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The Handicap May Be Yours

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ATTITUDINAL OVERVIEW

For the past year and a half, I have been the director of volunteers in an agency where half the volunteers are disabled persons. Through my work, I have come to the realization that the primary difficulty in incorporating disabled persons into the workplace (and elsewhere) lies not with their disability, but with our response to it.

We in North America have been thoroughly socialized into accepting one standard of beauty. Contained within that image are a person's attributes. Thus, beauty also connotes intelligence, social status, appropriate sexuality. In meeting other people, we immediately evaluate them on the basis of their similarity or dissimilarity to that image. If they approximate that image, they are suitable people with which to make social contact. If they look different, we already have a pre-set notion that they are not "good" and we shy away.

This pervasive image affects our interaction with disabled persons. Until recently, the majority of disabled persons were kept hidden from the American public in institutions and back rooms. Now, they are seeking equal participation in American life, and we need to deal with our responses to them.

OVERCOMING NEGATIVE RESPONSES

I entered my agency with a strong belief in the right of all people to lead fully productive, participative lives. I perceived myself as an advocate for disabled persons. When I found myself reacting negatively to some of the staff's physical differences, I was surprised and disappointed. I can only deduce that my difficulties were due to the socialization I had received, and were typical of first encounters between non-disabled persons and disabled persons.

I anticipate that, as you begin to incorporate disabled persons in your volunteer program, most of you will go through a similar process of acculturation. I will briefly share my experience, so that if you have some inner difficulties, you will know that you are not alone.

During my initial interview, I was introduced to a woman sitting in a wheelchair, who seemed completely surrounded by equipment. I reached out to shake hands and was met by little, inflexible fingers. Their rigidity made me gulp. I spent many months trying not to look at the long, spidery arms of another staff member nor could I stop myself from continuously wondering if his face was truly longer than other peoples'.

It took me some months to be completely at ease. I knew I had gotten to that point when I found myself remembering my initial reaction to my colleague's face. I no longer saw his abnormality. I liked him. I enjoyed working with him. He had become a person to me.

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The woman also emerged out of her equipment. As we shared an office, we met each other as co-workers. I grew quickly to appreciate her keen and empathetic response to people. I also learned her life story.

A TYPICAL LIFE STORY

Typical of most disabled people, my colleague participated only minimally in social and community life. As a child, she was tutored at home. The public schools were not accessible to her. Marriage was not considered, despite her beautiful blue eyes, her intelligence, and her good heart. Neither was employment an option.

From that secluded and isolated situation, her life has gone through a metamorphosis. In 1976, she sat in her first classroom, to begin work on her master's degree at the age of forty-six. In 1981, she held her first paid position, outside her home. In the fall of 1982, she drove herself to work for the first time because, for the first time, she had a driver's license and her own vehicle!

These changes in her own life were simultaneous to a general change in the attitude and self-perception disabled people had of themselves. Only in the late sixties did disabled people begin to perceive that the isolation and loneliness which shrouded their lives was not fundamental to their existence. As a result, they began to work for social and political change. To a degree, they have succeeded in obtaining governmental support and social acceptance. My agency, Resources for Living Independently Center, is an outgrowth of these efforts. It is a social service agency serving disabled persons through a staff composed primarily of disabled persons.

USING MY EXPERIENCE WITH VOLUNTEERS

Both non-disabled persons and disabled people come to the agency to volunteer. Of necessity, I speak to them somewhat differently.

When interviewing non-disabled persons, I have begun to use my initial experience as a way of opening discussion regarding their feelings about working with disabled persons. They need to evaluate their response to this environment. Most of these people will be supervised by a disabled person and need to be aware of that. To many, this is a new concept. To a few people, this has been an uncomfortable idea.

It has been important to discuss this issue from the start. It has enabled most people to relax and openly accept this new situation. Some have disclosed hidden disabilities. The few who have felt significantly uncomfortable have been able to say so and have generally determined not to volunteer here. They have screened themselves out.

The disabled people who come for an interview know this agency is oriented toward their needs. For instance, I am able to offer transportation (a contracted service) to wheelchair users and other disabled persons. Yet often when they first come to the agency they are surprised by its accommodations and by the staff. To see other disabled people holding positions of responsibility is a new and wonderful experience. They can relax. They can be who they are and know that they are okay.

A disabled person expects to be treated like any other person. Erving Zola, a professor of sociology at Brandeis University and a disabled person, decided on an experimental basis, to become a resident at a village specially designed for disabled persons. This required him to reduce his present mobility and return to a wheelchair. The moment he sat down in the wheelchair, an attitudinal change occurred.

