

“What if Nobody Wants to Make Lunch? Bottom Line Responsibility in the Clubhouse”

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From my early days as a member of Fountain House long ago, through my recent experiences as a staff person and visitor to other clubhouses around the country, through many conversations with colleagues in training at Fountain House, one myth about the way we operate clubhouses or should operate as clubhouses has been echoing in my ears. It goes something like this; if we want to empower the members, staff should help members become aware of the opportunities but then should step back and avoid too much involvement. Advocates of this theory believe that if members struggle with responsibilities on their own, then they will somehow succeed. The tragedy of this way of thinking lies in discounting the enormous potential of the staff to exert a powerful influence on the environment they share with the membership

People don't get better or stronger because someone moves away from them. They get stronger because someone who knows them and respects them and needs their help and talents seeks them out on a regular basis. In contrast, trying to empower members through a separatist mentality leads to the alienation of both members and staff.

The danger is that staff will hand out work from behind the safety of their desks and see themselves as supervisors rather than as very active participants in clubhouse life. For staff, there must be a constant struggle against the stigma members carry in themselves as well as the rejection they have already experienced in the world. After all, what we are aiming for in striking at the stigma created from institutionalization is an integrated society of members and staff, not one in which staff stand back and create a new form of segregation from the membership.

The question staff ask most often is how to motivate members, but I believe they are looking in the wrong place. The question should really be, what can we as staff do to make a more attractive clubhouse? What can we, as staff, do to be more inviting, welcoming, and energetic in our own approach to clubhouse opportunities, more creative in finding new opportunities, more ingenious in helping members find a niche in the clubhouse world, more tireless in building a sophisticated range of Transitional Employment jobs, more courageous in our willingness to take risks and delegate responsibilities to those we might otherwise overlook?

It may seem paradoxical that, in seeking to help members take on more responsibility, we as staff must first take on even more responsibility ourselves. In short, we must look at ourselves and see that the bottom line responsibility lies with us. Then we think less of pathology and what is wrong with someone else and more of where we can do more or work differently. In assuming the bottom line responsibility, the staff must struggle to engage the membership and share the responsibility to the greatest extent possible.

There is no question in my mind that the motivating force in the clubhouse begins with staff motivation. If staff are passionate about the opportunities in the clubhouse, be they humble cleaning opportunities or working on the newspaper, a contagious enthusiasm will swirl around them. This is not meant to elevate the importance of staff at the expense of members. I only seek to illuminate the reality that lack of initiative or confidence are only by-products of mental illness. It is in the nature of the disability, the illness we struggle against, one which I know from the vividness of my own personal battle with it.

In the beginning of each day in the clubhouse, an important part of the staff's role lies in generating enough enthusiasm and sense of urgency about the club's needs to overcome the inertia and anguish which is a realistic part of mental illness. In the clubhouse community, in the clerical unit or the dining room, the staff person must constantly be making sure that the responsibilities for operating their units are shared by many members. The bottom line is that, without having staff workers constantly moving through their worlds and finding new opportunities and tying together the loose ends of innumerable projects and tasks, while at the same time helping out with the many emergencies and urgencies that inevitably arise, the whole clubhouse process would grind quickly down.

Why can't members take on this responsibility for the bottom line operations of the clubhouse? The answer is that they often do take on that responsibility or share that responsibility. But the nine-to five, 5-days-a-week responsibility lies with the staff for a number of reasons. First, the staff have to be in the club every day; it's their job, and therefore they can provide the continuity that enables a sophisticated opportunity center to run smoothly. Members need a clubhouse where they have the right to give and take according to how much they are able, where they can best be served and in turn offer their talents and skills in a way that is hopefully most satisfying to them.

The staff must realize and accept their active roles in the rehabilitative process, presenting themselves as whole human beings. The staff of the clubhouse must see that their personality is a part of the rehabilitative process. At first, the staff must be at the center of the club solar system because in the beginning the members need someone to say, "You can do it, and I'll do it with you." The staff who model that attitude find themselves embraced by the membership, who weave themselves together in that system. The artistry of the staff is in helping and nurturing this process along. Each day member and staff relationships grow

stronger through a series of constant interactions that only come out of facing common struggles and taking on common goals. Staff are most effective when they live fully in the unit among the membership and see the opportunities, the meals, the computers, the newspaper, the TEPs, as shared opportunities.

