



Lifting All Boats

Florida's Rising Tide Car Wash shows how a business that employs people with autism can thrive

By Howard Blas • Illustration by Melanie Lambrick

Andrew D'Eri's family knew he was going to need a helping hand. As a 22-year-old with autism, he was aging out of his local school program, and the family was painfully aware of the staggering unemployment and underemployment rates of people with disabilities. Andrew's brother, Thomas, and father, John, began exploring the idea of starting a business that could support the needs of people with autism while taking advantage of their unique skills—and, of course, turning a profit.

"We loved the idea of a car wash," says Thomas D'Eri, "since it followed structured routines and processes." People with autism tend to do well when they have clear rules, routines, and repetitive tasks, and, with this in mind, the D'Eris founded Rising Tide Car Wash in 2013. Ten years on, the company has expanded to three locations around South Florida, employing dozens of people on the autism spectrum and serving as a model for how workplaces can help the neurodiverse

and other "barrier groups" learn skills and retain jobs.

Earlier this year, Thomas D'Eri published *The Power of Potential: How a Non-Traditional Workforce Can Lead You to Run Your Business Better* (HarperCollins Leadership) to share what he has learned at Rising Tide. In the book, he describes figuring out how to recruit and assess talent. "This is an industry that chronically struggles to find entry-level talent," he notes. "We often make incorrect assumptions about what 'good talent' looks like. It is not firm handshakes and smiles."

What's more, by endeavoring to create a workplace culture that values employee feedback and works to meet the needs of people with autism, D'Eri says he learned how to be a better manager for *all* employees. "The job of a manager and anyone building an organization is to make the implicit explicit," he explains, an insight he drew from the work of business author and executive Claire Hughes Johnson.

"This underpins most of what we do." Rising Tide put in place multistep, often visual systems for all manner of tasks, ranging from vacuuming to removing bugs from windows to cleaning bathrooms. "We create clarity around all we do," D'Eri says. "When employees struggle, we try to understand what we haven't clarified well enough."

Along the way, D'Eri discovered advantages to employing people with autism. For example, they generally don't hesitate to point out systemic issues. "Neurotypical staff often aim to cover up problems," he explains. "People with autism struggle and are honest, and they will show me what to fix."

Another big benefit for Rising Tide and companies such as John's Crazy Socks (run by a young man with Down Syndrome and his father) and Bitty & Beau's Coffee (a café chain that employs people with intellectual and developmental disabilities) is positive branding. "It is a very crowded marketplace," D'Eri notes. "Businesses like this resonate."