

## MEMBER ROLE/STAFF ROLE: ANOTHER LOOK

By Robby Vorspan

*Presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Clubhouse Seminar, October 2001, Chattanooga, Tennessee.*

This plenary is called "Why are we here?" Its purpose is to sharpen our focus on what is our essential mission in the clubhouse. It is a wonderful question, and a crucial one to be asking ourselves. However, trying to answer it is not so easy.

This is a difficult thing for us to consider, as it takes us quickly to the heart of the Great Clubhouse Taboo: in the clubhouse we are **never** supposed to make any distinctions between members and staff. But to answer the question: "Why are we here?" we have to accept that there is, in this regard, a very major difference between why we (staff) are her, and why we (members) are here. There are two answers to the question. There is a staff answer, and there is a member answer. And although we in the clubhouse world do not like to ever think about anything in these terms, we have to. Insisting on holding onto our clubhouse myth that members and staff are simply interchangeable words is not helpful to us. In fact, I believe, it is this insistence – to a large extent – that has contributed to the reason we need this plenary, with its focus on what the clubhouse is all about. If we insist that members and staff are interchangeable, we lose sight of the reason that clubhouses exist: to help members regain their lives.

For me, and I think for a lot of clubhouse people, the greatest thing about clubhouse is how it has forever altered the relationships between program workers and program participants – between clubhouse staff and clubhouse members. Clubhouses have successfully shifted these relationships from the hierarchical, authoritarian, sometimes condescending relationships that used to exist in all areas of mental health services, to the respectful, mutual, and interdependent relationships we all experience in our own clubhouses.

This is a wonderful thing, and a thing to be greatly celebrated. And, in fact, we have celebrated it. We have written about it, spoken about, and most importantly, incorporated it into our Standards for Clubhouse Programs. When we speak about clubhouse, one of the first things we say is how unique and different our relationships are. This is what sets us apart from the rest of the pack of mental health programs.

We say things such as:

*You can't tell the difference between the members and staff here.*

*Members do everything staff do, and vice versa.*

*Members have bottom-line responsibility for running the clubhouse.*

*Our clubhouse can run fine even if no staff are around.*

We could all add our own versions of these statements. They are at the core of our clubhouse culture.

So, it looks as if we've succeeded. We've succeeded in changing the very skeleton of how relationships and authority are experienced in our mental health community. We've succeeded in radically changing the reality of this experience for both members and staff at clubhouses. We have successfully erased the boundary between provider and recipient, staff and member, which used to be so thick and inflexible in other programs.

Anyone who has been deeply involved with the clubhouse community could speak eloquently about how this shift in relationships has benefited him or her. We know that our bold experiment in reconstructing the entire framework of how we relate to one another has been a phenomenal success. We have experienced first hand how re-mapping the nature of our relationships has freed us to grow, to see each other as who we really are (rather than as a label), to move beyond pre-determined ideas about ourselves and the people with whom we work.

However. Now it's time to look again, and to consider what might sound to some like clubhouse blasphemy.

For all these years, we have worked on changing our language so that the words "member" and "staff" could be used pretty much interchangeably. When we speak, we almost always feel the need to add the words "and members" to any sentence dealing with staff, or "and staff" to any statement about members.

However, now that we are all satisfied with how helpful this shift in relationships is, it is time for us as a community to take stock and decide where we go next. I am afraid that we are putting ourselves in a dangerous place if we simply think that we can stop where we are, having made the words "member" and "staff" interchangeable as the final victory of the clubhouse.

Let's face reality. Members and staff are *not* interchangeable in the clubhouse. Members and staff come to the clubhouse for different reasons. Blurring this reality bleeds the clubhouse community of its vision and its urgency. Members are coming to the clubhouse for one essential reason: to move on with their life's goals. Staff are coming to the clubhouse for a different essential reason: to *assist* clubhouse members in moving on with their life's goals. When we allow ourselves to gloss over these critical differences in our roles in the house, we are in great danger of losing our way.

