

This is a chapter from
Implementing Person-Centered Planning
Voices of Experience

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Pete Ritchie, A Turn for the Better • Connie Lyle O'Brien & John O'Brien, The Origins of Person-Centered Planning • Michael Smull, A Plan Is Not an Outcome • David & Faye Wetherow, Community-Building & Commitment-Building • Beth Mount, John O'Brien & Connie Lyle O'Brien, Increasing the Chances for Deep Change • Steve Holburn, The Value of Measuring Person-Centered Planning • David Pitonyak, Opening the Door • Mary Romer, Two Is Not Enough • Steve Holburn, The Weird Guy • John O'Brien, Great Questions and The Art of Portraiture • Beth Mount, The Art and Soul of Person-Centered Planning • Jo Krippenstapel, The Rhode Island Facilitators Forum • Mary Jo Almina Caruso & Kathy Lee, Some Words Along the Way • Michael Smull, Helping Staff Support Choice • Meyer Shevin, Communication Ally • Karen Green McGowan, Getting Beyond Sick • Susannah Joyce, Mutual Learning: Involving People Who Use Mental Health Services • Sally Shemsdorf, Sequoia: Planning with Senior Parents • Connie Lyle O'Brien & Beth Mount, Pathfinders: Transition to Adult Life • Connie Lyle O'Brien & John O'Brien, Large Group Process for Person-Centered Planning • Debra McLean, A Simple Half-Hitch • Anne O'Bryan, Vocational Profiles • Jack Pealer & Sandra Landis, Some Beginnings • Michael Smull, Thinking About Support Broker Roles • Helen Sanderson, Person-Centered Teams • Pat Fratangelo & Jeff Strully, The Challenges of Person-Centered Work to Agency Leaders • Martin Routledge, Helen Sanderson & Rob Greig, Planning with People: A National Strategy

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Community-Building & Commitment-Building with PATH

David Wetherow and Faye Wetherow

When people first learn about PATH, they tend to think of it as a planning tool –after all, that's part of the title: Planning Alternative Futures with Hope (Pearpoint, O'Brien & Forest, 1995). If they are involved in supporting people with disabilities, they are likely to be interested in the prospect of a colorful, engaging, positively-oriented alternative to traditional individual program planning, education planning, and service planning processes.

PATH is certainly a powerful planning tool, but in addition, and, perhaps even more importantly, it is a very powerful tool for *invitation, community-building* and *commitment-building*.

PATH and traditional planning processes

Unlike a service plan, a PATH is not defined by or constrained by the limitations of what the service system is prepared to offer, nor by the prescribed mandate of an agency, school, or service system. The creative conversation at the heart of PATH extends well beyond any agency mandate, and the invitation to participate should extend well beyond the boundaries of the service system.

PATH is not an ISP, IPP, IEP, Health Care Plan or Rehabilitation Plan. When it is thoughtfully undertaken, it offers a broad view of the person's vision for their 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 that is consistent with the PATH.

The service plan derived from PATH is one of a larger set of understandings and commitments. It is the response of *one* of the parties to the person's future (the agency, the school, the system's representative) to a larger expression of the person's life direction. It gives an agency a way of saying, "We see the overall direction and understand our role in supporting that direction. The ISP that we will

develop next week will reflect how we can support Shirley to pursue the elements of her PATH that fall within our mandate.”

The school might say, “We understand the broad direction that Jack and his family want to take with his education, and we’re clear about our role in supporting that direction. Next month, we will develop an Individual Education Plan to reflect what the school is able to offer Jack to assist him on that PATH.”

Sometimes the PATH graphic depicts the intention to create a relevant service plan as one of the many steps that will contribute to the goal, but by now it is clear that the service plan does not define the goal, and it is well understood that the vision is not limited by the mandate of the service system.

