

## Chapter 2

# Empowerment and the Consumer/Individual

## Overview

Throughout the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process, it is the consumer's role (or family, support network role) to actively obtain information in order to make the most informed decisions/choices about going to work. To the fullest extent possible, it is the individual consumer who is primarily responsible for using effectively any available information, services or resources to achieve empowerment. It is the VR counselor's role to provide guidance and information related to choosing a job goal, services necessary to achieve the goal and employment.

**This chapter includes specific strategies consumers can use to exercise more control and choice during the process, and firsthand perspectives from consumers who exemplify empowerment.** Finally, in Appendix A, there is a brochure designed to support consumers as they navigate through the VR process to attain personal and professional goals.

There is a variety of factors that can diminish individuals' ability to exercise control in their lives and achieve personal empowerment. Low societal expectations, lack of opportunity, learned helplessness, employers' misperceptions, institutional bias and unresponsive bureaucracies all present challenges to consumer empowerment.

Collectively, the IRI Primary Study Group (PSG) has worked with hundreds of empowered individuals with disabilities. From this experience, several principles were identified that consumers use to achieve empowerment. These principles attempt to describe those individuals with disabilities who have overcome the societal and environmental barriers that exist. The following principles are not necessarily profound or surprising, but they do point to specific attitudes and approaches that seem to work consistently.

### • *Self-Determination*

*"I recognized that the degree to which I could control my life was directly linked to how much responsibility I was willing to accept for it. At times, it was easier to let others make choices for me, but I came to realize that their good intentions were gradually paving my path to dependency."* —Former VR Consumer

Empowered consumers view themselves as being the "primary causal agents" in their lives (Wehmeyer, 1994). That is, they assume responsibility for their lives and take deliberate actions based on their interests, abilities and beliefs. They are proactive rather than reactive, believing they can make meaningful choices about their behaviors, attitudes and actions. Rather than adopting the expectations of society, this proactive approach demonstrates an individual's personal sense of self.

### • *Partnering with the VR Counselor*

Partnering takes two. A consumer and VR counselor have the right and responsibility to participate as fully as possible in the process of getting a job. In some situations, family, friends and others become involved to provide support during the process. Empowered consumers do not abdicate responsibility for their choices, and in doing so maintain their own sense of self-determination and decision-making ability. As Dr. Martin Seligman stated, “The long period between infancy and our last years is a process of emerging from helplessness and gaining personal control. Personal control means the ability to change things by one’s voluntary actions; it is the opposite of helplessness.” (1990, p. 6) It is this process of personal control that is recognized in consumers who are empowered.

### • *Creative Problem Solving*

Creative problem solving is at the core of an empowered consumer’s life. “Impossible” or “can’t” are not part of the empowered person’s vocabulary (or that of family, friends and supporters). Rather, these words are replaced with “how” and “what if.” This “can-do” attitude promotes innovation and a determination to press forward until solutions are found.

Creative problem solvers are willing to question conventional assumptions and to think outside the box. To do this, these consumers draw on a variety of resources, perspectives and people. Inevitably, there are failures, disappointments, and mistakes are made. However, these consumers are motivated more by the prospect of succeeding, reveling in the experience, than by the fear of failure. In short, creative problem solvers are willing to find solutions to problems that others deem to be insurmountable.

## *Empowerment Strategies*

Empowerment is a lifelong process. Many individuals with disabilities are able to overcome obstacles and demonstrate individual empowerment to succeed. The VR process can be confusing. Consumers need to understand the process and at the same time recognize the limits and parameters of the program. Consumers have the right and should be encouraged to ask as many questions as needed to fully understand their responsibilities and expectations of the VR program. In this section, specific strategies are described that consumers can use to support an empowerment approach to VR.

• ***Base employment/career goals on personal interests and aspirations rather than on perceived limitations. Ask yourself what you would do if you didn’t have a disability. Don’t hold back—the sky is the limit.***

Too often consumers base employment/career choices on their disability rather than on their inspirations, interests and real abilities. That is, they use disability to screen out and

limit career options. When asked “What kind of a job would you like to do if you didn’t have a disability?” consumers often indicate careers and jobs that differ (sometimes significantly) from their original considerations.

