Standing Alongside People as they Change

As a provincial, independent facilitation organization in Ontario, Families for a Secure Future is dedicated to serving adults with developmental disabilities and supporting them to become more engaged in directing their lives, making choices and taking up full citizenship in the community.

Our vision focuses on supporting people within the context of their family/friends to develop a unique plan for moving forward and creating a meaningful life for themselves. This plan evolves over time, out of intentional conversations that help them to clarify their vision as well as explore what it will take to really make it happen. Many of the people we support have chosen to secure individualized funding in order to build an ordinary life where they can contribute their gifts within a community context and among others.

As independent facilitators and planners of any kind, we can lose our way if we want to be seen as the instrument of change. Especially if we want to be seen as the person whose task it is to bring about change—set the course, define the goals—draw forth the vision/dream of what is possible. We lose our way if we judge our worth by the changes we are privileged to witness and be part of. We are lost if we insist on change. We cannot insist that people change—so that there is something to write about in the second quarter report.

Change does not operate that way.

Change is grueling. It takes initiative. It takes deliberate action. It requires something of us on a daily basis.

It entails pushing past our fears and engaging our will. Moving forward.

Even making little changes, requires tremendous effort the kind of effort that is sustained over time. We all know that change is hard won and that there is always the risk that we revert back to the way it was before.

As independent facilitators and planners, the system may want us to sell change—bring about change—work for change—enumerate certain changes, but we must resist the temptation to expect change. Change is a conscious decision to take a risk, to leave something behind and step into something new. It often means stepping into a new role/embracing a new identity or way of being in the world. For that to happen, for that to be rewarding and worthwhile something new needs to be activated not only within ourselves but also among the persons that love and care about us.
For years, I worked within the People First movement. I witnessed some tremendous changes in people’s lives over time—transformative changes. I experienced it as ripening into change, that when people were inwardly prepared to act differently they did so. When their will got activated—they acted. This was sometimes with the support of others and sometimes alone. It was sometimes with other’s blessings and sometimes against all odds. In fact, change seemed to be about taking a stand for oneself, standing up for something. It was for some a form of resistance. For this change to be possible inwardly, they needed to be emboldened, inspired by others. They needed to be witness to change, and have people who acted as models for change. They needed someone, at least one person that believed in them wholeheartedly.

I came away from the People First movement believing that we need to be careful to honour this process of “ripening into change” and not try to push or cajole people into change for the sake of change. We cannot change on behalf of another, it takes them to “will it” to happen. They must decide to act differently and willfully for themselves.

Those who take up the work of Facilitation and Planning need to be aware of the careful balance between expecting change and supporting change. We need to be a “stand for change” and assist people to:

• declare what they need and want,
• state what has become unmanageable in their lives,
• consider various directions and possibilities,
• think differently and act boldly with courage,
• choose consciously to pursue a different storyline about what is possible in their lives.

We need to be a stand for others to remain open to discovering something new about themselves and finding their unique voice.

At the same time, we need to recognize that change has its own time. That people need many opportunities for trying change on, exploring the new situation, the new role, the new relationship, to see if it “fits” with who they believe themselves to be. People need help with scenario building at first and then support as they and their loved ones need to experiment with what the consequences to change are and whether they will be able to sustain it.

I have found that one of the most important things people need is time to practice the change in behavior or the change in role- to try it on, try it on for size. They need support for adjusting their lives while they are working toward the new possibility.
As “story beings”, we need to carefully construct a new story about ourselves over time, in such a way that we feel transformed from the inside out, so that we own the new story.

We need to recognize that personal change requires us to consider others, engage others. My change always necessitates that those around me change, adapt, reorder their pictures of what is possible, and ultimately stretch their imagination of who I am. I need people to be there for me when I stumble or if I fall. For me to sustain change I need to know that people are behind me, that they have my back. Each of us asks the same questions when we take on change. Who will be there for me? Where is the safe place for me to fall back into? Who believes in me?

When we formed Families for a Secure Future, we worked on the premise that for individuals to take on and fully embrace change, their families would also need to change. Their families would also need to embrace and take part in that change. We believed from the outset that the wellbeing of the individuals and their families/loved ones were intricately and intimately linked.

For this reason, we create Family Groups so that parents and siblings can come together to learn and grow with one another over time. So that family members in joining together can listen to one another, co-inspire one another and hold the impulse for positive change among each another. At the same time as supporting the parents and siblings to gather so that they can imagine differently we actively support the person to gather key people in their life so that there is an intentional context for supported decision making and for helping them consider stepping into change, so that there is a “place” for change.

As an organization, we understood from the outset that there is a kind of reciprocity in change. As you change, I also change. For change to be sustainable it needs to arise out of relationship, trusting relationships, where we know each other’s stories and how the story has evolved over time. The kind of relationships where we tenderly hold each other’s dreams and vulnerabilities while choosing to act differently. For this to be possible, independent facilitators need to acknowledge who is it that is really taking the risk to bring about change and who bears the consequences of the change. We also need to ask who defines the pace and the nature of change?

As independent facilitators:
• we have the privilege to stand alongside people as they change, the change that they have willfully chosen.

• we bear witness to these changes. We see how these changes bring about changes in everyone who is woven into that persons’ life.
• we help people adjust to the newfound expectations and demands brought about by these changes and help them to consider their next steps day by day.

This takes a great deal of humility on our part, to be present to this kind of ripening, ripening into change.

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