Community-building and commitment-building begin with strategic invitation

When we are organizing a personal PATH, one of the general strategies we have in mind is the idea of following the threads of a person’s interests, gifts, dreams, and passions in the direction of community connection, companionship and contribution. We know that a great deal of energy is released when it becomes apparent that the personal interests of the pathfinder intersect with the personal interests of community members, caregivers and other allies.

With this strategy in mind, we encourage the pathfinder and his allies to think expansively, creatively and courageously about whom to invite to the PATH session. We mention family members, friends, neighbors, colleagues, people who may have been important to them in the past, and especially members of the larger community. We emphasize people with whom they might share a particular interest or passion, or people with whom they share a strong identity—perhaps people who attend the same church, members of common cultural groups, and so on.

One person’s question about how to deal with the bugs in her garden without using pesticides might be welcomed by community members who might be involved in permaculture, organic gardening, or saving the local river estuary. We could pursue the possibility that a brief connection based on that question might evolve into a more extended involvement, companionship and contribution to the cause of a less polluted planet. If someone were interested in music, we would encourage them to invite people who are involved in making music, even if they were relative strangers.

Church and cultural connections can be particularly fruitful, even if they don’t appear to include common interests other than a shared cultural identity. Remember the old nursery rhyme,

*Here is the church,
Here is the steeple,
Open the door,
And see all the people!*

When we think about it, each one of ‘the people’ goes some place during the day, so a connection that begins with the church has the potential to reach into hundreds of places in the community. Each of the members is also connected with other friends, neighbors, interest groups, community associations, workplaces, and so on, so a single connection has the potential to reach into hundreds of additional ‘places’ in the community.

If we limit the PATH invitation to the usual cast of characters—service managers, immediate family members, caregivers, system advocates—we may be missing this rich set of potential connections.

A few years ago, we visited a facility-based day program that was searching for a new direction. One of the young women who attended the program particularly enjoyed the activity of baking muffins every Wednesday afternoon. Program staff described the benefits: an enjoyable hour or two; a tasty dessert to share with friends and family, learning outcomes related to reading and following recipes, development of “functional” cooking skills, and so on.

Since many of the people in the program expressed the desire for more companionship and connection in their lives, we began to explore the idea of *moving from activity to connection*.^{*} When the staff began thinking about cooking-with-a-focus-on-connection, one of them quipped, “We need to stop cooking and start looking”. Being a good detective became an interesting new element in their job descriptions.

As our conversation evolved, we helped Sara and her mother create an invitation list for a personal PATH. Initially, Sara thought about inviting a couple of program staff, her social worker and her mother. We asked Sara if she might want to invite some other people in her community who cared about her.

^{*} To read more about this idea go to www.communityworks.info/articles/activity.htm.

She said yes, she would invite the pastor from her church.

On the day scheduled for the PATH, we arrived at the apartment building where Sara and her mother lived, and encountered a rather distinguished-looking English gentleman. We introduced ourselves and learned that he was the pastor that Sara had talked about. “I’m not sure what I’m doing here,” he said, “I don’t know anything about disability.” “That’s alright,” we said, “We’re really glad that you’re here. Our guess is that you’ll have a lot to offer.”

Sara had been in the day program for some time, and program planning normally took the form of asking “what activity should we add to the calendar?”—focusing on personal interests and skill development, but not particularly focusing on connections. But now, because Sara’s PATH included the idea of moving from activity to connection, several new opportunities presented themselves. And it turned out that Pastor Martin held the key to almost all of the connections.

As soon as we mentioned the idea of “cooking as connection,” Martin came up with the idea of introducing her to the group of women who met every Saturday afternoon at the church to make muffins for the Sunday service. ‘Gardening-as-connection’ led to Martin’s vision (included by Sara on her PATH!) of planting 5,000 daffodils in the garden beds at the foot of the church. “It will be spectacular in the Spring! And we won’t just have people digging and weeding alone—we’ll make sure that people do this together and have a picnic whenever they get together at the church.”