For example, one consumer selected “teacher’s assistant” as a vocational goal. When asked by another counselor what she would do if she did not have a disability, the consumer responded, “I would be a teacher, of course.” Fortunately, this same individual (with the encouragement of peers and the inspiration of role models) went on to become a teacher. However, the realization of her aspiration could only be achieved once she was able to put the disability into proper perspective and determined to base her choices on her true interests instead of on stereotypes and low expectation.

### • *Be an Advocate!*

Consumers who are empowered are believers in their own choices, needs, rights and ideas. As their own best advocate, these consumers are willing to speak up for themselves rather than to capitulate at the first signs of disapproval or conflict. This self-assurance allows them to negotiate effectively and to collaborate with service providers. Consumers who are able to self-advocate understand their rights and are willing to pursue more direct measures when necessary to accomplish their goals.

In addition, self-advocates are change agents, both in their own lives and in the broader community. This is evident in their willingness to become involved, to educate others and to challenge the status quo. In return, their involvement in the communities in which they live often results in innovative solutions and consensus building.

### • *Become Informed (Informed Choice)*

Empowered consumers are informed consumers. Empowered consumers identify their employment goals, interests and skills (with or without the assistance of rehabilitation professionals). With the consumer’s approval, family, friends and other supporters may need to be provided information at times to assist in supporting the consumer’s vocationally related decisions. Recognizing their responsibility and role in the development of their Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs), empowered consumers actively gather information about service providers, technology, employment options, training alternatives and other areas that may impact their rehabilitation programs. This is in contrast to some consumers who passively participate in writing their IPE and who expect rehabilitation professionals to provide them with all relevant and appropriate information.

Information gathering is not limited to data collection. Rather, empowered consumers draw upon the firsthand experiences and wisdom of other consumers, role models and mentors. Consumers use this confluence of information to identify appropriate options and to make choices that reflect their goals. They are willing to engage in this process, regardless of the time

and effort it may require, because they understand that the type and quality of information they receive is inextricably connected to their success.

#### • *Be Involved in Community*

Empowering begins with being involved and active, not only with the VR agency, but also in the community. There are many benefits to becoming involved in the community. Community involvement helps a person develop a broader knowledge and understanding of the opportunities available for employment. The more people who know you, the more contacts you have who can help you with finding a job. These are the opportunities to develop relationships which expand the awareness of the community and civic members to the value individuals with disability bring to the community.

Community involvement provides opportunity for skill development. Going to work means developing skills. There are many “soft skills” needed in the work place. Soft skills are the social skills and knowledge that make working with others easier. Think about opportunities to learn these skills that are available through volunteer efforts in the community as well as throughout the VR process.

#### • *Be a Leader*

One critical aspect of consumer empowerment involves applying one’s perspective and passion as a self-advocate by taking on leadership roles in one’s broader community. To achieve social change over time, disability advocates must interact with the broader society to encourage inclusive, accessible practices and programs and to help change public attitudes about the capabilities of disabled people. A few examples of leadership opportunities might include the following:

- ✓ Running for the board of a neighborhood association or community group.
- ✓ Being responsible as a leader at one’s place of worship.
- ✓ Running for the school board or other public office.
- ✓ Serving on an advisory board for a local transit agency, public library or recreation facility.
- ✓ Becoming a member of a local non-profit consumer advisory board.

By taking time to contribute to community organizations, people with disabilities have an opportunity to expand the circle of support for disability rights, learn new skills, make new contacts and create inside tracks for effective advocacy. Other avenues for community involvement might involve writing a column for a local newspaper, volunteering at a local school or mentoring a young person. How an individual asserts leadership locally will differ depending on the skills, priorities and preferences of the person. The point is this: when empowered consumers take their leadership into the broader community, they change attitudes, improve programs and decision-making, and expand their personal horizons

#### • *Know Yourself-Develop Your Individual Philosophy!*

Consumers’ expectations and beliefs about their own abilities, potential and competence influence every aspect of their rehabilitation programs – from developing an IPE to becoming independent or actually securing and maintaining quality employment. Unfortunately, the average person views “disability” as a tragedy, something to fear or a lifelong sentence to dependency.

