

THE CHALLENGE

Imagine a typical scene. The paid staff are in the office, half way through a meeting to decide on the future of the service. Individuals are arguing their points with great energy and vitality, and the meeting is chaired by the boss, who keeps order and ensures that the sophisticated rules of committee procedure are upheld according to the ancient traditions. Meanwhile, the service users are sitting outside the office, quite unaware that their future is being debated, and powerless to affect that future.

This is a picture of waste. Firstly, a number of the service users sitting outside the office have highly developed skills in corporate decision making, and by ignoring their contribution, the decisions made in the office will be weaker and less relevant. Secondly, it is a waste because the decision making process offers a chance for growth. Some service users have never had the chance to develop their skills, or have found that the effects of institutionalisation have eroded their confidence and assertiveness. Given appropriate support and learning opportunities, people can make potent contributions to the service. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, service users have a right to be involved in the decisions which affect their lives and they are uniquely qualified to comment and advise on the development of services. Fourthly, two heads are better than one, and there is less pressure on the staff group when they are sharing responsibility. The empowerment movement within mental health has challenged the traditional picture and encouraged the gap between service providers and users to close by sharing information and decision making. This paper attempts to unpack the three distinct areas that require attention if users are to become full members of the process. These three areas are:

- Service users learning to participate,
- Service providers re-structuring their decision making machinery,
- Service managers widening the arena for decision making.

LEARNING TO PARTICIPATE

A common first step towards including service users in decision making is to offer a place on a committee. The place offered to those who are members of two groups - MENSA (the club for geniuses), and the users of psychiatric services. The difficulty is that many service users do not currently possess the skills required to survive in the average committee room. In order to offer training to those who feel a need for it and combat the effects of institutionalisation, some users have organised and undertaken seminars in speaking out, decision making and

committee skills. This gives service users a language and an understanding of the culture which permeates committee rooms and therefore an ability to operate in that environment. They learn the jargon of committees, of planning processes, of budgetary issues. Users learn when to speak and when to keep silent, when to offer personal statements, when to stay on the topic. They learn the most sophisticated skills of committee life, such as how to bluff when you have forgotten to bring your agenda, how to tolerate extremely lengthy meetings, how to look interested when the topic is incomprehensible, how to dodge taking minutes. When service users have learnt these skills, the committee is allowed to continue its deliberations in the usual way, but with a larger membership.

RE-STRUCTURING THE DECISION MAKING MACHINERY

Committee procedures are not set in concrete. The decision making procedures can be changed to accommodate the existing skills of service users if the staff are willing to give up their traditional approaches and begin to explore alternative ways of doing things. The problem is that there seem to be few ideas around about what to do, and any change is liable to result in a more time consuming and laborious operation, at least at first. Decision makers must consider whether it is worthwhile to give up the easy and efficient routines and learn a new language, new priorities, new behaviour, and new systems.

Philosophy

Committee meetings usually fail to provide space and time for feelings and emotions. This truncated view of participation and belonging says, "We want your ideas, but not your feelings. We want your view on ... but not your personal news." Many people in the user movement would challenge the underlying philosophy and model of the person and of relationships that is purveyed by this view, preferring instead a holistic approach that values the person in their entirety. Shifting traditional committee procedure into a new, participative practice will mean that personal stories and emotions will be on the agenda in as prominent a place as policy decisions. Committees are often populated by individuals who are very stressed and driven by the need to achieve. Again, some would challenge this way of life and relationship.

Trade Descriptions

Users who are invited to attend seminars or join committees are sometimes discouraged by the content and style of the meeting. Instead of gaining enthusiasm and interest, their motivation is diminished by the experience of a meeting which is inaccessible to them. Such negative experiences could be avoided by clearly describing the session. Simply to set aside a third of the places for users will not help the process of user empowerment. Some

individuals will wish to know if smoking is permitted during the meeting; how long before a break, whether papers or financial data are to be written or read; whether the content of the meeting is based on storytelling or abstract ideas; whether jargon will be used.

Speaking

Professionals can be unaware of how much jargon they use and difficulties they cause by failing to present their thoughts in a plain and direct manner. Should training be offered in this area? One service for people with learning difficulties employs staff to translate official documents out of bureaucratic language into plain English. Certainly the strengthening of the movement for user involvement ought to mean the demise of the acronyms!

Membership

The question of who should join the committee is always a difficult matter. Service providers are sometimes perceived as wise and powerful in contrast to service users, and their views and preferences will dominate the decision making process unless their influence is diluted. Service users should outnumber providers by at least two to one, and in many cases the balance should be even more strongly in favour of users. Power is also exercised at the place where the agenda is drawn up and by the chairperson. This is particularly true for members who had not had committee experience in the past. For example, if the lone staff member is also the chairperson then some clients will identify the event with a therapy group rather than a committee. It is important to be clear whether people are representatives or delegates as this affects the freedom of the person and their responsibility.

