



Clubhouse International

Building the Work Ordered Day
Nancy Emory, Gateway House

Most of us have been to a wedding reception. We know the bride or the groom and we wonder who all the other people are. The bride and groom are too busy to say more than “hello” to us. We talk to others and spend a few hours with people we do not know and we go home and usually have not made any close friends.

Several years ago, I was invited to my neighbor’s daughter’s wedding. A few hours before the ceremony, my neighbor called me and cried that the caterer had not shown up. She asked if I would go to her house, where the reception was held, and heat up the food and present it for the wedding guests. I found out that the mother of the bride had purchased the food, but the caterers and servers still did not show up even as the ceremony began at a nearby church. I scurried around and began to heat up and set out food for the guest. As the guests arrived, several of the neighbor’s friends, who I had never met, saw the dilemma and began to help out. At the end of that wedding reception I had made four very good friends. Why and how did that happen? We worked together and the work was needed.

Susan Omansky, rest her soul, a passionate pioneer for the clubhouse model, visited a friendly clubhouse that prided itself on good relationships but in which there was very little work for members. In Bill Water’s article “The Work Unit: the Heart of the Clubhouse, Susan tells Bill and Rudyard Propst, “Don’t they know that you cannot give a person self-respect by friendliness alone....I treasure the relationships I develop at Fountain House, but I also need to engage in something from which I can derive my own sense of pride, accomplishment and self-satisfaction from inside” (1)

We all know that relationships at the clubhouse are built around the work day, and we often struggle with how to have a day full of meaningful work. So now we begin our discussion about the work ordered day. How many relationships are built around the opening of an institutional can of green beans? When we were small children, I remember sitting around in my neighbor’s carport and shucking corn and shelling peas. The parents and children talked and built strong, lasting friendships. We can do this in our own clubhouse. In the afternoon, let’s sit around and snap green beans together, peel potatoes together, shuck corn together. You say, there’s no one here to do that! Try it, staff. Sit down and start snapping. Before you know it, members will come around and soon everyone is talking and laughing. Ralph Bilby saw me at a conference one time and called me the “Chop, chop” lady. I was confused. He explained that our kitchen unit chops everything. I remember telling him, “no canned foods”. If our clubhouse community wants to get away from everything institutional, why would we still serve institutional food? It only takes one, isolated member to open a can



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of food. Or worse, how many relationships are built when a staff member is doing all the cooking?

When we eat lunch we enjoy our meal so much better when we are waited on instead of standing in line like a school cafeteria or an institution. The waiter feels good because they have to care about someone and we feel good because we are cared for.

We need fresh flowers on our dining tables. Fresh flowers make people feel better. Boys take fresh flowers to girls they want to impress and people take fresh flowers to cheer up friends. So, we know that placing flowers on tables and around the house shows members that someone cares about them. Growing your own flowers is another way to have real work and build friendships. While on that subject, let's go "green" in our clubhouses and save a few trees by eating on real plates and using real silverware and cloth napkins. Food tastes so much better this way. Members and staff can work together to get donations of china, silverware and napkins. We then need to write thank you notes for the donations! We need to wash and dry our napkins at the end of the day and roll the silverware as we sit around together in the afternoon. Members and staff will take pride in the fact that their kitchen unit rivals a fine restaurant.

Moving on to clubhouse snack bars, I ask you, how many relationships are built with a coffee pot and a stack of Styrofoam cups? How many relationships are built in a snack bar with a box of pre-packaged snacks and an honor system coin drop? The purpose of a clubhouse snack bar is not to serve coffee or snacks. It exists to develop relationships, not just member to member, but staff to member. Instead of a lone, isolated member (or worse, a lone isolated staff) opening a box of butter fingers, why don't we make homemade muffins? How fun it is to bake together. Isn't that what we do on Thanksgiving or Christmas mornings with our family? Remember the fun times at slumber parties when we baked together? Let's make sandwiches, let's put together trail mix. Anyone can go to the local convenience store and buy a snickers bar. Where can we get a warm brownie? Our clubhouse! Snack bar members can make fresh squeezed carrot juice or pop corn and take pride in serving this to others. We can help members celebrate their birthday by making a cake especially for them. Everyone can enjoy cake and coffee together in the afternoon. Snack bars can cook pancakes in the afternoon. Together, we can wrap them and store them for the next morning's breakfast.

Clubhouse banks are wonderful additions to the work day, but they do not exist to provide members just a place to keep their money. These banks should not be run by paid staff. If you need a bank, members and staff need to work together to provide this opportunity to the clubhouse. Everything we do in a



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clubhouse, including having member banks, exits to build relationships, member to member and staff to member.

