

What Makes a Great Unit?

By Ruth Osterman

At the heart of any clubhouse are our work units. In our clubhouses, we have all worked in units, struggled with units, developed units, engaged people in the work of the unit; loved them and hated them. We all have answers to what makes a great unit. Yet running a clubhouse work unit on a daily basis is still an area of constant debate, work and struggle.

The first answer that most clubhouse people give when asked what makes a great work unit is “relationships”, the foundation of a clubhouse community. Of course this is true. The work-ordered day Standards describe working side by side, engaging members in *all* the work, focusing on strengths and talents; but it is not simply that. Great relationships in a unit that is disorganized and chaotic are not enough to make that unit “great”. Likewise, a unit that is highly organized and runs like clockwork but leaves no time for human relationships will also never be a “great unit”. Relationships are critical, but woven in with these relationships there has to be a recognizable *structure* within which the work can get done, and great relationships can grow.

Structure begins with having enough *work* and having enough *resources* to follow through with the work. As clubhouses have grown, the generalist/specialist concept that has been applied to staff has sometime been translated to units. That is, there was a time in clubhouse development when work that had distinct and separate qualities was segmented into separate, individual units. Many clubhouses, for example, had a maintenance unit and an outreach unit and an education unit and an employment unit, as well as the more basic kitchen and business (clerical) units. Each unit typically had only one staff, responsible to keep the unit going, develop new work regularly, engage new and core members in the work and also be a clubhouse generalist – running out to cover TEs and working altered schedules to cover the evening/weekend program. As employment programs grew, and staff time was increasingly needed at TE sites, the unit was often left without staff coverage for extended periods of time. The result was fewer members coming in to work the unit, less of a focus on engaging new members in that unit, and sometimes the entire unit shutting down for a period of time. This is a familiar clubhouse dilemma: balancing a healthy work ordered day with an active employment program. At Genesis Club, we believe both are possible.

The solution to staff being out of a unit is certainly members taking over, and I am not minimizing this very important part of a great unit. But rarely is this a solution for a whole day or several days. Members are in the clubhouse for different reasons – to work side by side, to build relationships, for their own recovery. At Genesis Club, we certainly have talented, dedicated members who will make sure the work in the unit gets done whether staff are out or not. Few, however, are interested in leading a work unit for long periods, and may join another unit for a while until staff return.

So a great unit needs *adequate resources*, meaning enough staff to keep it vibrant and alive. As a solution to too many units with too specific work mandates and not enough resources to keep it going, many clubhouses now combine the work of the clubhouse into fewer units, thereby adding more staff and more work to each unit to keep it going. Units have become more generalist and less specialized. So, for example, at Genesis Club we have the Membership/Maintenance unit, which oversees the referral/orientation process, all of the large maintenance projects, a large outreach component, our warm-line and some housing supports. The work is not necessarily harmonious, but there is enough to engage members throughout the day, it is diverse enough to appeal to various member strengths and talents, and there are four staff who are based in the unit. There are clubhouses that have a first floor unit and second floor unit – so that the unit work is whatever the mandates of that floor require, rather than named by the work itself.

With a lot of work and sufficient resources to keep it going, we now have a busy, demanding, expanding workload. To support all of this, we need tools to help organize, prioritize, and communicate the work. We need to think through and plan how best to do the work, and we need to make sure we follow through on what we need done today. In other words we need more structure. But we need a flexible, open, welcoming, unique kind of clubhouse structure.

The structure starts with unit meetings. Most clubhouses find it most helpful to hold a unit meeting first thing in the morning and then another just following lunch, but each unit can certainly find the meeting times that work best for them. Our kitchen unit has its afternoon meetings at 2:00, because right after lunch is a pretty busy time for them. Some afternoon meetings are used just to “re-group” – a very short meeting to see how the morning went, what is left to do, and what new mandates present themselves. For other units, the afternoon unit meetings are longer and meatier because more members have come in, or just because that is the culture that unit has developed.

There are many ingredients to a good unit meeting, yet it is important to allow each unit to develop its own style and flow. Consistency, however, is key. We have all had times and reasons why we didn't hold a unit meeting today – not enough people, too chaotic, another meeting ran over time and we got lost in getting to the work – but these excuses have to be the rare exception rather than the rule, or the unit will never build a meeting that people can count on and look forward to. My unit, the membership services unit, has a written format that we follow for our unit meetings so that anyone, even the newest staff or member, can lead the meeting.

In general, in unit meetings there should be a balance between focusing on the work and paying attention to who is in the room. Unit meetings provide an essential opportunity to spend some time catching up and getting to know people, so that they truly are wanted, needed and expected. The unit meeting is the key communication tool for putting the work out there, sharing it, and involving the whole unit in important work-related discussions. Unit meetings should be long enough to cover the unit's successes, struggles and new projects, but should not go on forever.

