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THE PARADOXICAL ROLE OF THE CLUBHOUSE DIRECTOR

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A clubhouse director, perhaps more than any other person in the clubhouse, works in a paradoxical role. On one hand, directors need to promote egalitarian roles, consensus decision-making and the importance of process in the clubhouse. On the other hand, directors also have bottom-line responsibility for the outcome of clubhouse decisions.

In the article, Why Work Works, Robin Jackson writes, “Work is the medium out of which clubhouse relationships are created.” This was true when she wrote it in 1991 and it is true now. Member and staff relationships grow and develop from what we do with each other every day. If staff are teaching classes and holding stress management groups, the roles of members and staff grow more distinctly separate. Conversely, if members and staff are working side by side to help to make lunch, to update the outreach log book, or organize the thrift store, these roles become much more collegial in nature and much more of a partnership is developed. We know that it is this partnership that fosters the important relationships that are the vehicle for individual change and progress.

Clubhouse directors, in most situations, are involved in these partnerships. As a matter of fact, they excel at them. They do indeed have a responsibility to build relationships through working in units, covering transitional employment placements, and in working in the social program. However, their role is different from other staff in the sense that in addition to being ultimately responsible for the daily operation of the clubhouse, they need to develop and keep a vision for the growth and success of the clubhouse. The director needs to know where the clubhouse is going and what it will take to get there. A strong director is always thinking ahead.

Directors need to foster a sense of community within the clubhouse amongst members, staff and board members. In addition to this, though, they must also work to create a positive place for the clubhouse in the city or town and the immediate community where it is located. It is the clubhouse director who is most often the public face of the clubhouse and is identified with the clubhouses’ success or struggles in the community. Clubhouse directors have to be aware that how they are perceived is often how the clubhouse is thought of, and they must shoulder that responsibility as part of their daily routine.

Another paradox is that a strong director needs to ‘delegate’ and to ‘let go’ of many responsibilities, in order to more effectively bring the clubhouse members and staff into this work. At the same time, though, the director has to be ‘in charge’ and actively holding the community accountable for the work of the clubhouse. Directors who only do one or the other of these functions, will not be strong clubhouse leaders.

For example, ICCD Faculty members spend three days in a clubhouse on a certification visit, and may see a very flat or slow work-ordered day. There is no sense of urgency about the work as an important vehicle in members' recovery. There is not an environment that is active and engaging for members who struggle with self-confidence and motivation. We often find this is because the director is not holding staff accountable to get members involved. This director may well see his or her role as simply to 'delegate' and then stand back and supervise.

It is the strong directors who say, "We need this done by tomorrow." They create a dynamic of "Let's get going," that clearly creates a sense of important work that contrasts sharply with placid approaches that generate little enthusiasm for clubhouse work. The strong director knows that it is a motivated and energized staff that brings out the talents, skills and energy of clubhouse members. The strong director knows that when a group of members and staff are working together and are energized, that the engaging atmosphere is contagious. It is this interdependence between members and staff that creates real relationships. The director has to be able to constantly model this energy and has to insist on it from everyone else. The director has to be willing and able to share the work of the house with the members and staff, but at the same time actively hold the community accountable to do it.

A clubhouse director also faces a paradox when it comes to clubhouse decision-making. Yes, directors lead the process to make general programmatic and day-to-day decisions through consensus building that involves all stakeholders. However, let us look at a more challenging example of making decisions that can get a bit tricky for clubhouse directors.

For example, if a staff person isn't doing a good job. Although members are actively involved in a process that evaluates staff performance, the bottom-line decision to let this staff member go will be the director's. Clubhouses are friendly and accepting places, and letting a staff member go is not easy. This is sometimes an area where directors can hide behind the excuse: "Well, members and staff really like him." Instead of making the tough decision, they back off. A strong clubhouse director also has to have the backbone to make the difficult decisions that keep the clubhouse strong and vibrant. Although it may be difficult at times, directors need to keep in mind that our work is about helping members get on track with their lives, and not about helping staff members get on track with theirs.

Directors need to feel that they don't have to apologize for making the tough decisions. They need to realize that often the silent majority may be grateful that one was finally made. Directors are hired to lead. It is their responsibility to establish and maintain the trust relationships necessary to make it possible to act alone from time to time.

So, clubhouse directors must be able to genuinely engage in consensus building to make important clubhouse decisions. They must also, however, be willing to take a stand to protect the clubhouse culture.

Another example: Faculty walk into the clubhouse for a certification visit, and a pool table is the first thing they see. They ask the director about the pool tournament that

occurs each day at 1:00pm. The director says the members really want it and ‘we decided this through a consensus process.’ It is as if it was done through consensus, it means it is automatically the right thing to do. This is what we refer to in the U.S. as a cop-out. There is nothing inherently wrong with shooting pool; however, the director needs to be accountable for ensuring that the clubhouse sustains a strong work-ordered day.

Another paradox directors face is in process versus product. How often do you hear stories of the endless process of deciding on paint swatches to paint the snack bar while week after week go by and the snack bar remains looking dull and stays unpainted?

Strong directors balance the importance of process with actual results. Directors have different responsibilities than staff in this regard. They have responsibilities to the Board, to external funding sources, to their auspice agencies. Directors need to keep a balancing act of looking toward the future but also in actually getting things done. Then everyone can celebrate the successes such as high rates of members in jobs, an attractive housing program, and victories in advocacy efforts. These give us the drive to go on and are the true products of visionary leaders.

Another character trait that is consistent in strong directors is that they don’t accept “no” for an answer. When they believe the clubhouse or the members need something, and “no” is the response, this doesn’t mean they give up. This just means that they have to re-strategize their argument so that the listener understands and receives the message differently. Until all possibilities of getting a “yes” answer are completely exhausted, “no” really means you need to try harder. It does not mean walk away -- and members of ICCD clubhouses deserve no less.

In conclusion, when thinking of the vision and leadership of your clubhouse, think BIG. Think of Michael Jordan in the basketball world, Bill Gates in the computer world, and Rudyard Propst and Joel Corcoran of the clubhouse world. All these people have the vision to see the big picture, the uncanny ability to see the action before anyone else and what needs to occur to be successful.

We need to rely on the experience and wisdom of others in this clubhouse world. The best way to become a strong director is to ask questions, talk to experienced clubhouse people, and to go to workshops, trainings, and seminars. Don’t be afraid to ask questions and get what you need.

I remember very well when I was a young and hungry staff member attending my first International Seminar. I was a little afraid to approach the people whose articles I had read; whose words had inspired me. However, I wanted more for our clubhouse so I overcame my fears and approached the Robby Vorspans, the Mark Glickmans, and others, and their wisdom helped me to become a stronger director. This in turn did a much more important thing. It helped the clubhouse to become stronger which then offered our members many, many more opportunities to regain their lives, their hopes, their aspirations.

That’s why we need more strong directors.