What Makes Clubhouse Communities True Clubhouse Communities?
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Over the years, the worldwide clubhouse community has placed increasing importance on the aspect of 'community' in the definition of what makes a clubhouse a clubhouse. We have recognized that the fact that clubhouses offer their members the opportunity to belong to a lifelong community is probably the thing that separates us the most from other community mental health programs and services.

But when we try to describe the specifics of what constitutes a clubhouse community, we can run into difficulties. There are so many different models of types of communities – both within the mental health world and in society in general -- and we seem to be unclear about exactly what a clubhouse community looks like – as distinct from other models of community.

This has become very obvious to me in the last few years, from reading certification reports that describe practices that are taking place in clubhouses that point up that the clubhouse world is really not united in our understanding of what 'community' means for us.

In the early days of Fountain House's history, the structure of the organization was very different than it is today. Fountain House began with a small group of ex-patients who formed an organization called WANA – we are not alone. As this small club grew, they began to evolve in a way that is typical of the way most organizations begin to grow. They got together and elected a hierarchy of officers, and spent a lot of time creating policies about how to make decisions about who could and who could not become a member of the new group.

But when John Beard was hired as the executive director, there was some serious friction about this issue for a while. Beard apparently had a different vision, a vision of a kind of almost utopian community that would be based on acceptance, inclusion, and appreciation of what each member had and could do, rather than a community with formal policies delineating who had greater power than someone else, and who was allowed to decide who could join, and what behaviors were or were not acceptable.

The WANA members were intent on having the power to vote on who they wanted or didn't want to be accepted as members. But Beard was so passionately opposed to this concept that he simply refused to allow it to continue.

The WANA organization, on this issue, reminds me a little of when I was a kid, and my older brother and a bunch of older boy cousins and their friends formed a club, called the Zorro Club. The 'clubhouse' was in the garage of our house, and when they were in there they always locked the doors. They had the words 'Zorro Club: Keep Out' posted on the garage door. I remember standing alone, on the outside, pounding my fists on that door, but they never let me in.

WANA and Zorro Club had an important ingredient in common: being an insider gave its members a sense of belonging and value, which was based largely on the fact that others couldn't have what they had.

This is about as far from the essence of what we now think of as a true clubhouse community as we could get. Instead, I think that Beard's vision of a thriving clubhouse community was based on the opposite belief: members gain a sense of belonging and value precisely because the clubhouse is so open and welcoming to anyone who has a history of mental illness and would like

to become a member. Clubhouses are so powerfully healing for members because clubhouse communities try as hard as they can to eliminate the lines between the people who are on the 'inside' and those on the 'outside.'

People with mental illness know all too intimately what it feels like to live life on the 'outside,' forever excluded from virtually every establishment they encounter. The clubhouse offers a radical gift to its members. Within the clubhouse community, members can stop pouring out their energies painfully pounding on that locked clubhouse garage door, and begin to actually live their lives.

I don't think we talk about this enough. In my opinion creating this kind of community is not optional, --it is a central mission of the clubhouse. Before members can begin to find meaning in work, or in friends, or in school, they have to experience the unconditional acceptance that is so basic to clubhouse membership.

The early pioneers and visionaries of the clubhouse movement, including John Beard and Rudyard Propst, had what might be called an obsession with forming a clubhouse community that would be based on radical equality. I believe that to create and sustain a restorative community, a clubhouse needs to be vigilant about this equality. We need to work daily to make it our reality. In reading certification reports, I have become aware of several recent trends among clubhouses somehow seem to lose track of this mission.

For example, the ways that people become members of clubhouses. With more and more frequency, I read certification reports that describe processes that 'draw lines' between the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders,' similar to the WANA idea of having the membership vote on any new applications. In these intake/orientation practices, there is a subtle, but powerful message to the perspective member that we belong here, and you do not. It will be up to us to decide if you measure up to our standards or you don't, and it your job to prove yourself to us.

Many clubhouses have an orientation period that serves not only for the perspective member to get oriented to the clubhouse, but also for the clubhouse to 'check out' the person, and see if he or she will 'fit in' with the community. At the end of the process, the clubhouse, or part of it, has some kind of meeting in which a decision is made about whether or not to accept the member. I realize that clubhouses that do this, for the most part, do it with the best of intentions.' However, underneath all of the good intentions and warm welcomes, perspective members engaged in these intake processes have to sense that, once again, they are outsiders who have to prove themselves to be good enough.

No matter how benign this practice may sound, I think it conveys a powerful message that is in direct contradiction to core clubhouse values. Not only does the perspective member have to experience the anxiety and belittlement that goes with being judged and assessed, this practice is also destructive to the rest of the fabric of the clubhouse community. It causes a subtle shift in how the community members begin to look at each other, and at themselves. It introduces the element of judgment and non-acceptance into the whole structure of the community.

Although it may give people a sense of power and value to be the ones to give the thumbs up or thumbs down decision about this perspective member, it also takes away from the secure, safe knowledge that people don't have to prove themselves to become, or remain, fully accepted members of this community. Once a community begins to pull apart in this way, it becomes more and more difficult to ever create the community of radical equality that our founders envisioned for us.

