

BUILDING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

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STRONG BOARDS AS CLUBHOUSE CORNERSTONES

My name is Anne Mai and I am proud to have been a part of this movement for 12 years. I am on the Board of Directors of Fountain House in NY and served for several years as its Chairman. It was one of the great privileges and pleasures of my life. As of last Spring, I am also on the board of the ICCD.

There are many challenges we face in spreading this essential work that we all do across the world so that the comfort, community and employment that Clubhouse provides can be available to people who need it everywhere. After 20 years of the existence of the Standards and 15 years of the ICCD, we have learned a few things that were not necessarily evident at the beginning. It was always known and recognized that it is essential to have wonderful Clubhouse directors and dedicated staff.

Now we know for certain that the strongest Clubhouses have strong boards of directors to complement and support the work of directors and staff. They are the Clubhouses that are most likely to thrive and most likely to survive crises of management, changes of directors and financial difficulties. Why that is so and how to achieve and nurture a strong board is what I am here to talk about.

It is good to think of boards of directors as one of the three legs of the Clubhouse stool – equal with members and staff. Members, staff and board work together to create a vision for their Clubhouse, and the board becomes the long term keeper of the vision as members may move on to other parts of their lives and staff go to other jobs. Not that the board itself remains static, but the philosophy inherent in the mission statement and governance structures created by the board (and carried out in its committees) can endure well past any individual involvement and ensure the sustainability of the Clubhouse.

The term “board of directors” has different meaning to different Clubhouses. In independent Clubhouses the boards have more legally-required governance and oversight duties than in advisory boards. But strong, participatory advisory boards are as essential as good independent Clubhouse boards. They provide the connective tissue that binds the Clubhouse to the community, helping the staff, director and members navigate that community -- allowing them to understand its funding streams and power structures and act as ambassadors of the Clubhouse as well as advocates for the welfare of its members. In each

type of board the level of commitment and willingness to provide a bridge to and from the community can make all the difference in the quality and success of their Clubhouse program.

What are the responsibilities of a Clubhouse Board? As keepers of the Clubhouse vision, they are responsible for setting Clubhouse policy, long range planning and the financial health of the Club-house. They are also responsible for hiring, overseeing and yes, sometimes unfortunately, letting Clubhouse directors go.

But a good board does far more than that.

Let's look at several important elements that are essential to get right in order to have a truly effective board.

1) BOARD COMPOSITION

The composition of the board is critical. Who are the community members you need to recruit for your boards? Think what your needs are and find people who are available and able to fill those needs. Depending on your size you need at least one lawyer to help you construct sound legal structures –possibly a realtor to help with building issues (and maybe housing for members) and business people to provide access to employment. You also need people who are familiar with and know how to tap into the political and philanthropic circles of your community.

The more successful you are in recruiting the real leaders in your communities – whether in business, social services, politics or civic life, the better success you will have in making the connections that your Clubhouse needs to flourish. It is well worth investing time in recruiting community leaders who will have the biggest positive impact.

I can't stress this last point enough! It is tempting to stay within your comfort zone and approach only people you know well – say mostly people in the field of social work, which is after all the world most connected to Clubhouse. You also need to approach business leaders, corporate leaders if there are any in your town, who can lend their networks for developing Clubhouse relationships – and the all-important fundraising

The old adage that counsels “If you want something done ask the busiest person you know” has some truth to it – but in my experience it is also true that you need some people who do have time – because board work can be time-consuming – especially if you have a particularly demanding issue to deal with.

The week I took over as chairman of the Fountain House Board, we discovered that we had a

fairly major financial problem that had not been foreseen. I don't know what I would have done without a recently retired board member who must have spent hundreds of hours that year working out what had happened and plotting how to get us back into the black. His financial acumen was astonishing and he actually had the time – for the first time in his professional life – to pour himself into something unconnected to his work but still using his

vast financial experience. Within two years we had reached our recovery goals and were once again in good shape.

It was another board member, also recently retired, who tackled our governance issues, whipping us into impeccable shape, dotting every governance i and crossing every t, putting us in compliance with the strictest possible non-profit governance recommendations.

This past summer, when our board chairman had to resign abruptly because of illness, thanks to this same board member we had a provision in our by-laws for a smooth transition. We were saved weeks of confusion as a rudderless board searched for someone to take over. The transitional board chair stepped right in.

A suggestion: If you approach a captain of industry and he is not available, try researching his wife. If one of them is interesting and interested she might be able to parlay her husband's relationships into relationships for your Clubhouse. It was certainly my husband who was wanted for the board of Fountain House. Luckily I only discovered that fact years later and I was too hooked to be insulted! My husband was overcommitted and, knowing of my interest in mental illness, referred them to me. They had little choice but to approach me – probably reluctantly. That was a moment in my life when my time had opened up and I plunged into the joyful work of Fountain House with energy, enthusiasm – and TIME. And I brought my husband's network as well as my own to the job.

