

Building Our Profession
A Reflection on Good Work for Direct Support Workers
Discussion Leaders Guide

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Purpose

To offer direct support workers* the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their work by discussing a question drawn from the research of *The Good Work Project* and sharing a summary of what they have learned in the discussion with others who are concerned with improving the quality of direct support work.

This activity also helps an organization build up its traditions by encouraging occasional times for reflection.

Leadership

- Two people who will divide responsibility for convening the group, introducing the question, leading the discussion, and preparing and distributing the summary.
- Leaders model good listening and comfort with a session in which there are no correct answers except statements that reflect participants' (usually diverse) personal truths and group efforts to identify common themes in the discussion.

[†] Thanks to the groups from CCLS, Dungarvin, and Options in Community Living who tested the first version of this reflection guide.

* As we understand it, "direct support worker" is not a specific job title but a role that engages a person primarily with day-to-day assistance to people with developmental disabilities. In most service organizations we know, supervisors or first level managers spend enough time attending to day-to-day matters to be seen as direct support workers. In a few organizations, middle and even to managers spend an important part of their week offering direct support.

Process

- Create a suitable time and space.
- Gather the group.
- Introduce the question and its context.
- Get agreement on the ground rules.
- Invite short personal stories related directly to the question.
- Discuss what the stories say to participants about the question and record the main points in participants' own words.
- Ask the group to make a summary of the discussion by identifying key ideas and common threads that weave through the story telling and discussion. Record the main points in participant's own words.
- Prepare and distribute a written summary to participants. Share a copy with the Workforce Project for possible distribution to other people interested in improving direct support. Be respectful of people in preparing written summaries.

Before the meeting

- Think about a way to distinguish this conversation from your organization's business meetings. If possible, hold the meeting separately from regular staff meetings. If that won't work, hold this conversation first.
- Invite a small group of direct support workers to think together about the meaning of their work and the development of their profession.
- Review the *Background and Context* section.
- Think about why you decided to convene this meeting and how you can best share your reasons with participants in a couple of minutes.
- Set up a circle of chairs in a comfortable, quiet place. Provide light refreshments.
- Have poster paper, pens, and masking tape available to record the main points of the discussion and draft the summary.
- Decide which of the three questions the group will discuss, write it on a piece of poster paper and post it where people can see it.

- Decide with the other discussion leader...
 - who will welcome people
 - who will introduce the discussion
 - who will get agreement on the ground rules
 - who will invite the story telling and who will model the storytelling
 - who will lead and who will record the reflection on the stories
 - who will lead and who will record the summary
 - who will write and distribute the summary
- Write the ground rules on a piece of poster paper and post it where people can see it.

Introducing the discussion

- Call people together and be sure people know one another's names
- Tell people why you decided to have this discussion and state the question you have chosen.
- [If you are holding this conversation with a group that meets regularly, think about what you know about the group and what will help them get engaged with the question. Leaders decided that one group that routinely meets as a team and has a fast paced, "get the business done" style, needed a way to stop and think. They found it helpful to ask people to spend ten minutes alone, just thinking about the question. Some people took a short walk; others went and sat by the fountain in the building's court yard.]

Agreeing on the Ground Rules

Review these ground rules with the group and ask for their agreement to follow them. Say you may remind people of them and invite others to share this responsibility with you.

- Listen carefully, especially to people who have different ideas
- Think carefully about the question and say what is true for you
- Make time and space for others to talk about what matters to them about the question

- Think about how different ideas connect together, especially if they seem to conflict or come from very different places
- Take care of yourself and each other

Inviting storytelling about the question

Brief (2-3 minute) stories that say something important about the question from personal experience give the question a foundation in people's lives.

- Tell the group that one of the leaders will act as timekeeper, letting people know when two minutes have passed and when three minutes have passed.
- Ask people to simply listen to the stories as people tell them and not to ask questions or make statements of disagreement or agreement about the stories as people are telling them. Each question is far too big to be caught in a single story, but the group's collection of stories will show some of the dimensions of the question. One participant said, "If you listen for three minutes, you sure can learn a lot!" One leader invited people to "shut off your curiosity about the details and just listen for what the story has to say to you."
- Ask participants to take a quiet minute to think about a story that says something important about each question and then go around the group, offering each person in turn the chance to tell a story. It is ok for a participant to pass on their turn.
- The leader who has not been talking about the process takes the first turn. This gives people one model of how to tell the story and provides a place to start. Choose a direction to the leaders right or left to pass the story on.