Sara was interested in social dancing, and this activity had always taken the form of a little group of people from the day program being driven to the pub by staff on Thursday evenings. But when Martin learned that Sara loved folk dancing, he came up the idea of starting an English folk dance group in their small community. Martin had a personal interest in this—he missed the folk dancing that was part of his life in England before he came to Canada, and he knew that there was no such group in their town.

Martin absolutely understood what we were working on. He understood that Sara was a catalyst for community-building—that she would make his community stronger. And, he was able to make connections that nobody else could make—because he was a connected person. This gentle man who was so nervous at the outset, ended up making the strongest set of commitments at Sara’s PATH—and he kept his promises.

We thought about what made this work.

We limited “the ask”. When we made the invitation, we only asked for involvement for the duration of the PATH session itself; we didn’t ask for a lifetime commitment. In essence, we said, “Martin, we wonder if you could help us by spending a couple of hours thinking with Sara about her life and thinking about how her interests might be encouraged.”

Although we didn’t ask for a commitment beyond the PATH session, we did hope for it. There was no way of predicting or controlling the outcome, but the outcome would have been certain if Sara hadn’t made the invitation. Making the invitation requires courage—but it’s worth it.

Each of the elements of PATH offered an opportunity for engagement. Martin became engaged at many distinct points in the overall PATH process. Each of the steps in PATH offers a unique opportunity for engagement:

Hearing the Dream, people often begin to get the feeling that they are on sacred ground—in a tender place—and they respond with considerable empathy. As the deeper parts of the Dream are spoken and heard, people begin to see the other person in themselves; and they see themselves in the other person.

With the pathfinder’s permission, we offer all participants the opportunity to add something to the Dream—something that reflects their knowledge of the person, reveals the person’s gifts and interests, or is an expression of *their* dream for the person. We always check in with the pathfinder to see if each element corresponds with their own personal vision.

The inquiry about the Goal is framed in a way that allows participants to feel that it is not just desirable, but possible, and they begin to sense what might become their own role in making those possible things happen. In Sara’s PATH, the question “What would be happening if we were doing good work in this direction for a couple of years?” allowed Pastor Martin to visualize his own place in the picture, and to see that this role was within his means, because it was balanced by the roles that others played. “I know these women who bake at the church on Saturdays, and I know I can help Sara make that connection.”

As the PATH develops, each of the participants begins to envision their particular role in making things happen. In their imaginations, they begin to experience the sense of satisfaction that comes from contributing to a desirable outcome, and begin to relish the part they can play in making this positive future possible.

Creating a snapshot of What's Happening Now may engender recognition of difficulty, but it also contributes to an awareness of resources and opportunities. "Sara spends a lot of time alone" is balanced with "She makes wonderful muffins, and I know one woman in the group who would really appreciate her skill in that area. Mary would be a perfect bridge builder for the Saturday group."

Who Do We Need to Enroll? is a question that often marks a change in the energy level of a PATH. We recognize that we need to enroll ourselves; and we see that if others can be enrolled the effort will be more broadly shared – making our contribution possible. It becomes clear that a continuing strategy of enrollment is one of the things that will eventually bridge the gap between where we are now and where we want to be.

What Do We Need to Do to Get Stronger? Identifying General Strategies, and Identifying Milestones on the way to the goal are all steps that engage the creativity and the problem-solving energy of the participants, create additional opportunities to see oneself in the picture, and increase the sense of shared effort and possibility.

Committing to First Steps is a crucial opportunity for each participant to declare their personal commitment and hear and celebrate the commitments of others.

The final check-in offers an opportunity to recognize and declare a sense of delight, safety and commitment, and to relish hearing that expression on the parts of others.

The PATH process engages participants in problem-solving, and they experience a growing sense of involvement and investment.

Joe's vision of owning his own home galvanized the 17 people who had gathered to participate in his PATH. "I bought the house!" Joe said in the 'Goal' section of his PATH. "Great," we said, "How did that happen?" Joe was a bit stumped, but half a dozen of the people who had gathered with him 'remembered' what made it possible to buy the house:

"We used some of the money that Joe's mother had set aside for him to make a down payment."

