

Teaching George to count

The legendary John DuRand (1934-2008) started Minnesota Diversified Industries (MDI) in 1968 with \$100, a circular saw and a sewing machine. He had 14 employees between the ages of 18 and 24, all of them developmentally disabled.

When he retired in 1997, MDI had become a \$68.5 million nonprofit business employing more than 1,000 people of all ages, 600 of them with developmental challenges.

John often claimed it was possible to break down any task to the point where even the most severely disabled individual could be productive.

I once asked him how he learned to do that – and he took me back to something that happened during the early years of MDI.

He told me about teaching George to count . . .

“He was one of the most severely disabled individuals I’ve ever worked with,” John remembered.

“He was about 35 years old and had very limited speech, a very personal type of speech. You had to be around him a long time to even understand what he was saying. But he was able to do tasks by mirroring or mimicking someone else.

“His mother brought him in and asked if there was anything I could do for him – and the first thing I thought of was a movie I’d just seen about (psychologist) B. F. Skinner, who’d taught a chicken to peck a dot three times to get corn.

“I knew George had a much more highly evolved brain than a chicken, even with his limitations. Hell, if a chicken could do things, George could, too – he’s 100 times brighter than any damn chicken put on this earth.

“So I went home that night and tried to figure out how to use him. We had a contract at the time to make specialty vending kits, and I tried to figure out where I could put George so I would be the least vulnerable.

“My budget was so tight. I couldn’t risk damaging a product, because I’d have to eat the cost.

“I couldn’t have him staple the kits because, if he screwed up, then I’d have to go back to the printer and have him reprint the inserts and it would cost me more money than I was getting for the job.

“I had to figure out where I could put George so it wouldn’t cost me out-of-pocket money even if he did create excessive errors – somewhere I could just throw in more labor to correct the problem.

“Turned out the only possible place was in the last stage of the packaging process, where the kits had to be put in a box in groups of ten. If he screwed up, we’d just have to dump them out and re-package them.

“So I thought, ‘I’ve got to teach George how to do that. I’ve got to teach him to count. Ten’s a big number – why don’t I teach him to count to five?’

“I called the customer and asked, ‘Would it really make any difference if the kits are packaged in groups of five instead of ten?’

“The customer said, ‘Well, not really, if it’s consistent, but it’s much easier for people to do ten at a time.’

“I said, ‘That may be, but I think I’ve got another approach where five would serve me better with the employees I have.’

“And the customer said, ‘Go ahead, do it.’

“So that afternoon I worked about two-and-a-half hours with George teaching him how to count to five – and got absolutely nowhere.

“I thought, ‘What the heck, George’s just new here and it’s getting on in the day, he’s probably fatigued. We’ll take it up in the morning first thing.’

“Next morning we started up again and worked until break and there really wasn’t any progress.

“One of my other developmentally disabled employees was working nearby and in frustration I turned to her and said, ‘Jane, teach George how to count, I’m going for a cup of coffee.’

“She looked at me and said, ‘What?’

“I said, ‘Teach George how to count.’

“Jane said, ‘WHAT?’

“I said, ‘Teach him how to pack these things!’

“Jane said, ‘Oh,’ and turned to George, raised up her hand and said, ‘George, how many?’

“And George looked at her fingers and said, ‘Two, four, six, three, two.’

“Jane said, ‘Fine, give me that many.’

“She didn’t care what he called them or whether he counted them: Could he *identify* five, that was the real task.

“By the end of the day, he could match up one kit with each of his fingers and when he had that many he could put them together and put them in a box. George did it and George could pack.

“He didn’t have to know how to count or know how to deal with numbers. I was trying to teach him something unnecessary.

“It was quite a lesson. I realized all you have to do is break down the job until you’re smarter than the task.

“That way, *every* individual can be productive.”