

PERSON-CENTERED PLANNING: MYTHS, MISCONCEPTIONS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

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As part of the Performance-Based Contracting demonstration project, the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration is conducting training about Person-Centered Planning, a family of approaches used instead of or in addition to more traditional interdisciplinary planning. Person-Centered Planning focuses on a person's gifts, capacities, and personal dreams, and utilizes a circle of committed friends, family, and community members to help realize those dreams and assist people with disabilities in moving toward full citizenship.

As facilitators are strengthening their skills through participation in the training program, we are learning with each other, with those who developed these approaches, and with communities in other states where such approaches are used. In this article, some of the typical misconceptions about Person-Centered Planning are described. These misconceptions and misunderstandings are barriers to the full power of the process for organizational and community change.

Misconception 1: "We're already doing it."

Since 1985, there has been training in Minnesota on Person-Centered Planning, with several projects funded by the Minnesota Governor's Planning Council as well as other initiatives. Many people have attended anything from one-hour sessions to year-long facilitator training programs.

Several different concepts have become incorporated into both formal planning processes and other meetings. Persons who have used ideas based upon these approaches and principles, as well as people who have attended little or no training, sometimes say, "We're already doing Person-Centered Planning," or "We've been doing it for years." Almost everyone these days claim they're doing it. These beliefs can interfere with expansion of the quality and depth of the process, as well as interfering with more significant change for persons with disabilities, the organizations, which support them, and the communities in which they live.

Part of the difficulty is that people use the term "Person-Centered Planning" to refer to a large range of different planning practices. When someone says, "We're doing Person-Centered Planning," it's hard to say exactly what is happening. In addition, this term is used when people are implementing some but not all of the processes that make Person-Centered Planning unique. Some people have said they do "Person-Centered Planning" if the person with disabilities attends the meeting. Other people think it means asking the person what they want, and then trying to fulfill on their desires. Still others think it means listing the person's strengths, or talking about positive things. The scope of this type of planning, as envisioned by the people who designed it in the early 1980's, is much larger. In addition, all Person-Centered Planning approaches are characterized by five elements (O'Brien & Lovett, 1996) that have been identified as common and fundamental to all approaches:

- The person at the focus of the planning and those who love the person are the primary authorities on the person's life direction. The essential questions are "Who is this person?" and "What community opportunities will enable this person to pursue his or her interests in a positive way?"
- Person-Centered Planning aims to change common patterns of community life. It stimulates community hospitality and enlists community members in assisting focus people to define and work toward a desirable future. It helps create positive community roles for people with disabilities.
- Person-Centered Planning requires learning through shared action, collaborative action, and fundamentally challenges practices that separate people and perpetuate controlling relationships.
- Honest Person-Centered Planning can only come from respect for the dignity and completeness of the focus person (as he/she is).
- Assisting people to define and pursue a desirable future tests one's clarity, commitment and courage.

Instead of stating "we're already doing it," people who have worked most closely with person-centered processes are more likely to say, "This is what we're seeing..." "This is what we're learning right now..." "What we're currently struggling with is..." Being person-centered is not a destination or a final state that one can achieve; it is not similar to being male, a brunette, or licensed. As Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint & Judith Snow (1996) have noted, "When people say to us 'we tried it and it didn't work,' we know they have missed the point. It is like saying "I did life and it didn't work."

Misconception 2: Being "person-centered" means asking the person "What do you want?"

"Listening to a person" means much more than paying attention to the words given in response to the question "What do you want?" Developers of the Person-Centered Planning methods have called this expanded listening: "listening beneath the surface," listening to the unsaid," and "listening with a third ear." Responses to the question "What do you want?" from a person labeled as having a developmental disability, who has lived much of his/her life with decisions made by others, can be shaped by many things that are unrelated to what the individual really desires. These include: lack of experience, lack of trust, communication limitations, pleasing people in authority, fear, and complacency.

Person-Centered Planning methods are based on a group of thoughtful, committed people working together to craft ideas that will create a life of meaning, a life of community contribution, a life that makes sense, and a life as a full citizen of the community. Such crafting goes far beyond "what do you want?," and is just as critical for someone who does not use words to communicate as one who does. It means asking very different questions to assist a group in figuring out what a desirable lifestyle would be, and envisioning what an individual's life might become.

