Field Report

Living the Behavioral Dream

Mark R. Dixon
Southern Illinois University

Most of us have had a workday where we left a bit frustrated about one thing or another and thought “if I was in charge, I know I could do it better.” We dream of a better tomorrow where we tell our employer goodbye and become our own boss. Is that not the American Dream? We are told from early childhood that anything is possible and we can be anything we want to be if we just work hard. Somewhere between those naive childhood years and today we probably have come to realize these grand promises are more myths than truths and we become content with an approximation of this dream. To some individuals, however, approximations are not close enough.

Karen Harper began her career in the field of developmental disabilities some 20 years ago, long before behavior analysis hit the mainstream. Sure behavioral principles were in place here and there, but the day-to-day care plans were laden with unscientific treatments that were more the result of staff “ideas” than proven principles of behavior change. Like many around her, Karen stumbled into the field of behavior analysis through nationwide initiatives to move the developmentally disabled from state operated large congregate care facilities to more inclusive community-based group homes. With the increasingly challenging population came a need for increased sophistication of treatment approaches. Many developmental disability care providers began turning to the successes found in behavioral interventions and some even nudged their staff to further their education specifically in behavior analysis. Karen happened to be in the right place at the right

time and thus obtained a master’s degree in behavior analysis in 1999. Keep in mind this was still before the BACB® existed.

Back at the grind with a wealth of new knowledge, Karen held a variety of positions across a variety of agencies, mostly in the capacity of “encouraging” direct care and clinical staff to try out some behavioral approaches toward treatment. Some staff listened better than others and some clients got better while others stayed the same. As many frontline BCBA’s know, good behavioral knowledge and skills are only going to take you so far. To succeed you need to win staff over so that they actually do what you say even when you are not their boss. Somehow they have to believe you and trust that if they work harder for no extra pay, that down the road the person with disabilities will get better. The good BCBA will have more successes than failures, but those failures—they keep you up at night and

make you wonder if that American Dream had any fraction of reality in it. One of those nights Karen Harper decided to find out.

In 2009, Karen walked away from her full-time job with a great salary and benefits and threw all caution to the wind. She was determined and confident she could do better than the status quo. Instead of being a behavior analyst in an existing organization she had the vision of making an entire organization behavior analysts. From the top down, behavior analysis would be the driving philosophy of the company. ABA of Illinois was formed.

Karen convinced three of her coworkers to follow her and as they operated from a home office, over the past 4 years they built a company that today employs 49 staff and serves over 1,000 clients across the state of Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Most of the business focuses on providing behavioral expertise to community care providers for adults with developmental disabilities. With the movement into the community many local providers do not have the funds or the necessity to hire a full-time BCBA. Karen's alternative is to contract her company to provide the behavioral assessments, write treatment plans, and train staff. And the best part, are you ready for this? the services are free to the agency. Yes free. Through a state funding mechanism, behavioral services are reimbursable through the state for each client served in the community. Karen provides the service, the state pays, and the agency wins. For once it seems

that the politics of human rights got it right.

I spent some time with Karen recently and asked her why she has not jumped on the autism wave. Most of my students want careers in autism and the need is surely there for services. Karen gave me a refreshing answer that I will never forget. She said, "The need is so great for adults with disabilities. Their lives can be so empty and it only takes a little

reorganization of their treatment plans to make a big difference. We can do this and make things better. I can't give that up."

What does the future hold for ABA of IL? Surprisingly not aggressive growth. Instead, Karen wants to focus on quality. She wants to rise above any other provider in terms of sophistication and effectiveness. Given what she

has already accomplished, my money's on Harper.

We live in great times for being a behavior analyst. The demand for services typically is greater than the supply. Many people approximating good clinicians are trying to get in the game. Agencies that have no history of behavioral expertise are claiming such. In the sea of hands that raise up when asked who can provide ABA, it's nice to find a group that can really do what they say. We all shake our heads from time to time as we walk out of work wondering if this is the best we can do. Maybe if more of us began to tear off the callouses of adulthood and remember the words of Walt Disney, "all our dreams can come true—if we have the courage to pursue them," we could be like Karen, and live the Behavioral Dream.