National Leadership Consortium Bulletin

Leading Positive Organizational Cultures

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONSORTIUM
ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

July 2023 • Issue 7

About the Bulletin

The National Leadership Consortium Bulletin is a free, web-based publication dedicated to providing relevant, trustworthy, and thought-provoking information to leaders, practitioners, and people with disabilities and their families involved in the field of developmental disabilities support services. The Bulletin will serve as a bridge between scientific journals and day-to-day leadership, exploring timely research and policy issues in the leadership and disabilities fields with the aim of promoting organizational change and assisting leaders to support people with disabilities to experience inclusive, valuable, and meaningful lives.

About the National Leadership Consortium

Leadership, Values and Vision: Transforming Lives and Organizations

The National Leadership Consortium was founded in 2006 to develop current and future generations of disability sector leaders to have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to transform services and systems to be responsive to the needs, wants, and rights of people with disabilities. Our mission is to provide quality training, technical assistance, and support aimed at the development of values-based leadership in disability sector leaders. The National Leadership Consortium is focused on promoting the rights of people with disabilities to direct their services and lives and to fully belong in their chosen communities. One way the National Leadership Consortium works to meet this mission is through a nationally recognized, intensive leadership development program, the Leadership Institute. These in-person or virtual trainings focus on knowledge, skills, and supports leaders need to transform systems and organizations in the disability service sector.

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Introduction: Leading Positive Organizational Cultures

"*Being a great place to work is the difference between being a good company and a great company*." Through this quote, Brian Kristofek, President and CEO of Upshot, succinctly shared how culture can impact results. When people like where they work, the organization benefits. This issue of the Bulletin outlines why company culture is so important and what research shows impacts it and what it impacts, as well as some of the steps and strategies leadership, teams, and organizations can take to create a positive one. But first, what is organizational culture? Organizational culture sets the context for everything a company does. It is a shared set of beliefs and values that become prevalent and enforced through actions, structures, and other methods. Before jumping into culture change, organizations need to first identify what culture means to them.

In our field, change is often slow. The sentiment of 'we have always done it this way' can stifle even the most exciting new idea. Looking outside of our sector, we can see fields and companies that are much more fluid and embrace change. Their cultures are created and cultivated to encourage this. Articles in this issue will examine other fields and how their successes in creating meaningful culture can impact our organizations. We also review what we know about our system, organizations within our system, and the impact of our current practices on employees and those we support from research such as the *National Core Indicators State of the Workforce Survey Report* and the Relias *Direct Support Professional Report*. Strategies such as examining your organizational hierarchy and leadership style and creating opportunities for, and expectations of, strengths-based employee development can be seen in successful companies and translated to work in our organizations.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a growing focus on creating cultures that promote employee happiness and wellness. Organizations recognize the link between happy and well employees and their ability and motivation to be successful at work. This issue examines how organizations can promote wellness in their cultures by emphasizing autonomy, infusing well-being systems throughout the organization, and considering measurable outcomes for those efforts and systems.

We know that culture impacts outcomes. Outcomes for the organization, for the employees, and for those who use supports and services in our system. To create an organization that truly provides person-centered and person-directed services and supports, the internal organizational culture must be person-centered and directed too. Leadership of one organization share how their organizational structure supports a culture that is person-centered and how other organizations can use their model to do the same.

Although not in this issue, I do want to highlight a previous article that was featured in issue 4 of the Bulletin that directly relates to creating a welcoming and effective organizational culture. In the article "Embedding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)," Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, the Director of Equity Initiatives at the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disability Services, outlines ways for organizations to ensure that they are making a long-time commitment to equity and inclusion. This can be done by embedding equity throughout not only our structures but also our behaviors and our culture. Like the article says, "As an organization strengthens their commitment to equitable outcomes, quality outcomes will follow."

Bulletin articles now feature Key Takeaways!

In an effort to make content more accessible and easily understood, Bulletin articles will now each have three bulleted Key Takeaways, or main ideas, at the beginning of each article. Let us know what you think about this addition at bulletin@natleadership.org

By the end of this issue, we hope you leave with many new strategies for creating and nurturing a culture at your organization that promotes employee engagement and the best outcomes for those who use the supports and services of our system. One thing should come through loud and clear in each article though, **culture needs to be intentionally built and maintained**. Don't leave it to chance.

Kristen Loomis Greenidge

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Learning From Other Fields: Effective Practices of Leaders Who Promote Innovation and Healthy Work Cultures

By Caitlin Bailey and Kristen Loomis Greenidge

- We can learn a lot from research outside of our field about what leaders can do to help an organization be a place where people feel good at work.
- When leaders make sure that employees feel like their wellbeing is important by encouraging time off, giving everyone a say in decisions, and making feeling valued, it helps the organization's culture.
- If organizations want to create a culture of engaged employees, investing in their development by offering things like tuition reimbursement, training, and ongoing support, is key.

Leaders set the foundation and tone of an organization's culture. A study from Gallup showed that managers and leaders account for 70% of the variance in employee engagement, meaning that if you take the average engagement scores in an agency, managers and leaders impact 70% of the difference of those who score above and below the average. Essentially, when leaders demonstrate and support practices that promote safe, healthy, and engaging work environments, employees thrive; when they don't demonstrate and support these practices, employees are disengaged. Another study from Gallup showed that only two in ten employees felt connected to their agency's culture, meaning most leaders have their work cut out for them when it comes to establishing a workplace culture.

To build and sustain engaging cultures and healthy work environments, leaders need to invest time, energy, and resources to stay current and implement innovative best practices. Corporations and for-profit businesses tend to have more resources and personnel to dedicate to researching, creating, testing, and adopting strategies that improve workplace culture and engage workers of different generations, cultures, and experiences than non-profit organizations that are common in the disabilities field. Because they can invest more in creating healthy work environments, our field has an opportunity to learn from companies outside our sector and think about ways that we can adapt some effective strategies to our organizations and teams.

