

Stewardship of the Vision: The Role of the Clubhouse Director and the Board of Directors

Brenda Singer, Executive Director, Progress Place, Canada

It wasn't too long before I became director of a clubhouse that I began to ponder a question: who will support me as I endeavour to fulfill my responsibility as director?

The answer became clear. I was accountable to the board and the board was there to support me as I carried out my duties.

Since Progress Place is an international training base, this question has arisen many times in my role as host of the three-week administrators during colleague training. It seems to be a challenge for many clubhouses, so today I will analyze the relationship between a board and a clubhouse director.

A solid vision is the cornerstone of a successful director. This vision is grounded on a firm knowledge of clubhouse philosophy. This is essential as it is the application of the philosophy that provides the structure and the basis of clubhouse operation. The clubhouse work-ordered day might appear like a simple approach on the surface or on a tour. It is however the application of the rather complex philosophy that makes it appear as such. The smooth operation of a clubhouse will depend on basic precepts of clubhouse philosophy being understood, articulated and examined by the director. The vision will also be enhanced by The International Standards for Clubhouse Development which facilitate and strengthen the vision. A director will know and articulate the "why" or the rationale for each Standard and be guided by this direction.

The director will have the values that are connected with those of human service workers in the field of social justice. In fact, the clubhouse movement has its origins in the social justice movement. This set of values is essential because clubhouses are democratic communities that believe in the rights of all people, particularly consumers (called "members") with mental illness. It takes more than cooperation, compassion, caring and empathy for everyone involved in the clubhouse. It also involves team work.

The knowledge and values of clubhouses need to be transmitted internally to the clubhouse community and externally to the larger community. It is therefore essential that the director have a charismatic personality so they will be heard by others and have a presence so that they can project the hopes and dreams of the community.

A board must be committed to the mission of the clubhouse and have a full understanding of the overarching needs of the clubhouse and thus be prepared to turn their understanding into action so that the clubhouse is equipped to operate to its maximum capacity. Board members will be "good people" committed to the mission, however, kindness, cooperation and social service-oriented values are not the only criteria. Board members need to lend their skills and talents toward action and leadership as they carry

out the broader duties of governance in order to fully assist the executive director and the clubhouse members and staff.

The role of the board is governance, which entails carrying out the broad mission of the organization. This will involve primary responsibilities of fund raising, public relations, as well as broad oversight in the areas of fiscal accountability, personnel management, as well as building/property management. The board hires and evaluates the performance of the director.

The composition of the board should include people from the community who believe in the mission of the organization. Leaders in the community who have influence or who are in powerful positions, and/or connected to wealthy individuals can help provide resources for the clubhouse. In these times of governmental fiscal restraint it is extremely important to attract these people to the board. Every board should have at least one lawyer; this is necessary for both developing and established clubhouses so they can provide expertise in the areas of by-laws, building lease agreements or building purchases, contracts with granting bodies, contracts, etc. An accountant or person with a CFO background will provide expertise on financial policies as they often function as treasurers on the board and assume executive positions on the board. People with backgrounds in human resources are assets as they can provide expertise in matters related to personnel policy.

Lawyers, accountants and human resource personnel all provide essential resources for the board. Additionally, it is an asset to have people with public relations and marketing skills. Generally people who are leaders in the community augment the profile of the board.

Clubhouse boards of directors have a special obligation to have mental health expertise and this expertise should be provided by clubhouse members/consumers who are indeed experts regarding the mental health system. They not only provide experience regarding mental health system delivery by hospitals, clinics, day programs and community mental health agencies, but also have a rich background regarding clubhouse culture and philosophy. Another constituency able to provide expertise in this area are individuals who have family members who are mentally ill. They may be members of the community at-large, relatives of clubhouse members, or members of the board recruited for their other talents and also have mentally ill relatives and general familiarity with mental health.

Boards should also reflect the cultural diversity of the community they represent. Boards should not recruit mental health and other social service professionals as this often presents a conflict as they are used to working within the framework of the traditional mental health or health system and have difficulties understanding the basic principles at work in the non-traditional clubhouse environment.

Recruitment of board members is difficult, however, the most common method used for voluntary non-profit boards is for other board members to recommend potential

candidates. Other methods of recruitment are to advertise in non-profit volunteer recruitment organizations, law firms, accountancy or financial firms, non-profit association newsletters, volunteer bureaus, etc.

Clubhouse member recruitment can be handled differently according to the clubhouse. A suggestion is to recruit three members of the clubhouse who will together serve on the board for a term of two years. This rationale allows different members the experience and opportunity. At Progress Place sign-up sheets for these positions are posted in the units. The criteria listed for candidates of the board include:

- being a positive spokesperson for the Progress Place Clubhouse;
- having a commitment to the mission of the clubhouse;
- being knowledgeable regarding the clubhouse and philosophy;
- having the ability to share information with the clubhouse;
- having good interpersonal skills i.e. diplomacy; and
- being respectful regarding confidentiality.

A selection committee is developed with the clubhouse director facilitating the process and on the committee are a staff and member from each unit. The committee reviews all the candidates according to the above criteria and selects the three candidates who most closely meet the criteria. The selected members are aware that their role is not to represent the clubhouse or to act as a grievance committee venue for members but rather to represent themselves as experts in the mental health system, in general, and the clubhouse in particular.

