

"The Art of Asking"

Ric Thompson

Ric Thompson is Coordinator of a small community building agency, Inclusion Works, in Townsville, Queensland. Over the past thirty years Ric has maintained a 'passion' for the ongoing development of inclusive communities for individuals with a disability and their families.

Introduction

The successful pursuit, attainment and maintenance of community in the lives of individuals with a disability (and their families) is a major focus of Commonwealth and State governments, many Disability Services and above all, individuals themselves. The vision and accompanying 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 failure to either *ask of others* and, even more importantly, to be *ask prepared*.

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

We all experience those *Ah Hal* moments 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 community members to both welcome and support people with a disability to be *of* their community. He goes on to say that it would appear that we have failed to do something as fundamental as to 'go a calling'.

John McKnight adds further to this *Ah Hal* moment 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. Yet when it comes to asking members of the community to stand alongside and with individuals with a disability and their families we enter a period of silence and apprehension. I began wondering why this is so.

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 with over 100% attendance (more people arrived than invited, as word had got around). I wondered why this was 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'. Even the churches, through their membership and in fact leadership within the human service industry, have 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. Lastly, 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 therefore be defined as:

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

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 focussed attention and skill development 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 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 a/so shares your passion for the environment and would love to be involved in the Magnetic Island Conservation Group. Can I introduce'

This approach highlights the value to be gained by both the individual asked and the group being considered and is worthy of serious consideration within the asking process.

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 the individual with a disability (who ends up leaving the club owing to the lack of support). For the individual asked (who has already left the club or association) and finally the club or association who in witnessing the tension becomes hesitant in supporting any further inclusion initiatives within the club.

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 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 (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 if we are to be effective in our asking. It is helpful to employ the 60/40 principle whereby 60% of our time is spent planning and 40% of our time is involved in actually doing.

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.

*Rule 3 (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 (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 (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, for example a place that has some form of climatic control so that one is not competing with the elements. A place of value and respect may also help contribute to the seriousness and importance of the issue to be discussed.

*Rule 5 - How will you safeguard?

No matter how hard we plan, and plan and do even more planning: things do go wrong. The act of safeguarding asking requires 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 importance 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'. I am of the belief that it is with this in mind that we have a greater responsibility to accept the challenge 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 those known to us. Our failure to plan and give due attention will result in limited opportunities.

Rudyard Kipling said 'I keep six honest serving-men, they have taught me all I know, their names are What and Why and When and How and Where, When and Who' (Baird, 2004). In our work we have discovered that when we allocate time for the purpose of planning and giving attention to the task at hand, then there is a good chance that the result will be more positive than negative. When we have moved through the process of asking ourselves the questions listed above, and acting upon them, then we will be ask prepared. Successful asking is favoured by the prepared mind- and I wish you all success.

References:

Baird, D. (2004). *Thousand Paths to Creativity*. London: MQ Publishers.

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