We've highlighted four strategies that corporations and businesses are using to promote healthy cultures that are relevant and aligned with the values and purpose of the disability service sector to promote inclusion, autonomy and control, human rights, and dignity of people we support.

Strategy: Promote Work-Life Balance

Who Does It Well: Indeed In 2021, Blind, an app that lets tech, finance, and corporate employees anonymously rate their companies, named Indeed as one of the best places to work for work-life balance.

What the Organization Does: Indeed promotes flexibility in work schedules and work location by offering unlimited PTO and flexible remote work (people choose to work at home, hybrid, or in the office). They also take one day each month as a 'You' day in which the entire company takes the day off and encourages people to spend time on themselves. Indeed adopts a holistic approach in its benefits packages as well by offering benefits related to physical and mental health. They offer incentives like time off, insurance options, and benefits to help employees, their immediate and extended families, and their pets.

What Leaders Do: Leaders are responsible for supporting employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. They encourage employees to utilize benefits, including wellness programs, paid time off, and flexible work schedules. Leaders also demonstrate healthy work-life balance by participating in monthly 'You' days and highlighting how people spend their time recharging on their social media and website.

Why It Works: According to research from the U.S. Travel Association, Oxford Economics, and Ipsos, Americans did not use approximately 768 million vacation days in 2019, equating to over $65 billion in lost benefits and surges in burnout and disengagement. Individual challenges, such as family, high cost of travel, and organizational challenges, such as packed schedules, excessive amounts of work responsibilities, and cultures that discourage people from using their time off mean that most people do not take the valuable time needed to recharge and refresh so that they are motivated and engaged at work. When company leaders set the tone for taking time off and utilizing programs that promote wellness, it shows employees across the organization that they value them as whole people.

How It Aligns with the Values of the Disabilities Service Sector: In our field, we often talk about supporting the whole person when it comes to services for people with disabilities, but we struggle to implement those same standards in agency policy or how we lead. While unlimited PTO, a company-wide day off each month, or pet insurance may not be options for some organizations, as leaders we can encourage employees to use their time off, celebrate their lives outside of work, and make sure that we emulate prioritizing our wellness so that others see it is valued.

Strategy: Flat Leadership

Who Does It Well: Nvidia In 2020, MIT Sloane named Nvidia, an artificial intelligence company, a Culture Champion, having one of the top organizational cultures in the country.

What the Organization Does: Nvidia got its designation as a Culture Champion in large part because of the way that it is structured, and how its leaders operate. The organization values a flat or nonhierarchical leadership structure that promotes collaboration and innovation at all levels.

What Leaders Do: Leaders exemplify the values of the company and provide employees with the opportunities, support, and autonomy they need to thrive. Nvidia was ranked among the top organizations in the country in the areas of respect and integrity. Leaders ensure that everyone feels respected, they value diversity in their workforce, and they promote collaboration and shared decision making so that every employee feels valued and heard. Their decentralized and flat leadership structure also encourages shared success and acknowledgment across the company. Employees feel like they are supported to do their best work.

Why It Works: When leaders exemplify the values of an organization, employees see that an agency is committed to walking its talk. Integrity and ethical and moral behaviors are consistently named as top skills and practices that leaders need to be most effective. It is essential that companies hire and promote leaders who consistently demonstrate respect, promote diversity, and make people feel valued. Flat leadership structures that encourage collaboration, autonomy, shared decision-making, and acknowledgment promote engagement as well. Study after study has shown that when employees have an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to important decisions and are supported and trusted to succeed in their roles autonomously, they are more purposeful, productive, likely to stay, and motivated to help the organization succeed. When leaders set the tone for mutual respect and collaboration, the workforce benefits.

How It Aligns with the Values of the Disabilities Service Sector: Many of our organizations have goals, missions, and visions that use words like 'promote the autonomy of,' 'design supports that are directed by,' etc. Values of collaboration, flexibility, and control with instead of control over are foundational to our organizations. To truly live these values though, our agencies must adopt these principles in how we lead and treat our employees as well. We hear, far too often, from frontline leaders that their organizations operate very hierarchically and use punishment and threats to control employees rather than flexibility and support to collaborate with them. Our agencies need leaders at every level who have strong moral compasses and who emulate our fields' stated values of respect, autonomy, and support.

Strategy: Putting People First

Who Does It Well: Hyatt Hotels Corporation For the past 10 years, Hyatt Hotels Corporation [Hyatt] has been on Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For list. Recently, Hyatt has also been named a Most Admired Company by Fortune, a Best Employer for Diversity by Forbes, and one of America's Greatest Place for Diversity by Newsweek.

What the Organization Does: Hyatt Hotels Corporation has worked to differentiate itself from its competitors in the hospitality business by investing in its culture and its people. Hyatt invests in employee development programs, offers clear opportunities for advancement, great perks for employees, and at the core there is a "culture rooted in care, belonging, and discovery, where colleagues are celebrated for who they are and can thrive in every stage of their career"

What Leaders Do: Leaders at Hyatt are committed to people, even referring to employees as all part of the 'Hyatt family.' This commitment starts when employees first come through the door. In a study by Great Place to Work, 94% of employees agreed that they were made to feel welcome when they joined the company. Leaders contribute to this feeling by outlining expectations right away and promoting a people first culture by treating employees as valued, capable leaders regardless of position and offering room for autonomy and growth. Leaders ensure employees have the tools to succeed and grow in their role and the company. Hyatt prioritizes fostering a growth mindset by creating opportunities for continued learning and advancement, such as tuition reimbursement, guidance beyond technical skills needed for the job, including training on design thinking and active listening, and an interest in and opportunity for advancement internally by often hiring from within to promote a feeling of growth potential.

Why It Works: Through research from Gallup, we know that employees who know what is expected of them at work, who have someone at work who has spoken to them about their progress recently, and who have had opportunities at work to learn and grow in the last year are more engaged. Hyatt creates cultures of engagement by putting people first and encouraging growth and development right from the beginning. Employees start with a keen understanding of their role and the expectations for that role and as an employee of Hyatt. They are encouraged and supported to have a growth mindset through benefits offered and training given. Leaders support employees to think beyond their role and contribute to the success of the company by valuing their opinions and offering autonomy. We know that design thinking can aid companies in better meeting the needs of their employees. Hyatt ensures that employees have the training needed to try new things each day by implementing design thinking.