People with disabilities themselves, being part of the larger community, are just as likely to adopt these widely held misconceptions as anyone else. Many people with disabilities undervalue themselves and what they have to offer. Hence, one step toward empowerment is for the consumer to articulate clearly and to define his/her personal philosophy of disability. Without deliberately and honestly assessing our own beliefs about disability, we are likely to adopt those of society. In addition, by defining our own philosophy, we establish a standard by which we can measure our own behavior, attitudes and actions.

The National Federation of the Blind, for example, has a clear philosophy of blindness. While it was developed specifically for the blind, it serves as a powerful example for people with other disabilities to use as they develop their own personal philosophies. It is as follows: “With the right training and opportunity, blindness can be reduced to the level of a nuisance.” This simple statement motivates thousands of blind persons and sets forth a direction they can follow to attain success. This example along with the following questions may help you to clarify your current beliefs about disability and develop a philosophy of your own. Do your responses support a healthy and positive attitude towards disability? If not, how can your personal philosophy address these misperceptions?

- ✓ Do people often refer to you as “amazing” for doing those tasks considered to be commonplace for non-disabled persons? Do you believe them? That is, do you think you are amazing or extraordinary for doing what everyone else does in the course of a day? If so, consider what this belief indicates about the expectations that you and others hold for persons with disabilities.
- ✓ What activities do you refrain from because of your disability? Are your reasons for doing so legitimate, or are they founded on fear and insecurity?
- ✓ Do you believe that, with the right training and opportunities, you could compete with your non-disabled peers?

#### • *Align Your Actions with Your Philosophy*

Developing a philosophy of disability is only the first step. The real challenge comes in living it. How we spend our time, the activities in which we engage (or do not engage in, for that matter), the meetings we attend, the contributions we make and the people with whom we associate reflect our values and beliefs. Assessing how and if our outward behaviors reflect our inner values/personal philosophy is a critical step in the empowerment process. Of course this is

not easy. It requires that we are brutally candid with ourselves and that we deliberately juxtapose our actions with our values.

Examine the activities, conversations and meetings in which you participated yesterday.

- ✓ What do they say about you?
- ✓ Do they reflect your values and personal philosophy?
- ✓ Identify two things you could do which would align your actions with your values and personal disability philosophy.

## ***Enhancing Participation in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program***

*“Successful people believe in their own ability. If you are already pumped up and ready to take on the working world single handedly, three cheers!” (Witt, 1992)*

### **• Know Your Rights—Client Assistance Programs**

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, establishes a variety of consumer protections and rights such as the informed choice provisions and the right to appeal decisions. Truly empowered consumers understand their rights or at least know where to go to learn more about them.

In order to help consumers understand their rights, the Rehabilitation Act established Client Assistance Programs (CAPs). These programs are designed to provide free and confidential services to consumers or applicants of VR programs. Specifically, CAPs advise consumers of their rights and responsibilities in the process of obtaining rehabilitation services, assist consumers in appealing agency decisions, and explain specific benefits and services available to individuals with disabilities.

- ✓ Request that the CAP provide a guide specific to the consumer’s state VR agency.
- ✓ Most CAPs have developed a guide that addresses everything from eligibility criteria to due process proceedings.
- ✓ Consumers have the right to appeal any decision made by the VR agency and can request a copy of the agency appeal process rules.

### **• Ask Questions**

For those consumers not yet ready for the working world on their own, a sample consumer booklet is located in the appendix of this manual which provides guidance to navigating the VR program. Asking questions of the VR Counselor is the key ingredient to enhancing the VR experience. Here are some topics to ask about:

- ✓ The VR process: It is important to have knowledge and understanding of the

process, as well as a clear understanding of the limits and parameters of the program.

- ✓ Consumer rights and responsibilities
- ✓ Choosing a job goal: The end result is to find employment that matches your interests, aptitudes, skills and abilities.

### **• Choosing a Job Goal**

The VR program operates on the premise of good job matching. Good job matches occur when a consumer chooses an occupation that is consistent with his or her attributes (interest, strengths, skills, aptitudes, etc.), the job qualifications and the demand for those skills in the market place.

