

Download and Discuss: Clubhouse Practice of the Month

The Role of the Clubhouse Director

The surest predictor of a strong, vibrant Clubhouse is a good Clubhouse Director. When we visit busy, thriving Clubhouses that have a sense of urgency and energy; and where members are achieving their goals and getting jobs and going back to school, there is almost always one common denominator. No matter what country it is in, what language the people speak, what type of building or economic factors there might be, the one thing all strong Clubhouses have in common is their motivated and committed Directors.

But although having a great Director is so essential to the success of the Clubhouse, the role of the Clubhouse Director is not easy to describe - and in many ways it is paradoxical role. At the 12th International Clubhouse Seminar, Jack Yatsko (ICCD Director of Training, and former Director of Friendship House, Hawaii) delivered a plenary presentation on this topic in which he helps clarify what makes a great Director a great Director.

The following is excerpted from his speech.

A Clubhouse director, perhaps more than any other person in the Clubhouse, works in a paradoxical situation. On one hand, directors need to promote egalitarian roles, consensus decision-making and the importance of process in the Clubhouse. On the other hand, directors also have bottom-line responsibility for the outcome of Clubhouse decisions.

In the article, Why Work Works, Robin Jackson writes, “Work is the medium out of which Clubhouse relationships are created.” It is this partnership of members and staff working side by side that fosters the relationships that are the vehicle for individual change and progress.

Clubhouse directors are involved in these partnerships. They have a responsibility to build relationships through working in units, covering transitional employment placements, and involvement in the social program. However, their role is different from other staff. Besides being ultimately responsible for the daily operation of the Clubhouse, they need to develop and keep a vision for the growth and ongoing success of the Clubhouse. The director needs to be thinking ahead, to know where the Clubhouse is going and what it will take to get there. Directors need to foster a sense of community within the Clubhouse among members, staff and board members. In addition, they must also work to create a positive place for the Clubhouse in the city or town and the neighborhood where it is located.

Another paradox is that a strong director needs to ‘delegate’ and to ‘let go’ of many responsibilities in order to more effectively bring the Clubhouse members and staff into the work. At the same time, though, the director has to be ‘in charge’ and actively hold the community accountable for the work. Directors who only do one or the other of these functions, will not be strong Clubhouse leaders.

When there is no sense of urgency about Clubhouse work, this is often because the director is not holding staff accountable in getting members involved. The director may see his or her role as simply delegating and then standing back to supervise. Strong directors say, “We need this done by tomorrow.” They create a dynamic of “Let’s get going,” that conveys a sense of the importance of the work and contrasts sharply with a placid approach that generates little enthusiasm. The strong director knows that it is a motivated and energized staff that brings out the talents, skills and energy of Clubhouse members and that such an engaging atmosphere is contagious. The director has to constantly model this energy and to insist on it from everyone else.

A Clubhouse director also faces a paradox when it comes to Clubhouse decision-making. Directors lead the process of making general programmatic and day-to-day decisions through consensus building that involves all stakeholders. However, if a staff person isn’t doing a good job, the bottom-line decision to let this person go will be the director’s responsibility. A Clubhouse director has to have the backbone to make the difficult decisions that keep the Clubhouse strong and vibrant and to protect Clubhouse culture. If through a process of consensus, a decision is made to have a pool tournament at 1:00pm, the director must say, “No.” Directors must establish and maintain the trusting relationships necessary to make it possible to act alone from time to time.

Another paradox directors face is in process versus product, balancing the importance of process with actual results. Different from other staff, directors have responsibilities to the Board, to external funding sources, and to auspice agencies. Their position requires a balancing act, looking toward the future while also getting things done. If the Clubhouse or the members need something, a strong director doesn’t give up. Then everyone can celebrate successes such as high rates of members on jobs, an attractive housing program, and victories in advocacy efforts.

A strong director needs to rely on the experience and wisdom of others in the Clubhouse world, asking questions, talking to experienced Clubhouse people, and going to workshops, trainings, and seminars.

In conclusion, when thinking of the vision and leadership of your Clubhouse, think BIG: see the big picture; understand what needs to occur in order for members to have many, many more opportunities to regain their lives, their hopes, their aspirations.

We need more strong directors.