

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

**Raising Expectations Across the Lifespan: The Convergence
between Skills and Attitude
Structured Discovery Rehabilitation Training in the United States**

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It happened on April 25 of this year. My wife, my two daughters and I were all sound asleep in our beds when a tornado warning sounded at 1:00 a.m. My wife insisted that we go down to the basement and wait for the weather to pass. Just before 2:00 the tornado ripped through our neighborhood dropping trees everywhere, including on my house. We lost power and we knew we took damage. After ensuring that my wife and kids were safe I put on some boots and went upstairs to assess the damage. I knew immediately that there was significant damage to our kitchen and living room. Once I assessed that the remainder of the house was safe, I got some flashlights for my girls to be able to see, and we waited until sunrise to further assess the damage.

Tree limbs blocked both the front and back doors, so I grabbed a battery-powered saw and cut a path through. Then, we were able to get to safety and no one was injured. By the way, my wife and I are totally blind but both of my teenage girls are fully sighted. This was a horrible tragedy that I would not want anyone to go through, but because of the training and expectations that my wife and I have received through rehabilitation services in the United States, we were able to handle the situation.

So, what does good rehabilitation look like? Before we talk about rehabilitation, we need a better understanding of how humans function as a whole. A Psychologist named Carl Rogers coined a term called self-actualization. This term means that all humans (sighted as well as blind) are born with the innate drive to thrive—to succeed—to achieve their potential. Another researcher named Maslow helped us to understand that all humans have basic needs that start with the need for food and water. Once the survival needs are met, then the need for shelter and safety come next. Once a person has food and shelter, then, and only then can he or she begin thinking about work, education, or other types of social pursuits.

So then, what happens to a blind adult who no longer wants to work, or who has given up on all of his hopes and dreams? If, like Rogers said it is part of human nature to want to succeed, then how does a person lose the desire to achieve? The answer is that he or she has learned to become helpless. This person has learned to be pessimistic and has engrained the notion that to not be able to see means to not be able to do. So long as society provides basic substance, such as food and shelter, then there is little drive to hope for much beyond that.

But we all know better and we understand that blind people do have dreams, ambitions, and want to work, contribute to their community and have an active social life. But if the person has already been demoralized or taught to be helpless, how then do we help them to believe in themselves and strive for more? There are really only two secrets to rehabilitation—actually there are three, but only two main one's for you to work with.

In the area of rehabilitation for blind people we talk about specific skills they need to know, including the use of a white cane for mobility, braille for literacy, computers for communication, and activities of daily living to live independently. Each of these skills are important. If a person cannot travel with a white cane, then he or she will not be able to live alone, get to and from a job site, or safely navigate in familiar or unfamiliar areas. So, mobility, whether with a white cane or guide dog is a very important skill.

Braille is the key to literacy for a person whose eyesight does not allow efficient use of printed material. Young children learn everything they need to know about vocabulary, sentence structure, and basic literacy through either print or braille—these things cannot be learned by listening to audio recordings. So, certainly braille is a very important skill. Computers too are such a critical part of daily life it is hard to think of a job that does not require at least some basic level of computer knowledge. You almost need to know computer use just to watch television or operate household appliances. And of course, no blind person can live independently if he or she cannot cook, clean, and care for his or her belongings. So all of the skills are very important in the field of rehabilitation. But the trick is that skills in isolation have very limited use.

In the United States, we operate under a model of rehabilitation called Structured Discovery. This is a model that was developed by successful blind men and women who passed down through word of mouth the belief that with some skills training and confidence, they could make their own determinations about life. Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, the person who originally developed this model said that life was really about choices and having the ability to make those choices stick. In other words, to make one's own path in life and to have both the right and responsibility to live as one chose.

Secret Number One: So, the first secret to rehabilitation is that you have to believe in the capacity of blind people to be independent. I don't mean to believe as an academic exercise, but to believe in a manner that is conveyed to the student at every turn. Students will invariably give up on themselves. They will give up at the first sign of difficulty. For much of their lives (certainly since they have lived with a visual impairment) they have been told to

“be careful,” “just sit down and I will do that for you,” “I am afraid you will get hurt.” And so of course the blind person begins to believe these messages and they become the internal message they tell themselves as an excuse to give up or stop short of pushing beyond their fears. This is where you come in. To believe in your student means to believe in them far more than they believe in themselves and far more than society has ever believed in them.

If you are fearful that they will get hurt by a car, you will convey this fear to your student. If you are worried that they will get cut in using a sharp knife, then your student will feel your fear and will become fearful as well. If you believe in your heart that your student, because of his or her poor vision, is more likely to get hurt when out in the public, then these fears will get conveyed to your student. No amount of cane travel, braille, computers or ADL instruction will ever be effective in counteracting these fears. You could have a student in training for a whole year, but so long as they student is not pushed outside his/her comfort zone, then he/she will not learn—or at least won’t strive to achieve his goals to the fullest. A

Secret Number 2. The second secret is to problem solve. Now, in order for this second secret to work, you have to already be practicing secret number one. Because life is little more than a giant problem to be solved. How will your student do the job of a schoolteacher, supervising children and keeping them safe? How could your student become a chef in a busy restaurant, with all the hot pots and sharp knives? How could a blind person own a day care center for children, work with dangerous animals, or a hundred other jobs that involve some level of risk? The answer is you have to figure it out. Not by yourself, but you and your student together.

The job of problem solving is made much easier when you have a network of other blind adults who have already been successful. In the United States we have the National Federation of the Blind. This is a U.S. resource, but with the miracle of the internet, it is largely available to you as well. Why is the NFB a powerful tool for problem solving? Because the NFB has thousands of members who are all blind adults, and who work in all sorts of industries. And even if you cannot find a blind chef on the list, chances are you will find enough blind people who have enough ideas about how such work can be done safely. But, first you have to believe. You have to believe in the capacity of blind people in general, and in your student specifically. Then you have to work through the various problems with the attitude of “not how can this be done,” but “how do we get this done.”

But I told you there was a third secret. The third secret is that even when you have mastered secrets number 1 and 2, your job is not done. That is because 99% of the general public does “Not” believe in your student and they begin with the assumption that a blind person cannot do any job safely, except for maybe answering the telephone. So each and every day as you

work to believe in the capacity of your student and work through the various problems that present challenges to success, you will be working in an environment where most people around you are reinforcing the message that blindness means helplessness, and that blind people are vulnerable and need to be protected.

But all hope is not lost. Even when it seems an insurmountable problem with so many negative messages and reinforcements, you need to keep pushing towards independence and reinforcing the message of love, hope, and determination. And, if you do this effectively, before long your students will be saying the same words. Then they will start believing the same things, and then they will start doing more than even they felt possible. And, once this begins to happen, then there is no stopping your student. And, when you get a new student, and that new student feels hopeless and helpless, then you can introduce that new student to your newly independent student who tell the new student, "I know how you are feeling right now, but believe me there is a bright side at the end of this story," and the hopefulness and energy of your student will become manifest in the new students and this will become a culture within your agency, and so hopeful, effective rehabilitation will become the norm.

On April 25 of this year a tornado came through and destroyed half my house in the middle of the night. I had a choice to make that day. I could have chosen to sit down and cry. I could have looked up at my two sighted teenagers and said you have to protect us and make sure it is safe. Or, I could decide that I was the adult who had the responsibility, skills and ability to protect my family. I made the right choice that day and I made the choice because a long time ago a group of rehabilitation professionals believed in me more than I believed in myself, and those individuals taught me that with love, hope, and determination I could live the life that I wanted. And that is exactly what I am continuing do do.