

# THE ART OF ASKING

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## Introduction

The successful pursuit, attainment, maintenance and enhancement of community in the lives of individuals with a disability (and their families) is a major focus of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and more importantly an expressed priority need of the majority of recipients throughout the present trials being carried out across Australia. The vision and passion is present, yet there appears to be little evidence that matches the vision. This brief paper wishes to share a belief that a major contributing factor to our limited success may rest in our collective failure to either *ask of others* and our failure to be *ask prepared*.

***“How on earth did you get Tim Costello (World Vision / Advocate) to attend the Charters Towers community dinner when he lives thousands of kilometers away in Melbourne?”***

***Answer: “I asked him”***

## What does it take to ask, and to enhance our skills in the art of asking?

We all experience those *Ah Ha!* moment's in our lives when *'the light goes on'*, when we experience common sense and when we are offered direction. One of these moments occurred for me whilst reading the work of David Schwartz (1992). Schwartz identified that one of the major reasons why individuals with a disability continue to be excluded from the richness and diversity of community is that we have simply failed to ask the “right” community members to step forward to welcome and support people with a disability (*and their families*) to be *“of”* their community not just *“in”* community.

John McKnight adds further to this by highlighting the fact that asking alone is not adequate; effective community builders need to know not just *why* they are asking but *who* to ask, *how* to ask, *when* to ask, and where to ask. As askers, we need to be *ask prepared*.

Asking is natural. We carry it out in our daily lives, at the shops, at work or school, and with our families. At the recent G20 Meeting in Brisbane world leaders spent 2 days “asking”. I tin they would have been “ask prepared”. Are we, when our work is just as important and significant in the lives of others?

The answer to this question became clear to me a number of years ago whilst working within the Queensland Government. I facilitated a community meeting for local churches. I invited twenty different churches from a wide cross section of denominations to consider how they as faith communities could better welcome people with disabilities and their families.

The meeting day arrived and on arrival I became aware that I was facilitating a meeting for more people than who were invited. I wondered why this was so. So I asked them and I experienced two powerful learning moments. *Firstly*, one of the participants raised his hand and said, '*Because we have never been asked before*', and *secondly*, a nun pointed across to the manager of a large church based welfare agency to say that she thought that it was 'His responsibility', yet she was invited. Here was further evidence that the formal Human Service industry had distanced its own members from seeing themselves as part of the solution to community exclusion. We have failed to ask because we have come to believe that the pursuit of community inclusion rests within the domain of the human service industry not within everyday citizens.

### **So why is asking important?**

There are five main reasons why asking is important. *Firstly*, significant opportunities have been denied to individuals with a disability (and their families) owing to the lack of asking. *Secondly*, human services dominate the lives of marginalised people therefore denying community a responsibility and opportunity that was once theirs. *Thirdly*, we live in a world of shared interests and it is often these shared interests that bind us together with a sense of common unity. *Fourthly* asking is an essential tool for all: individuals with a disability; family members; human service workers; and the wider community. *Finally*, there is a consequence if we do not ask.

The art of asking is therefore not just important, but critical in the building of inclusive communities. The seeking of others to be involved in the lives of individuals with a disability (*separate from representatives within the human service industry*) requires a deliberate and conscious approach to achieve valued and relevant outcomes.

Asking can be defined as:

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***the deliberate and conscious act of approaching others and in so doing seeking an involvement that previously wasn't there.***

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This definition clearly highlights the importance of '*the act of asking*' requiring an involvement that is both deliberate and conscious.

It is through both this deliberate and conscious action that we personally redefine 'asking' from that of solely a 'natural act' to an act whereby focused attention, planning and serious pursuit is required.

## The Five Rules of Asking

Being *ask prepared* requires consideration of the following five rules.

### ❖ Rule 1. Why are you asking?

It is important that the act of asking is preceded by a clear understanding of why the act is being carried out in the first place. What is the guiding motivation? What vision or dream is driving the asking act? What impact will this request have on the individual concerned, those significant others in his/her life and the wider community? Whose needs are being served through this act of asking? Have you taken the time to pause and reflect on why you are asking?

