

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 43: Denise Esson

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Terry: Hello, and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today I'm joined by Denise Esson, an employment counselor with Employment Services Elgin in Ontario, Canada. Hello and welcome, Denise.

Denise: Hi, Terry. Thank you for having me.

Terry: Thank you. Let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Denise Esson is a CPI Certified Instructor and employment counselor and facilitator with over 15 years of services at Employment Services Elgin, a community agency in St. Thomas, Ontario. She provides counseling to individuals and small groups seeking employment and career supports. With a background education in psychology and criminology as well as community advocacy, Denise has expertise working with a variety of participant groups, and strives to provide client-centered service and guidance. She is a lifelong learner who pursues professional development relevant to her field of practice, and she embraces CPI's *Prepare Training*[®] model and its core values of *Respect, Service, and Safety [at Work*[®]].

Today's interview is going to focus on how CPI training and techniques have become central to successfully managing the culture and environment at the agency. All right, Denise, then if you're ready, let's begin. Can we start today by having you tell our listeners about the basics of Ontario's Employment Services Program? And then talk a little bit about the history of Employment Services Elgin.

Denise: Certainly. In Ontario, we have a ministry-funded program called Employment Ontario, and that funding is from our province. It goes to agencies like this one in communities across the province for us to provide support to all of our residents in their efforts to obtain employment, explore career opportunities. Really, it's a wide range of things, but anything related to those; there are programs that they get access to that are funded beyond the job search to help them re-train as well.

Now the agency that I work for, the Elgin-St. Thomas Youth Employment Counseling Centre, has been providing this type of service for just over 30 years. And really, the core values of the agency are to be supportive and maintain our integrity and professionalism for our community.

Terry: And so could you describe some of the users that might come into Employment Services Elgin?

Denise: Yeah. There's a wide range. There's—I know we talked a little bit about if there was a typical user, and really the typical user is darn near anyone unemployed, underemployed, full-time employed people. We work primarily with youth 15 years of age up to post-retirement age. We do get a few younger [people]. We have had some very elder clients come in as well. And essentially, they're all seeking new opportunities or exploring new directions, looking at replacing or supplementing incomes. Often, they're displaced or they've been laid off from employment. They may have limited or no income—all of these things that can become potential stressors for them in the process. And having somebody to help support them and guide them through those times is what we primarily do.

The common ground for them is likely that they're all just looking for some form of assistance, so how we respond to that need as an agency and as professionals in our words or in our actions, whether it's in person or over the phone or with social media now—we have that texting capacity—we have that with clients as well. It's very important for us to be conscious with how we respond in a professional way that is supportive and doesn't send them off, you know, feeling that they haven't received that kind of service.

Terry: So it could be conceivable then that there are times in your office when there could be someone sitting at a computer, and sitting next to them could be someone from a couple generations away, so a wide disparity in the ages and the experiences of people that are there.

Denise: Absolutely. That's actually one of the things I like about it because I believe each generation can learn from the other. So it can be helpful; it can be [that] one age range can support the other. The bottom line is they're all experiencing the same general feelings usually.

Terry: But there's also a potential for some intergenerational conflict that maybe CPI techniques and training could help smooth over.

Denise: There can be, yes.

Terry: Yeah.

Denise: Yeah, absolutely.

Terry: During our pre-interview, you spoke about how some users experience multiple stressors because of their unemployment. And you make an analogy between them and the damage that might result to a vehicle because of poorly paved roads. I think that's a really fascinating comparison. And you said it highlights why CPI training has become one of the primary resources in your toolbox. Could you expand on that for our listeners?

Denise: Sure. I use analogies and metaphors a lot.

Terry: Okay.

Denise: So in that particular conversation, it occurred to me that, yes, when you consider driving down a road, and we all occasionally come over those little bumps in the road. And a small one, you know, might be a bit frustrating, but it's not major damage necessarily unless it's a great big crater or bump. But if you are driving along and you hit one bump after another after another, and they're not—even if they're very closely spaced, that all impacts and has that compound effect.

For me, I see that as—that's similar to what happens when people have multiple things going on. They lose their job, and then that puts their bank account at risk. Maybe they've got a child that's in daycare and they have to take care of those costs, and somebody going off to university, and they have to take care of those. And then, you know, they're late to get to an appointment at our office because of the line-up, you know, at the coffee shop or they got stopped by a train. Those are all those little, tiny bumps in the road, but you start putting them all together, and if it happens to be on a day that they're coming in for an appointment, they can be quite literally ready to explode once they reach [our office].

You know, I think of us as in that contact moment, when they walk in and moving beyond, as an opportunity for us to support them and repair some of that damage to their day, at the very least, and assist them in getting them to their next destination, whatever that goal might be. So sometimes we are the auto repair person, I think of it as. And other times it might be referring them to other professionals in our community. We can't necessarily change the circumstances that created the stressors, but we can certainly avoid adding to them or increasing them in any way. That is where the *CPI Prepare Training*[®] becomes that primary resource in our toolbox, or one of them. Yeah.