Decision-making at board meetings closely follows the process of decision-making used in the clubhouse. The meetings reflect the philosophical underpinning of consensus decision-making, a democratic process, where all opinions are aired in the discussion of issues. A decision is made when everyone in the group can live with the decision.

In the clubhouse everyone is attuned to this way of thinking. At boards, however, individuals are often accustomed to a quick “yes” or “no vote, the kind made at business board meetings, and then the board moves on with the other items. At the clubhouse, issues are discussed at length and take more time. The board of a clubhouse is wise to have the mindset of a business board but it needs to allow time so that everyone is ultimately comfortable with the formal vote at the end of the discussion. Open and transparent discussion of issues also allows everyone on the board including consumers to be aware of all aspects of an issue before voting takes place.

It is the responsibility of the director as the representative of all staff and members to bring to the board the news and information from the clubhouse. Areas of information that pertain to the board are the program statistics such as number of members attending the clubhouse daily; the number of active members; numbers of members on transitional employment positions; number of members in housing, if applicable, etc. The director will bring issues regarding funding sources and funding requests for enhancement; quarterly fiscal reports, reflecting current spending against annual budget; program

reports such as housing, employment, evening/weekend, warm-line, double recovery groups, etc. The director must clearly articulate budget shortfalls and the need for augmenting resources such as the need for adequate salaries for staff, the need for staff to develop new programs, and the need for capital items such as minor and major renovation projects, a new computer system, new equipment like refrigerators or stoves for the clubhouse, etc.

The director may also articulate community pressures such as the clubhouse's standing in the community in relation to opposing treatment modalities. The director may seek help from the board to mount a public relations campaign, to attend a community panel discussion, to attend meetings with funders when that type of intervention is essential, to attend international clubhouse conferences, or to attend local functions to publicize the clubhouse approach.

The director will rely on the consumer members of the board as well as several other board members to sit on clubhouse committees. This may be a program committee, an internal clubhouse fundraising committee or a property/maintenance committee. Directors will utilize the talents and skills of board members to promote the clubhouse through being available for special clubhouse meetings, clubhouse tours, or community conferences or meetings.

The director of a clubhouse is dependent on the board to provide support as she or he carries out the day-to-day operation of the clubhouse. The director provides bottom-line responsibility for the clubhouse and the smooth operation of the clubhouse and it is the board that ultimately sets the policy for the organization which the director must operationally apply with the help of the clubhouse.

The director is responsible for briefing the board regarding the current trends and best practices in mental health in their state or province and also must be knowledgeable about global trends. From time to time the director is expected to give the clubhouse information from the board regarding board policies, and board events.

A true partnership exists between the board and the director when roles are clearly defined. Interference with the day-to-day operation of the clubhouse can be a problem facing some clubhouses. A strong board will understand the task of governance will have sufficient responsibilities and therefore will not make attempts to micromanage the clubhouse. A governance board will be occupied with board fund raising pursuits with the goal of augmenting clubhouse resources; will help to raise the profile of the clubhouse in the community; and will often help to provide connections to develop transitional employment positions in the community. A board will also help the clubhouse reduce the stigma of mental illness by participating in community events. A strong director will confidently bring the information to the board regarding the operation of the clubhouse and will only seek support on policy matters outside the realm of the daily operation of the clubhouse.

Since board selection is critical, it is helpful for the director to initially meet a prospective board candidate and arrange for a clubhouse tour during the visit. The candidate's reaction to the member conducting the tour and to the clubhouse in general is usually immediately evident and acts as a barometer to assess their suitability. Often a board member will join the director for the meeting and have the opportunity to inquire about the candidate's interest in the organization's mission and their expectations of the position. The initial visit and tour provide both the board candidate and the director and board member with an opportunity to gauge suitability. The role of the board and the expectation of board members are discussed at the meeting. If the candidate appears interested in joining the board, a request is usually made for the candidate to send a copy of their resume to the board nominating committee.

If a board member is selected by the nominating committee their name will go forward to the annual general meeting when an election of the board occurs.

To further strengthen their role, board members are provided with an orientation by the executive director and other board members. At this meeting the information given at the initial meeting is reinforced; the by-laws, minutes of previous meetings are given, a copy of the annual budget, a list of board members, and terms of references for board committees. As well, they are provided with relevant clubhouse literature according to their interest. A person might wish information relating to their expertise and background, for example, copies of personnel policies, or fiscal policies.

A clubhouse board is usually friendly and will welcome questions during the meeting so that all board members will be comfortable and fully understand all the items being discussed. It is imperative that clubhouse members on the board feel welcome and included as fully participating board members. Therefore, it is the role of the clubhouse director to liaise with members between board meetings to ensure that the board proceedings are clear and intelligible.

The partnership between the clubhouse director and the board of directors occurs when their respective roles are clear. As mentioned above, a solid orientation program for board members helps this process. The director and the board together are responsible for the stewardship of the agency. The director brings the vision, guided by the philosophy and standards, from members and staff forward to the board and the board then develops broad overarching policy based on this vision taking into account information from all its constituencies.

The clubhouse experience is about a sense of belonging, about feeling needed and wanted and about making a contribution. Board members have the opportunity to become part of a community, and play a pivotal role which has great influence on the strength of the clubhouse community. A dynamic and strong clubhouse cannot thrive without a strong board and strong director working in concert to perform their different, yet crucial roles.