"I got my friend Charlie, the bank manager, to come to a circle meeting about a month after we did this PATH. He saw Joe's vision, and he also realized that the circle was a source of real strength – it gave Charlie the security he needed to feel comfortable about making the loan."

"We had a big painting party one weekend. All of us showed up with our families. We painted and gardened and picnicked, and had a great time. Mary brought one of her famous apple cobblers!"

Joe's group needed a real estate agent who would operate with integrity – they couldn't afford to make a big mistake in purchasing a house – and one participant in the group remembered that she knew someone who would fit the bill. "My friend Janna is a real estate agent who is very honest. We can share Joe's PATH with her so she understands what we are trying to do, and she can help us find a place that we can afford that won't have any hidden problems. Also, she'll know that seventeen people will be watching – that will keep anybody honest."

The real estate agent showed up later in the PATH as one of the 'People we Need to Enroll', and the person who had the strongest personal connection with her included contacting her as one of her personal First Steps. Other participants celebrated this contribution, and in a very subtle way, are prepared to encourage and support that participant to take that important first step. If the group makes good use of the PATH graphic, they can re-visit the story each time they meet, and hold themselves accountable for their personal and collective commitments.

As participants begin to get engaged in active problem-solving, the experience of making these active contributions deepens their sense of commitment and shared purpose.

The inquiry helps pathfinders and their allies become more strategic in their thinking.

As a long-time recipient of rehabilitation services, John had adopted a rather closed, binary model of thinking about how he might make progress in his life. Significant gains were either to

be achieved alone –through independent effort– or they could not be achieved alone, in which case he needed to go back to the service system for further rehabilitation and training.

Years of immersion in special education and rehabilitation services had never raised the prospect of enlisting his personal support network in helping with his search for meaningful employment, quitting smoking, or moving towards more authenticity in his relationships – all of these had been interpreted as matters of individual skill or will.

The pattern of inquiry and reflection in PATH opened up some new possibilities. John can use the graphic record to remember the strategies he created, to share his vision and plan with his friends, and to reconnect with the energy that was attached to these discoveries.

The inquiry encourages the pathfinder to recognize the importance of identifying individuals and groups to enlist, to get very specific about what they plan to ask people to contribute, and to make very specific plans to contact those potential supporters.

Even when potential supporters are absent, pathfinders and allies see that they can use the PATH graphic to effectively share their vision with friends and family members. The prospect of gaining understanding, commitment and practical support from this extended community is exciting and highly motivating.

PATH may help redefine stuck roles, releasing a lot of energy.

The staff members who worked in the four-person residence that was Walter's home had become rather bored with their jobs. The Nursing Plan (in a big blue binder full of charts) not only defined the work of the shift, it defined their relationship with Walter, their jobs, and their identities. One staffer said, "We have to check our real lives at the door when we come in to do a shift."

Walter was a man who didn't speak, and he slept most of the time. When we were inquiring about the Dream, it initially began and ended with "Healthy" and "Safe". But when we asked, "When does he wake up?" the staff woke up!

"He loves banjo music. I brought my banjo here one night, and he really seemed to enjoy it."

"He wakes up when he's in fresh air. I had to meet my daughter at the skating rink, so I took Walter with me, and he kind of came alive."

"He loves it when new people are around. I had a couple of friends over for tea one afternoon, and he really liked hearing the sound of people talking together.

As those elements became part of the Dream (connected to a little graphic showing Walter waking up), new elements began to emerge: "Walter surrounded by people who see who he really is", "Part of a larger community." "A gentle, patient teacher and listener."

Then, in the Goal section, the PATH took an interesting twist. Instead of moving in the direction of looking for a music program, a recreation program, and a socialization program, individual staff members began to create little stories about involving Walter in the activities and connections that formed important parts of their own lives. It turned out that one staff member is a very accomplished musician, and that he was connected with dozens of people who make music in the area. He started the ball rolling...

