

# Who Decides to Do What, and When? Decision Making in the Clubhouse: Process and Implementation

By Kevin Bradley

Genesis Club has been operating on a consensus model of decision making for the past five years. As a result, we now have a good deal of experience with this type of clubhouse governance and decision-making. However, it is very important for us to remind ourselves that we are in a state of continual learning in this regard. Thus far, we have exchanged information and experience about consensus model decision-making with Fountain House, New York; Fontanhuset, Malmo, Sweden; and Progress Place, Toronto, Canada.

## HISTORY

It is important to start with the journey that Genesis Club has traveled, which delivered us to our present status of decision making. Our clubhouse opened in 1988 with a small group of members and staff. At that time we had a weekly “staff training meeting”, which was a time for the staff to get together and discuss the principles and philosophy of the clubhouse model. Of course, we had failed to recognize that we were leaving out the major part of the clubhouse – the membership! To be quite honest, this was a vestige of my own mental health background, in which staff-only meetings were regularly held for training, client reviews, and policy setting.

Shortly after the opening of Genesis Club, we attended the 5<sup>th</sup> International Seminar (1989) in St. Louis, Missouri. There, I began to understand more deeply the way that members and staff work together in the clubhouse culture. For instance, I saw members and staff making major presentations together. I was particularly impressed with a presentation made by Mark Glickman, entitled “What If Nobody Wants To Make Lunch- Bottom Line Responsibility.” In that speech, Mark stated “Bottom line responsibility includes a great deal of decision making. That decision-making works best when members have the chance to influence this process. In accord with this premise, all action is carried out by staff and members working together, and our decisions are reached together by achieving consensus through discussion.”

The idea that everything in the clubhouse, including our decision-making, should be carried out by members and staff working together, made a great deal of sense. So on my return to Genesis Club, we immediately did away with the staff-training meeting. In retrospect, this staff meeting never really felt “right” for us anyway, but now we had a better idea *why* it had felt wrong. We attempted to remedy the situation by replacing the “staff meeting” with a “staff – member meeting,” whose primary function was to review clubhouse issues and policies.

This “staff -member” meeting continued for a period of about one year, until we had our consultation from the National Clubhouse Expansion Project, in 1989.

The faculty members were Barb Hennings (Yahara House, Madison, Wisconsin) and Robby Vorspan (Fountain House, New York, New York). During this consultation, Robby inquired as to what really happens at this meeting. We explained that the meeting was an opportunity for both staff and members to give their input at a discussion of clubhouse issues, and to set clubhouse policies. Robby suggested that we change the name of the meeting, so that it would more accurately reflect its actual purpose. Thus, the Genesis Club Policy Meeting was established, and has been the mainstay of decision-making at Genesis Club for the past five years.

## **ARENAS OF DECISION-MAKING AT THE CLUBHOUSE**

Governance and decision-making at Genesis Club is carried out in three distinct arenas. The first of these is the Board of Directors, which has responsibility for the legal and fiscal operations of the clubhouse, and for the hiring and evaluation of the Executive Director. The second is the Executive Director, who is responsible for making the “program” decisions for the clubhouse, including hiring, firing and evaluation of delivery of services, safety issues, and program development, and for ensuring that we are always adhering to the International Standards for Clubhouse Programs. The third area of discreet decision-making and governance in our clubhouse is within each unit. Units are responsible for generating unit tasks and projects, design of their own space, and all other decisions that relate specifically to that particular unit.

The issues with we deal at our weekly Club Policy Meeting are the “program” issues, which are the issues which fall under the domain of the Executive Director. As Director of Genesis Club, I have turned the decisions for which I am ultimately responsible over to the clubhouse community as a whole. I have elected to put my faith in the members and staff of the clubhouse, and to trust that the decisions we make as a clubhouse community, by the process of consensus which involves the whole clubhouse, rather than making them by myself, helps us to become a stronger community and gives each of us a tremendous sense of ownership.

In addition, I think the quality and the thoughtfulness of the decisions we reach, as a community is superior to decisions I reach alone in my office.

This does *not*, however, mean that I simply relinquish my responsibility as Director. As Director, I see my role as providing bottom-line continuity of clubhouse principles in our clubhouse; and for ensuring the safety of the whole clubhouse community. As such, there are some issues over which, despite a consensus of the community, I will exert my authority as Director. For example, in the (unlikely) event that the clubhouse consensus was to implement something that was clearly not in line with the Standards (such as putting a pool table in the middle of the Business Unit), I would reject the decision of the community and exercise my role as Director to “derail” the decision. Likewise, if a decision made at the Policy Meeting interfered with the safety of the community, it would be my responsibility as Director to reverse that decision. I also maintain *bottom-*

*line* responsibility for the hiring and firing of staff, although I fully share this decision-making process with the clubhouse community.

