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Thinking about PATH

PATH is a team-facilitated graphic planning process that was developed by Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and John O'Brien (visit Inclusion Press for the PATH workbook). PATH combines the best elements of a number of vision-building and future planning tools, and is the most useful tool for listening, planning and community-building we've ever encountered.

Faye and I learned PATH (the acronym stands for 'Planning Alternative Futures with Hope') at the feet of Marsha and Jack over 15 years ago. They taught us by facilitating our own personal PATHs and explaining the thinking that was at the heart of each step. We were surprised, delighted and inspired by the process, and began using it in our work, eventually including it at the core of a workshop we conduct on a variety of tools for creative facilitation.

The Inclusion Press workbook is the 'source', but we thought we'd like to add something about our own experiences and observations...

Interestingly, PATH isn't a 'disability' tool. It's a great generic process that can be used to define direction in ones own life, design a building, develop an organization, organize a community.

PATH begins with the Dream. Your vision. Asking what is it that you hope for, yearn for? What is the dream you have for your life? What gift to you want to be bringing to the world? What gives your life direction and meaning? What's at the center? If there were no barriers, how would you be living?

The next step (the Goal) is a chance to develop a good sense of what is achievable in time. Positive, possible movement towards the dream. We ask the person what their life would be like if they were doing effective work in the direction of their dream for 'a while' (long enough to make some significant progress) ... perhaps two years (they choose the time-frame). We encourage the person to imagine this as if it had already happened.

Our experience has been that if enough of the right people are present at the PATH, they all begin to contribute ideas, solutions, connections, action steps. More importantly, they all begin to see *their* part in the picture. The reason we like PATH so much is that it's partly a 'planning' tool, but also a great tool for *community-building, team-building, and commitment-building.*

A few weeks ago, we heard about a PATH that one of our students was facilitating for a young man, involving his mother and a couple of older sisters. At the end of the day, one of the sisters said, "Mom, now I know what I can do to help Tom. Before this, all I could see was you banging your head against a brick wall, and I just couldn't see myself joining you in that. But now I see what I can do".

Once the 'positive possible future' (the Goal) is developed, we do a quick check-in about what's happening in the present (the Now). What are the feelings, challenges, resources, obstacles, commitments ... the current state of affairs? It gives the pathfinders a sense of the work that has to be done in order to move effectively towards the goal.



In order to fill the gap between 'Now' and what people sense could actually be accomplished in a year or so, we can begin to identify:

- who we need to enroll,
- what we need to do to get stronger (the skills and practices that will help us stay energetic, focused, and on track),
- helpful general strategies (whenever we have a chance, we'll share the PATH with other people, and ask them if they have any ideas about how some of these things might happen),
- sometimes we work on some 'time-lines' (another way of depicting the story ... if it's going to look like this in two years, what would it have to look like in a year? six months? next month?),
- and we always end with First

Steps — very concrete, small-potatoes steps that can be taken in the next few days

- We finish with a big check-in ... "How do you feel?" Excited. Focused. A bit scared (that's okay, too). Glad.

One thing that can help is remembering that PATH isn't an Individual Education Plan (although you can *derive* an IEP from a PATH ... "What can the school do to help Sarah along her path?"). It isn't a 'Program Plan' (although you can *derive* a program plan from a PATH ... "What can our agency do that will help Sarah and her family on this journey?"). It's *Sara's* PATH.

Faye and I have had ten or more years of experience with this approach to planning. We've learned how to use and adapt PATH in situations that are very conflicted, confusing, challenging. We've facilitated PATHs for projects, agencies, county boards, state-wide programs, websites, people in business. On a personal level, we invite friends to help us do our own PATH every couple of years. The one iron-clad ground rule is that you never facilitate someone else's PATH until you've had your own done.

We teach PATH and other facilitation tools in workshops (lots of practice, and everybody gets their own PATH done). The best workshops are *diverse*, including family members, people with disabilities, professionals, and especially 'civilians': grandmothers, architects, church leaders, environmentalists, artists, clergy, educators, business people, people involved in community foundations, people involved in media, legislators, high school students, people involved in sports, etc. The message is, "these are tools for change, for discovery, for community-building and commitment-building" - not, "these are tools for disability, and we want to recruit you into our disability scene". Many times, people discover that their friends 'with disabilities' reflect great understanding, insight, strategic thinking and artistry. And the facilitation patterns turn out to be powerful tools for expression and leadership in the realm of self-advocacy.

PLEASE NOTE:

The Arc of Tennessee, working with the Tennessee Microboard Association, and the Council on Developmental Disabilities, is prepared to do a PATH for you, your family member, or your organization. There is no charge or fee for this service, and we will come to you, at a time and location that is convenient to you and your circle of friends and support. Please contact Steve Jacobs (800) 835-7077 at your earliest convenience!