

## A CONVERSATION ABOUT PATH WITH INTEGRITY

GINA WROTE: *I was told some of the language that is being using for school aged children is not true self-determination. The other thing I know people are saying and using is person centered planning, however if there is no money attached to it, it is cruel and inhumane.*

Dear Gina,

Faye and I have been facilitating and teaching person-centered planning (especially PATH) for some time now, so I want to reflect a bit on how we approach this.

When we are teaching, we try to be very clear that, unlike a service plan or an education plan, a PATH is not defined by what the service system or school is prepared to offer. The creative conversation at the heart of PATH (or any other good person-centered planning approach) extends beyond any agency mandate, and the invitation to participate should always extend well beyond the boundaries of the service system.

PATH is not an ISP, IPP, IEP, or any of those other P's. It's not a service-centered plan or a facility-centered plan. When it is thoughtfully undertaken, it offers a broad view of the person's vision for her or his own life - a vision sometimes developed in collaboration with friends and family members, especially when people have great difficulty communicating. With that broad vision in mind, it becomes possible to *derive* a service plan or an education plan that is consistent with the person's PATH.

The "service" plan that might be derived from PATH is one part of a larger set of understandings and commitments. It is the response of one of the parties (the agency, the school, the system) to a larger expression of the person's life direction. So, at the end of a PATH, the school might say, "We understand the broad direction that Jack and his family want to take with his life and his education, and we're clear about our role in supporting that direction. Next month, we will develop an IEP to reflect what the school is able to offer Jack to support him on that PATH."

This means that when preparing to create a person-centered plan, *invitation is critical*. If we limit the invitation to "the usual suspects," we will be missing a rich set of potential connections. On the other hand, if we open up the process to extended family members, friends, neighbors, people from the family's church, etc., we greatly expand the number of people who 'get it' - who begin to see their role in helping to move things along, and who are available to take action.

Later, if the school (for example) doesn't take action, there are still a lot of people left who are working away at the goal, and also a lot of people who become clearly aware that one of the parties isn't pulling its share of the load. The politics get interesting and rather compelling.

GINA CONTINUED: *They did a person centered plan on my son 10 years ago and it is still sitting there. I do not even remember what was in it. Gives people too many hopes and dreams and nothing happens. Kevin is still waiting on his hopes and dreams.*

Here's how I read this little bit of history...

First, your words "they did" the plan speak volumes. I suggest that if this had been done well, the overwhelming feeling would have been that "we did" a plan.

My guess is that the people who "did" (or facilitated) the plan would have been school division employees. This creates a couple of dilemmas right off the bat: A) it becomes far more likely that the plan (the conversation) will be limited by what the school division considers to be its

mandate, and certainly limited by what the division thinks it is prepared to actually provide; B) it probably means that people who could have been part of your son's circle of allies were busy facilitating the plan instead of sitting in the circle, listening and contributing; C) you and your son missed the chance to have a facilitator (or facilitation team) in place who could have helped to equalize the power in the room, giving you, your son, and your personal allies an equal voice with the school system (this alone may have made it almost impossible to feel that "we did" the plan).

Second, the fact that it was done ten years ago and not re-done since then speaks volumes. Who among us is exactly following the "plan" that we might have had for our lives ten years ago? All of us change, grow, learn, discover new things, bump up against our limitations, develop new interests and discover new gifts and directions. To me, a ten-year-old plan means either that we have become blind to the fact of growth, or (which is far more likely) that the "person-centered planning process" was just a bureaucratic exercise, or possibly a heartfelt exercise that got buried under the full weight of a bureaucracy. In any event, there was clearly no commitment that we would 'live by' the plan -- which means taking the brave step of re-visiting it often and asking the difficult questions, "How are we doing?", "What are we learning?", and "What do we need to do next?"

