

## **The Work Unit: The Heart of the Clubhouse**

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Work is the central ingredient in the clubhouse model of psychiatric rehabilitation. Work has always been the foundation on which the model has been based. The earliest descriptions of the Fountain House model simply stated that it was informed by “a belief that work, especially the opportunity to aspire to and achieve gainful employment, is a deeply generative and re-integrative force in the life of every human being” (Beard, Propst, & Malamud, 1982, p. 47). But as time has passed and increasing numbers of people have become acquainted with this model, the need to be more articulate about why work is so important to clubhouse programs has become essential.

In the last 5 years the virtues of structuring clubhouses around work, or the “work-ordered day,” as it is now commonly referred to, have been expounded on by many of the most knowledgeable leaders in this movement. Work puts us in a unique relationship with other human beings so that the opportunity to form meaningful relationships is readily available to us. Work also helps us feel a common bond with the larger community and gives us a better picture of what our lives will be like in the future. All people benefit from work in the ways described above, but in many ways, given the isolation and confusion that so often accompanies mental illness, people with psychiatric disorders may benefit most of all.

For me, as I think it is for all of us, personal experiences have most helped me learn about the importance of work in assisting people with mental illness in getting their lives back on track. It never ceases to amaze me as I witness the literal transformation that takes place as members discover their roles in clubhouse and begin to use their own ideas, talents, and abilities to enhance part of the clubhouse for the benefit of the membership. It is as if you can watch the layers of armour shielding them from ignorance, contempt, and indifference gradually drop off to expose feelings of power, mastery, confidence and self-esteem. Fear of failure and resignation give way to awe-inspiring courage.

Not for a minute am I suggesting that relationships are not instrumental in this process, but it is in the work role that members find the fertile ground that supports and nurtures the seeds of psychological health. Probably many of us in this room have heard some version of, "I finally have something to look forward to besides watching T.V. and sleeping most of the day," as a person's involvement in the clubhouse increases.

Performing real work in a clubhouse seems to give most people with mental illness a toe hold to begin to achieve a more healthful relationship with themselves and ultimately, with other people.

These experiences are a constant reminder of how important work is to our clubhouses, but it is what a friend told me once that etched its importance into my heart. Rudyard Propst and I, and Susan Omansky, a member of Fountain House, were visiting a clubhouse that worked very diligently on making relationships between staff and members as equal as possible and on developing a friendly family-like atmosphere. They did not understand the importance of a work-ordered day, however, so the clubhouse had very little work for members to do. On the way home that night, as we were discussing how we might be able to assist this clubhouse in becoming stronger, Susan said, "We need to help these people understand that you cannot befriend a person into wellness." Rudyard and I fell silent with the emotion of that moment. My jaw dropped. Susan had just conveyed the essence of the clubhouse model in seven heart felt words. Then she said, "Don't they know you cannot give a person self-respect by friendliness alone?" She went on to say, "I treasure the relationships I develop at Fountain House, but I also need to engage in something from which I can derive my own sense of pride, accomplishment and self-satisfaction from inside." Needless to say, I have never forgotten what Susan said that night, and since then the work of a clubhouse has had a deeper sense of importance to me.

Given the undeniable importance of work to the basic structure and function of the clubhouse model, I think it becomes obvious why we call the work unit the heart of the clubhouse. It is in the work unit that the member will find the work that has meaning and importance to him or her. It is also in the work unit that members will find acceptance, encouragement, and support for the endeavours they wish to pursue. And it is in the work unit that a person has the opportunity to develop relationships with co-workers and colleagues that are based on commonality of experience and purpose, mutual respect, and a newly acquired health derived from working again. It is also true that the work unit serves as one's home base as they venture out into the larger

community to do such things as reachout, speaking engagements, TEP, or work one's own job. In short, the work unit embodies the core values and philosophy of the clubhouse model and it is where members may immerse themselves in the clubhouse community.

