



CALIFORNIA NETWORK OF MENTAL HEALTH CLIENTS

2012 - 19th Street, Suite 100, Sacramento, California 95818

Voice: (916) 443-3232 ■ (800) 626-7447 ■ Fax: (916) 443-4089

E-mail: main@californiaclients.org ■ Web: www.californiaclients.org

LEADERSHIP AMONG MENTAL HEALTH CLIENTS

by Shelley Spear, PhD., and Bob Quinn, Field Coordinator, CNMHC

Introduction

The process of developing leadership among mental health clients is critical in order to forward the emergence of strong, positive, ethical leaders in organizations and groups of all kinds, including those that represent and advocate for mental health clients. Through group training programs and self-directed study, individuals can be provided with a wide array of resources to help them achieve their leadership goals. While a number of resources focus on competitive leadership or leader-centered processes, others promote a more collaborative community in which leaders share their authority and roles with others in their groups. Collaborative leadership is better suited to the promotion of the following goal for mental health organizations and individual clients, as it is specified by the California Network of Mental Health Clients:

Overarching all of [CNMHC's] principles is the need for our involvement in all decision-making of the mental health system as it directly affects our lives, on every level of policy making and program monitoring.

Most clients who have a desire to assist others can become leaders, especially when they receive training and opportunities in leadership experience. Many opportunities for leadership development exist, and a client who is thoroughly prepared to take an active role in the process can step up and be recognized. On the topic of leadership, one client wrote, "Leadership of a client group involves persuading others to follow you to accomplish a mutual goal. It also involves making sure, through competent direction, the group engages in a sound process to achieve their goals."¹ Strong leaders are able to state clearly the values, objectives, and beliefs that members of the group share. Some leaders may emerge through their desire to achieve certain goals that are not being successfully dealt with by others. These individuals may want to begin new groups, or they may want to reform

¹ Names and identifying information of clients who made written or oral statements for this paper have been omitted to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

existing groups. Other leaders may emerge as they see roles for themselves in promoting existing goals and the groups or organizations that support those goals. This paper is intended for both of those audiences. It discusses definitions and descriptions of leadership, the role of supporters, qualities and abilities of leaders, responsibilities of leaders, and challenges leaders face. It also proposes a number of issues and questions that might be pursued in an expanded discussion of leadership. The paper ends with an appendix that names trainings and resources recommended by members of the California Network of Mental Health Clients, and another that lists client-run groups and organizations in California. The second appendix may be used to assist potential client leaders in finding a group or organization to participate in.

Definition and Description of Leadership

Leadership comes in many forms, everything from Thomas Jefferson's ideal of representative democracy to Gandhi's passive resistance to Mother Theresa's humble style of leadership by example. These leaders had individual visions and divined or created shared goals among members of a group. Each pursued those goals with highly focused intensity. The three individuals above were highly charismatic people and have been called "natural-born leaders." While it is accurate to say that many individuals are born with attractive personalities and leadership talent, clients who do not consider themselves to be charismatic can also become leaders when they acquire needed training and experience. A would-be leader must be willing and prepared to do the groundwork necessary to be knowledgeable about the issues and personalities s/he will deal with.

Leadership has been defined in an enormous number of ways. One simple and useful definition (Yukl, 1994)² says: "Leadership is the ability of one person to influence a group of persons toward the achievement of common goals." In a collaborative leadership model, sometimes referred to as transformational leadership, the leader must be sensitive to the needs and wishes of supporters. This inclusiveness has the potential to inspire and motivate them. Collaborative leaders also ensure that supporters believe that they and their activities are highly valued. Two strategies for demonstrating this value are ensuring that all interested supporters are part of at least some of the organization's decision-making processes and by publicizing the contributions of individual supporters. While genuine collaboration is central to empowering clients in the mental health community,³ few leadership styles are

² Yukl, G. A. (2005). *Leadership in organizations*. 6th Edition. New York: Prentice Hall. This book provides a review of theories and research involving leadership in organizations. It also presents practical information about developing leadership skills.