Third, the fact that you "don't even remember what was in it" speaks volumes. One of the things that we like about the graphic aspect of PATH is that it creates a vivid, accurate picture of what we said, discovered and invented, what we learned that we needed to do next, and what we committed to. It creates a record of the conversation, captures the energy and excitement of the event, provides a way of quickly communicating the plan to someone who might not have been there, and provides a platform for re-visiting the conversation, holding ourselves accountable, and adapting the plan. It sounds to me like none of these things happened.

Finally, your words, "Gives people too many hopes and dreams and nothing happens. Kevin is still waiting on his hopes and dreams." are very painful, and speak volumes. It looks like the process was not well understood or well-conducted in the first place; that many people who probably should have been there were not there; that there was no vivid record of the event that could be followed afterwards; and that there was little understanding or commitment to follow through and hold ourselves accountable.

It is very important to understand that the sin -- the harm -- was not in giving your son the opportunity to fully express his hopes and dreams. We commit a far greater sin when we fail to invite that expression, when we don't listen, and when we don't take that expression seriously. What is "cruel and inhumane" (in your very expressive words) is not being serious about how we respond when we hear those dreams.

It is absolutely possible to invite wholeheartedly, to listen carefully to your son ("think softly," as Amber would have said), honor his expressions by accurately and vividly capturing them in words and graphics, and then saying, "Kevin, thank you for letting us know about all of this. We will keep all of this in our minds and in our hearts. There are some parts of what you are saying that we can help you with. Here's what they are, and here's what we can do.

"And there are some parts of what you are saying that we can't figure out how to help you with. Here's what they are, and here's what we can do to get closer to figuring them out. But right now it's important to understand that we're not there yet. Let's look at the parts that you can do to help things move along this way, and what we can do together to get stronger and know more."

Finally we can say, "We'll keep our commitments to you, including our commitment to keep this whole picture in mind even if we can't figure it all out now."

When we say "We hear all of it", we are not making an empty promise.

When we say, "This is what we'll do", we are making a promise but it is one that is within our means (we don't always keep all of our promises, but this means that we need to re-visit the conversation, see where we need to make course corrections, and sometimes ask for forgiveness). And when we say, "This is a part that we can't figure out", we are honoring the person with our honesty and vulnerability.

In the end, a well-crafted PATH also invites the hopes and dreams of our friends, family and allies. The person at the center gets to say, "I don't want that to be part of my plan", but he also has a chance to hear the care, commitment, thoughtfulness and hopefulness of the other people around him. It's person-centered, but in some ways it's a shared dream.

*GINA CONTINUED: To me it should be called individualized budgeting. This has money and using the principles of true self-determination as the main piece of the budget.*

Individualized budgeting can certainly help all of this along. It is very important. But it is not the same thing as good person-centered planning. I think of individualized budgeting as one of the many things that might be upholding the person and their plan. There are other things doing this as well: the love and action of family, friends and allies; a continuous process of inviting more people to get to know your son and his dreams (and your dreams for him) and inviting them to see their role in the picture.

I've been in and around 'the system' for a long time. It's very clear to me that if we depend entirely on the system to uphold our future (even when the system is making sense), we're backing ourselves into a corner we might not be able to get out of. I'm not suggesting for a second that we turn away from rightful and appropriate system resources or that we stop asking for what we need, but the core of what we do, the core of moving forward with a person-centered plan, is much stronger when it is anchored in personal relationships and personal commitments.

*GINA CLOSED: Again thanks for sending me this web-site. I have not had time to read it all but will.*

You're welcome. There are a couple of additional articles on our website at <http://www.communityworks.info/articles.htm> that have a bearing on this, and that offer some additional strategies, tools and connections: 14,000 Islands, Community-Building with PATH, Reflections on Friendship, and the article on Microboards. I also highly recommend Al Etmanski's book, *A Good Life*, from <http://www.plan.ca>, and all of the Inclusion Press materials, at <http://www.inclusion.com>.

Cheers,  
Peace,  
Dave Wetherow