When the Standards were first written, Standard # 10 said that *staff* have *bottom line* responsibility for the running of the clubhouse. As the Standards revision process got underway, this Standard provoked a lot of heated discussion. This Standard, the discussion went, is not "politically correct" clubhouse language. Bottom line responsibility cannot belong to staff, because where does that leave members? The language is non-equal, and therefore "non-clubhouse." Eventually, the Standard was changed to say that 'responsibility for the operation of the clubhouse lies with the members and staff. . .' The issue of 'bottom line' was eliminated altogether, and the easier concept of 'responsibility' was generalized to everyone at the clubhouse.

Of course it is true that everyone in the clubhouse is responsible for various aspects of the running of the clubhouse, but the change in the language of the Standard is a critical one. The change aims at blurring the distinction between the essential staff role, and the essential member role. What is wrong with this new version is that it dilutes the critical question that we are asking here today at this plenary: "Why are we here?"

Take the kitchen, for example. If I am a member and I know that I have bottom line responsibility to make sure the lunch gets out, how am I supposed to feel about leaving the kitchen in order to get a TE, or go to school? And this is not simply an abstraction, or a matter of semantics. There are members in clubhouses everywhere, in every kind of unit, who have had this experience. Maybe there are no staff in the unit for long periods of time, so members step up to the plate because they don't want to let their community down. This can, no doubt, be a wonderful experience for a member. But if the clubhouse does not understand, deep down in its bones, that

the *bottom line* responsibility for the running of the clubhouse has to lie with the staff, it can and will become a dead end trap for many members.

The subtle, and often not-so-subtle message to members is: we cannot survive without you. Clubhouses allow themselves to become so short staffed, or so dependent on some members' specific talents, that members can begin to understand that many functions in the house will simply fall apart if they are not there. So, they stay. And stop progressing toward their own life goals.

But, of course, isn't this what clubhouse is all about? Isn't it about: needed, wanted, and expected? Aren't clubhouses *supposed* to be deliberately understaffed so that staff will truly need members? Isn't being needed the first step towards self-respect and self-confidence?

Obviously, the answers to these questions are Yes Yes Yes and Yes.

However.

Since the early years of Fountain House, clubhouse communities have been compared to families. The analogy is, obviously, very limited. Parents and children have a hierarchical relationship that does not exist in clubhouses; clubhouse members are adults, and not children, and it is offensive to use an analogy in which members are compared to children.

However, there are ways in which the analogy is nonetheless extremely useful. Families are institutions in which different people have different roles and functions. In the family, it is the parent's responsibility to build and maintain a family structure in which children are afforded all kinds of opportunities and resources to attain their highest potentials. It is the children's responsibility to make good use of these opportunities and resources as fuel for growth toward their own developing life goals.

Families are only healthy families when the children know, deep down, that they can find all of the support and resources they need in their families, and that having been nurtured by this constant support, they are free (and encouraged) to move out into the larger world to achieve their life's goals. On the contrary, families in which the children feel that they must stay inside the family unit in order to hold the family together somehow, are not healthy families, and the children will inevitably not become healthy adults.

But does this mean that in a healthy family, family members don't genuinely need, want, and expect one another? No. It just means that the needing, wanting, and expecting takes place in a larger context of remembering the essential point. The whole point of working to create a strong, healthy family is so that each of its members can move out into the world as healthy, contributing adults who are achieving what matters to them in the world. Children have to be given every opportunity to grow and learn and accomplish within the family structure. However, if a child's contributions (financial, emotional, or otherwise) become *essential* to the functioning of the family, the child loses the freedom to move on and find his or her own place in the larger world.

In a family, parents have the "bottom-line" responsibility for holding the family structure together so that children can both contribute and move on in their lives. In a clubhouse, it must be the staff who hold this bottom line responsibility.

Removing this concept from our Standards, and therefore from our clubhouse practice, is dangerous in many ways. If members and staff see themselves as interchangeable parts, we will

not succeed with our mission – which must be to provide an environment in which members can identify, and progress toward, their life goals. Members cannot and should not experience themselves as having bottom line responsibility for the running of the clubhouse, because this kind of responsibility will rob them of the freedom they need to try new things, to move on, and ultimately, for many, to move out.