Terry: So when did Employment Services Elgin bring CPI training into the organization?

Denise: So it would have been—we historically use *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*[®] training, but we are a hands-off organization. We are required to not have any physical contact whatsoever with our client. Our new executive director came in a few years ago, and she had experience with the *CPI Prepare [Training]*[®] foundation training from her previous employment. So that would have been, I believe, 2014–2015. And so they sent me for the training so that I could bring it back to my team and train our entire team in it.

Terry: During our pre-interview, you told a story about using CPI techniques to de-escalate a potentially violent confrontation between two men who were using computers and other office equipment at the agency, both looking for work and using your support structure at the same time. And after the incident between these two guys, a coworker remarked, "Your CPI training has paid off." Could you share that story with our listeners?

Denise: Sure. In this particular case, I was working downstairs in our resource area with clients. We have it open to the public to come in and use computers for job search purposes. So I was the counselor on duty that particular day. And I was working quietly at my computer. A couple of clients were working at the resource computers quietly. And suddenly, there was this wild voice, and I turned and the one gentleman was hollering at the other. I determined it had to do with him believing that the other client had tossed some garbage into a shredder, and he was quite agitated by it.

Because he—the aggressing client had actually stood up and moved forward towards the other client who was seated at his computer and in—he was finger-pointing so he was clearly in a higher level of agitation. I went over. I applied the *CPI Supportive Stance*SM that I've learned, to interact with the client that was upset, and try to determine what exactly I could do to help, what the issue was. And I had quietly gestured as well at the same time to my colleague who was on the other side of the office to call upstairs to get our management team down as well in case it escalated any further, and to have the extra support.

In the end, when they came down, they were able to—I introduced the client to the manager, and let him know that he could speak to him about his concern with the other client. And then I took the other client, removed him from the area so that I could kind of debrief with him, reassure him of his safety as well, pulled him away, kind of moved each of the clients away from each other.

And then we—I guess we took a space. It's been a while now since that happened. But in the end, both clients' needs were met in terms of safety. Both of their needs, I believe, were respected as well. We were not certain why that particular day the one client was agitated to an extra level, but we respected that whatever he was experiencing was his experience. And we wanted to still

allow him to receive services and not feel like he was disrespected, and de-escalate him, too.

When all was said and done, as well, my management team and I had discussed it, did our debrief. And it was actually my immediate supervisor—when I had emailed the report, she had sent that message out to say that the CPI training really paid off. One of my other colleagues had actually sent out a message to the team to say, "The training that we've received from Denise, she put into action. I watched her put it into action today, and it was very helpful."

So that kind of support by the team that were actually involved is really validating and important because you don't always see the outcome of the training. If you don't have to use it, we don't. We wouldn't necessarily know for a fact that, "Oh, yeah, that's actually a good training that we received," because we received professional development training from a variety of sources. So as much as you don't wanna have to put it into use in a situation, when you know that it's there and it worked for you, it's a good feeling.

Terry: Well, you also used a lot of expertise in bringing in many important elements and CPI techniques to effectively de-escalate that situation. It was kind of really textbook in the way that it was handled, and effective because of your expertise, and the fact that your team understood the approach that you were taking as well.

Denise: Mm-hmm.

Terry: You have a saying there at Employment Services Elgin regarding your users, and I think it's really a grabber. It's this: "There is no wrong door." That sounds really enlightened, and I'd like if you could explain that to our listeners a little bit.

Denise: Sure. And I really wanna take the credit for making an enlightened statement, but ultimately, it actually came from our ministry quite a while ago. They had some service adjustments, and that was kind of the motto that we had developed. There is no wrong door for service. Our service is to provide service to anyone who walks in that front door regardless of their circumstance. It might not be about [a] job search. Regardless, we don't simply say, "Oh, we don't do that here." We might not be the most appropriate or correct door they walk through, but we provide the information or refer them to alternate resources in a courteous, respectful, professional manner.

So if they're seeking income support, that's not our service. We give them the information and the direction and then refer out. If they're—if a person comes in presenting highly agitated [behavior] and they're under the influence of substance or have the appearance to be, for example, or some other

Precipitating Factor that we might not be aware of, we don't simply send them away and refuse service like you would in a bar. It's not right to refuse, right? So based on how they're presenting in that moment or on that day, we actually take some time to determine what the need is in that moment and respond to it. And that's the respect and service piece, while we're maintaining the staff, client, and that individual's safety.

Terry: That's a very—what can I say? It facilitates a lot of, I would imagine, empowerment in the people who come to use you because they know that they're going to be supported and accepted, you know, if they're there to seek employment and not—like you said, an income support.

Denise: Absolutely. And that's really our hope that we are seen and understood in our community as being able to provide that level of service.

Terry: Is your entire staff there CPI-trained?

Denise: Yeah. Well, for the most part. I have one new one this year that is a summer student that was not trained, and then there was one staff member that was missing. She was away ill when we had done the training. So she'll do the follow-up training this year; we're doing [the training] in the fall. And we're actually having a colleague of mine trained, a secondary trainer, a staff. So we're doing—I'll do a refresher and she'll do the train-the-trainer training. So if anything ever happens to me, we've got the backup.