While our understanding and appreciation of the value of work in the clubhouse has qualitatively and quantitatively increased, some nagging questions seem to echo through the halls of our clubhouses. Do we have enough work to engage all of the members of our clubhouse meaningfully, and can we really order our entire day with work? It is often difficult to engage members in this or that type of work. Is this work truly meaningful to the membership and, therefore, to our clubhouse? These questions seem to haunt us as we work so hard to build good clubhouses. All of us seem to ask these questions in one form or another at various times in the development of our clubhouses, but none of us seems to be able to answer them quite as easily as we answer questions about the value of work. It seems to me that these are questions we as a movement haven't studied as intently as others, and there seems to be far too little written about them as yet. Is the work we are doing, or want to do in the future, really meaningful, and do members truly want to be involved in it?

To answer this question we must first ask: where does the work we do in the clubhouse come from? To begin to answer this we must know where it does not come from. It is not *prescribed* by Fountain House just because Fountain House has certain work units and does various specific tasks in these units. The work that is performed by the members and staff of any clubhouse should be born of, and naturally flow from, the needs of the membership of that clubhouse. Looking at it in even more fundamental terms, the work of a clubhouse should be based on assisting people in meeting their basic human needs: needs such as being wanted and needed: needs that range from food and shelter, to acceptance and recognition, to employment and relationships. If we build our clubhouses around the central idea of developing environments in which people can get their basic needs met, then the work we all do in our clubhouses to build these environments should be meaningful.

I will describe the early development of the Cowlitz River Clubhouse and why the work we are now doing seemed to us to be meaningful work. First of all, we all knew that we would get hungry around noon of each working day and that we would want something to eat. We also had plenty of people who enjoyed coffee during the day so we wanted to have it available for those who wanted it. The natural decision was to organize

a group of people who were interested in buying, preparing, and serving food to meet this need. As this group got together to plan how most effectively to accomplish their task, hundreds of questions came up that needed to be answered. Here are a few examples of the types of questions that came up. "What are we going to serve? Are we going to charge for the meals? How many lunches should we prepare? How shall we set up the dining room? Who's going to clean up after we're finished eating?" Usually, the answers to the questions necessitated identifying people or procedures to address the various needs.

A great deal of work was generated in order to meet this very real need of the clubhouse. Thus a work unit was born, made up of staff and members all working to accomplish a shared goal as the clubhouse grew in popularity, our membership started to grow rapidly. We needed a way to communicate with each other that would inform people of the happenings of the clubhouse and celebrate the accomplishments of its members no matter when they were able to come to the clubhouse. We decided to begin printing a clubhouse newsletter. As we discussed the advantages of having a newsletter, many members indicated an interest in working on its development. From this need, a daily bulletin and a bi-weekly newsletter were born. At the same time, with more people coming to the clubhouse with each passing week, we needed a better way to keep track of attendance. It was being kept by the staff who were finding it very difficult to keep track of all the comings and goings since they were now busier than they had been before because of the increased work unit activity. So we created an attendance desk, where attendance was taken and documented and later permanently recorded. In this same fashion we began to do research. Orientation of new members, networking with other clubhouses, reachout and tracking, and recording Transitional Employment development. From all of this additional work, there arose a tremendous need for ever-increasing amounts of typing and filing. So these tasks, too, became additional work for the clubhouse. As we got busier, our staff receptionist became unable to locate us to give us our phone calls that were now coming in much more frequently than they had been before. The obvious answer to this problem: we needed a member to be the clubhouse receptionist and phone person. Therefore we developed the role. We lumped all of this work together and it became the nucleus of our clerical work unit.

The work we adopted sprang from a real need that we as a community felt. The work is performed to meet the communities need, and, if the work were not done, the community would not operate as efficiently or effectively. The better the community operates, the better it meets the

needs of the membership. All the contributions, therefore, make the clubhouse a more rewarding environment for all of the other members. So not only is the work meaningful for those who are performing it, but it is also equally meaningful for those who will take advantage of the services that are created as a result of the work. If we keep in mind the basic principle that the work we do should flow naturally from the needs of the membership, then we should feel assured that our work is meaningful.