How can the membership feel excited about a newspaper or a lunch, or giving a tour, or any of the myriad activities of clubhouse life, if they sense that these opportunities are not taken seriously by the staff and that their work is not important but merely seen as activity to keep them busy? Just as we, as staff, would not ask members to do work we would not want to do, who should we not try to create opportunities we ourselves wouldn't see as worthwhile or exciting. Sometimes staff may be tempted simply to tack up a piece of paper in the clubhouse and ask members who are interested in any particular activity to sign up for it. It should come as no surprise if very few people do sign up for an activity or opportunity that is promoted in such a half-hearted way. If I as a staff person care so little about the outcome of such an activity, why should I expect members to want to get involved? Starting from the very top with the director, the impression must be made that all clubhouse work is significant and important and that the staff do not have a separate, more important agenda, while the less important and less exciting jobs are delegated to the membership.

What we must do first as staff is invest anything we think is good for the members with enormous passion of our own. If we want horticulture, or audio-visual work, or photography, or anything we think is an exciting opportunity, we must first demonstrate our own excitement. That excitement and vision of opportunities in the clubhouse must never die in the staff. From the director on down, there must come a sense of urgency that more and more will be done in the club; that urgency will be passed on by the staff to the membership. There is no more motivating force for staff than knowing that, without the help of members, they cannot accomplish the work they are responsible for. If enough urgency is expressed by the director of a club, who seeks more and more opportunities, the staff will have to move faster and struggle harder to find the member talent to get the work of the clubhouse done. The staff will become like talent scouts, always seeking to discover the strengths and abilities waiting to be developed in the membership.

It is a myth to say a clubhouse is, or should be, completely member-run. It is a myth that often serves as an excuse for staff to separate themselves out of the heart of the clubhouse world. If staff do not totally immerse themselves in the life of the club, and instead maintain clinical detachment, they cannot hope to change their own attitudes about what members can or cannot do. We must give up the myth of empowerment by default or empowerment by separation and face the fact that the staff must assume the bottom line for the operation of the clubhouse. We must accept that it takes a certain plus and continuity of staff support to keep the wheels of the clubhouse turning. We must realize that it is not the role of the members to assume this bottom line responsibility each day.

Bottom line responsibility also includes a great deal of decision-making. That decision-making works best when members have a chance to influence the process. In accordance with the premise that all action in the clubhouse is carried out by members and staff working together, side by side, so decisions are reached together by achieving consensus through discussion. In the context of the clubhouse, invoking a voting procedure to arrive at a decision is to create unnecessarily the division and dissension, the "winners and

losers." of the political world. Instead, clubhouses should operate on the basis of the values and needs of the clubhouse culture.

Ultimately, the essential reason the staff have the bottom line responsibility for the operation of the clubhouse lies in the nature of the club itself. We expect clubhouses to be opportunity centers that can, when a member so chooses, lead to greater freedom and opportunity in the community through access to transitional employment and, hopefully, to independent employment. Thus, to expect members to be tied down to do all consuming daily roles in the club is an unfair expectation. If we were to do so, we could be discouraging members from taking advantage of the challenge of transitional employment in the community and other aspects of the wider world.

I deeply believe it is far better if the operation of the club is seen as a partnership by members and staff such that members can co-manage any aspect of the club's operation but can always depend upon staff workers to pick up the slack. The danger comes when the bottom line is guarded too jealously by the staff, when they hoard their status and don't relinquish, delegate, share, and constantly seek to nurture leadership abilities among the membership. If staff see work or opportunities as ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end, they will fail at their bottom line responsibility. Equally, they will fail if members see the bottom line as a one-way street that they can never cross at any time, and if staff must always have all the answers and step forward first.

Yet, the clubhouse requires an awareness from the staff of their own responsibility for the bottom line as well as their ability to invest their own energy, dreams, talents, and vision into the clubhouse world. Once the clubhouse wheels are turning, the staff must move gracefully to find the member talent that lies like a great untapped reservoir waiting to find expression.

Finally, the reason the staff have the bottom line responsibility for the club is not to create a more staff-centered environment but rather to create a clubhouse where staff are more fully immersed in the clubhouse culture with the membership. Such a fully shared world is a very dignified and respectful place where both members and staff strive together for a more satisfying, challenging, and joyous way of life.

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