How It Aligns with the Values of the Disabilities Service Sector: At the heart of our sector are people. Creating a culture that focuses not only on the people supported, but also on the employees at our organizations can lead to better outcomes in our services and across the sector. In a sector that often focuses on the here and now and the current challenges and successes, it is important to prioritize people and invest in employee development. If employees have the tools and support to learn and grow in their current role and opportunities for advancement to future roles in our organizations, they are more likely to stay and more likely to use that growth and development for the betterment of the organization and the services and supports provided.

Strategy: Prioritizing Passion

Who Does It Well: Patagonia Previously named one of the Best Places to Work in Retail, Patagonia creates a culture of diversity and collaboration aimed at working for purpose.

What the Organization Does: Patagonia ensures it is not getting stuck in a 'culture trap' of only hiring like-minded individuals who fit into the current culture by prioritizing passion instead of only purpose. This begins in the hiring phase. Patagonia hires employees who have passion not only for the greater purpose of environmental activism, but for helping and connecting with others, volunteering, and getting involved. To support employees' passions, they embrace workplace flexibility and offer benefits that support their purpose and the employees who work there, such as onsite, subsidized childcare.

What Leaders Do: Patagonia goes beyond hiring employees who have a shared purpose to look at their passion. Leaders worked to "build an 'un-company' — one whose principal concern was taking care of employees, customers, and, above all else, the planet." Leaders at Patagonia start this during the hiring process, taking a 'bottom-up' approach to reviewing resumes. They prioritize those things typically at the bottom of a resume, like interests, hobbies, volunteering. They take a 'business unusual' approach to hiring and culture, believing that you must "be careful whom you hire, treat them right, and train them to treat other people right. They believe that hiring passionate people and fostering and supporting that passion will reap successful outcomes.

Why It Works: Patagonia embraces the uniqueness that each employee brings to the company. By prioritizing passion, they are looking for a 'culture add,' meaning new and unique skills and viewpoints that don't already exist at the company. Many companies fall into the trap of hiring those individuals who 'fit' within the current company culture, but that can be subjective and can lead to bias. By taking a vastly different approach, Patagonia strives to create a culture of uniqueness that thrives when everyone works together, bringing their diverse experience, skills, passions, and viewpoints, to work towards the common goal of prioritizing purpose over profit and protect the planet.

How It Aligns with the Values of the Disabilities Service Sector: Often, we hire people based on need within the organization and an applicant's relevant job experience or skills. While it is important to understand a new employee's training and development needs, Patagonia believes that their "best efforts are collaborative, and the Patagonia culture rewards the ensemble player while it barely tolerates those who need the limelight." If we consider the goal of our organizations as providing the best supports and services possible, it is important to consider how our hiring practices can shape and impact them and our culture. Shifting to a hiring system that promotes and prioritizes people's passions can change our organizations' connection to the community and other organizations within it. If we better understand who we are hiring in a holistic way and not just looking at the skills and experience of the person, we can leverage our unique differences to ensure that those who chose our supports and services are always at the forefront of the work we do.

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Leadership Needed to Address the Workforce Crisis

By Valerie Bradley and Dorothy Hiersteiner

- For many reasons, provider agencies are having trouble hiring and keeping enough Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).
- National Core Indicators® Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (NCI-IDD) State of the Workforce Survey Report helps people understand some of the challenges DSPs face.
- There are some strategies, like more on the job supports, increased training, and better matching between DSPs and people they support, that might help hire and keep DSPs.

Within the past few decades, the system of services and supports for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the U.S. has progressed from segregated care in institutions to a network of services supporting people to live and thrive in the community. This network of supports is heavily reliant on the workforce of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). DSPs are the backbone of the system of supports for people with IDD and their responsibilities include varied and complex tasks that require skills and training. The DSP workforce now faces many challenges that pose threats to home and community-based service systems. There are many factors that coalesced to create a DSP crisis in Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and supports for people with IDD including:

- Job related variables, like low wages, limited benefits, lack of career advancement, and unpredictable schedules
- Demographic shifts in the U.S., like a larger aging population
- The varied range of competencies required to provide individualized supports
- Increased lifespan of people with disabilities
- More individualized supports requiring higher staff ratios
- Inflation leading to wage competition
- COVID-19 pandemic that heightened the danger of the DSP role and highlighted the precarious nature of DSP employment

Each year, the National Core Indicators® Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (NCI®-IDD) State of the Workforce Survey works with state developmental disabilities service systems to collect comprehensive data on the DSP workforce providing direct support to adults with IDD. The goal of the survey and the resulting data is to help states examine workforce challenges, identify areas for further investigation, benchmark their workforce data, measure improvements made through policy or programmatic changes, and compare their state data to those of other states and the NCI-IDD average.

The State of the Workforce in 2021 survey included responses from 29 states and 3,838 providers and the results paint a picture of the current DSP workforce issues. The NCI-IDD average demonstrates that almost one quarter (24.0%) of responding provider agencies reported having discontinued programs or service offerings in 2021. Across participating states, the average DSP turnover ratio was 43.3%, and, of those DSPs that left employment in 2021, over one half (56.1%) had been employed for less than 12 months. Of those who left DSP employment with responding providers within 2021, 80.4% left their job voluntarily. The NCI-IDD median hourly wage for DSPs at responding providers in participating states was $14.50 an hour, but median hourly wages varied for type of service between $14.41 for residential supports to $15.00 for non-residential supports. Almost three-quarters (73.7%) of responding providers reported providing some type of paid time off to some or all DSPs, and 59.9% reported offering health insurance to some or all DSPs.