But "meaningful" is a relative term in this context. The work of our clubhouses will only remain meaningful as long as our Transitional Employment programs are developing and/or maturing in concert with it. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in cultivating good work units that we forget this undeniable reality. Work units are only as strong as our Transitional Employment programs and vice versa. TE gives validity to the work of the unit and prevents the stagnation that permeates programs that have no clear avenue to the larger community. Work units and TE working in harmony are the lifeblood of the clubhouse, and they keep the oxygen called hope surging in the veins of our clubhouse communities.

Do we have enough work in our clubhouse? Can we really organize our entire day around work? These are extremely important questions, for if there is not enough work in our clubhouses, then how meaningful work is loses its significance.

How do we know if our clubhouses have enough work? The answer to the following question could be considered a loose indicator: is there enough work with sufficient variety and challenge to interest and engage most of the membership for approximately 6 hours a day, Monday through Friday? If there is, the clubhouse has a good start, and over time your community can strive to engage all of the members. But if large percentages of the memberships of our clubhouses are not engaged in work that they might find meaningful for significant amounts of time, then we have cause for concern. Most of us seem to find ourselves in this second category far too often. Why is it that we all believe so ardently in the value of work, but so often find ourselves wondering how to engage so many members of our clubhouses?

More than any other, the issue that probably affects how much work we have in our clubhouses is the staff role in the clubhouse. Staff have the bottom-line responsibility to make sure the unit in which they work runs smoothly and has the quality and substance to assist members in meeting their rehabilitation goals. But if staff are not clear on how to exercise this

responsibility, chances are the unit will not have a powerful influence on its membership. More specifically, if staff believe they are there to provide the work of the unit, the unit will invariably not have enough work. Remember that work is needed in response to a need of the membership of the clubhouse. If the staff person does not see themselves as capable of identifying the needs and helping to develop the unit work that will respond to those needs, the members will not see themselves as capable of doing so either, and a tremendous resource of creativity will be lost. If members are not allowed to shed the role of the incapable client or patient because the staff do not give up their roles of the capable people in charge, a truly functional work group cannot be realized. In this type of group, each person is recognized and respected for having various talents and abilities, and each member's contribution becomes a valuable asset that improves the functioning of the group as a whole. For our clubhouses to have enough work, all people in them must work together to identify what needs to be done and how to do it. Work units will work best when the people in them are human beings first, and staff or members second, and as a team they work to meet the real needs that they have identified together. Only if this happens will there be enough work, because work units, just as the clubhouse as a whole, need to be adapting constantly to the ever-changing needs of the membership.

Misunderstanding the staff role can cause another problem that may stifle the creation of meaningful work. If staff never let go of the leadership role, then members will not shed the dependent role and will not complete the work of the unit on their own initiative. When this happens, staff will tend to want to take on only as much work in the work unit as they feel capable of handling comfortably. This is deadly to a unit. As Robby Vorspan described in her article, "Attitudes and Structure in the Clubhouse Model" (Vorspan, 1986), "A clubhouse needs to be structured so that staff are overwhelmed with work, so that looking to and depending on members' strengths and assets is not a philosophical nicety, but a necessary means of survival. Staff need to need members. They need to be in a position in which they are forced to ferret out every hidden ability, skill, and strength in every member, in order to ensure the clubhouse, and their own survival in it" (p. 1). If the staff do not allow themselves to be overwhelmed for fear of being unsuccessful in the role they believe is theirs, the members have little chance of ever becoming all that they can be, and neither does the unit of which they are part. In order to get over the fear of being overwhelmed and consumed by too much work, thus freeing all the participants of the unit to address the needs of the memberships creatively.

Clubhouse staff must learn that they genuinely can trust members to help them do the work that needs to be done. If this happens, the work unit can grow naturally as described above.