Agenda

Traditional committees often deal with a dozen or more separate items at one sitting and require members to stay put in the same room for a long time, sustain concentration, and have an ability to move from one topic to the next and stay with each item until it is completed. When the next topic is introduced members must leave the old topic behind and not slide back into discussing it again. Many people do not have these skills, and so it would be more appropriate to deal with no more than one or two topics at a sitting, and ensure that the meeting does not go on longer than half an hour. This means that frequent short meetings are often preferable to infrequent long meetings.

Chair

The roles of chairperson and secretary are under threat also. In some projects two people sit together and carry out each function, so that each person is supported and newcomers can learn the ropes. The chairperson's role may include making a

cup of tea and ensuring that each person is valued, perhaps by translating one person's contribution so that it is understood by the rest of the group. Decisions will take longer, especially if the group are determined to seek a consensus rather than a majority view. In any event, there will be a great deal of time spent in helping every member of the group find and express their view.

Demonstrations

Practical examples will help where the topic under discussion is abstract and vague. If the group are discussing a budget of £100 and deciding how it should be spent, they may find the discussion easier to follow if there is a pile of ten £10 notes in the middle of the committee table. The cash can then be allocated to various items and the balance pointed to, rather than assuming that everyone can add up and work out which sum is being referred to at any time.

Voting

Decisions are difficult to achieve at the best of times. A group member may feel dominated - either because there are others in the group who are overbearing, or because that person has misinterpreted the intentions of other members of the group and feels obliged to try to please. It may be necessary to set up a secret ballot, or to interview each member separately outside the meeting in order to establish their views, rather than simply asking for any dissenting voice. It may be necessary to invite guests into the meeting to act as advocates for one or more of the members, or for some members of the group to assist others in speaking out.

Papers

The Paperwork associated with meetings excludes people with literacy problems. Minutes can be recorded on to audio cassette and replayed before the next meeting, so that anyone with a visual impairment or with reading difficulties can be fully informed. During the meeting, notes can be made on flip chart paper using key words or symbols. Everyone will be able to see the things that have been agreed as the meeting progresses, and decisions can be dictated on to tape as they are made or before the meeting disbands.

WIDENING THE ARENA

The third area where development work must be undertaken concerns the arena in which decisions may be taken. Funding authorities, senior management, external agencies and other groups may exert powerful influences upon the project, limiting the staff and users of the service to detailed and fixed rules, so preventing freedom and development. In large organisations these rules are often generated in response to a single difficulty. The solution to the difficulty then becomes enshrined in a policy

which is applied to all settings for all time. Some years ago, perhaps, petty thieving caused anxiety and the response was to make a rule saying that all fridges or radios must be padlocked. Service users are then prevented from taking responsibility for the environment by the rules of the organisation.

Risk

A second area where development is indicated concerns the element risk. Many policies are designed to minimise risk by removing the potentially dangerous operation rather than teaching safe practices. We ban matches rather than teach fire safety and take out fire insurance. A risk policy will enable junior staff to feel secure in offering service users real opportunities under agreed conditions, rather than restricting opportunity because of their fear of scapegoating by management should anything go wrong. Where junior staff are fearful of their bosses, the bosses are often fearful of the law. Service users are excluded from recruitment because of the fear of breaches in confidentiality or equal opportunities; buildings must be staffed at all times in case of accident and public inquiry; buildings maintenance must only be carried out by qualified personnel to ringfence jobs; budgets may not be handled by service users because the Audit Department fears lack of accountability.

Tasks for Managers

Service managers could dismantle old and irrelevant regulations, encourage customised policies designed around the particular service to which they apply, face hazards by proper risk policies and insurance, and develop imaginative new procedures which achieve the dual goals of involving service users and satisfying formal requirements.

A number of areas invite development of new policies. Large organisations often remain secretive with communication, and unclear about who is responsible for what and this prevents anyone managing effectively, especially service users. Where junior staff feel unsure, uninformed and unsupported, then they will be less likely to share decision making with users. This is particularly important as it is the junior staff who have the largest contact with users and so they will have the largest effect upon the culture "at the coal face". Budget handling and the devolution of financial decision making can give a real sense of involvement and participation, if procedures are secure and easy to understand (poor structures in this area will fail to provide protection for cash handlers and will exclude people who lack a degree in Accountancy). Open recording practices provoke questions about who confidential records belong to, and the common use of clerical space undermines the traditional notion of the staff office. The recruitment and selection of staff has a

powerful symbolic importance and procedures can be designed to involve service users in every step of the process. Clear and adequate insurance arrangements for the project clears much of the undergrowth and makes space for real development. Buildings occupancy, key holding, and maintenance arrangements make statements about ownership and power in the environment.

All these areas are powerful in their own right, and also make statements about the place of service users in the system. If users are involved in interviews, but only in the informal "trial by sherry" and not on the appointment panel, and if the limit of their decision making is the destination of the summer coach outing, then user involvement will be no more than tokenism. Thorough and responsible policies and working practices which fully involve users can be drafted - it simply takes some courage and lots of work!

CONCLUSION

There is much work to be done. A number of projects around the country are working in areas one, two or three outlined above. The innovations made and the lessons learnt in one organisation may be valuable to others who are journeying on the same road. Perhaps a communication network could be established...

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Paper presented at the second of our workshops.