### ❖ Rule 2. What are you asking for?

Having clearly defined why you are asking helps clarify what you are actually asking for. Often the major reason for asking is the seeking of an involvement of others who share interests or concerns. It needs to be something that is possible, achievable and in line with other community expectations. The *'first ask'* may need to be a stepping stone that in time will lead to the addressing of more complex needs at a later stage. An example of this is that an individual may be relationship poor. Rather than approaching a group and asking them for the more complex need for friendship, for example

*'Would you be Mark's friend?'*

promote the shared interest that the individual may have with them, such as

*'Hey Tom! I know a guy, Mark, who also shares your passion for the environment and would love to be involved in the Magnetic Island Conservation Group. I would love to introduce Tom to you''*

This approach highlights the value to be gained by both the individual asked and the group being considered.

In the past (and even over more recent times) the pursuit of community inclusion has been followed by the act of identifying one individual within a group or association and placing upon that individual what may be considered unreasonable expectations. That he or she alone will provide all the necessary supports that are required for the individual with a disability to be successfully included. Through this approach in carrying out what may be termed as *'the big ask'*, we have become aware that the result is often one of failure for all concerned – the individual, family community members and the group approached.

An alternative to *'the big ask'* is to seek the support of the right person within the club to be *'the asker of others'*, who in turn have the capacity to share the various support roles that may be required.

From experience we have come to learn that:

- a) Individuals don't mind playing a support role but are hesitant to meet the expectation of meeting all the support needs of the individual;
- b) Often individuals have the personal experience, the capacity, the confidence, and the competence to fulfil a certain function or support role when asked; and
- c) Through the deliberate building of a number of support arrangements there is more likely the potential for a number of reciprocal relationships to evolve.

We are asking for the sharing of interests, and the identification and development of the most appropriate support arrangements.

### ❖ Rule 3 Part A – Who are you asking?

It is critical that we are asking *the right person*. Does the person we are about to ask have the influence, charisma and power necessary to assist us in our goal? The identifying and seeking of such individuals requires significant planning and attention.

When we have planned and researched well we are then in a position to place accurate expectations on the individual. For example I have been rarely let down when I have approached the *right person* with the opening line of: 'I welcome the opportunity to meet with you. I have received most positive feedback from others in this community as to your leadership and your ability to influence others. This unique skill has made our community a better community. Thank you.'

If we are able to identify the right person, being that individual who displays influence, charisma and leadership then they will be in a good position to be the 'asker of others' and in so doing help construct the necessary support arrangements necessary for successful community inclusion to occur. With the "right person" within a supportive environment of "role expectancy" great things happen!

### ❖ Rule 3 Part B – Who does the asking?

The status and importance of the message is also determined by *who* brings the message.

- Is the best person doing the asking?
- Does this person have the greatest influence on those to be asked?
- Is the person able to be clear, concise, focused and positive in their asking?
- Those being asked will accept the challenge when the asker is both respected and valued and gives clear reasons for why their involvement and participation is important.

### ❖ Rule 4 Part A – When do you ask?

Timing is critical. You can have the right person, asking the right person but if the timing is wrong an opportunity is more than likely to be lost. It is important to identify a time that has the greatest potential to be successful, a time that is free of other distractions or commitments.

The question is – *“What is the best time for the asking act to take place that will maximise its potential for success?”*

#### ❖ Rule 4 Part B – Where do you ask?

Along with the question of when do you ask, the issue of where do you ask is equally important. The location can contribute significantly to how the individuals concerned feel and whether or not the information is in fact even absorbed and understood. It is important that the location is where the individual being asked is most comfortable and free of distractions.

#### ❖ Rule 5 – How will you safeguard?

No matter how hard we plan things do go wrong. The act of safeguarding requires of us to have a number of safeguarding strategies prepared. We need to have a heightened consciousness of the issue and in so doing allocate time, and focus on those situations that we may not have control over but which may threaten the process. We also need to learn from our mistakes, acknowledge them, write them down and above all do not repeat them!

#### **Are you ask prepared?**

Schwartz reminds us of the important responsibility of the asker. Schwartz says 'It is the asker's deepest ethical responsibility to absorb any new rejection on behalf of the individual with a disability'. With this in mind we have a greater responsibility to accept the challenge of a conscious and planned approach to asking and in so doing reduce the potential for harm. In the act of asking we bring with us a huge responsibility to help orchestrate an action that will result in positive outcomes for all. Our failure to plan and give due attention will result in limited opportunities.

#### **References:**

Schwartz, David (1992) Crossing the River – Creating a conceptual revolution in community and disability, Cambridge, Mass: Brookline Books.