

“Just sit down and take the first bite . . .”

Last month I described how John DuRand changed his nonprofit from a sheltered workshop into a social enterprise.

“Starting tomorrow,” he told his senior managers in 1973, “we are no longer a rehab center – we’re a business. Starting tomorrow we no longer have clients or patients – we have employees. And starting tomorrow we are no longer clinicians – we’re business people.”

John believed the best way to enhance the self-respect of the people he employed was to give them more respect -- and that meant establishing conditions typical of a business: Normal work hours, the use of appropriate technologies, market-driven benchmarks, training and development programs, competitive wages, bonus plans, career tracks.

During the next quarter century, until he retired in 1997, John continued to re-invent the world of work for people with disabilities and disadvantages – and especially emphasized the importance of four key principles:

- *Operating as a business and generating profits*
- *Employing a “blended” workforce*
- *Using non-disabled employees as role models*
- *Giving employees the opportunity to fail*

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MONEY COMES FIRST

“I don’t know how the idea ever came about that ‘profit’ is good or bad or that ‘business’ is good or bad,” he would often lament.

“‘Business’ is just ‘business’ and ‘profit’ is just ‘profit.’ The only evil parts are some of the people who happen to be managing the businesses or using the profits.

*“I know I can’t do any of the things I want to do without money,” he’d say. “If I don’t make money, I won’t be here tomorrow to do *anything*.”*

Of course, a lot of people, even today, object to “making money” in the nonprofit world, but John would remind them “they need to read (Peter) Drucker. Profit is what permits you to stay in business.

“Show me a company that is not generating a profit and I will show you one that is going out of business. If you can’t get comfortable with that then you don’t understand business and you need to get out.”

He also “listened, *really* listened to my employees. I heard them saying they wanted to be successful employees. And I realized they couldn’t be successful employees unless I was a successful employer – and I couldn’t be a successful employer without being a successful business. That’s what it’s all about.”

Critics often claim the nonprofit sector should not become what they call “a shadow private sector” because it will lose track of its social mission. They say the “corporate” way of doing business is fraught with dangers.

John’s response?

“Bullshit. You can use those exact words. Business is business. Business is neither good nor bad. There are some assholes running businesses that do bad things with them, but business is business.

“It comes down to this: What are you going to do with the business? I’m a social entrepreneur. I’m looking for both financial and social dividends. But if I don’t have the money, I won’t have the mission.”



TOO MANY JANITORS

One of John’s most controversial innovations took place when he looked more closely at sheltered workshops.

“They were trying to run businesses where all the employees were disabled or disadvantaged,” he recalled. “I thought, if you tried that with a *real* business, you’d get killed! If you tried to open a bank and you hired all janitors, the building would be clean as hell, but you’d go down the tubes.

“So I wouldn’t hire ten janitors – and I wouldn’t hire 10 presidents. I’d have one president, a couple of janitors, some tellers and clerks. I’d have a mixed workforce. And if I’d do that in a normal business, why would I do it any differently in one of *my* businesses? So I decided we needed a fully integrated workforce with people who had different levels of skill, aptitude and ability.”

The blended workforce strategy ran afoul of the protective mentality embraced during the 1970s by most social workers and family members. “Sheltered” workshops meant just that: Protecting people who were disabled from the outside world.

But John believed integrating the workforce was essential to building his business – and thereby creating more jobs and career paths for people who were disabled or disadvantaged. A blended workforce opened up broad areas of business opportunities for MDI that would otherwise have remained closed.

“If all my employees were disabled,” he reasoned, “then out of all the jobs available we could probably only do about 40 per cent. The other 60 per cent would be beyond our reach. But, if I had an integrated workforce, I’d have a shot at the other 60 per cent as well.”

As the years passed and the blended workforce approach began to be widely adopted, people would ask John for the ideal ratio of disabled to non-disabled workers.

“There isn’t any,” he’d tell them. “What kind of work are you trying to do? Sometimes it might be an 80/20 mix based on the demands of the job. Sometimes it might be just the reverse – 20/80.” Overall, however, John did find “if we deviated very much from a 60/40 mix, we lost a lot of our viability and punch. If we dropped below 40 per cent non-disabled workers, we changed as an organization significantly.”