Here are some methods for developing skills for job matching throughout the VR process:

- ✓ Job Seeking Skills Groups: Participate in small groups designed to improve completing job applications, interviewing, writing resumes and providing support throughout the job search.
- ✓ Labor Market Surveys: Contact employers to learn more about specific industries and expectations of upcoming job opportunities in your area.
- ✓ Informational Interviewing: Interview employers to learn more about training programs and their industries.

### **• Involvement in Consumer Organizations**

Consumer organizations play a crucial role in the lives of people with disabilities and in the VR process. These organizations offer consumers support, opportunities and hope in ways that are beyond a VR agency’s ability. Whether through peer mentoring, leadership opportunities, career exploration, role modeling, or disability-specific training, consumer organizations are invaluable resources for VR consumers.

In addition, because consumer organizations represent the collective voice of their members, they offer broad-based and firsthand perspectives on the effectiveness of VR policies and programs. They advocate for specific program improvements, and they often interact with policymakers (on both the local and national level) to promote needed changes to the Rehabilitation Act and other statutes which impact people with disabilities. Get involved! Consumer organizations are run by and comprised of volunteers; there is always work that needs to be done. The following are suggestions for becoming involved:

- ✓ Locate consumer organizations in your area that you may be interested in joining.
- ✓ Attend a function hosted by a consumer organization, including a state convention, local chapter meeting or social event.

### • *Attending and Participating in Consumer Groups and Opportunities Provided by the VR Agency*

Attending and participating in consumer groups and opportunities provided by the VR agency are opportunities to get to know others who might be helpful and supportive throughout the VR process. Whenever possible, it is advantageous to participate in local VR office consumer groups and in the functions hosted by these groups. VR consumer groups offer opportunities to develop leadership skills, confidence and relationships that can enhance the VR experience.

Consumer groups have had significant input into the following areas:

- ✓ Changes to the Rehabilitation Act during each reauthorization.
- ✓ Policy changes and VR service delivery including informed choice.
- ✓ Changes that need to be made on local, state and national levels in order to address consumers' needs.
- ✓ Education and advocacy with legislatures regarding programs for people with disabilities.
- ✓ Education and training for people with disabilities.
- ✓ Design of annual consumer conferences.

### • *State Rehabilitation Councils*

State Rehabilitation Councils were established as a mandate by Federal law. The State Rehabilitation Council members are people with disabilities, former VR consumers, family members, advocates, educators and employers. Council members donate their time to this valuable entity. The council works to advise the VR program in the state regarding the use of resources and services that lead to employment of people with disabilities. Becoming a member of the State Rehabilitation Council is an opportunity to work with people with disabilities, a network of people who are always striving to improve the rehabilitation program and develop leadership skills.

### • *Helping Others*

Whenever possible, seeking the support of others who have been through the VR process is helpful. Consumers who have been through the VR process can provide a wealth of expertise and feedback to the VR counselor. Often consumers will write to the counselor or office director about their VR experience.

## *Summary & Case Study*

Being involved in the VR process can be a rewarding experience for the consumer,

family, friends and supporters. The VR program has been driven by consumers throughout history to respond to the individual needs of a person with a disability who wants to go to work. The focus is to provide avenues to share information and responsibility for determining the services needed by partnering with the VR counselor to successfully go to work. Below is a case study which is exemplary of developing consumer empowerment throughout the VR process. This is a true story of self determination, partnering with the VR counselor, developing the IPE and becoming successfully employed with the assistance of the VR program.

## *CASE STUDY: A PUEBLO CONSUMER*

Matt is a resident of the San Juan Pueblo who applied for services with the Department of VR (DVR). He is a member of the San Juan Pueblo tribe and was raised in a Native American household in Albuquerque with close ties throughout childhood to his tribe and his culture. At the time of application, he had just completed a residential treatment program at San Juan Pueblo for alcoholism. Following his release, he had moved into his family home in the pueblo and had begun working for the nearby casino. He had been in treatment numerous times before but had always relapsed within a short time. This was his first application for services from DVR.