> *The next half hour was weird. Partly it was my getting used to being in a wheelchair after a twenty-year absence. But it was much more than that. Subtly, but all too quickly, I was being trans-*

formed. As soon as I sat in the wheelchair I was no longer seen as a person who could fend for himself.

Although Metz had known me well for nine months, and had never before done anything physical for me without asking, now he took over without permission. Suddenly in his eyes I was no longer able to carry things, reach for objects, or even push myself around. Though I was perfectly capable of doing all these things, I was being wheeled around, and things were being brought to me--and all without my asking. Most frightening was my compliance, my alienation from myself and from the process.[1]

It is this attitude we need to fight against when we interview disabled persons. During the interview, the same questions need to be asked as we ask of any potential volunteer: What are your skills? What is your previous training? What are you interested in doing? Additionally, it may be useful to inquire what this person's physical capabilities are, for example, how long s/he can work at a stretch of time or if s/he can write. As this person is well-acquainted with his/her physical needs, the best thing to do is listen and not assume answers. Disabled people are quite capable of saying what they need and what they can and cannot do.

THE VOLUNTEERS AT RLI

Working with a disabled person sometimes takes a bit of creative ingenuity. For instance, a man who has been blind since birth volunteers weekly as our receptionist. He answers the phone by pressing the row of buttons until he finds the one with the caller on it. He takes the message in Braille. At the end of the morning, he reads the messages to me and I write them down and give them to the various staff. Taking the messages from him in this way makes it possible for him to work and is what I mean by ingenuity.

Another example of using resources and making links creatively is the work being done by our ramps building project. We are building ramps to enable our clients to leave their residences independently. (For most clients, steps are a major impediment to their free entry and departure from home.)

The ramps project coordinator is a young man who has recently become disabled. He has chronic tendonitis and walks with crutches. His background as a carpenter enables him to assess and design ramps. He cannot do the actual construction, so we have linked up with a weekend workcamp, which provides the manual labor, and he oversees the construction of the ramps.

Another volunteer, a paraplegic who drives his own van, is also involved in the project. He uses his van to drive the ramps project coordinator to sites and to transport lumber. Without using these various resources, the ramps would not be built.

Some of the work done by the volunteers is more straightforward. One extensively disabled woman calls a group of clients on a monthly basis to check with them if the services they are receiving are satisfactory. She reports her calls to one of the staff. She does all her work at home. It is more convenient for her.

Another woman, also a wheelchair user, contacts housing developers on a weekly basis. She questions them about buildings which should have accessible units for disabled persons. She asks how many units, what different types of accessible units, how to apply, etc. She reports her work to the housing coordinator. Her persistent questioning makes her able to obtain much needed information. Disabled volunteers could ask similar informational questions at other agencies in equally competent ways.

A man born with spina bifida is the legislative liaison between an attendant care[2] task force at the agency and state officials. As the

liaison, he contacts state officials to talk about proposed legislation for attendant care, to enlist their support, and to educate them about the concerns of the disabled community. This type of assignment could be developed by any agency to utilize a disabled volunteer to contact state officials on any issue. Education about the issue and methods of approach would be important in preparing this person for the work involved.

As you can see, disabled persons hold a variety of volunteer positions at my agency. They do research, contact clients, act as intermediaries between the state and the agency, design ramps. They also write articles, proofread newsletters, type, file, Xerox, and have organized social activities for themselves and clients. Their skills are many. As with all volunteers, their work should be determined by their ability and the agency's needs.

CONCLUSION

It is up to us, as directors of volunteers, to evaluate our programs and consider how we may incorporate disabled persons as volunteers. Just as any other volunteer, a disabled person could teach sewing to a group of Girl Scouts, tutor someone preparing for high school equivalency exams, edit a newsletter, or organize a fund-raising project. The possibilities are endless and are only limited by our imagination.

The point is to begin to think about disabled people as people first. It may feel easier not to do so, but in not doing so we are denying ourselves and this "other" an opportunity for real human contact. As directors of volunteers we have a wonderful opportunity to integrate our programs and to use an invisible minority in effective volunteer positions.

REFERENCES

[1]Erving Zola, Missing Pieces, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1982, p. 52.

[2]Attendant care is a form of assistance some disabled people need to take care of washing, dressing, meal preparation, etc. The goal of the task force is to enable disabled people to be responsible for their own hiring of attendant care providers with state money, rather than through a third party.