³ A formative and well established definition of leadership comes from S. Lundstedt (1975): "[T]he ability to influence the behavior of others in a group or organization." He specifically discusses the means by which individual leaders support the goals of the group and develop processes to achieve those goals. Lundstedt, S.B. Essay on leadership. *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 5, 611-613. Sep. - Oct., 1975.

purely collaborative. Practically speaking, most organizations and groups must combine authoritative and collaborative models of leadership. In the most successful organizations a leader gives group members power and momentum by organizing and directing them.

Leadership can be seen as a combination of art and science. Currently, most theorists identify effective leadership as the result of quality training and relevant experience, but many have examined the personality traits of leaders. One client explained how training and experience can be connected: "Once an individual is chosen to be a leader in some small capacity, he or she begins to develop the experience of leadership and to demonstrate more pronounced leadership qualities. Thus the leadership process can be self-perpetuating. One lesson to learn from this is that if you want to be a leader, don't be afraid to start small and build from there." Events often bring leaders to the fore, but more often consistently hard-working and dedicated individuals acquire the recognition and respect of others, which promotes the instatement of these individuals in leadership positions. One client laments, "Too often able consumers stand up and speak out, but if they don't immediately get the results they want, they fade away." Without practice, drive, enthusiasm, persistence, and experience, leadership ability can be unlikely to develop.

The process of becoming a leader is also variable. While, ideally, new leaders would be trained before taking on their positions, these individuals often need to take on their roles before they have the benefit of training. In such cases, most learning takes place on the job, and supporters and others affiliated with the group or organization must support a leader-in-training and allow for some of the mistakes that arise out of inexperience. At the same time, beginning leaders must work and study to improve their natural skills and to increase their knowledge base and understanding of important issues.

Once an individual agrees to become the leader of the group, s/he must be willing to reflect the beliefs and values that members of the group share. While a leader may use an unorthodox style or advocate unfamiliar strategies, s/he should not assume that her individual beliefs and values are characteristic of the group as a whole. A transformational or collaborative leadership model requires leaders to avoid imposing their beliefs and values on others. Instead, they must make sure they clearly understand and represent the group's consensus.

Leadership Qualities and Abilities

Those clients who are considering becoming leaders should understand the qualities and abilities leadership will require. Leadership does not have to focus primarily on wielding the power of a position and driving others to accomplish the group's goals. Collaborative leaders encourage others to work toward goals because they are internally committed—they are self-driven by their belief in the organization or group's ability to make needed changes and provide necessary services and supports. Helping others become internally motivated is a difficult but achievable task. It requires the leader to have a strong sense of purpose and belief in the organization and those involved with it and to communicate that purpose and belief.

In addition, a required characteristic of a strong leader is sound judgment. Leaders must be able to assess circumstances, consider the positive and negative consequences, and possible unintended consequences of a decision, and then vigorously point others toward the chosen direction. Sometimes leaders have little time to make a decision. In these instances, leaders must fall back on their instincts, developed over the course of their experiences. A client commented, "Spontaneity and an ability to roll with the punches is an important quality for sustained leadership."

Another quality the leader must employ is the ability to organize a group's responsibilities and work. Successful leaders are seldom capable of carrying out all necessary actions and in truth should not be the one doing the carrying out. Many people's talents and experiences are necessary for an organization's success. Leaders should be aware of and clearly admit this fact. Instead of doing all the work, a strong leader recognizes the skills and talents of everyone in the group and calls on each individual to employ his or her specific abilities. It is important to recognize that supporters are happiest when they are able to engage in and complete work they enjoy.