His counselor had made a practice of going to the treatment facility once a month to present VR information and take new referrals. Matt had been present at one of these presentations and decided to apply for services. His initial interview was conducted at the DVR office. At the beginning of the process, he felt some reluctance to ask for help, and he was concerned that his counselor would see him as a stereotype—"the drunk Indian." However, he states that he had "reached a degree of humility and realized it's ok to ask for help," and he was determined to do whatever it took to remain sober.

He found his counselor, Denise Stone, very easy to talk to and supportive of his plans for maintaining sobriety. He did not feel looked down upon, as he had feared might happen, but instead felt supported and respected. Although it is more common for people coming out of the treatment program to be unsuccessful in maintaining sobriety and returning to the workforce, his counselor began with a positive attitude and belief that he could be successful. He felt encouraged by this constructive approach, and they developed a relationship of mutual respect. The development of a courteous, respectful relationship is an integral part of interactions, business and otherwise, within most Native American communities. It is critical to the success of this case.

He was given the lead in developing his IPE and, later, in amending it to meet his evolving needs. During the process he developed increased self-confidence as he stated his needs and felt they had been validated by his counselor. From the beginning, he focused on the importance of maintaining sobriety so he and his counselor organized his services to meet this need.

He was successful in making the transition from the treatment center to independent

living, attending recovery support groups and maintaining gainful employment. His existing skills as a cook were utilized in his employment with a casino. During the course of his case, Matt developed good skills in navigating the DVR system, addressing his own disability needs and developing a healthy lifestyle within his community. Toward the end of his case, his counselor suggested that he consider employment in a grant program associated with DVR working as a liaison with Native American communities to assist community members in accessing DVR services. Although he felt complimented by the suggestion, he decided that he needed to focus his attention on establishing his recovery and that such a drastic vocational change would not be in his best interest at that time.

A year later, his counselor again contacted Matt. The liaison position was again open. Was he interested? By this time, he had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and was experiencing serious physical symptoms that were interfering with his employment as a cook. He had worked hard and sustained his recovery and he was open to change. He felt confidence in the relationship that he and his counselor had previously established and in his ability to advocate for himself. This confidence allowed him to move beyond his normal “comfort zone” and into a vocation far different from what he had previously experienced.

Today he works in the American Indian VR Program (AIVR) as a liaison to the San Juan, Santa Clara, Pojoaque, Nambe, Tesuque, and San Ildefonso Pueblos and the Jicarilla Apache tribe. He provides direct assistance to Native American consumers in understanding the mission and services of DVR, conducts initial interviews, makes presentations to tribal groups and works with VR counselors to deliver appropriate services and follow up with employment needs of consumers. His part of the AIVR Program is considered to be one of the most successful in the state. He is attending classes to become a certified public accountant.

## Study Questions

- 1. For an empowered consumer, being in control of the VR process means:**
  - (a) Making financial decisions to complete the IPE
  - (b) Accepting primary responsibility for outcomes
  - (c) Choosing the best VR Counselor available
  - (d) Finding his/her own job
  
- 2. An empowered consumer bases career goals on:**
  - (a) His/her vocational evaluation information
  - (b) The guidance of the VR Counselor
  - (c) A realistic assessment of the job market
  - (d) Personal interests and aspirations
  
- 3. Having an individual philosophy of disability requires**
  - (a) A complete understanding of physical limitations of disability
  - (b) Learning about the Americans with Disabilities Act
  - (c) An honest assessment of personal beliefs about disability
  - (d) Adopting the views of family and community
  
- 4. Which of the following actions can consumers take specifically to enhance and improve their participation in the VR Program?**
  - (a) Ask the VR counselor many questions
  - (b) Learn about the Client Assistance Program
  - (c) Accept the counselors' suggestions for job goals because they are the professionals
  - (d) Learn about upcoming job opportunities in your area
  
- 5. To make an informed choice in the VR process an empowered consumer may**
  - (a) Depend on a qualified VR professional to provide all the information necessary
  - (b) Interview employers to learn more about industry training programs.
  - (c) Play a passive role in writing the IPE
  - (d) Read information provided only at the VR office