**Building an Inclusive and Integrated Workplace**

Prior to my role as Executive Director of the Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities in Arkansas I was a store manager for Marshalls and TJ Maxx for 13 years. During that time, I learned how practicing competitive, integrated, and individualized employment made my stores more productive and my management team more effective. Competitive, integrated, and individualized employment means this:

* **Competitive** refers to wages. An employee with a disability earns the same amount as an employee without a disability for the same job. It does not refer to how someone got the job!
* **Integrated** means an employee with a disability is part of the team. They are not part of a sub-group that only consists of employees with disabilities. This includes the social side of the business as well.
* **Individualized** means the employee is on the company’s official payroll. They are not part of an externally funded internship or job study.

Put simply, the employee makes the same money, does the same work, is held to the same standards, and is part of the same company as everyone else. When I left Marshalls earlier this year the I/DD associate population of store I managed was 10%. The TJ Maxx I had managed previously is still at 10% as well – the inclusive culture endured after I left.

I didn’t fully understand competitive, integrated, and individualized employment overnight. I had multiple lessons to learn to really make it work. The most of those lessons didn’t come from any formal training: they came from my store associates with an I/DD over two summers hosting a youth employment program at TJ Maxx.

Here are the three main lessons I learned on how to build an integrated workplace:

**Work coaches are a good thing.** At first, I didn’t really understand the value work coaches brought to the table. My initial belief was that if someone needed a coach, they weren’t ready to work. I was wrong. The employees who did need work coaches needed more supervision at the beginning but needed less over time. Eventually, the work coaches spent most of their day in the break room – my own supervisors learned how to direct and motivate the employees who had an I/DD.

**One store, one team.** Several of the employees with an I/DD knew each other from school. They were friends and very comfortable with each other. They worked together and took breaks at the same time. They weren’t interacting with the rest of the store. We adjusted the schedule, so everyone went to break at different times. That way associates without disabilities interacted with those that did. No more enclaves. No more “us” and “them”. We were one store, one team.

**Different is okay.** One of the employees with an I/DD quoted movies all day long – and not all of his quotes were work appropriate. It made some people uncomfortable, and it made him stand out in a negative way. His work coach talked to him about, and he stopped. But he still stood out – he was different. But he was also dependable, productive, and depending on what movie he was quoting very funny. Once everyone got to know him, the negative impression went away. Yes, he was a little different, and that was okay.

Participating in the summer program also forced us to look closer at how we trained all new employees, not just those with an I/DD. Specifically we learned:

**Watch Out for Acronyms!** Acronyms can be great. They can save time when you communicate, but only if everyone knows what you are talking about. For example, all new hires started out in the backroom (BR). They reported to the backroom coordinator (BRC). The receiving process was called Door-To-Floor (DTF). On their first day they were told to “Report to the BRC in the BR to learn DTF”. It made perfect sense to us and confused the heck out of our new hires. We learned to provide a handout with acronyms in orientation and used more concise language as well.

**Job Aids are for Everyone.** We had large posters in the backroom describing the roles and responsibilities of everyone in the backroom. And they were posted eight feet above the floor. We moved them lower so everyone could see them. Some of the existing employees told us they had never bothered to read the posters because they were embarrassed to ask. That was a wake-up call for my managers and me. After that we made sure every job aid was current and at eye level.

**Make Sure the Entire Team Receives Disability Etiquette Training.** The management team was fairly well versed in how we should interact with employees with an I/DD. The backroom team got a high-level overview, but we didn’t go deep enough. For example, if someone with autism spectrum disorder doesn’t look you in the eye when you speak to them, they are not being disrespectful. If we had spent more time discussing possible behaviors, we could have avoided some issues early on.

Once we figured this out, we were able to build an inclusive and integrated store. The TJ Maxx I had mentioned earlier still employs the majority of people with I/DD I had hired. The ones that have left went on to better paying jobs. In thirteen years, I only dismissed one employee with an I/DD for performance. Only one.

In this unprecedented job market, employers are willing to move out of their comfort zone to staff their organizations. Doors that may have closed before are open now. So, put your resume together, fill out an application, and get ready to go through the door.