



Expert Insights

Lessons in Leadership: Ciatto Blends Basics and Visionary Innovation

Good leaders know that success is a team effort. Robert Ciatto, President and CEO of ACLD in New York and instrumental in the business RewearAble, which provides sustainable employment for people with developmental disabilities by collecting and recycling unwanted clothing and textiles, hasn't just embraced this lesson throughout his career; he has taken it to new levels to create innovative programs, touch the lives of tens of thousands of people and, during the pandemic, keep his teams going and people safe.

Experience Enables Empathy

Ciatto stresses that good leaders are empathetic and encourage their teams to have a work-life balance. "We have learned to appreciate the little things in life and take advantage of opportunities for time with family and friends." Thanks to his nearly 30 years in the field, Ciatto also understands his workers' roles and responsibilities better than most. He explains, "When I talk to staff about their work, I understand first-hand the ups and downs they face. This has been one of the keys to my success."

Despite his many accomplishments, don't expect Ciatto to rest on his laurels as a leader. "Leadership is always changing and evolving. Everything needs to be customized for the moment. I want this to be a place where people want – not have – to work," he said. Ciatto suggests that creating and maintaining a fun environment and positive culture requires an ongoing commitment to understanding and addressing the

challenges staff are facing and what benefits or supports they need and want. At the same time, he says, "We have created a culture that lets staff see that they are needed and valued."

Promoting, Enabling, Nurturing Personal Growth

Addressing the workforce challenges that continue to plague healthcare calls for a back-to-basics, approach, Ciatto says. "You need to have a bare-bones understanding of your organization's and your workforce's core values. And you need to get back to the basics of communication." He explains, "We don't always tell people the why of doing something and what impact it has and their everyday work. We need to give people that 'why' piece," he says.

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Then it is important for leaders to help others up the ladder they themselves have climbed. Ciatto says, "I have been fortunate to have had many opportunities that I have made the most of. I always seek to provide staff with opportunities to grow if they are interested. At the same time, they have to make the effort to walk through the doors opened to them."

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His advice to those seeking to advance their careers: "Investigate opportunities and if you are interested, grab them and make the most of them. Use all available resources to learn new skills."

Ciatto notes, "I always tell people that it won't be easy, but in our field there are resources and supports available to help. Don't be afraid to take the next step."

He stresses that every person needs to follow their own path. "Whatever you want to do, utilize the resources and opportunities available to you and work hard at it. Whether you want to be a CEO or a career DSP, your goal needs to be right for you."

The Path Ahead: Not Perfect But Promising

Looking ahead, this care sector has some obstacles to overcome. However, Ciatto is optimistic about the resilience of the field he loves. For instance, he says, "Funding is always a challenge for our industry. There are always cuts, and it's a challenge to manage them. But if government funding isn't there, we need to come up with other ways to finance our work. For instance, over the years, we would ask for a cost-of-living adjustment and we finally got it this year. We need more, but it's a good start. We are heading in the right direction."

During the pandemic, policymakers saw in real-time the significance and power of I/DD and home- and community-based services. Leaders and others in the sector need to maintain this focus. Ciatto says, "We got a little steam and need to keep up the momentum. One of the most important things we can do is to continue to share our stories. Our voices are strong when they are collective and get our message across about what we do and what funding we need."

He urges, "We need to flood lawmakers with information – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and seek their support. It needs to be a full-court press."

Ultimately, Ciatto says, "We have to be creative and adaptive. We need to involve everyone in innovations and solutions, learn from people with different views and hear everyone when they speak."

He adds, "Even though the pandemic was a great tragedy, some good came out of it. More people than ever realize how special our population is and what it takes to provide quality care for them."