Occasionally there are questions as to which are “unit” decisions, and which are “program” decisions. A simple example of this is the issue of lunches. Decisions about menu planning, we have determined, are unit decisions, and therefore do not come to a Policy Meeting. However, the overall topic about lunches being nutritious and affordable is a program issue. So if someone wanted to suggest a change in price or quality of menu, this topic would be brought to the Policy Meeting.

## **HOW CONSENSUS WORKS AT GENESIS CLUB**

How does Genesis Club make decisions at the Policy Meeting? We have arrived at the conclusion that the best way for us to make group decisions is through the process of consensus. Consensus is generally defined something like this: “The vast majority is in *agreement* with the issue, and all ‘stake holders’ (in this case, members and staff) can *live* with the decision, for the betterment of the overall community.” We are now clear that consensus cannot be willed, mandated or ordered. The process of true consensus takes time, thought and effort. Sometimes during a long and often heated Policy Meeting, the co- chairs will ask for consensus on this issue. We have learned that true consensus does not happen that easily or quickly. There is often very lengthy discussion before we make a decision about a club policy. For example, our Genesis Club smoking policy was developed through a consensus process that took months and months of discussion, surveys and review. However, when the clubhouse finally came to “consensus” regarding smoking, all major stakeholders were able to live with the policy for the overall quality of the clubhouse community.

We have identified a clear, well – defined process for setting policy at our Policy Meeting. We have written these steps on a large board, which hangs in the room where we hold our weekly meeting. The process is as follows:

## **GENESIS CLUB POLICY MEETING**

Wednesday, 3:00 P. M.

1. Put agenda item on board (anyone in the community can do this, at any point during the week.)
2. Introduce topic (the topic is introduced by the person bringing it up).
3. Review current Policy on this topic, if any (co- chairs)
4. Get community input (community, facilitated by co- chairs)
5. Propose a solution or alternative (community, facilitated by co- chairs)
6. Explore pros and cons of such a proposal (community, facilitated by co- chairs)
7. Can we all live with the decision? (community, facilitated by co- chairs)
8. Make a decision by consensus (community, facilitated by co- chairs)

This process has helped us to focus our discussion, and to move more effectively toward a decision and eventually a clubhouse policy. I feel that it has also been important for us to have the process of this meeting in a visible and accessible space in the clubhouse. It has helped us to establish a routine, and to familiarize all of the members and staff with what goes on in the meetings.

For the first year or so of having these meetings, I was the chair of every meeting. Then, gradually, we were able to pass the responsibility on to other staff and members in the clubhouse. However, it is still important that I am present at each meeting to provide necessary information relating to budget and other program developments.

## **CO- CHAIRING THE MEETING**

Presently, at each Policy Meeting there is a member and staff team co- chairing the meeting. Each unit takes on the role of co- chairing on a rotating basis. The unit that is scheduled to chair next week 's meeting, is in charge of taking the minutes for the current week. It is the responsibility of the co- chairs to:

- Start the meeting on time
- List the agenda items
- Read the minutes from the last meeting
- Ask for approval of minutes
- Read the process of consensus
- Facilitate the discussion during the meeting

Their primary function is to keep the discussion moving and to help the group stay focused on the issues and proposals. The co- chairs are also responsible for making sure that all members and staff in attendance have had an opportunity to express their opinions, if so desired. The minutes of each meeting are typed by the administration area of the clubhouse. A book of Genesis Club Policies is maintained and present at all Policy Meetings for reference.

The role of co- chairing takes a special set of skills that have been reviewed at our Genesis Club Education meeting. The major skills required include the ability to:

- remove yourself from the discussion
- gather community input
- solicit solutions or proposals
- judge conflicts and or agreements
- identify consensus, or move to gather more information and input

## **ISSUES DECIDED AT POLICY MEETINGS**

Some of the issues that we have discussed and formulated policy about at Policy Meeting have included:

- Psychiatrists in the clubhouse
- State VR counselors in the clubhouse
- Smoking in the clubhouse
- New grants
- Research projects
- Policy Meeting procedures
- Clubhouse transportation A
- Waiter/waitress service
- Color of the house and of the new awning

Some of these issues have been more straight forward than others. However, I am able to say in confidence that when the clubhouse finally makes a policy, it has been thoroughly discussed, debated, and reviewed. For example, we have a policy that an approved clubhouse policy must stand for at least six months before being brought up for review. Guess which policy was brought up for review on exactly the six-month mark. You guessed it, SMOKING in the clubhouse! Again, the debate raged! However, this time the consensus was more rapid and decisive. Genesis would remain a non- smoking clubhouse. It was then decided that an outdoor covering and protection would be provided for the smokers. I am pleased to say that this capital improvement has now been completed.