TYING UP HER KERCHIEF

Once he began to integrate his workforce in order to function more effectively as a business, John began to notice something else as well.

“It’s so important to people who are disabled to be just like the rest of us,” he’d tell me repeatedly. “Our non-disabled employees became role models – and how powerful that is!”

He noticed it the first time when MDI started a production welding operation.

“Jan O’Rourke, one of the welders, had two people who were disabled serving as station loaders, filling up the jigs with components to be welded. And Jan, of course, tied up her hair in a kerchief so she wouldn’t get sparks in it and catch on fire.

“Well, the next day, Bob and Greg both came to work with kerchiefs tied around their heads.

“And it dawned on me . . . of course! They want to be like us! But we were training them in sheltered environments and expecting them to go into the outside world and be a success on a job when they didn’t even know what the hell it’s like out there.

“I can’t give you a chambray shirt and a pair of jeans and a wide belt and a buckle and a wallet with a long chain on it and a pair of boots and expect you to go to a truckers-only counter and pass as a trucker, even though you’ve got the uniform – you still can’t pass if you don’t have the language, the body language, the experiences you need.

“So what we had to do was make our work settings more realistic, more industrial, so that when they did leave for the outside world, they took with them not only the job skills they needed, but also the social skills.”

One aspect of the integrated workforce really surprised him, though.

“I didn’t anticipate how much trouble the non-disabled people were going to have working with the disabled,” he admitted years later. “That one snuck up on me. I expected our non-disabled employees to come in neutral, maybe a bit negative, but over time see that these folks were able to do a lot of things – not everything – but a lot of things.

“What I didn’t realize was how emotionally charged any situation is when you have a large number of people with disabilities involved. I didn’t realize the impact it was going to have on the non-disabled. We had something like 70 per cent turnover in the first 18 months among the non-disabled workers.

“The only thing I could ever put my finger on was that it was such an emotionally charged situation, so demanding emotionally, that small problems they would probably have dealt with easily in a lot of other circumstances just became more than they could handle.

“So we addressed the issue by creating an employee support service program for both disabled and non-disabled workers, and almost 80 per cent of the non-disabled people used it. And eventually we re-wrote our mission statement to emphasize “providing a supportive environment for *all* employees.”

THE OPPORTUNITY TO FAIL

John believed passionately that his employees could do anything they put their minds to – and he constantly challenged them to take risks.

“Too many systems are built to exclude the possibility of failing,” he complained, “and if you do that, you’ve excluded the possibility of succeeding. Sure, any time you build a system where only success can happen, *you’ve* succeeded – but *not* the individual who goes through the system.

“So we challenged our people, asked them to get better and better at what they did. Yes, it was a risk, but without risk there’s no dignity. And there’s no success unless there’s an opportunity to fail.”

John believed people with disabilities could accept more responsibility than they had been given in the past. So he gave it to them. But he also believed that was *all* he could do.

“As a company,” he told me once, “we can’t ultimately be responsible for the happiness of specific employees. We can create opportunities for them – but that’s as much as we can do. We can’t go beyond that point. That’s it. The maximum you can do is create an opportunity. Whether the person takes advantage of it or doesn’t, that’s their choice. If you try to do more than that, you’re going to drive yourself crazy.

“So, we fired people. People with disabilities and people without disabilities. They didn’t all make it at MDI. Because some of them chose not to try.” The rationale was simple: “Our business depended on them,” he said. “If they couldn’t fulfill their obligations, we had to take them off the line, send them back for more training or send them somewhere else.”

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John had an aversion to “people who see the glass half empty all the time. They look at all the problems in society and complain about everything that’s stopping them from doing what they know really needs to be done.

“That’s not how I see the world. I see a world with unlimited possibilities. The fact that the money isn’t available today doesn’t mean anything – it means I haven’t looked in the right place yet. It doesn’t mean the world is going to hell in a hand-basket.

“It’s dangerous being around those people. It’s scary. You could start thinking like them after awhile.”

John never did.

"There are so many challenges out there," he would tell me, again and again. "So much for us to do. It's like sitting down at a table to eat an elephant – the task just seems completely overwhelming. So there's only one thing to do.

"Just sit down and take the first bite."