The third way that the staff role can negatively impact the amount of work that is available to members in a work unit is when staff understand their role to be that of therapists or counsellors. When this is the case, work, and especially the development of additional roles, is simply not the priority. Work is seen more as a context in which to observe pathological behaviours and social inadequacies than a truly powerful change agent in and of itself. After the problem has been identified, it is addressed in some kind of “talk” therapy. Whether these staff identify this way of working as traditional therapy or not, the results are the same. Traditional therapist-client relationships are maintained, and, since work is far from the priority, there is little chance that the unit will have enough meaningful work to engage the membership. Obviously, to change the scenario, staff must understand that their role in the work unit, especially when it comes to developing and maintaining enough work, is much more like that of a colleague in relation to the member than it is of a therapist. Colleagues work side by side and solve problems through mutual sharing of ideas and constructive feedback.

The solution to a given problem is selected because it is the best solution, not because of the role of one of the colleagues. Having enough work in the work unit is but one problem for members and staff to solve.

There is another reason that clubhouses struggle with not having enough work to engage their membership meaningfully. Most of the clubhouses in the western portion of the United States are a program of a larger parent organization whose priorities are different than those of the clubhouse. This can lead to misunderstandings between the auspice agency and the clubhouse. What sometimes happens, either intentionally or inadvertently, is that the parent organization “withholds” work that should be done by the staff and members in the clubhouse.

Case management is an example that comes to mind because of its current popularity. Case management should be a function of the work unit that naturally flows from the supportive relationships that develop as a result of working together side by side in the unit. Member roles expand to include assisting each other with finding and maintaining housing, using the public transportation system, filling out SSI or SSDI disability forms, doing reach-out, and other similar types of activities. These activities generate more “work” for members. If the auspice

agency decides that its role is to perform these tasks and does not understand why it is so important for the clubhouse to do this work, then this work is lost to the clubhouse. Not only is the work lost, but the clubhouse is weakened in the process. Case management is only an example. The same thing can happen with all kinds of paperwork, various “administrative” tasks or office work, or any other kind of work, for that matter.

Clubhouses must be constantly hyper-vigilant to make sure that work that is generated from the needs of the membership is, and remains, the property of the clubhouse. Clubhouses should examine whether there is work being done by the parent organization that really should be the work of the clubhouse. We need to negotiate actively to bring these jobs and tasks into our clubhouses where they belong, where they will provide a greater variety of opportunities to members.

Can we structure our entire day around the work we organized into our work units? Is there enough work to enable us to do this? I would answer these questions this way. We must strongly believe we can then do whatever is necessary to make it so. If work is the lifeblood of our clubhouses, then our clubhouses become anemic without enough. All of us that are part of the clubhouses are painfully aware of how true this is.

The reasons why the late John Beard, the founder of the clubhouse model, believed “that work must underlie, pervade, and inform all of the activities of the clubhouse” are no less important today than they were in the 1950’s (Beard, Propst, & Malamud, 1982). Work is the key to shaping our identity; it is also one of the most important factors in terms of valuing ourselves. In our culture, it is the “membership card” to being valued by society.

I don’t want to downplay the difficulty of establishing and maintaining enough work in our clubhouses to have a genuine and strong work-ordered day. Staff need to be well-trained and very dedicated to what they are doing. Members must be very courageous and shed the patient role and be active in the club’s formation. Everyone in the program must be sure that the clubhouse values pervade and inform all of the activities. I am convinced that if our belief that work is the foundation of our clubhouses is unyielding, we can meet the challenge. Mindful of what makes our work meaningful, staff and members together need to be attentive as new work matures from the ever-changing needs of the membership, like tiny plants from a carefully cultivated garden. And just as some plants will thrive with the care they receive and some will die no

matter what is done, so too will various roles become deeply rooted in the fabric of the clubhouse because of the importance of the need they meet, while others will be transient and fade away over time. In place of the ones that die, new work roles should be planted and nurtured. With the numerous challenges people with mental illness face every day, as long as we consistently look to the current needs of the members and our clubhouses and never stop inventing more effective ways of meeting these needs, we should have enough work in our clubhouses.

*This paper is based on one presented at the first Western Regional Seminar on the Clubhouse Model, 1990, in Olympia, Washington.*

## REFERENCES

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