Another important issue with which we grappled at our Policy Meeting had to do with a new housing contract which was being proposed by the Department of Mental Health. The clubhouse gathered together all kinds of relevant information and data, and in the end, via the process of consensus outlined above, decided that we were not ready at that time ready for such an expansion. And most recently, after upgrading and renovating our 120-year-old clubhouse building, the issue of what color we should paint and side the house came up at Policy Meeting. I was sure that this was going to be a long and difficult debate. However, to my surprise we came to an almost immediate consensus that the house should remain the same color! Thank goodness!

## **BOARD, DIRECTOR, AND CLUBHOUSE COMMUNITY- WORKING TOGETHER**

The Board at Genesis Club has hired the Executive Director to make the major agency decisions. What I have done as the Executive Director is to put my faith in the clubhouse community of members and staff to help make these decisions. To make this work, the Board in turn has had to put its faith in my choice to rely on the clubhouse community to make major decisions. Because of the unique nature of our Board, this has worked very well for us. I have been able to go to the Board and say, “These are the decisions that the Genesis Club community of members and staff has made, “and the decisions have been well-received. The Board’s comfort with clubhouse community being very active in our governance stems from our history as a clubhouse. In 1987, when the Board was first forming, there was a clear vision that Genesis Club should be a freestanding clubhouse and that the Board of Directors should be a “partnership”, which included “consumers” and/ or clubhouse members. At that time, four consumers /

members were elected to the Board of Directors. This policy has continued to the present. From the beginning, we had the vision of operating and governing together, as a whole community.

A recent example of this joint decision process had to do with the issue of space. We have outgrown our present space, and members have brought up the issue of confined space at the Policy Meeting. The need for a larger dining room and community room is evident. When this issue was brought from the Policy Meeting to the Board, the Board launched the first Capital Campaign to renovate and expand our existing space.

## **CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES**

The challenges involved in the issue of clubhouse governance are many. In the second year of our weekly Policy Meeting, several staff asked if they could talk to me about a very serious issue. The issue was that they felt that we needed to reinstate a regular staff meeting. When I asked why, they responded that the Policy Meeting was member dominated that they could not discuss their issues in that format. I was somewhat confused. I thought we were on the right track regarding member involvement and participation.

Looking back at that request, I now realize those staff members were also looking for recognition and value. (It was indeed true that we would extend Policy Meeting to let every member talk, and that we were very lenient with members who would not be discussing the agenda item but rather personnel issues or complaints.) My response was that we would not go back to a staff meeting, but that we would have to work to make the Policy Meeting a place where both staff and members could give their opinions and share their ideas. Our Policy Meetings are now stronger, with both staff and members giving input and making suggestions, and with a higher expectation that everyone needs to stay focused on the issue being discussed. This was a period of growth that has helped us to become better at making decisions and policies together, as well as at living and growing together.

Most recently we have borrowed another chapter from Fountain house, in the form of a monthly Program Meeting. We were finding that the Policy Meeting was becoming a time for announcements, unit updates and general information, and that by the time we were able to get to the agendas, the meeting was losing its focus and becoming too long. Thus, it was decided (at a Policy Meeting) to start a Program Meeting that would be for unit and program updates to include personnel, fiscal, and board issues. This meeting would not be a decision making meeting, and issues that arose here that required decisions would be channeled back to the Policy Meeting. This has helped the Policy Meeting to become more clearly focused on issues and solutions.

All staff and members were encouraged to attend this meeting. Initially, I was worried that the "Program Meeting" would become staff dominated and a staff meeting in

disguise. I am pleased to report that these meetings have been attended by both staff and members and have not been “staff dominated”.

## **THE BENEFITS**

The benefits of holding a genuine Policy can be seen in all aspects of the development of our clubhouse community. As a direct result of this weekly meeting and the process it embodies, the idea of participation and consensus has become a vital key to the life of our clubhouse. I believe that, because of the effects of this meeting, the partnership of model of working and making decisions is now woven into the entire culture at Genesis Club.

The Policy Meeting is able to create a place and a voice for many leaders emerge, and creative solutions are found for difficult problems. The clubhouse community together celebrates. Our victories. In summary, I would like to say: Please do not take the process of decision making for granted. At Genesis Club, we have found that the process is precious!

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