The clerical unit can be the most isolating area of all. Are computers facing the wall and members struggling to figure out how to read data and put it in the computer correctly? Or, of course, is there the bad scene of staff doing all this work while members sit around with nothing to do. Members can work together on these computers. Put all the computers in the middle of the room, facing each other and let members and staff work together to put data in computers and on forms. One member, or staff, calls out the information, the other member puts it in the computer. Then switch positions. The work gets done more accurately. The work is more pleasant and is more likely to get finished. And best of all, people are building relationships with each other while the work gets done. In the clerical unit we can collect information and type daily newsletters to keep a diary of our clubhouse and share information. We can produce a daily video show to provide interest at afternoon unit meetings and let members and staff know the news of the clubhouse. We can keep up with vital employment statistics so members can have a resource of information and know that others have cared enough to save and record this information for them.

Many members make such an effort to get to the clubhouse each day. They want something to do. The worst thing we can ask our members at a unit meeting is "Let's come up with things to do." Instead, members and staff need to identify the massive amount of work that needs to be done.

Do you struggle with a dead afternoon? Are you familiar with the "Rush, rush, get through" syndrome. About an hour before lunch time, everyone in the house is rushing around....rush, rush, and get through! What are we getting though to do? Sit around? Go home?

We need a vibrant afternoon for our members who are coming in from work or school. Having afternoon unit meetings is more productive than a daily large house meeting, which can signal the end of the day, the time to go home. After going to a daily house meeting, it is often difficult to get interested in yet another meeting, the unit meeting. This same scenario applies to morning house meetings, followed by unit meetings. Staff and members can only stomach so many. We are not the "meeting ordered day". Are we having meetings to take up time because we cannot identify needed work?



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So how do we get our days to be alive and vibrant from start to finish? We can start by: 1. developing member roles, 2. providing organization and structure and 3. preventing staff from hiding their knowledge from members.

1. Member roles

Our clubhouses are not in existence to teach specific skills. Members come to our clubhouse with so much talent. Staff must recognize the talent and help a member believe that his talent is useful and needed. When a member wakes up each morning, he needs to know that someone is counting on him for his contribution to the clubhouse community. This may be answering the phone, giving tours, making salads, or running the bank. As staff, we are not teachers who rotate members through different tasks because we have decided that they need to learn many different things. In the early days, John Beard was able to recognize “islands of wellness” in members and allow them to use these talents for the good of the clubhouse. (2) When members feel confident and take responsibility for needed clubhouse work, staff can focus on providing opportunities and organizing and structuring the day. This does not mean that staff ignore members in their roles. Members should not become possessive about their contribution to the clubhouse, nor should they feel compelled to stay in their role and deny themselves an opportunity to try a job or educational experience as Robby Vorspan talks about in her article Member Role/Staff Role: Another Look (3). In a vibrant clubhouse with ample TE opportunities, members move on with their lives and give others the chance to experience the role a member left behind.

2. Organization and structure

Some members do not come to the clubhouse each day and other members struggle with assuming a role. For this we need organization and structure. As we identify the work, we write it down on white boards or “needs lists”. At unit meetings we can talk and decide who wants to do what. A unit meeting leader should not ask for volunteers. We’ve all seen the line of army men step back when asked to volunteer for the front line. Staff need to stop asking “Will you do this for me?” Members must know that what they do each day is important and needed by the clubhouse community, and that their contribution is not done to please a favorite staff. So as clubhouse members and staff, write down your day’s structure. Members and staff need a stable routine and need to know what to expect each day.

3. Staff hiding knowledge.

Do we hire expert cooks to be the staff in the kitchen unit. If so, then members know that this person can do things so much better than any of them, so why



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should they be excited about sharing their knowledge? Does this well meaning staff person set out all the needed materials for the day before the member's arrive in the kitchen? Does she set out the food, the utensils, the pots and pans? Members need to feel ownership in their units and need to know how to find the sugar or the can opener. Is the "company computer guy" the assigned staff in the clerical unit? Does he turn on all the computers, find the files and rush to the rescue of a computer problem? Members who are part of the clerical unit need to know how to find materials and operate various business machines in order to take responsibility. In the article "From Pedestal to Personhood" we learned that staff are selected for the clubhouse for their ability to relate to others in a genuine way and are challenged to let go of their work ethic and focus on the process by which work is done and not the end product. (4) We will eat and we will get attendance taken but let's focus on building relationships as we do our work.

We are told over and over to have more work in our clubhouses. As we provide wonderful opportunities for our members with employment, education, social life and housing, we still struggle with identifying the work of the clubhouse. It begins with brainstorming at our unit meetings and house meetings. We think of ways to make our clubhouse a better place to be.

The needed work in a clubhouse never stops and the relationships we build remain with us for a lifetime. Being productive is healthy. At the end of our busy day, we can go home and feel the sense of pride, accomplishment and self satisfaction that Susan Omansky was referring to. We can develop the self respect that only meaningful work can provide. And along the way, we can develop some good friendships.

This becomes a wonderful way to spend our life!