

Staff and the Science of Clubhouse

Andy Wilson, The Carriage House

For me, Clubhouses are magical places - intentional communities full of hope and belief and encouragement and laughter.

My old boss at Independence Center, Bob Harvey used to say, “Andy, farmers don’t grow crops.” And I would say, “What, Bob?” He would say “Farmers don’t grow crops. They plow straight furrows, they throw down seeds, they make sure there is enough rain and enough sun and enough fertilizer ... and crops grow. It’s just the nature of crops – they grow.” And he would say, “This is what we’re doing in the Clubhouse, we are making sure there is hope, there is need, there is meaning, there is opportunity and people get better. It’s the nature of people to get better.”

The fact that this works seems to me to be magic. There is magic in Clubhouse. However, as a colleague of mine is fond of saying, there is science behind this magic. Creating a culture of hope and meaning and opportunity takes a crazy amount of work, structure, patience, and experience. The magic of Clubhouse does not happen in a vacuum.

It seems to me that at its core, Clubhouses are about community. Engaging each other in meaningful activity, building real relationships, and creating a space where we all get better. This meaningful activity - this real work - is, for me, the foundation that Robby talked about. Creating this kind of community is the responsibility of all of us, members and staff. However, for this presentation, Robby asked me to speak particularly about the staff role in creating it. So, I’d like to briefly share a few thoughts on work.

Let me start by saying I love the kitchen. The work in our kitchen at the Carriage House is hard, stressful, fast-paced, dirty - and the best work in the house. Immediate. Necessary. Consequential. If lunch doesn’t come out of kitchen by 12:00 noon there is hell to pay.

I think, in a nutshell, this is what makes work meaningful - when the need is real. This, I think, can be a little counter-intuitive. When the need is so real that we forget that we are doing Clubhouse, we forget this is psycho-social rehabilitation, when we forget that we are young or old, or black or white, or *members or staff*; this is when the need is real and the work has meaning. This is what changes lives. This is where the magic happens. We could speak clinically about experience-based cognitive restructuring but I think the essential truth is simply that when we are truly needed and there is truly meaning, we become community and transcend our limitations.

Now, I feel like I have a pretty good grasp of this conceptually. And yet, at the Carriage House, we struggle everyday to get to this place. And, frankly, most of the time, we don’t get there. Our biggest challenge seems to be that we don’t have enough meaningful work - yes, the dreaded slow afternoon.

Let me say that I have never met a Clubhouse staff who was bored. In fact, mostly the staff I meet, including the staff at the Carriage House, would tell you that they don’t have the time to get everything done that they are supposed to do. And yet, many of our Clubhouses lack meaningful work.

The Standards have helped me believe that every moment in a Clubhouse is full of possibility. Full of the promise that today, maybe for the first time in a long time, someone will make a

choice or share a smile or be appreciated in a way that changes the rest of their lives. Because of this, I have also come to believe that any and every activity in a clubhouse in which a member is not involved is a potentially wasted moment, a wasted possibility for relationship, a wasted chance for magic.

Additionally, I'm afraid that having work done by staff and not done by members sends the pretty clear message that there is, in fact, real meaningful work in the Clubhouse – we just think it is too difficult or too important for members to do. I think we *must* challenge this presumption wherever and whenever we find it. I don't think anyone would ever do this intentionally. At the Carriage House, the truth is usually much more mundane – it is harder, more time consuming, sometimes more uncomfortable to share ALL of the work.

So, I think that the first thing we try to do at the Carriage House, is look to make sure we are sharing the meaningful work we already have. The second thing we try to do is dream big for the Clubhouse. We create meaning by becoming better than we are.

We visit businesses to see what kind of cool stuff they do, and we try to replicate it in our snack bar, our kitchen, our bank, our clerical area. We visit other Clubhouses who we've heard do cool things with transportation or orientation or employment and we steal their ideas. We go to conferences and steal stuff. We go to training and steal stuff. We read newsletters and steal stuff. When we are really on our game at the Carriage House, we have a crazy, probably neurotic, need to be the best Clubhouse in the universe. This need is infectious. It leads to a ton of work. It leads us to meaning.

So as to avoid irrelevancy, here are a few practical things we have learned about the science behind the magic:

1. As a matter of disciplined thinking, expect that everyone in your Clubhouse will get better. Objectively speaking, from a certain point of view, this may not be true. Objectively speaking there are many things that we believe in the Clubhouse that may not be true -things like: this person will be able hold a full time job; this person will be able to live on their own; this person will be able to overcome their addiction; or, *this person is really going to recover from their mental illness*. Frankly, there are times when all of my instincts, and my schooling, and my upbringing, tell me that these things may not be true for someone. And I, as a matter of disciplined thinking, I choose to believe it anyway. And, what's more, because the person may not believe these things themselves (probably doesn't), I not only have to believe it, I have to believe it hard enough for both of us. While these words are easy for me to say, the belief is not so easy – it takes work, practice, emotional energy and vigilant discipline. Just because we believe it, doesn't guarantee it will happen – but it will never even have the chance to be true unless we really believe it first.

2. Go over your list of unit responsibilities and dump everything that really doesn't matter. For many of us, this is a scary proposition. What will people do all day if we lose a bunch of stuff off of our unit list? If we are doing work just to keep busy, then we might as well be shooting pool or making clay ashtrays. Taking a good long look at the work we do has been a good starting point for making sure that the work we do has meaning. To create opportunities in the clubhouse, we must have real meaning.

3. This is related to #2 – get more meaningful work. At the Clubhouses where I have worked, it hasn't seemed to matter how much work there is – we always need more. The day must be so overloaded with meaningful work that we are out on the

smoking porch begging each other for help. When an outreach call begins to sound like, ‘man, we really need you, can you come in – *now?*’ then I think we are creating the level of need in which the Clubhouse really works.

4. Clubhouse staff are often in a position of leadership, so learn to let go. This is a particularly hard one for me. Anyone in our Clubhouse will tell you that I am a bit of a control freak. I remember when I did my three-week training at Fountain House. Tom Malamud was part of our training team. You may know Tom Malamud - he has been around forever. I do not doubt that he has forgotten more about the Clubhouse Model than I will ever know. During my training, as you might imagine, all of us were a little intimidated. We didn’t want to sound like idiots and we were waiting for Tom to tell us ‘how it is’. He didn’t. He paid attention, he was obviously interested, but he didn’t take over.

Some tricks I learned from him included: **look down a lot** – if you are looking down, people will assume that you are not about to say something and will move on in the conversation without you. **When someone asks a question, look around at the other people in the room.** This will send the clear message that you are waiting for someone else to say something. And, usually, someone will. **Ask, “What do you think?”** often. And, mean it. When I am genuinely interested in what others think, it allows them space to be the person ‘in-the-know’.

5. And this may be somewhat controversial; If you are a Clubhouse staff and you don’t love your job - If you are not honored everyday to go to work at your Clubhouse, then you have my personal permission this morning to quit.

That’s pretty much all I have. I wish I had more - I wish that the science of Clubhouse didn’t always seem to hinge on vague, subjective things like ‘believing hard in people’. There is just no book to teach us how to do that. But, in the end, I think that this is why many of us think that Clubhouse is more about community than treatment; more about relationships than interventions; more about changing the world than fixing each other. With such bizarre intentions as these, who would have thought that we would be so effective? Meaning, need, opportunity, belief – and people get better.

It’s almost like magic.