The NCI-IDD survey also reveals issues related to equity in the workplace. The data on 2021 revealed that 40.1% of the DSP workforce was Black or African American and 38.6% were White. Conversely, 36.5% of frontline supervisors were Black or African American, while 46.9% were White. This discrepancy merits further investigation.

What can state systems and other leaders do to recruit and retain a strong, quality DSP workforce?

- **Increased wages and benefits –** While it goes without saying that increasing the pay and benefits of DSPs is the right thing to do in recognition of the importance of the work they do, increased pay and the presence of benefits (specifically, payments for higher education tuition, paid job training, and credentialing) have also been shown to increase the tenure of DSPs.
- **Employee Resource Networks –** One innovative model is the Employee Resource Networks (ERN). ERNs pull together job retention services, work supports, education and training. While the focus is on entry-level and low-wage employees, the services are available to all who work for ERN member companies. You can also consider creating internal Employee Resource Groups with the same purpose.
- **Supervisor ratio –** A recent study by New York State found that the ratio of supervisors to DSPs also influenced the length of tenure. Specifically, the ratios of 10 DSPs to one supervisor or less was associated with longer tenure.
- **Training and certification –** Research studies have found that competency-based training is important to ensure the workforce has the skills to provide quality supports. Increased competency is linked to higher wages and increased retention.
- **Organizational culture –** Organizational culture is important to maintaining a stable workforce. One aspect of a supportive organizational culture is the opportunity for DSPs to participate in governance of the organization, to provide feedback for quality enhancement, and to be empowered to innovate and be creative in the ways in which they provide support.
- **Match between workers and people they support –** Involving participants in screening and hiring staff makes it possible to match staff with participants based on interests, skills, culture, and personality. Including the participant in the hiring decision minimizes conflicts that may result in termination down the line.

What Can Providers and Public Managers Do?

- **Use workforce data to increase wages and benefits –** Use the data in your state to inform and persuade legislators, Medicaid rate setters, and IDD leadership about the extent of the workforce crisis.
- **Address equity issues and provide an equal opportunity for advancement –** Take note of the fact that there is a higher proportion of white people in supervisorial roles than among DSPs.
- **Support training and credentialing initiatives –** Credentialing and training are crucial to increase the competency of DSPs which benefits the participants and contributes to retention.

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How to Infuse Employee Wellbeing Into Teams and Organizations

By Rosanny Crumpton

- Employee wellbeing systems must emphasize autonomy.
- Employee wellbeing systems must be infused throughout the organization.
- Employee wellbeing systems must have measurable outcomes.

The focus on our health and wellness has been more prevalent since experiencing Covid-19 both on an individual and organizational level. Many people have prioritized physical, mental, and emotional health and they're wiser for it; however, we still have a long way to go.

According to the CDC, "Six in ten Americans live with at least one chronic disease, like heart disease and stroke, cancer, or diabetes. These and other chronic diseases are the leading causes of death and disability in America, and they are also a leading driver of health care costs."

Additionally, recent studies by National Institute of Health have found nearly half of Americans who responded to the survey reported symptoms of anxiety or depression.

It's a known fact that lifestyle changes can improve our health. Building sustainable healthy habits such as eating a balanced meal, getting good sleep, exercising, and managing stress can make all the difference in a person's life. However, this is easier said than done.

The U.S. Department of Labor published the following statistics related to workplace stress:

- Workplace stress has been reported to cause 120,000 deaths in the US each year.
- Approximately 65% of U.S. workers surveyed have characterized work as being a very significant or somewhat significant source of stress in each year from 2019-2021.
- 83% of US workers suffer from work-related stress and 54% of workers report that work stress affects their home life.
- For every $1 spent on ordinary mental health concerns, employers see a $4 return in productivity gains.

With health being a hot conversation topic and numbers like the above, many employers want to offer health incentives to their staff members. Some employers simply can't afford the continuous turnover, they want to retain their key employees, and genuinely want to create a supportive culture and are doing so by emphasizing wellbeing.

As a National Board-Certified Health and Wellness Coach, I work with individuals and organizations to help promote health and wellbeing. Here's how teams and organizations get it right:

1. **Employee wellbeing systems must emphasize autonomy**. While an organization should have a health and wellness action plan (more on this below), each participating employee needs to have buy-in. We each have our own individual *why* and it differs from the organization's *why*. People's motivating factors are different. For example, leadership may implement a companywide walking challenge competition. They provide pedometers and track number of steps weekly for a period of time. The employer may be doing this to promote health, build community, and support staff retention. With good intentions for a healthy competition among

coworkers, the employee will likely choose to participate with *their* personal reason to do so. Like, they want to comfortably walk their daughter down the aisle in three months without feeling out of breath. Autonomy is essential. It can be provided by allowing participants to self-opt in on any wellness initiatives, contribute ideas to the organizational cause, lead wellness projects, and even share their why.

2. **Employee wellbeing systems should be infused throughout the organization, AKA your workplace culture.** That requires buy-in from everyone, especially organizational leadership. I recently met with a colleague who was hired to do some consult work for a local company. She told me that she recently had to have an uncomfortable conversation with the company's CEO. She had been hired to build strategic plans for this organization that centered wellness. The team met and unfortunately for that company, the boss came in and rained on the entire team's parade. She explained to me that it wasn't that he disagreed with the approach. It was that it became evident to the entire room that he didn't believe in the message of wellness that he had hired her to implement. While I wasn't in the room for this particular conversation, it reminds me of similar instances I've witnessed where a leader is simply contradicting the message. The company's mission is one thing and sometimes leadership does another. When health and wellness is implemented as a company wide effort, it should be weaved into the organization-from the top-down and in between. This can be done with a checks and balance system (see more below) and regular touch points for accountability to take place.

3. **Employee wellbeing systems must have measurable outcomes.** Like any other company-wide initiative, this too should be measurable. Adopt it as you do other requirements in your organization. Make it part of your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) or accreditation outcomes. Build a budget for it under staff development or whichever way it makes the most sense in the company. Make it a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Action oriented, Realistic, Timely) goal. Develop a health and wellness team. Appoint a leader who tracks the outcomes. Whatever you do, make it sustainable.