Being a leader is not about the recognition and prestige it brings; rather, it is about reaping the rewards that come from finding a purpose for oneself and others. It is about standing up and speaking out for something one believes in. And it is about integrity, honesty, and hard work toward a shared goal. A client explains, in relation to the particular environment of the mental health community, "One of the qualities I keep coming back to is fearlessness, gumption, or courage, because the client is going up against people with paper validation, positions of power, and the ability to support or cut the client loose." Clients who want to become leaders should develop a considerable knowledge base about mental health entities and services and about how organizations or groups work. The knowledge and expertise a client leader possesses must be clearly visible to others within and outside of the organization or group.

Responsibilities of Leaders

The central responsibility of a leader is to represent the consensus of the group or organization. Through mission and vision statements the group consensus is already likely to be spelled out. If the organization or group does not have mission and vision statements, the leader should make their development a number one priority.⁴ While some wisdom and direction will percolate upward from the grassroots of an organization, some guidance will also need to come from the top down. As long as supporters feel that their voices are heard and respected, they are likely to welcome this kind of direction from the organization's leadership.

Following are several responsibilities of leaders:

- ***Reflect the organization as a whole***
 - Comprehend the shared goals, values, and beliefs of the group and target population
 - Ensure that the organization or group has clear, up-to-date mission and vision statements
 - Represent the organization or group and articulate information about the organization or group to members of the larger community
- ***Direct programs and activities***
 - Develop and oversee programs and activities
 - Delegate responsibilities to others within the organization or group
 - Consult with experts and others inside and outside of the organization or group
 - Resolve conflicts and solve problems as they arise, sometimes by confronting difficult issues and people who obstruct the organization's progress
 - Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the organization or group's activities
- ***Support the organization's staff and board***
 - Provide encouragement, motivation, and support to staff members
 - Support the professional development of staff and encourage team building activities
 - Provide orientation and training for board members, especially with a working board
- ***Forge connections within the community***

⁴ There are many resources to help an organization and its leader in the development of mission and vision statements. One excellent "how to" guide appears at the following website:

<http://www.usaswimming.org/USASWeb/ViewMiscArticle.aspx?TabId=290&Alias=Rainbow&Lang=en&mid=63&ItemId=346>.

- Network and form alliances with like-minded organizations or groups and individuals to build consensus on shared issues of importance
- Recognize community members for contributions to the organization and its target population

Leaders also have the responsibility to understand themselves and how they affect and are affected by the organization or group. Developing self-awareness is a critical skill that leaders need to employ. A leader should ask him- or herself the following questions:

- How do you think others perceive you as a leader?
- Do others seem to be content to follow your lead?
- Are you happy with your leadership style?

By developing a deeper degree of self-awareness leaders will be able to build and maintain positive relationships and monitor the effectiveness of their activities. Consciously focusing on self-awareness helps a leader make sure he or she consistently acts in ways that support the organization or group.

A final responsibility of leaders is to promote and foster the development of other leaders within the group. Being aware of the talents an individual offers is one means of identifying potential leaders. In addition, established leaders, organizations, and supporters must be able to “weed out” potential leaders who have hidden agendas and may be destructive. Established leaders may want to dialogue with potential leaders about their aspirations, plans, questions, and problems. Established leaders should also help developing leaders through a process of mentoring, providing the individualized, specific information and resources an emergent leader needs. As the developing leader becomes more proficient s/he should be encouraged to become more self-sustaining and less dependent on others. One successful method is to build in redundancy in functions with assistants who learn the ropes by shadowing the leader.

Leadership Challenges

Fostering leadership in the California Network of Mental Health Clients, or in any individual client or organization for clients, can be challenging. One client jokingly but aptly remarked that the simple fact of being a mental health client is one of the greatest challenges. Leaders with serious mental health conditions must be able to look beyond their own needs and focus on the needs of others. If there are times when a leader feels symptomatic or ill, leadership may need to take a back seat to getting well. Leaders should foster within the organization the ability to accommodate the needs arising from support for all people with a serious mental health diagnosis. This

