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RESOURCE

A Business, Not a Program

Getting the workforce mix right, so the people and the business both thrive.

A social enterprise is a business, not a program. It has to make money, because if it does not, it cannot employ anybody.

When I started, I hired almost anyone who needed a chance, including people who were still deep in their struggles. It came from a good heart and it was a poor business model. Attendance was unreliable, quality suffered, clients left, and I was not actually helping anybody. I learned the hard way that you can kill the business with kindness.

Our experience over sixteen years is that a workforce drawn entirely from program referrals creates instability. The culture drifts toward running a program rather than a business. The answer is not to stop hiring people who face barriers to work. The answer is the mix: a team where people who are rebuilding work alongside people who are steady, where the standard is real, and where nobody is set up to fail.

Holding a standard is part of the care. We are not helping anyone if we reward poor behaviour in the workplace. That sounds harsh, and it is the opposite. Clear expectations, kept consistently, are how someone who has been failed by every system finally gets an employer who takes them seriously. Firm about the work, soft about the person. Behind the scenes you can be endlessly flexible and human. At the point of work, the job is the job, and doing it well is what builds the pride and the paycheck.

The goal is not placements. The goal is to hire people for the long term so they can build a career, in a company strong enough to keep them.

The organising principle is this: the business supports the people. A funded program does not support the business. When that slips, the gap lands on whoever is carrying it, month after month. When it is right, the work begins to carry itself, and the people with it.

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