
WHAT MAKES A GOOD SUPPORT PERSON?

by Dean Richards

Dean Richards lives in Melbourne. He works and is an active contributor to his local footy club. Dean has been involved in the disability movement for about seven years. Dean's introduction to disability services came following an accident in 1987 which resulted in Quadriplegia. He was to learn that services were not always flexible enough to meet his needs and his family was becoming increasingly worried about the day when they would no longer be around to support him. This led to Dean working with a small group of people to develop a flexible night time service called Nightlife in 2007 that enables people with disabilities to remain living in their own home. The service maintains strong life giving ethics and is consumer governed. In 2006 Dean, through further frustration started using Direct Payments in which has completely changed the way his support is administrated.



Due to my physical support needs I rely on others to meet some of my needs. Some of this assistance is given by family but I also use paid supports nearly every day of my life. It is not always easy and I have found when thinking of what makes a good support worker there are some obvious qualities I require, for example reliability, punctuality and a willingness to learn. But these alone do not always give me a good support worker. In the following article I aim to address some of the qualities that I think are important in a good support worker.

LISTENING AND BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WELL

Listening and being able to communicate well are just as important if not more as other qualities. Given all people are unique human beings we all have idiosyncrasies,

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preferences and habits that vary from one person to another. Therefore it’s important for support workers not to assume

something is done a certain way or their way of doing things is better. As a support worker if you’re not sure of a task or request its far better to ask for clarification ensuring the task can be carried out correctly and in the manner that a person prefers.

Good listening and communication ensures the person being supported is guiding their supports and controlling their environment. It leaves the individual empowered and will make a happier working relationship.

KNOWING THE PERSON WELL AND BEING DILIGENT

Getting to know a person well assists a support worker to be proactive and attentive e.g. ask if shoes need to be put away or clothes folded, checking that there’s nothing switched on or off

that shouldn’t be etc. Another quality I look for is diligence. It’s important that support workers don’t rush through

the routine and complete tasks quickly but work through thoroughly to ensure the task

is done properly. For example, as I work and often meet with people, I like to dress professionally and represent my workplace appropriately. For this I need my support worker to understand this need and ensure that my wishes are carried out. I find it frustrating when I hop into the elevator at work, look into the full length mirror and notice flaws in my appearance as I'm unable to fix on my own.

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TAKING A BACK SEAT

A good support worker also knows when to take the back seat! For me this is important particularly when out shopping as I need the people serving me to focus on me as the customer - not the support worker. Once I needed a new watch band and approached the counter. The support worker, who was holding my watch, addressed the shop assistant and asked for a new watch band. The shop assistant then pulled out all the watch bands and showed my support worker! She then looked at me to see what I liked thus creating a situation where the shop assistant realised I was the customer and felt embarrassed. A good support worker would walk behind me and in essence only be my hands leaving me to talk and negotiate for myself! This also alleviates assumptions of dependence and enables community members to negotiate and build relationship with me!

have people that suit my personality and fit in with my family and home. Ideally I look for someone that is not going to get flustered if things are not right. I like to show staff how to do the tasks that are required but I'm also happy to be flexible about the routine. I have found this has

worked well for both myself and support workers and helps people to remember the routine and tasks that are required. What this still means is on occasions I have to speak up if a support worker has forgotten something or left something out but I find in general that this method is better than having a pre-set routine where it is task a, then task b, then c etc. with little or no flexibility. For some people this may not be suitable.

RESPECT AND DIGNITY

Having good enough health and working full time show's that I'm a capable to deal with issues that may arise in my life and deal with problems that may occur. I do need support to do tasks that physically I'm unable to do but I'm not a child and I'm old enough to look after myself! However sometimes because of my support needs

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GETTING THE RIGHT MATCH

I never expect that a friendship will develop with support workers but it is important to

others often think I'm incompetent and that I need mothering, caring or nursing! I need support workers who respect my ability to

control my life and my body! By all means I'm happy for support workers to say that my skin maybe red or that something does not look right. However they must respect that I control my own body and if I am not bothered by it, then it means that is the end of it! I do not need badgering or statements like "I know I'm a fuss pot but I only want what is best". Dignity means enabling me to decide what's best for me! This also means, like other adults, I will wear the consequence of poor decisions. After all, at the end of the day I'll be the one stuck in bed if I let things go and do not seek treatment!

"My disability is part of me but it is not me."

I also have family visit on a regular basis and the support worker must blend in without being obtrusive. For example sometimes we maybe finish a meal when the support worker arrives. It's important that the support worker does not make a song and dance on arrival but to pass through and if need be discreetly talk to me so they understand my wishes. Understanding this ensures I'm not worrying that staff are going to interrupt my family time and family don't feel pressured or rushed to have everything finished before the support worker arrives.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Another part of the role of a support worker is to maintain confidentiality. For example if I need assistance with filing of bank documents, financial statements or funding administration I expect support workers to maintain my confidentiality. Similarly if I have phone calls or discussions with family members these are private and not for repeating. Confidentiality is vital to building trust.

SEEING ME AS A PERSON FIRST – NOT A "DISABLED" PERSON

My disability is part of me but it is not me.

I have many and varied interests and my disability or disability related activities only take

up a fraction of my time and life. To see me as a person that is involved in family, community and enjoys a fulfilling job are all important. I have been fortunate to have had and still have support workers that have been there to assist me in actively pursuing interests of different kinds which have enhanced me socially, physically and emotionally. In assisting me with these things support workers and others see me as an active person with normal wants and desires but sometimes a person who needs some assistance to achieve these tasks.