accommodation, to be effective, must be seen as an integral part of an authentic client-driven model of services and supports. In other words, accommodating members' and leaders' mental health needs is not above and beyond the duty of client organizations—it is critically important. Organizational policy about accommodation has to be congruent with actual behavior. A client explains, "There was a client who went to work for another client in mental health administration, and he was not allowed any accommodation for his mental issues. Eventually he was unable to continue and had to return to disability." All employers, including client-run organizations, need to support full access for persons with disabilities through reasonable accommodation and full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A second critical challenge to client leadership is the inevitable conflict that arises within organizations. All leaders should recognize that conflicts are a normal part of client groups and organizations. Resolving conflict successfully is one of the most important and intimidating tasks of a client leader. As Kenneth Bailey remarks, in "Brave Leadership in Organizational Conflict,"⁵

Conflict within a nonprofit organization can be scary. At their best, nonprofits put into collective practice the personal passions and beliefs of their members. ...[I]ntractable conflict can cause loss of funding or of leadership, or it may destabilize the system in any number of other ways. People within the organization or group know this and may react with fear, choosing sides or assigning blame.

The consequences of handling conflict poorly or failing to address it at all can be disastrous for an organization, so it is important to develop a strong knowledge base and the necessary skills to manage and resolve conflict effectively. Emerging leaders must understand the basic elements of conflict, conflict management strategies, and methods for applying strategies in specific situations.⁶ Conflict may also arise between a board of directors and an organization's leader. In such cases, the leader and the board must take immediate measures to unify their voices so that divisiveness and strain do not develop, and so that the organization does not come under the negative scrutiny of the community at large.⁷

⁵ Bailey, K. (2003). Brave leadership in organizational conflict: Managing the mosaic. *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 10:4.

⁶ Many trainings and other resources focus on the topic of conflict resolution, identifying kinds of conflicts and proposing strategies for dealing with them. Two selected resources follow: Daniel, D. *Conflict resolution*. (2001). New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc; and Ursiny, E. T. (2003). *The coward's guide to conflict: Empowering solutions for those who would rather run than fight*. Available at http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/1402200552/ref=sib_dp_pt#reader-link.

⁷ Resources for addressing board of director and leadership issues are also widely available. See, for instance, C. MacNamara's "Free Complete Toolkit for Boards," at <http://www.managementhelp.org/boards/boards.htm>.

Along with the challenges inherent in accommodating mental health conditions and those involved in managing conflict, other challenges must be addressed by client organizations and their leaders. These challenges include the following:

- A lack of adequate funding to support the development of client groups and their leaders
- The tendency of mental health systems, service providers, and policy makers to promote existing power structures in which client leaders may have little or no authority or voice
- Stigma within communities, systems and organizations and their opposition to bringing forward a culture in which many potential client leaders can stand up for their rights and the rights of others

Through client training and the ongoing placement of new clients in leadership positions, strong emerging leaders can find their voices and use them to promote effective and accessible mental health services and supports, and to retool the systems intended to benefit mental health clients.

The Critical Role of Supporters

By definition, not everyone can be a leader in every situation. There is a need to balance when to be a leader and when to support the leadership of others. Some people do not have the desire to lead, but their participation is still vitally important. Others who may desire to lead do not yet have the ability, and they can be defeated by the required responsibilities, study, work, and commitment. All clients, both those who are interested in leadership and those who are not, need to understand the dynamics between leaders and supporters. In this way the voices of supporters can contribute to charting the direction of an organization or group. Choosing to follow and support is admirable and important. Supporters in a collaborative leadership community have responsibility for providing advice, feedback, and evaluation. German sociologist Max Weber said, "Thus it is those who would follow, not those who lead, who are the ultimate power." The leader gives supporters within a group or organization needed direction by organizing and empowering them.

No leader can be successful without willing, committed supporters. A rejection or devaluation of leadership by supporters can jeopardize the success of an organization or group. One client asserted, "I've been in a group where the leader didn't listen to the rest of us, and after awhile we didn't listen to him either." Leaders must be willing to recognize, welcome, and pay attention to the contributions of supporters, and leadership training should include instruction about the qualities required of supporters, how to promote those qualities, and what happens when those qualities are not utilized by group members.

