conclusion

Leadership has many different forms and faces.

People providing direct support have a wide range of abilities they can draw on to successfully lead in that space.

Leadership doesn't always have to be about big picture strategic things, it's not all about senior roles. We are called to lead every day and the “small things” offer us that chance to do just that.

Every person has the capacity to influence others on every level and the critical ingredients for that are encouragement, courage, self-belief and a passion for life that goes beyond just you.

Chris McCormick

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