Misconception3: Person-Centered Planning methods are a new and different way to have interdisciplinary team meetings or annuals.

A Person-Centered Planning approach means that meetings do not look like business as usual, with one agency after another presenting their information and "plans" for the focus person. At a Person-

Centered Planning gathering, people who love and care about the person work together to design a vision for the individual's life. Each person who attends speaks as an individual who cares about the person, not as a representative of an agency, and expresses what they can personally do to make the focus individual's vision a reality.

Very few "Person-Centered Planning" meetings taking place in Minnesota include anyone other than the focus person, their paid staff, and family. If our goal is to not only create a vision with the focus person, but also effectively support them in making that dream come true, we will need to focus on doing a better job at inviting non-paid community members into the lives of people with disabilities. This includes finding and nurturing the caring of ordinary citizens, inviting them to come to a person's gatherings and to assist in moving the person's life forward.

Misconception 4: "Person-Centered Planning" is a different kind of planning process (one that uses colorful charts and drawings) that can be undertaken in a vacuum without significant organizational change.

Many, but not all Person-Centered Planning methods, use colorful wall posters and drawings to help group members stimulate creative thinking, draw upon powerful imagery, promote the generation of ideas outside of traditional service system answers, and assist the understanding of all circle participants. While many facilitators use these approaches in the initial planning, there are hundreds of rolled-up posters sitting unused in closets, car trunks, and basements.

For many individuals, Person-Centered Planning has to come to mean the substitution of more fun, relaxed, positive meetings for more formal ones. Such meetings have often led to positive outcomes for persons with disabilities—more control and choice in their everyday life, greater participation in the community, and more acquaintances and friends who are not disabled. At the same time, however, the outcome has often looked like nothing more than an improved life inside a typical group home, waiver-funded home, or day training program, with perhaps more brief forays into community life. "Person-Centered Planning" meetings which have gone on for a number of years look like more discussions of activities the person might like, rather than examining the larger issues of a person controlling their own life and having a home, housemates, and job best suited to them. Many features of people's lives still look much the same. People's lives are still controlled by an agency that is supposed to be supporting them to lead the lives they desire. People still live in a "client world" rather than a "citizen's world." Although more people now live in 4-bed homes than 15-bed homes, they still live in buildings owned by others, in places that are not their own, and with roommates they had no choice in selecting. "Going home" means visiting family on weekends or holidays, rather than having a sense of one's own home (indeed, some group home residents have openly indicated they live in the house of the agency director, that the "home" isn't "theirs"). Although more people participate in supported employment, the majority still work in segregated programs, making little money doing work not suited to their interests. Most people in their life, whether called "friends" or not, are people who are paid to be there.

As Beth Mount (1994), one of the developers of Personal Futures Planning, describes the process:

"Personal futures planning is much more than a meeting; it is an ongoing process of social change. The effectiveness of a plan depends on a support group of concerned people who make a dream

reality by learning to solve problems, build community, and change organizations together over time. The focus of change is moved away from the person with a disability toward change in social roles, responses, and existing organizational structures...Personal futures planning can be a helpful tool when it is used selectively to support long-range change in organizational cultures...However, it can easily become another empty ritual if used as a quick fix without appreciation for the complex tasks of changing environments and creating a context for friendships.” (p.97). “Organizational change is an integral part of personal futures planning. *Almost every personal futures plan that is true to the person challenges the existing organizational process and structure in some way.*” (p.100). “The most common breakdown in the futures planning process occurs when people place too much emphasis on the initial meetings and do not value, plan and invest in the ongoing process of follow-up...The first several meetings are powerful...but then comes the hard work of making the ideas a reality and slogging through the details, obstacles, and frustrations of implementation...The most common problem of personal futures planning occurs when the individual planning process is detached from the effort to change existing organizational structures, processes, and cultures.” (pp. 102-103).

The process itself can only go so far, and then becomes frustrating if more significant organizational changes are not undertaken. Many Minnesota agencies have or are “bumping up against” these limits, and have the opportunity to undertake resolving these barriers, including inviting the community into people’s lives. As this project continues for another year, we’ll be working together on addressing possible resolutions.

References:

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