By the same token, staff *must* experience themselves as having bottom line responsibility for running the clubhouse. It is the lack of this sense of urgent responsibility that makes so many clubhouses so lack-luster and enervated. It is only when staff clearly understand that “the buck stops with me” that true clubhouse relationships and vitality can develop. If each individual staff member knows that he or she is ultimately responsible for very specific areas of clubhouse functioning (such as the lunch, the newsletter, the bathrooms, etc.) that staff worker will *need* to form genuine relationships with members in order to get all of the work done. There will be energy, urgency, and vibrancy in the clubhouse if staff know they are accountable for more than they could ever do on their own. But when there is simply a generalized sense of ‘we are all responsible for all of this,’ the energy tends to drain away and no one fuels the fire of urgency.

Members are not staff and staff are not members. This is not a matter of equality or non-equality. It is a matter of role. It is the staff’s role to create the stable skeleton of structure in the clubhouse, so that there are consistent opportunities available for members. It is the members’ role to engage in these opportunities for their own growth and rehabilitation. Members should not be burdened with bottom line responsibility for clubhouse work for two reasons. One, success; and two, failure.

If a member, for example, takes bottom line responsibility for getting out the newsletter, and succeeds, she will be unable to freely explore the option of going back to school (without feeling obligated and guilty). She will know that she will be letting the clubhouse down if she just walks out on the newsletter. This is not helpful to this member. On the other hand, however, if she takes the bottom line responsibility for the newsletter and fails at it, she is also disrupting the opportunity system of the clubhouse. If the newsletter flounders because this member’s illness makes it impossible for her to carry out her responsibilities, other clubhouse members will lose out on the opportunity to participate in this important clubhouse job. Members should have every opportunity within the clubhouse. It is imperative, however, that members know that there is a staff worker who holds the ultimate responsibility for each clubhouse function and that the member is free to either move on, or, if necessary, to be ill.

The same holds true for staff. Staff are not members, and are not in the clubhouse for the same reason members are. Many clubhouse staff (myself included) have appreciatively noted the transformative effect that working in a clubhouse can have on our own lives. This is great, and is no doubt true for many, many clubhouse staff workers. The danger, however, comes when the staff worker subtly shifts his or her priorities so that this personal enrichment becomes the primary reason for being in the clubhouse. The answer to the question “Why are we here?” for the staff worker cannot and should not be: “The clubhouse is transforming and enriching my life.” It has to be “to help the clubhouse *members* transform and enrich their lives.” That is what clubhouse staff are getting paid to do, and whatever happens to them in the process is a lovely by-product.

It is very understandable that we in the clubhouse community are afraid of making these kinds of distinctions between members and staff. We have worked so diligently, and so passionately, to transform our relationships from the medical/clinical types of relationships that used to be the stock and trade of all mental health programs. We have been successful at moving this seemingly

unmovable mountain, and in achieving the impossible. Clubhouse relationships have proven that workers and participants in a mental health program can indeed have relationships that are mutually respectful, deeply interdependent, and even genuinely fun.

We do not have to worry that we will lose all of this if we press ahead and continue to define and describe the ingeniously unique member/staff relationship in the clubhouse. It has been a long and difficult journey to get to the point where we are. We have worked hard to blur the destructive distinctions and boundaries that the medical model sets up between the "givers" and the "recipients" of services. But we can't just sit in this blur and call it the end of the road. We needed to get to this point, to get away from the types of distinctions and boundaries that used to be the only way to relate to one another. But now we have to pick ourselves up and continue down the road.

We need to think deeply and honestly about the question: Why are we here? It is the only way we will move forward in our deepest held desire, which is help clubhouse members gain access to meaningful, satisfying, and productive lives. But as we think about the question, we need to think about it from our own unique perspectives: a staff perspective, and a member perspective.

*We are afraid of losing the great strides we have made, but we don't have to be afraid. It's OK for members and staff to be different, and still be equal. It's OK for us to accept that members and staff have different missions and different roles, and that we can still be co-workers, colleagues and friends. We don't need to have the same job in order to be peers and partners in the great and exciting pursuit of clubhouse.*

*It is only when we each do our own unique, distinct part, and do it as well and as conscientiously as we can, that the clubhouse truly becomes that haven of help, support, and success that we all know it can be—and that it must be in today's painful and troubled world.*

*Robby Vorspan works at the ICCD in New York City.*