

The Power of One

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This article was originally published on the ABC Ramp Up website in June, 2011. In it Mark discusses the importance of understanding how an individual's internal capacity to deal with life's inevitable challenges is crucial for each of us to lead fulfilling lives. It explores the importance of developing our internal capacity through the process of lifelong learning.

In my previous post, "Disability Is Everyone's Business", I described three factors that I believe are preventing so many people with disabilities from participating in the community: the massive infrastructure barriers that make every day hard work; the low community expectations of people with disabilities; and the overwhelming sense of disempowerment felt by so many people. And these things are all related.

One of the reasons why the community's expectations are so low is that citizens see people with disabilities struggling to catch the bus, to read the paper, to hear what people are saying, and the response is often "Poor Johnny, life is hard for him so we can't expect him to do what everyone else does". So the pressure is off governments and businesses to provide decent infrastructure. Of course, if instead the response was "Dear Politician/Bus Owner, Johnny's life is hard because the buses aren't accessible - fix them, or you don't get my vote/business", we might get this infrastructure problem fixed.

One of the reasons why Johnny is feeling so disempowered is that facing these huge infrastructure barriers reduces his confidence in his ability to participate. He is further disempowered because his next-door neighbour feels sorry for him and expects little of him. Observing his disempowerment, his next-door neighbour expects even less of him, and the owner of the bus company sees little point in making the bus accessible. It's a never-ending downward spiral.

All is not lost - far from it. I believe there are "strategic interventions" to address each of the three factors described above. And they, too, will be even more effective if they are connected together.

I am not suggesting that this is simple, or that there is just one "silver bullet" that will fix all of this. What I am suggesting is that, while there are many specific, targeted things that need to be done on the ground (and there is often more than one way to address any problem), there are also some overarching strategies that can provide a framework to bring together the many, often fragmented programs and activities to create a "smooth life pathway" for people with disabilities.

Providing opportunities for people with disabilities to travel on the superhighway of life with everyone else - and to travel in the fast lane if they so desire - is, I believe, ultimately what disability reform is all about. I call this the "Whole of Life Approach" to disability reform. Instead, though, many people with disabilities are currently travelling on the back roads of life in a horse and cart.

In my previous post I described "social marketing" and specifically a properly funded National Disability Marketing Strategy as a strategic intervention to help lift community expectations of people with disabilities. In a future post (if you'll have me!), I will describe a strategic intervention to fast track the removal of infrastructure barriers based around engaging the business sector. Why? Because the majority of the infrastructure we find so difficult is designed and built by the business sector.

These two strategic interventions address the external factors that prevent so many people with disabilities from participating in society. As such, it is the responsibility of the community to address these two factors. Most of us would argue that the community has a long way to go in creating a level playing field for people with disabilities, but it's also fair to say that progress has been made. While people with disabilities have been active advocates in this process, in another sense we've been passive to the extent that the change has not been focused on people with disabilities themselves, but on the environment in which we live.

The third factor - the sense of disempowerment felt by so many people with disabilities - is about the individual's internal response to his or her disability. It is therefore very much about human nature itself. As such, I believe each individual needs to take ownership of the process, and a more active role in it - with the direct support of the community. Of course, it's hardly fair to expect people to own this if they have never developed the capacity to do so.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this factor is that, while living with a disability creates a feeling of disempowerment for many people, for others it is the total opposite. For some people with disabilities the disability is a daily challenge, but they deal with it. For others, overcoming the effects of a disability can be one of the most motivating, empowering experiences of their lives. I have always felt that if we could understand why some people participate in all aspects of society, irrespective of the type or severity of their disabilities, while so many others don't, we might be able to create a strategic intervention to help empower those who feel disempowered.

That strategic intervention had me stumped for years. I didn't think there was one. I thought - as I think the majority of people do - that those people with even the most severe disabilities who lead lives that are little different to the lives they would have led without a disability, overcame the negative effects of poor infrastructure and low community expectations using what most of us think of as "X-factor". They were born motivated, with exceptionally high IQ, with a healthy dose of bravado.

I won't deny that a healthy dose of X-factor makes an enormous difference for those lucky enough to be born that way. But I also thought that, unless we could invent an "X-factor pill", increasing the participation of those not so lucky would be dependent on the speed with which we removed infrastructure barriers and increased community expectations.

I no longer think it's just about X-factor. For a start, X-factor is not something that we either have or we don't. Some people's X-factor is more overt than others, and some have more than others, but we've all got it. And, powerful as it is, left to its own devices it can be a destructive force. It needs channeling - to be pointed in the right direction.

That direction is provided by the "Y-factor" - the individual's ability to harness whatever X-factor she or he was born with and direct it to help solve the challenges he or she faces living with a disability. I

don't believe we are born with that ability. I think we gain it by acquiring "life skills" - skills that we all learn to varying extents throughout our lives. Decision-making skills, personal planning skills, personal management skills, communication skills. Most importantly, these are skills that can be taught.

I had the opportunity a few years ago to see this working first-hand. I was introduced to a personal leadership and development program for troubled young people in Year 10 in some of the most disadvantaged schools in South Australia, run by a wonderful organisation called Youth Opportunities. They transformed the lives of these young people by teaching them life skills. Their success has been profound - so much so that they are now delivering the program on a much larger scale. One of Australia's most highly respected Disability Employment Service providers, Personnel Employment (based in Adelaide), was so impressed with the program that they tried it with their own clients. That pilot was so successful that they now run it in-house, significantly improving their clients' ability to manage their lives and their preparedness for open employment.

Throughout my life I have been in awe of the achievements of my fellow human beings. It has instilled in me an undying faith in the capacity and potential of every individual. That so many people in our world never get the opportunity to unlock their potential, to achieve their aspirations and dreams, is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the human race. But that potential, that powerful human force, is always there. It's The Power of One.