Terry: And how many people are on your staff?

Denise: I should have done the count. I wanna say, well, we're over 25.

Terry: Okay.

Denise: We have a joint health and safety committee.

Terry: All right. Well, that's a fair number. You refresh yearly then?

Denise: This'll be my first refresher because I had been doing—it's been so close—and I had done the training right away. So this will be my first refresher and we're doing Setting Effective Limits as the topic this year.

Terry: How did you choose that?

Denise: Actually, the management team suggested that one. That just was their natural progression, I guess. The idea being they want to ensure that we all know how to create healthy boundaries when we're working with clients and our colleagues,

because it's not just about working with clients. It is your interaction with the people you work with. So yeah, Setting Effective Limits is a good secondary option for us.

Terry: Good. Well, I wish you luck with that.

Denise: Thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. During our pre-interview, you mentioned that a portion of the population that utilizes your agency comes to the center with multiple barriers that sometimes include mental health issues. I wondered if you could explain the specific challenges that might present, and how CPI training helps you with that.

Denise: Yes, I can—and it is—it can be one of those or it could be multiple/dual diagnosis in some cases, but because we are open-door, we do have resources in the community for a variety of different services. But we sometimes get clients that may have more severe mental health concerns. Others, and really it could be anybody that has—I mean anybody can be experiencing depression or anxiety, that can—depending on the nature of the illness—some behaviors can be more unpredictable, so we need to be prepared to a certain level to respond appropriately, and respectfully, and mindfully to those situations as well.

I find that the CPI training has actually increased [staff] confidence, certainly my confidence. I have a different level of confidence just based on my understanding and experience. But in other cases where you have a full complement of staff, not everybody has a psych degree or experience working within those types of settings. So if you haven't experienced it, having a little bit of extra training can help you respond appropriately, and at least knowing that you have a full team that you can have training as well, that you can call on for support, is also important.

Terry: Well, you've just given a great example of why *Prepare Training*[®] is appropriately named that.

Denise: [laughs] Exactly. It does prepare you for sure.

Terry: Very nice. You know, during our pre-interview, you said—this is an interesting point—that you're aware that you have been referred to as both "De-Nice" and "De-Nasty." Joking aside, you made a point about how CPI training has helped you with self-regulation. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Denise: Yeah, I can. It was kind of one of those personal examples. But I'm very real, and I don't pretend to be perfect with my colleagues or anybody else in the world. And the story I had shared was actually about my daughter and her friends. She's

a dancer. And they know when I'm having a good day and when I'm not having a good day. And so they had come up with this nickname, and they said, "Well, Serena, when your mom comes, is she being 'De-Nice' or 'De-Nasty'?" And I told them, "You don't want 'De-Nasty' on scene because it's not gonna be pretty."

So I actually—I've applied it, that story. I share that story with my colleagues. And for me, it's that extra bit of mindfulness that helps keep myself in check. So if somebody says, "Oh, 'De-Nasty' is on scene," I know I need to take a yoga moment, what I call a yoga moment. It's saying to myself, "Respect, service, and safety." And I tell clients that as well. If all you can do in those moments of anxiety or upset frustration is remind yourself to be respectful, and if you're working in a service environment where you're interacting with clients, certainly you want to—or customers—you certainly want to maintain that level of respect in your service, and really keep yourself and others safe.

I learned that in my training. Bill had talked about and made a suggestion of having a mantra. I just added it as my own yoga moment.

Terry: Excellent. So that concept of mindfulness we're finding more and more, you know, media awareness of it and I think it's a very timely message. And I appreciate you bringing it into a conversation about CPI training. And that leads into my close today, and it's a quote, one of your own, that I wrote down during our pre-interview. And I think it's just this wonderfully positive philosophy, and it kind of ties together all the things we've talked about today. And you told me this, "Every interaction in our life, everybody in our life, is an opportunity to put CPI into action." Can you expand on that important comment?

Denise: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So every interaction with any given person in your life any given day is an opportunity to put it into action. The Prepare [*Prepare Training*®] application, the CPI training, it's not exclusive to workplace settings only. It is meant to be used in the workplace, but I really truly believe that you take it with you in your daily interactions with your family, your friends, your colleagues, customers, clients, neighbors, people walking by, driving. You know, we all get frustrated behind drivers or in front of drivers sometimes.

For me, it's those basic principles of the training, that they just grow out of the basic principles of humanity and decency. Respect each other. Be a servant to each other. Keep each other safe. That's life. That's good living.

Terry: Yes. And that's a really good summary of what we like to believe that our training helps people to accomplish in their workplace. So I thank you for sharing that. Thank you for the interview. My guest today has been Denise Esson; she is an employment counselor with Employment Services Elgin. That's in St. Thomas in Ontario, Canada. Thank you, Denise, for joining us today.

Denise: Thank you, Terry. It's my pleasure.

Terry: And thank you for listening.