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Abstract

"One of the most promising roles which people with disabilities can assume is that of a self advocate member of an agency's board of directors." This article describes the two activities which are important when people with disabilities assume board membership status - the strategies of regular board members and the structured activities of the self advocated themselves. Both activities represent necessary conditions and productive use of, consumer board members. **Keyword: Advocacy**

Self advocates as board members: Guidelines and strategies for implementation by human service organisations

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In recent years, people with disabilities have become increasingly more visible as participating citizens in their communities. One of the most promising roles which people with disabilities can assume is that of a self advocate member of an agency's board of directors. In an attempt to promote the integration and empowerment of people with disabilities, an increasing number of human service organisations are attempting to include self advocates on their boards.

The inclusion of self advocates as board members creates benefits for the human service organisation, as well as for the self advocates who serve. People with disabilities who serve as board members engage in activities of self expression, see that they can contribute to others' lives and learn how to work toward the accomplishment of goals which extend far beyond one's personal needs. At the same time, self advocate board members can provide the organisation with a set of personal perspectives which may otherwise not be available to the board. Including self advocates as board members emphasises an organisation's commitment to community integration and to the inherent value of individuals with disabilities as spokespersons and stakeholders. The fact that an organisation's board of directors is, itself, integrated helps create a deep and abiding respect for the missions at hand. The presence of self advocate board members reinforces the use of their feedback in evaluation, decision-making and policy development.

Self advocate participation on an organisation's board will be more likely to realise the inherent benefits when several conditions are met:

1. Self advocate board members are recruited and elected following the same procedure used to recruit and elect other board members. This will

ensure the identification of self advocates with experience and maturity to represent their peers.

2. Self advocate board members are accorded the same rights and responsibilities as other board members. Their terms of service and voting privileges should be identical to those of other board members.

Unless these conditions are met, an organisation may be subject to accusations of "tokenism", or be burdened with unproductive self advocate board members.

Since most boards are faced with the requirement to change board membership periodically, organisations that support self advocate board participation will need to ensure that there are motivated consumers who may be recruited, appointed and supported in their endeavours as board members. Support for independent self advocacy groups, such as People First, or the development of a "self advocates' congress" within a human service organisation (such as TASH) are possible ways to ensure the availability of a pool of potential board members.

Two types of activity are important when people with disabilities assume board membership status. One involves strategies of regular board members, while the second involves structured activities of self advocates themselves. Both types of activity represent necessary conditions for the effective participation by, and productive use of, consumer board members. These types of activity are briefly discussed below.

Each board member brings his or her own history and experiences to the board. An individual with a disability brings a particular perspective which may be quite different from that of other board members. It is important that other board members ask

themselves, "How can I help this person become more effective?" The more effective each board member is, the more productive and cohesive the whole board will be. Fortunately, there are many ways to help a new - or existing - board member to be effective in his or her new role.

- Greet each person at the door when they come to the board meeting. Be friendly and let him or her know you are glad he or she came. Be prepared for each person's communication style (e.g., sign language, symbol system, communication board, gestures).
- Make introductions at each board meeting.
- Contact the self advocate board member regularly between board meetings.
- Arrange the meeting room so that members can see each other.
- Arrange seating so that a self advocate board member sits with his or her support person.
- Be sure everyone has the chance to speak.
- Prompt each board member to participate actively.
- Send meeting minutes and/or information packets to a new self advocate board member well in advance of each board meeting. Ensure that he or she has assistance in preparing for the meeting.
- Be patient if it takes a new self advocate board member time to express his or her thoughts. Do not try to finish their sentences or communicate for them without asking first if they want help.
- Speak or communicate in simple, intelligible language.

Recruiting and selecting a self advocate board member, like all other board recruitment, is a complex process. Many people with disabilities may not have experience with democratic processes or opportunities for self-representation. As a

result, a person with a disability may very well require basic and ongoing support to help him or her perform effectively. This instructional and collegial support can be provided using these strategies:

- Identify an existing organisation board member to guide the new member through his or her initiation to the board.
- Identify an existing set of materials (written, audio/visual) and a set of occasions (public board and/or committee meetings) which would allow the consumer to become acquainted with a board at work.
- Provide information, materials and experiences which allow a consumer board member to learn what happens at a board meeting, e.g., following an agenda, discussing and voting on issues and reviewing committee reports.
- Help a self advocate - who is a potential board member - to learn why there is a board of directors, why he or she should join a board and specifically identify his or her own reasons for wanting to join a board.
- Help a self advocate who has joined a board of directors identify his or her own strengths and identify areas of expertise which would contribute to the board's efforts.
- Assist a self advocate member to develop at least one goal that he or she believes is important to work on while on the board.
- Allow a self advocate to discuss ideas before group meetings to identify appropriate board issues.
- Help a self advocate member learn to evaluate his or her own performance. Self-evaluation and self-reinforcement skills are invaluable to everyone.

Realising the full benefits of self advocate board representation will require both initial procedural changes and ongoing modifications in the behaviour of each human service organisation/agency board member.