If the unit is stuck on a project and needs to retool an area of work, then set a time for a planning meeting rather than dragging the unit meeting on and on. For example, we were not happy with the accessibility of the work of tracking new members in the referral process. The issue came up through a unit meeting, but as ideas began to flow we realized that this topic needed an hour set aside to explore all the ideas fully and come to consensus on the changes we wanted to make. We wanted to make sure all the key members and staff who work in the unit had an opportunity to give input. So we scheduled a planning meeting later in the week to talk about how to make our referral process accessible work.

Another important tool for structure is the unit task board. I think every unit I've been in has had one, a large white board, centrally displayed. There are many, many ways to have a unit task board. But the task board I like best is one that has the core, daily work of the unit listed on the board, and a place where people working in the unit can sign up for that work at each unit meeting. I like a task board with an area to write in special projects or work the unit needs to get to this week – such as writing the unit update for the newsletter, or researching prices for new kitchen equipment. If the work can't be done that day but is still important, it should go in a special projects area, and at each unit meeting progress made in that area can be updated. This process makes the work easily accessible for everyone in the unit rather than having it all stored in one person's head, or in a "to do" file. The task board is most effective when it is used throughout the work day. On our unit task board there is an area to write when unit staff and members are out on TE, or at a conference, or are elsewhere, as an added way to facilitate communication.

There is great creativity in how units make the work visually accessible, with the task board being one important structure in this endeavor. Some units have "work stations" – the outreach area, the reception area, the area for computer work, etc. Each area is a way to access that particular work – large, well marked outreach books, folders for newsletter items to be typed, copying bins, maintenance supplies, etc. Often there are bulletin boards that display and/or explain the work.

In my previous example of how our unit struggled with the accessibility of the new member referral process, what we finally agreed on was using a large bulletin board in the unit. We made vertical columns for different stages in the process – one column for perspective members who need to schedule a tour, another for those in orientation, one for those needing follow up, another for people who didn't complete orientation. Each member's name is written on an index card that then gets moved from column to column as he or she moves along in the process. Now, it is easy for us to know what work needs to be done concerning people in the intake/orientation process. In addition, if a perspective member calls to find out the next step, anyone in the unit could look at the board and answer that question. Some clubhouses have procedure manuals for the work of each unit, so people can refer back to the manual if they haven't done that piece of work for a while.

None of this replaces the whole human interaction of people working side by side together on projects, of members being trained by other staff and members. If it did, you

wouldn't find a lot of members working in that unit, because members do not *primarily* come in to get unit work done. They come, first of all, for the relationships. But when too many things are kept in the knowledge of too few, than the work is not accessible and available to everyone.

Earlier, I mentioned planning meetings. I used to believe that units were only humming if I walked by and a lot of staff and members were actively busy doing the work. Later, a very talented staff person joined us who held a lot of meetings discussing the work, analyzing if we were doing it the best way, getting opinions and input. I thought that was great, but when some of those meetings went on for a couple of hours, that didn't feel right. I wanted to say, "Let's get back to work." But what I've learned is that, when done well, those meetings *are* great work. A lot of members are good at joining planning meetings and thinking through things, rather than jumping in and doing the work. Also, members who have been involved in doing the work are interested in participating in planning meetings because they care about the project.

Often staff think through the work themselves. They hold onto information, maybe discuss it with a couple of people, and then open it up to the unit only when they are already close to having made a decision. Getting everyone involved in the beginning stages builds ownership in the process, truly engages everyone in the decision making, and allows a forum for everyone's concerns, frustrations, and ideas to flourish. Every organization, every unit needs to review and improve its systems. Planning meetings allow the unit to review and change our own systems as often as we feel is needed.

Units learn from one another. At Genesis Club we have a structure that requires all units to work together and to be dependent on each other to get the work done. At Genesis, every unit needs to get a newsletter update and weekly logs to the business unit. Every unit helps out in the kitchen during lunch one day a week. The membership services unit talks to each unit that has new members in orientation to see how the process is going. Units depend on one another, which encourages cooperation between units to get the work of the house done. Units should not operate in isolation.

The components of what makes a "great unit" are virtually endless. We haven't yet spoken about engaging members in the work of the unit; the importance of new members continually joining the unit; the risks of members owning one task; the dance of staff staying in the unit to complete the work yet going out to find members to help complete that work. If we are doing our jobs then we are continually rebuilding our units.

Relationships and structure are the keys to building a sound and strong unit. Good unit structure and systems help form and support strong clubhouse relationships. Good unit structure facilitates members' ability to choose to engage in the work, and helps staff feel that they are prepared to handle the multiple mandates of the unit.

Again, no magic here, but maybe a little organization to get us through the day.

Ruth Osterman is the Program Director of Genesis Club in Worcester, Massachusetts. This paper was presented at the Eleventh International Clubhouse Seminar, October 2001, in Chatanooga, Tennessee.