2) BOARD MEMBERS MUST UNDERSTAND THE MODEL

There is one attribute board members should all have in common – and you may have to work on making sure they develop it. It is an understanding of the remarkable nature of Clubhouse and how it is transformational in the lives of those it touches. If you can find leaders who have a family or friendship connection with mental illness, you have a good head start. They will easily understand how wonderfully radical it is to be part of a community that is above all about “getting a life.”

Help them “fall in love” with your Clubhouse. The best way to do that is to take them into the Clubhouse and have them experience the beauty, the love and the depth of relationships that rarely leave observers unmoved. At Fountain House we often say that the hardest part of involving someone in the house is getting that person in the front door. After that the Clubhouse usually just sells itself. That is exactly what happened with me. I walked through the door, saw an amazing atmosphere of respect and affirmation and knew that's where I wanted to put my time and energy.

For some board members the “falling in love” process takes a little longer. So, remember, the better informed your board is about every aspect of the Clubhouse, the more committed they are likely to be. Having a plan for board training and development is really important. The ICCD has a well-formulated program in board training. Use it!

3) RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships more than any other factor are what Clubhouses are most about. Strong boards are also all about relationships: relationships with the members, staff and director of a Clubhouse, relationships between the Clubhouse and the community and working relationships with each other. If any one of these elements is missing, the board is unable to do its job optimally and the Clubhouse suffers.

The relationship between the board and the director needs to be a strong and collegial one. A good board/director relationship gives a director wings – the freedom to do his job with the knowledge that the board is helping to provide the underpinnings for Clubhouse security and the outreach for its growth. Although the board is responsible for overseeing the director, a wise board knows that it is the director who is running the program, giving him the support he needs without undue interference. The relationship between the board chair and the Clubhouse director is, of course, the most important one of all and should be nurtured with great care.

Earlier I said that the board of directors provides the connective tissue between the Clubhouse and the community. Willingness to share their network of relationships and to tap into their friends' networks as well is a key aspect of a stellar board member. There are many ways in which a web of community relationships is critical – cases in point are in securing employment opportunities from local businesses and organizations, dealing with stigma if it arises against the Clubhouse or against any individual Clubhouse members and of course in (the all-important) fundraising.

Let me give some examples of how board members have used their relationships to help Fountain House.

One of our Fountain House board members, an artist herself, understood the need of the many artist members of Fountain House to have a place to show their work and support each other collegially. Using her art-world skills and network, she was instrumental in getting our Fountain Gallery underway. It has been a success both for our member artists and also, to our surprise, in creating great public relations for us in our community. Thanks to a strong volunteer network, the gallery raises almost enough funds each year to be self-sufficient financially.

Our wellness initiative, developed in alarm over premature deaths of too many of our members – and with concern over the high rates of diabetes and high blood pressure in our

community - was developed in a Fountain House member and board partnership that has been highly successful. Board members raised money for the initiative and worked side-by-side with members in developing the program which has now become a unit. We are already

seeing many health success stories and are awaiting the completion of the space which will house it.

4) FINANCES

A critical responsibility for the board is to ensure that the Clubhouse is financially sound and has access to funding that will enable it to grow in the future. This means two things. First that the board oversees the annual budget with diligence and then exercises proper oversight to ensure that the actual expenditures are within the budget. A second critical dimension of the board that is ongoing and longer-term in nature is to raise funds for the Clubhouse enabling it not only to fund current programs but also to provide resources for expansion.

The main responsibility for this will rest with the business and corporate leaders on the board who should feel committed to introducing the Clubhouse to their networks and to people who have the financial resources and philanthropic tendencies to make annual commitments to the Clubhouse. Having business and financial leaders on the board is absolutely fundamental to achieving long-term growth and expansion of services. Indeed, without this expertise Clubhouses will not have access to the resources they need to grow. Moreover, once a culture of community outreach is achieved, fundraising becomes easier and easier, helping Clubhouse boards and staff to plan their long-term growth with more confidence and conviction.

Don't overlook the social leaders who are willing to introduce friends and raise money. I don't want to seem crass, but you need to find people who can afford to be generous – with friends who can also afford to be generous. A Fountain House board member-- a woman with great charm, a huge social network and tenacious dedication was the organizing force behind a luncheon/seminar which has over the past few years turned into a stunning financial and public relations success for Fountain House – and an outstanding educational event I hope I have convinced you of the invaluable nature of Clubhouse boards in establishing and nurturing the connection between Clubhouses and their communities and in ensuring their sustainability. Boards should be viewed as essential partners with staff and members of any Clubhouse. A strong and engaged board will provide a better foundation from which to expand the quality of services and the financial security of your Clubhouse. Next to my family it is the Clubhouse community that I proudest to be a part of. Thank you, members of the Clubhouse community I love so much, for being such a wonderful audience!