Like many new things, allow yourself some grace and space for trial and error. When building employee wellbeing support practices, you'll want to make sure to do more than offer a wellness workshop here and there. Ask yourself how any of your actions are building sustainability and meaningful behavior change to support team members in their health and wellbeing. After all, work related stress impacts performance. Healthy employees equal happier, more invested and productive employees.

Poll your staff anonymously to learn about their current individual challenges. Everyone's needs are different. Align individual challenges to the organization's systemic challenges. Be open to the variety of health and wellbeing support offerings, not just what you already know. And get help from experts to support you and your staff as needed.

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Improving Direct Support Professional Retention Through Positive Organizational Culture

By Nellie Galindo and Arlene Bridges

- Create targeted onboarding training that addresses the issues Direst Support Professionals (DSPs) will face in their day-to-day work.
- Offer career paths so DSPs can grow their career in the direction they want.
- Take time to recognize the great work of DSPs in a way they find valuable.

It's no secret that retention rates among intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) service providers are troublingly high. The last time this data was collected in the 2020 National Core Indicators® Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Staff Stability Survey, Direct Support Professional (DSP) retention rates hovered around 56%. This difficulty in retaining qualified staff is leading many agencies to have to turn away potential clients and case managers are having difficulty placing clients with services.

One way organizations can mitigate the impact of DSP turnover is to create a culture that more effectively retains staff. In this article, we'll outline three strategies IDD agencies can use to create this type of culture: improve training, offer career growth opportunities, and recognize quality work.

Improve Training

Feeling confident and competent in one's role is key to feeling comfortable at work. Therefore, organizations need to place a premium on training throughout the employee lifecycle.

In the 2023 Relias DSP Survey Report, only 46% of respondents reported feeling well prepared for their job after onboarding training. This was startingly low and speaks to the gap between organizational expectations and DSP needs. On the bright side, organizations can use this data as a launching point for culture-building initiatives.

To create the type of culture that can better retain IDD support staff, start by building out targeted onboarding training that specifically addresses the issues that DSPs may face once they are on the job. This may involve creating personalized learning plans to fill skill gaps of incoming DSPs or evaluating DSPs' competencies throughout the employee lifecycle. It also includes offering easy access to continuing education when unique topics come up, such as working with individuals who communicate with sign language or learning about specific developmental conditions.

Training proves critical to improving culture and increasing retention, as 66% of respondents to the Relias 2023 DSP Survey Report said that better professional development opportunities would increase their likelihood of staying at their current organization.

Offer Career Growth Opportunities

Going hand-in-hand with continuing education and training opportunities, offering clear career advancement paths is an increasingly important means of creating a healthy culture that retains staff.

To again draw from Relias' 2023 DSP Survey Report, 65% of respondents reported that they would be more likely to stay with their current organization if provided with new leadership and/or career opportunities. While this may involve leadership development for some, it could also include specializations, such as becoming an employment coach or working with aging individuals with IDD.

Much like any other industry, for individuals to feel valued by an organization and stay with that organization long-term, they need to see a future for themselves there. The best way to achieve this is to lay out career paths for every position in your organization, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities that go along with each role in this path. By creating career paths and making them accessible to everyone in your organization, staff members can know what training they need to get where they want to go in their careers.

Recognize Quality Work

The role of a DSP can be a thankless job. Yet these professionals give all of themselves every day to help the people they support. To create a culture that can attract and retain DSPs, it is crucial to offer regular recognition for their great work.

There are many ways to show appreciation and to recognize the work of your DSPs, a few of which we have already mentioned. The top two ways respondents to the Relias 2023 DSP Survey Report preferred to receive recognition was the provision of professional development opportunities (66%) and new leadership/career opportunities (65%). A close third to these options was receiving private recognition directly from their supervisor (64%).

More than double the number of respondents preferred private recognition from their supervisor over recognition in front of the CEO/executives (32%) or their team (30%). This goes to show the huge role that great supervisors play in creating a viable culture at IDD organizations and their importance in maintaining DSPs' job satisfaction and wellness. Another key to creating a great culture at your organization is to work with your DSP supervisors to make sure they know how to create an environment of recognition and appreciation for their team members.

Nellie Galindo, MSW, MPH, *is Senior Product Marketing Manager at Relias. She received her Master of Social Work and Master of Science in Public Health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has worked with individuals with disabilities in several different settings, including working as a DSP for individuals with mental illness, leading a youth program for young adults with disabilities, and creating and facilitating trainings for individuals with IDD. Galindo has worked in state government helping individuals with disabilities obtain accessible health information in their communities, as well as utilizing the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure equal access to healthcare services. Contact Nellie at ngalindo@relias.com.*

Arlene Bridges *is a Senior Product Manager for IDD and ABA at Relias. She has over 20 years of experience in many areas of IDD service provision, including clinical coordination, oversight and administration. She has experience in managing contracts and billable services with MCOs and other payers, overseeing quality improvement processes, and working with CQL accreditation requirements. She served on the board of the NC Provider Association and currently serves on a human rights committee for an IDD organization in NC. Contact Arlene at abridges@relias.com.*

Creating An Intentional Culture: Keeping It Simple with One Big Idea

By John Dickerson

- Culture is built, whether the organization is intentional about it or not.
- An effective way of building culture is to center it around one big idea based on your organization's vision.
- Stories are the most effective way to help people understand the meaning of what you are trying to communicate.

When leaders are asked, "How much time do you spend working on the culture of your organization?" people almost always say, "Not enough." In truth, every moment of every day you spend with your organization you are building the culture – often unintentionally.

You are building your culture when you communicate with your staff, when you meet with individuals you support and their families, when you interact with your team, and when you set policy. For example, I recently asked families of an organization we are working with, "What communication do you get from the agency?" Their response was, "We get a call when things go wrong." This is not necessarily the culture the organization was hoping to project, but what you do every day defines your culture. And it is not necessarily about spending more time but about spending the same time intentionally.