Why should society reward the kind of work we do?	Which workers in our profession best realize the calling and why?	What makes me a worthy ancestor for future generations of practitioners?
Think of a specific moment in your experience of providing direct support that says something important about the real value that the work contributes to our society.	Think of someone whose actions help set the standard you use to identify the best in direct support work. Then, think of something specific this person did that shows why you would say this person best realizes the calling of offering direct support to people with developmental disabilities.	Think of someone who could be called one of your ancestors in the work of supporting people with developmental disabilities; someone who gave you a strong sense of what your work can mean .Then, think of a something specific this person did that captures some of the reason that you call this person a worthy ancestor in your work.

Reflecting on the stories

- After each person’s story, a leader asks the group to pause quietly for a short time to ask themselves, “What did I hear? What did I learn?” Don’t discuss, just pause briefly (30 seconds will seem like quite a long time to many groups) and then invite the next story.
- After each person has had the chance to tell a story that answers the question, state the question again and ask, “What do we learn about the answer to this question from thinking about our stories?”
- When discussion of the stories slows down, ask “What else is it important to ask in answer to our question.?”
- Record the main points each person makes on poster paper in the person’s own words.

Summarizing

Toward the end of the meeting ask, “What are the key ideas we want to remember and share with others in answer to our question?”

Evaluating

Go around the circle once more. Ask each person to say a word or a phrase about how they have experienced the conversation.

Background and Context

To do good work, those of us who offer direct support to people with developmental disabilities deserve fair wages and decent working conditions. We also need opportunities to reflect on what good work means to us. The times we work in make reflection difficult for at least three reasons. First, most people understand our work poorly and do not esteem either the people we work with or the work that we do; this allows political decision makers to under-fund our work. Second, schedules stretch to the point that taking an hour to think with colleagues about how our work makes a difference seems like a luxury. Third, we lack the kind of professional traditions that give health care and education practitioners a recognized framework for understanding their work, steering their decision making, and claiming professional status in their communities. Without shared traditions to highlight its meaning, direct support to people with developmental disabilities is easy to define as no more than the physical labor of keeping people with developmental disabilities clean, fed, and occupied.

Since 1995, three psychologists have studied the ways that professionals define and do work of high quality that benefits our whole society in times of rapid economic, political, and social change. Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon have studied scientists, lawyers and journalists, but their framework for understanding professional work can help direct support workers build their own tradition.* This

* See the Good Work Project website at <http://www.goodworkproject.org> and Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon (2001). *Good work: When excellence and ethics meet*. New York: Basic Books.

framework identifies three basic issues for thoughtful professionals and presents three questions that capable professionals should be able to answer.

Issue	Defining Question
Core Mission: reflects a basic social need & deserves commitment from the practitioner	Why should society reward the kind of work we do?
Standards of performance: reflect the qualities that practitioners should strive to develop	Which workers in our profession best realize the calling and why?
Identity: reflects the moral principles that set the limits of what practitioners will do in difficult situations	What makes me a worthy ancestor for future generations of practitioners?

This discussion gives direct support workers an opportunity to reflect on their work by discussing one of these questions.

These **talking points** summarize the main ideas to share as you introduce the discussion.

Invite Reflection

- This is a time to reflect. It is not a training with a definite set of outcomes or a prescription for how to do your job better.
- There are no “right” answers – only what is your individual experiences and points of view. We want to learn from each other –people who do the work– to better understand how we view ourselves and the value of our work within greater society.
- Some may lack prior experience in participating in this type of discussion, but with practice they will likely become more comfortable.

Acknowledge that there are many necessary actions

- We are in a constant state (not a crisis) of needing competent direct service professionals to support people with disabilities.
- Being fairly compensated and having decent benefits is important. However, it is not the only reason and often not the primary reason people do this work well.

- Fair wages and good benefits do not automatically translate into having capable, satisfied direct service professionals.
- Though we are making some progress, achieving fair compensation and decent benefits for direct service professionals will advance slowly and take many years. The issues we will discuss can help build the image of our profession.
- Solutions to the direct service professional shortage need to be tackled from many different directions. No one approach will work. An example : the way the public views how people with disabilities are supported and how society measures the worth of this work will effect citizens' belief about how much pay is fair for the job.

Set the foundation for the discussion

- Our question comes from the work of researchers who study the ways professionals define and do work of high quality that benefits our whole society in times of rapid economic, political, and social change.
- Other professions – like teaching, social work, and health care– have traditions that answer the question that we will talk about today. These answers help them to understand their work, steer their decision making, and claim professional status within their communities. We need to build professional traditions for direct service workers by having discussions like this one and by sharing what we learn.