"I can get Walter in when people are jamming ... especially when they're playing Bluegrass music. That'll be a good time for Walter, and it will be a good time for me!"

"I coach competitive skating. If we can free up the van, I can bring Walter to practices. The one time he went, the skaters loved pushing his chair around on the ice."

"For years, I've wanted to be part of the Amnesty International group that meets at the Library. If Walter and I go together, he would be my best reason for finally making that commitment. I wonder if Amnesty works on behalf of people in institutions?"

"Hmm, you know, if we do this with Walter, we can do it with Jane..."

The move from caretaker to detective and bridge builder, especially when it involves things that people are personally invested in and passionate about, can be liberating.

We've seen this happen with family members as well.

Two sisters said, “Now we know what we can do. Before this, all we could see was Mom beating her head against a brick wall, and we knew we didn’t want to do that. But now we see ourselves on Mary’s PATH.”

A father who had long been separated from his family had only spoken a few words during his daughter’s PATH. When we reached the last stage (First Steps) he was literally the last person in the room to speak. “This has been great” he said. “We can hold the next PATH meeting at my house.” A breakthrough.

Community and organizational PATHS

PATH builds community in the context of planning for individuals and families, but it can also directly support a community or a group to develop a clear picture of their direction and commitment. Sometimes, the group has a very specific project they want to work on, but sometimes, they’re simply struggling with the question, “What do we want to *be* together *as a community*?”

Pastor Martin’s small church congregation engaged this question a few months after Sara’s PATH. The pattern that emerged surprised and delighted everyone, and opened the door to the church being more purposeful in its commitment to inclusion. One man said, “I want this to be a church where my skepticism is as welcome as my faith,” and he received acclamation from all of the other participants. At the end, I said, “If I knew for a certainty that there was a church like this in our community, I’d be there in a second!”

Members of a housing cooperative used PATH to regenerate their commitment to be a community. “In the last couple of years we’ve gotten totally preoccupied with finances and furnaces, and we’ve lost the sense of why we came together in the first place.”

Parents, teachers, students and elders created a PATH to re-energize a private school that was based in seven constituent churches. In this PATH, it turned out that the most disaffiliated student was the person who created the biggest breakthrough!

In Northern British Columbia, a group of First Nations elders created a community PATH that was initially focused on the question of how to bring back people with disabilities who had moved to urban institutions and nursing homes decades ago. Rather than starting with a vision for a service agency or a hospital board, their vision centered on a 3,000 year-old traditional body of understanding about how individual life, family, clan and community life, life on the land, and connection with the Creator were to be conducted. Then they used this pattern to figure out how they would organize the work of bringing people with disabilities home.

Since then, this community has unrolled their PATH about every six months to work on another question –fisheries, education, economic development, cultural enterprises, and so on. One of the participants said that this PATH was like doing an archeological dig: it is a way for the community to remember together things that they have always known, but now, because the whole pattern can be seen in one place, it is more available for community-building.

Walter’s PATH includes a tiny graphic depicting “a long, slow, tender journey”. PATH-in-practice is a world-wide journey of discovery, connection and contribution. It can be a gift from the disability field to the larger community. People who live with the questions about welcoming people into the heart of community life are discovering many patterns for capacity-finding, community-building, following the threads of gifts and interests, and developing engagement and commitment. Our communities need this.

The picture that is emerging is more like a mosaic than a satellite map. The discoveries about PATH and community-building are being made in the moments, with Walter, and Sara, and Martin. There is no Corps of Engineers or university research facility assembling a giant map. We’re more like the early explorers, following tiny trails, canoeing in and out of small bays –the sweet places of community life. If there is ever going to be a ‘big map’, it will be because the explorers –the people who are reading this book– occasionally take the time to gather together, share their stories, and weave the stories together. We invite you to share your discoveries.

Reference

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