One Big Idea – Simple, Inspiring, Repeated Through Stories

Culture can start with focusing on One Big Idea. Keep it simple so staff, families, and people with disabilities not only understand but embrace your message. *"The shortest distance between two people is a story."* – Patti Digh

Stories are the most effective way to help people understand the meaning of what you are trying to communicate. Through stories that reinforce that One Big Idea from different perspectives and different people, you can highlight and focus on the positive results.

A recent Harvard Business Review article shared that today's leader must be an effective storyteller.

For example, consider if the vision or strategy you want to communicate is "using technology to help empower people in their lives." You have a clear strategy and resources available and yet it is not being implemented the way you envision. Try telling stories!

Share short stories of people in your organization or around the country using new tech to improve their lives. For example, this Quillo video shares the experience of a woman talking about the first night she used remote supports. Ask people in your organization who are using technology what works for them and use their stories to guide others.

One of my favorite stories about the use of technology was when a friend who spent his first month using remote supports told me what life was like and how much he liked staying in touch with someone through a computer monitor and camera mounted in the wall. He said, "John, the guy on the wall is friendly and does not always boss me around!"

We know from adult learning that people need to hear things several times before they understand and embrace an idea. So, find more stories to keep bringing people to the point of understanding.

You might say you don't have time to do this, I would suggest you do not have time not to. I am a big fan of Marc Gold and had the chance to meet him back in the day. His Try Another Way approach is a wonderful tool to help people discover new solutions for people with IDD. The approach is very personalized, and its core belief is that everyone can learn if we can figure out the best way to teach through evaluation and feedback.

Many of you have recognition programs, such as Employee of the Month and Employee of the Year, often recognizing people not only with a plaque but sometimes a monetary reward. I'd like to suggest you *try another way.*

A psychologist friend shared with me that when you give out an Employee of the Month/Year you have one winner AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF LOSERS. Does the concept really work?

My friend suggested instead of picking a monthly winner, constantly train managers to catch people doing something good – big or small, praise it! Then, share the story to model that behavior and do it over and over again. Catching people doing the right thing every day will have a much more positive effect on staff than picking one winner each month. Rather than Employee of the Month, *try another way* by constantly acknowledging everyone you can.

At Quillo we are all about storytelling and the results are important. Staff shared that 42% felt stories improved their relationship with their supervisors and 72% said it improved relationships with the people they support. Over 80% of families and people with IDD reported that short success stories helped them create a vision for the future that was more positive and informed.

However you choose to do it, building an intentional culture starts with you. I love talking with people about their intentional culture so please reach out if you have a story you would like to share!

John Dickerson *is the CEO/Founder of Quillo. He is starting his 51st year in the field of developmental disabilities, 42 of which were with The Arc. Having planned to be a teacher, John joined this field at the suggestions of his college football coach who also was a professor of special education at Huron College, Huron S.D. and has stayed with it ever since. His passion is engaging individuals with I/DD, their families and those that work with them in building a better life for all. Contact John at john@myquillo.com.*

Innovative Initiatives Q&A: Ensuring Organizational Culture Supports the Mission

An Interview with Bryan Dooley and Mark Steele from Solutions for Independence

By Amanda Rich

The following is a conversation with Bryan Dooley and Mark Steele from Solutions for Independence in the Piedmont Triad area of North Carolina. Mark Steele is the Executive Director of Solutions for Independence and Bryan Dooley serves as a Community Inclusion Specialist for the organization. Bryan and Mark share how organizational mission needs to be the foundation for organizational culture.

- Creating a healthy organizational culture requires everyone to have an understanding of and respect for the history of the organization and the people the organization serves.
- For organizations to "walk their talk" it is important that the organization's board and leadership reflect the people who are served by the organization.
- Leaders of organizations with positive workplace cultures understand that no one can do it all on their own and create places where it is safe for people to ask for help when they need it.

What is Solutions for Independence Center for Independent Living (SICIL)?

Bryan Dooley:

We support independent living. We are a grassroots organization led by people living with disabilities. We help people help themselves and help them get community-based support. We help people learn about advocacy. We do independent living skills training. We help people transition out of nursing homes and a lot of other things.

What is the role of a Community Inclusion Specialist?

Bryan Dooley:

I help people with disabilities with whatever they need help with. First, we develop goals and then we work on "living" the goals. As long as it has to do with independent living, we can help.

As a Community Inclusion Specialist, how do you ensure that people with disabilities are fully in charge of their lives and their services, and have opportunities to belong to their chosen communities?

Bryan Dooley:

Well, that's a good question. First of all, as an independent living organization we are person-driven, so I don't do anything without the person with disabilities telling me what they want to do and just support them. So, when a person with disabilities calls me, I don't do anything until they tell me what they want help with and then I support them to help them achieve their goals. I don't do things for them. I am just here to support them.

How does your organization ensure that the culture is driven by its values and how do you make sure that the organization is a place that people know is person-directed?

Bryan Dooley:

Well, I'm not the boss, but we all help. It involves everyone. This organization supports people with disabilities and everyone at this organization has a disability. So, we all understand the Disability Rights Movement. We all understand where there is a struggle. Though we have different experiences, we all have lived experience. Most of our board of directors, they have disabilities also.

Mark Steele:

As a Center for Independent Living (CIL), SICIL is mandated to have, at a minimum, at least 51% of the staff and board members with a significant disability. This ensures that SICIL is embedded with the disability community and decisions that we make involve individuals with disabilities. The concept of person-directed is at the foundation of Solutions for Independence and our approach to service. The consumers that come to us for services drive the direction that we take. We developed our 3-year business plan based on the needs of the communities that we serve.

If somebody with a disability was looking for a support services organization, what would you tell them to look for, or look out for? Many organizations say that they are person-directed or person-centered, but not all of them necessarily walk that talk. What do you think are some good signs?

Bryan Dooley:

Well for me, having a person with disabilities in leadership is important. And not just one person with a disability, not just a token person, but several people with disabilities in leadership roles who have real influence, is important.

