

FOREWORD

When working with people in poverty, one of the most common refrains is: “*Why don’t they just get a job?*” To individuals with a good work history, the answer to this question is a no-brainer. Stories about work are passed intergenerationally: how to relate to supervisors, the rules of work (get there on time, stay busy, etc.), what happens when you work for yourself, how to balance work and a personal life, and so forth. But one of the characteristics of generational poverty is the instability of work. One of the most common phrases you hear in a neighborhood of generational poverty is: “I was looking for a job when I found this one.” The concept of a career is largely nonexistent, and if you don’t like your boss, you quit—on the spot.

Liane and Dave Phillips have provided a self-supporting model for development of human capacity in the workplace. Theirs is a story about faith—faith that people in poverty are able and are problem solvers, faith in the business sector that has used a business mindset to eliminate workplace barriers for people in poverty, and faith that Cincinnati Works treats its employees fairly and provides an employee assistance program—tailored to the needs of the working poor—that’s second to none.

INTRODUCTION

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: You don’t give up.”

—Anne Lamott

“Are they Christians or just insane?” our son’s friend asked when he heard of our plans to start Cincinnati Works with the lofty mission of ending poverty in our community.

“Both,” Scott replied.

In retrospect, our son was right, although we prefer to substitute the word *naïve* for *insane*.

As my husband Dave contemplated his retirement in 1994 after a 32-year career with accounting firm Arthur Andersen, I encouraged him to come up with a plan well in advance. I had retired from teaching remedial reading in the public school system eight years prior and filled my days volunteering, primarily for children’s causes.

For the past five years Dave had routinely worked 100-hour weeks in the high-octane job that he loved. In just seven years he’d racked up more than five million frequent flyer miles.

I anticipated that a sudden cessation of activity would be

CHAPTER 1

Startup: An Audacious Vision Summer 1994

*“There will always be poor people in the land.
Therefore I command you to be openhanded
toward your brothers and toward the poor
and needy in your land.”*

—Deuteronomy 15:11

When Dave turned down the position, opted for early retirement at age 56, and told the partners at Arthur Andersen what he planned to do for the remainder of his life, they were dumbfounded.

“I think they expected to haul me out kicking and screaming at the mandatory retirement age of 62,” he told me when he related their reaction to his announcement. His colleagues at Arthur Andersen couldn’t reconcile the hard-charging, no-nonsense Dave they knew with the one who insisted he would be content sharing a tiny office with his wife and working with the poor.

Some of our closest friends thought we had gone a little crazy. Even our own sons were skeptical. Word got back to Dave that our oldest son Scott told friends he was betting our foray into the nonprofit world wouldn’t last a year.

Lack of adequate behavioral skills is another major barrier. Lonnie, a tall, outgoing 19-year-old, worked on the prep line in the kitchen of a chain restaurant for nine months. His skill and fast work soon won him a promotion to head prep cook. The oldest of eight children in a violent household and a high school dropout, Lonnie was proud of his accomplishment and the 25-cent raise that came with it.

Then one night one of his co-workers made a remark about his braids. Lonnie chased her out of the kitchen brandishing a large spatula with a serrated edge. He was fired on the spot, and that incident became a blot on his employment record. In our workshop Lonnie started to grasp why that behavior was unacceptable in the workplace.

Self-sabotage is another destructive behavior that we frequently see. In many cases our members know exactly what they should and need to do, but they elect not to do it and thereby undermine their own success. Inappropriate attitudes also hold people back. A chip on a member's shoulder or a belief that everyone is out to get them can prevent them from finding or keeping employment. An entitled attitude or too much pride can keep them from even seriously looking for a job. All of these internal issues are addressed in the workshop and on an individual basis with Cincinnati Works staff.

Lack of skills and job seekers' inflated views of their skills present another barrier. Most entry-level jobs do not require specific skills, but most do require the interpersonal and other soft skills that we teach in the job readiness workshop. But an inflated self-concept is common and causes some to refuse a job because they think it is beneath them. We help job seekers understand that, for example, if you don't have computer skills, you will not be able to function as an administrative assistant.

As with job acquisition, pinpointing specific traits that led to long-term retention was difficult. But our research showed us that members who could cope with barriers and work through them, and those who had motivational strengths (for example, the desire to deal with a legal issue), were more likely to succeed.

“At the end of each month I look at the number of employments and retentions,” said Darren. “I save messages that encourage me. One message I saved recently was from a member named Ben. He never said much in the workshop and always seemed to have a lot on his mind. He was a real responsible person, and for him not to have a job tore him up inside. Sometimes he’d come in to talk to me during job search, and he couldn’t find the words. ‘It’s okay. You can just sit there as long as you need to,’ I’d tell him. He finally landed a job with maintenance in the housing projects. I hardly recognized his voice when he called to tell me, he was so excited.”

One afternoon after Ben had been on the job about three months, he came into the office. “I hope you aren’t here because something happened on the job,” said Darren, eyeing him warily.

Ben broke into a wide grin and said, “Oh, no, nothing like that. Everything is great with the job. I just came by on my break to say thanks.”

The photographs of our members who reached their one-year anniversary with one employer covered the walls in our lobby. The numbers grew and grew until we started posting them all down the hallway. Their stories kept us going.