Another example that grows out of this concept of 'community' is the growing practice of having TE Selection Committees in the clubhouse, comprised of a group of clubhouse members and staff whose job it is to select members for placement on TE jobs. Now again, this sounds like a nice, democratic, empowering way to go about selecting members for TE openings. After all, it formally involves members in this important clubhouse role.

However, no matter how you look at it, this structure once again casts some members as the 'insiders' and others as the 'outsiders.' Again, in a different type of community, this form of decision making might be fine. In companies, and governments, and even churches, this might be a very effective way to decide who was going to get which responsibilities or projects. But in a clubhouse, it is destructive. It erodes the central pillars of support upon which the whole clubhouse structure is built. By casting some members as the ones who somehow have managed to earn the power and authority to make critical decisions over others, it automatically casts other members as the ones who are, once again, being judged and assessed as worthy enough, or not.

True, the clubhouse gains from having created a structure that engages members in an important clubhouse function. But the cost the clubhouse pays for this is way too high. Creating any kind of formalized system in the clubhouse that asks members to pass judgments upon one another eats away at the roots of one of the most fundamental values of the clubhouse community. The essence of what makes a clubhouse community a clubhouse community is that there is no longer a larger-than-life garage door that says "You: Keep Out." The clubhouse door, according to our Standards, says that we are all equally welcome here.

Clubhouse disciplinary committees also fall into this description. More and more, clubhouses are creating standing committees whose function it is to pass judgment upon members who are deemed to be a threat to the clubhouse community. Then, once the committee exists, it often takes it upon itself to exercise its authority by creating policies and manuals and rules about what behaviors are not acceptable, and what the appropriate consequences should be. Again, this rips at the fabric of the equality that is the central premise of a clubhouse community.

I find this practice to be particularly destructive, because I think it also introduces the expectation that people coming to a clubhouse will of course behave badly so the clubhouse must be prepared with a set of rules and punishments. It also assumes that everyone who exhibits a particular behavior, does it for the same reason and with the same intent, and should therefore deserve the same consequence.

It is clear, of course, that all of this raises an obvious and crucial question. If these decisions are not made by a committee of members and staff, who should they be made by? Staff? The Director? And of course, as is true about so much in clubhouse, there are no simplistic black and white answers.

However, developing committees of members and staff that have power to make decisions about other members, I think, is a recipe for creating a Zorro Club, and with it, for disempowering the rehabilitative magic of the clubhouse community.

Our Standards actually have a good deal to say on these issues:

The Standards tell us that "anyone with a mental illness" should be welcome in the clubhouse. So why do we need a policy of using orientations as chance to assess the new member? And if it turns out, for whatever reason, that a new or existing member is a threat to the safety of the

clubhouse community, then the staff and any members who were directly involved in discovering that should be the ones to deal with it, in the way that seems most appropriate to that member, and that clubhouse, at that time.

If this is not adequate for the situation, our Standards also tell us that the clubhouse Director has the bottom line responsibility for the operation of the clubhouse. Clubhouse Directors have the responsibility, and the mandate, to protect the community from divisiveness. Sometimes clubhouse Directors must simply take up that bottom line responsibility and work to resolve an issue as simply and fairly and quickly as possible. Sometimes this kind of action will be unpopular, but the Director has to know when to be a skillful consensus builder and when to simply make a decision that is essential to the life and health of the overall clubhouse community. It is why we have clubhouse directors, who are entrusted to lead and to exercise good judgment and skill in that leadership.

Again, our Standards tell us that the desire to work is the single most important factor in determining TE placements. So why do we need to have elaborate systems in place, giving power to some members over other members? If all staff do truly function as placement managers, than they will be closely involved with members in their units and have a good idea of who wants a job. Selection can simply be an informal process that includes placement managers, members who may have been on that placement and therefore have a good idea of its expectations, and of course the member who is interested in the job. But why set up clumsy systems that create formalized distinctions between the members with the power from those who are being judged and assessed?

Again, our Standards tell us that the "work-ordered day engages members and staff together, side-by-side" in the work of the clubhouse. This is the heart of what we do. We have to consider the possibility that focusing on all of these committees, and their organization and power structures, can be used as an easy alternative to the much more difficult task of offering a day full of opportunities that engage members and staff together in important and meaningful work.

We describe clubhouse communities as places where members can access a broad range of opportunities that will help them move on with their lives. However, if the structure of the community itself is not built upon the core values that John Beard fought so passionately for -- inclusion, acceptance, non-judgment, and equality -- then members will not be prepared to make use of those many wonderful opportunities. The embrace that the member experiences, of the uniquely accepting clubhouse community, is the key to successfully making use of all of these wonderful opportunities. Without having known that embrace, members can only approach the clubhouse opportunities for work, education, housing, and friends from the old, familiar stance of a disregarded and devalued 'outsider.'

It is up to us, as clubhouse people, to build communities that invite, welcome, and heal, and not clubhouses that assess, judge, and exclude. If we fail to do that, none of the opportunities we offer, offer any real opportunities at all.