What is the role that leadership plays in impacting the culture of your organization?

Bryan Dooley:

Well, we all have different experiences and we all have lived experience and bring that lived experience to the table to help this organization in different ways. We really try to involve and influence our local community. It's not just about changing the culture of an organization. It's about changing the community. We have a lot of events, and we go out and we talk to people. We visit schools a lot. We go to resource fairs. We host community events and educational events and this office community is visible for people with disabilities and others as well.

Mark Steele:

Solutions for Independence has been in the community since 1992 and has consistently been a resource for individuals with disabilities. The current leadership, including board members and executive staff, has various disabilities and this provides for unique perspectives and approach to serving our community. From the top down, SICIL is focused on being a strong resource for individuals with disabilities in the communities that we serve. Those individuals that are in leadership roles with SICIL are independent thinkers and know the value in 'taking care of your business' and 'handling your stuff.' We realize that no one can do it all themselves and knowing when to ask for help is a strength, not a weakness.

How can other leaders make sure their organizations have cultures that are centered on the people they support as opposed to the convenience of the organization?

Bryan Dooley:

Well, as I said you need people with disabilities in leadership. If they are not, you can create positions for them to be in leadership and put people with disabilities on the board of directors. I started as a volunteer and was one for a long time. Then I got on the board of directors and now I'm on the staff. So, I have been in several different roles. For me it's made a big difference having a boss who has disabilities. He uses a wheelchair also. He is an incredible role model for me. He's been in the field a lot longer, but we have a shared experience of having a disability and using a wheelchair. For everyone at an organization, whether or not they have a disability themselves, learning something about disabilities and etiquette is important. Making sure people are respected and feel respected. And knowing the history of people with disabilities is important.

Mark Steele:

SICIL tries very hard to stay in our lane with a focus on serving individuals with disabilities to assist them to live as independently as possible. Staying in our lane is much easier when an organization has leadership that is invested in the mission and the outcomes of the organization. In our situation, outcomes are people with disabilities living independently and thriving in our communities. Since our staff and board members consist of people with disabilities that live independently, we are continuously reviewing and analyzing our service provision and making changes to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the communities that we serve. As Bryan indicated, having people with disabilities in leadership and/or decision-making roles helps to make sure that the culture of our organization remains centered on those we support.

Bryan Dooley *is a Community Inclusion Specialist at Solutions for Independence Center for Independent Living in Winston-Salem North Carolina. Dooley is a graduate of Guilford College, Summa Cum Laude. Earning a degree in History. Dooley also currently serves the state of North Carolina as both the Chairman of the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Co-Chair of the North Central Olmstead Plan Stakeholder Advisory Committee. Since his mother passed away unfortunately, Dooley has lived in the struggle to achieve the goals of the Olmstead Discussion every single day and has used the knowledge to help his consumers. Contact Bryan at bryan@sicilnc.org.*

Mark Steele *is the Executive Director at Solutions for Independence Center for Independent Living. He holds a master's degree from East Carolina University. Mark is passionate about disability rights and enhancing access to community-based services. Contact Mark at mark@sicilnc.org.*

Strengths-Based Leadership to Improve Organizational Culture

By Cory Gilden

- Recognizing and applying your strengths in the workplace makes you a more effective leader.
- Recognizing and utilizing the strengths of the employees at your organization helps build their confidence, which leads to positive workplace and personal outcomes.
- Strengths-based leaders know their strengths and the strengths of their team, incorporate strength development in their organization's mission, vision, values and processes, and invest in the development of their staff's strengths.

What Does the Research Say?

Strengths-based leadership is a positive leadership style that emerged a couple of decades ago and has been confirmed as an effective way to improve individual and organizational performance by the analysis of 20,000 in-depth interviews with senior leaders, studies of more than one million work teams, 50 years of Gallup polls of top leaders, and a study of 10,000 followers around the world by Gallup. The book *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* from Gallup, chiefly based on Don Clifton's work, describes the three key elements to being an effective leader as: "knowing your strengths and investing in other people's strengths, getting people with the right strengths on your team, and understanding and meeting the basic needs of those who look to you for leadership." Essentially, strong leaders are aware of their strengths and utilize the strengths of their staff while weak leaders may either be unaware of or try to hide their weaknesses and focus on identifying and improving their staff's weaknesses. According to strength-based leadership, focusing on people's weaknesses diminishes their self-confidence, while focusing on strengths has been shown to improve confidence, leading to improved work engagement, productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction, less turnover, more cohesive teams, enhanced commitment to care, improved person-centered care, and increased job satisfaction, as well as having personal benefits to employees such as higher incomes and better health outcomes.

While seemingly simple, recognizing and working with people's strengths may not be an easy task. Not everyone is self-aware and positive feedback may not be accepted or internalized because people are sometimes afraid of becoming complacent, worried it may go to their heads, or worried that expectations for their performance in that area will be higher in the future. Also, often praise in the workplace through performance reviews has been used to make people feel good or to brace them to hear the things they need to work on, instead of a launching pad to promote confidence and better work outcomes. Conversely, leaders should not lean too hard into their strengths because overusing strengths could lead to one-dimensional or unbalanced leadership, for example a leader growing too forceful or enabling. When utilized correctly, a strengths-based leadership approach has been shown to have positive effects in many fields, including the disabilities field.

What Does It Mean for Our Field?

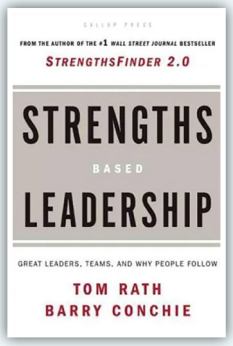
Building a strengths-based culture at a disabilities-related organization is ideal because it includes acceptance and inclusion, concepts that are talked about in the disabilities field but sometimes not integrated into organizations at an operational level. Strengths-based leaders embrace diversity, hiring people with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and strengths so there is more opportunity to align projects to people's strengths. Strengths-based leaders also strive to understand their employees by knowing their strengths, which helps motivate employees and give them a sense of purpose. Strengths-based organizations offer opportunities for growth to their employees based on their strengths and how they want to grow, which keeps employees more engaged and less likely to leave for other opportunities. By helping employees develop strategies to leverage their strengths, strengths-based leaders empower everyone to maximize performance, leading to better organizational outcomes, such as better services for the people they support.