Future Directions for Leadership Exploration

Some questions involving mental health client leadership are not easily answered or do not readily elicit a consensus of opinion. Client organizations, and CNMHC in particular, may want to explore these questions in the future. Following are some questions and underlying issues that warrant further study:

- What kinds of authority do client leaders need to deal with the power of the mental health community and the crushing limitations of budget?
- To what degree do individual clients need to stand up and assume leadership and to what degree should existing organizations and leaders identify them?
- How can client organizations encourage leadership in clients who emerge and take a position because of a specific issue in which they are invested? Conversely, how can they redirect potential leaders who are focused on the wrong issues?
- In what ways can client leaders learn from and compete with leaders who come from privileged positions within academia, industry, and social service systems? And how can client leaders earn the same pay and respect as do their non-client counterparts?
- By what means can organizations encourage and support clients who rise to positions of leadership organically, that is, based on their determination and instincts rather than specific experience and training?
- In what ways can organizations deal with clients who put themselves forward to be leaders, but who are actually detractors?
- How can client organizations construct a practical leadership model that incorporates collaboration and downplays authoritarianism? Similarly, in what ways might leadership by groups of individuals become practical models?
- What strategies can organizations and their leaders use to avoid power struggles so that they have a unified voice?

Conclusion

In general, client leaders have emerged in response to the stigma, discrimination, and limitations that have been placed on their life opportunities. Client organizations or groups can assist in the development of leaders by articulating their needs and goals and by providing relevant training and information. Without strong leadership that addresses the needs of clients, promotes positive changes in the service system, encourages a recovery model, and presents a unified voice, client organizations and groups cannot move forward. One client stated, "Effective

leadership is essential if we're going to make changes. Most of the professionals who are in the field now have been trained in the traditional medical model. We need these people to understand and respect the recovery model." He continued, "It is important to tell people how empowering being a leader is. [Leadership gives you] something greater than yourself to get out of bed for." When leaders can motivate others to join forces to promote common goals, they can lead the way to a public mental health system and a world that affords opportunity and success to people with lived experience of mental health issues.

Appendix A: Recommended Leadership Resources

Training Program: "The West Virginia Leadership Academy." Information can be accessed at the following website: <http://wvla.wvmhca.org/>. The website asserts, "The WV Leadership Academy is a self-help program successfully adapted and implemented by the West Virginia Mental Health Consumers' Association (WVMHCA)." The academy is coordinated by Kathy Muscari. In recommending the program, a client remarked, "I previewed the curriculum and spoke with many of the graduates and participants. [I]t was very impressive and, based on that encounter and communications with the training team since then, I highly recommend this model."

Training Resource: "Nonviolent Communication." Located on the web at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonviolent_communication and <http://www.cnvc.org>. About this resource, a client explained, "I started getting involved when a local consumer activist started criticizing ... me" He continued, "I consider these skills essential for a leader who is interested in contributing to the welfare of the general population. For those who are interested in [a highly authoritarian] version of leadership, they will be irrelevant."

Training Program: "Being an Effective Client Liaison," presented by Michele Curran. This training involves a conversation about clients as business partners. It is intended to help move forward the vision of client groups. This training is free. Watch for availability on the California Network of Mental Health Client's listserv.

Training Program: "Finding Our Voice." The California Network of Mental Health Clients organizes and conducts this training in collaboration with the National Empowerment Center and self-help expert Dan Fisher, MD. It is focused on creating a recovery-based mental health system that is characterized by an increase in peer support services at all levels. Contact CNMHC at the following email address for information about future trainings: main@californiaclients.org.

See, also, the extensive resources of CNMHC's five regional centers, at the following website: <http://www.californiaclients.org/projects/regional.cfm>.