The positive strengths-based approach leaders use to improve organizational operations and culture should also be mirrored in individualized, person-directed service delivery. The "Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability" recommends assessing a person's functional strengths and needs, along with assessing their desired life experiences, ambitions, and wants, and then linking those personal goals with related resources and action strategies that build on the person's strengths. This approach prioritizes the empowerment of the person by considering their strengths and abilities first and then adding in other nonspecialized or natural resources before adding professional services and resources as necessary. This approach is very different than the historical medical model in the disabilities field of identifying and addressing a person's deficiencies or limitations related to their disability first.

To Learn More about Strengths-Based Leadership, check out these resources:

Summary of the book, *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*: http://ebsp.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/strengthsleadership.pdf

To purchase the book, visit https://store.gallup.com/p/en-us/10369/strengths-based-leadership



What Does It Mean for Me?

A strength-based workplace starts with leaders examining themselves, their employees, and their organizational policies and practices. It requires adopting not only a philosophy, but actions that support a culture of respect and ongoing development. Here some starting steps for organizations wanting to be more strengths-based:

- Since people may not realize their strengths in the workplace, surveys such as the CliftonStrengths assessment by Gallup (a tool that help tie strengths to daily tasks in the workplace), which is administered during some of the National Leadership Consortium's programs, or other assessments may be helpful to identify strengths.
- Because people may be resistant to positive feedback, it is important to give them evidence of their strengths through qualitative data like anecdotes and quantitative data like ratings on a performance assessment. The combination of a high rating on a 360-degree feedback evaluation with positive comments about that specific strength all in one place helps prove the strength of that skill to the employee.
- Hire people from diverse backgrounds with different skill sets. More variety in the workplace will provide a better chance that employees work on projects aligned with their strengths.
- Strengths-based organizations are more focused on developing people than managing them. To be clear about having a strength-based approach, strengths development should be built into the organization's mission, vision, values and processes.
- Organizations with a strengths-based approach make decisions that are based on individual or team strengths. Consider employee strengths and skillsets and how they can be aligned with new initiatives and when forming balanced teams to complete those projects. Employees should be given a say in which projects they work on.
- Strengths-based leaders continuously promote the development of strengths in their staff. Consider offering training and experiential learning opportunities to staff frequently and allow staff to select training that excites them.

Cory Gilden *is the Research and Evaluation Manager of the National Leadership Consortium. Cory holds a Ph.D. in Urban Affairs and Public Policy and works with local and national organizations conducting research and advocating for people with disabilities and their families. Contact Cory at cgilden@natleadership.org.*

What We're Reading, Viewing, and Listening To

Title: Open Future Learning (Instagram page)

Author: *Open Future Learning*

Description: Open Future Learning is an online learning provider dedicated to the IDD workforce. Their Instagram is fun, funny, and smart and uses videos and photos by and starring people with disabilities to illustrate thought-provoking ideas about supports for people with IDD.

Title: 2023 DSP Survey Report

Author: *Jordan Baker, MA., Lance Kruse, PhD, Arlene Bridges, BA and Nellie Galindo MSW, MPH, of Relias and ANCOR*

This report is based on a survey of DSPs working for IDD service providers. Participants gave their input on supervisor support, recognition, and career advancement. Based on the survey data, we can see that a desire for workplace wellness, a thirst for learning opportunities, and a yearning for career growth options are driving DSPs' attitudes toward work

Title: The Fearless Organization & The Fearless Organization Scan

Author: *Amy C. Edmondson, Harvard Business School*

Description: In *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson highlights how organizations with cultures that promote and support psychological safety thrive. This book shares examples and strategies on how to create a culture of learning and growth by prioritizing and embracing psychological safety. It shows that a company can only make real progress when employees feel free to discuss their plans and ideas and dare to express their concerns openly. Using *The Fearless Organization Scan*, you can measure and better understand your team's level of psychological safety.

Title: Workplace Stress

Author: *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*

Description: OSHA shares workplace stress findings and national statistics and gives guidance and tips for employers. The website also offers training resources, outreach materials, and tips on approaches for different demographics of employees, such as working parents, young workers, and frontline workers.

Title: The Positive Dog

Author: *Jon Gordon*

Description: This book uses the metaphor of dogs to get the reader to think about how to shift our energy to be more positive. According to the book, we each have two dogs within us who are constantly battling: one who is positive, happy, optimistic, and hopeful, and another that is negative, mad, sad, pessimistic, and fearful. The book reveals strategies and the benefits of harnessing the power of positivity.

Upcoming Training Sessions

September 2023

The Leadership Empowerment, Advancement & Development (LEAD) Training Program will be held in person and via Zoom in September 2023. Applications are open now and will close on August 4th. Click here for more information or to apply. This training is open to all Direct Support Professionals in the state of Delaware.

October 2023

The Western States Leadership Institute will be held in October 2023 in California. If you would like to be notified when we open applications for this Institute, please add your name to the list here. This Institute is open to all Disability Sector Leaders.

November 2023

The 2023 Canadian Leadership Institute will be held via Zoom in November 2023. Applications will be open in August. If you would like to be notified when we open registration for this program, please add your name to the list here. This Institute is open to all Canadian Disability Sector Leaders.

Upcoming Workshops

October 2023

The Virtual Leadership Boot Camp will be held via Zoom in October 2023. If you would like to be notified when we open registration for this program, please add your name to the list here. This workshop is open to all Leadership Institute alumni.

Contact Us

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If you have any trouble accessing the referenced material, please email Amanda J. Rich at openroadicc@gmail.com.