



LISTENING TO VOICES

I've been hearing voices recently. As a family therapist working in mental health programs, I've long heard stories about the voices that other people hear. However, since these voices have been speaking to me, I've made a point of paying attention to this experience and this is some of what I've learned so far. I've discovered that the less attention I give to the voices, the more insistent they become, even to the point of wreaking havoc in my environment when ignored. On the other hand, if I listen to the voices and make a good faith effort to do what they suggest, my daily life is much more productive and peaceful. Sometimes the voices are critical of me and tell me I must change; other times the voices offer words of praise, and sometimes the voices ask for my opinion. I've found it very helpful to talk about my experiences and I've begun to find that there are other people who are hearing these same voices.

Before you begin to worry about the status of my mental health, let me explain to you that the "voices" I am hearing belong to the young consumers who are being served by the mental health programs in which I work. I have been involved in the development of "Teen Advisory Boards" or "Youth Leadership Councils" in a variety of settings over the last four years, and have found this to be the most exciting and gratifying work of my career.

It seems to me that teenagers in general, but especially teenagers in treatment, are routinely excluded from the new table of empowerment. When asking about youth representation in a variety of settings, I routinely hear comments like: "They wouldn't understand what we're doing . . . They'd be bored/disruptive/overwhelmed/ intimidated." Other exclusionary remarks have been couched in therapeutic terms: "They'd get the wrong idea about how much power they have . . . They would be frustrated when they couldn't have their way . . . They would only focus on negatives . . . They would try to undermine the authority of the staff." We would consider it politically incorrect to exclude any other minority group from self-representation on the basis of these "explanations," yet we routinely exclude teenagers with such remarks. After years of experience with advisory boards, I can safely say that *these concerns are*

not any more true of teenagers than they are of adult board members!

By listening to the comments of young people, we have developed an approach to empowerment which we call "Advocacy Voice Lessons." Our "Voice Lessons" consist of four steps:

- 1) Learning to read the music
- 2) Rhythm
- 3) Voice control
- 4) Practice

Learning to read the music refers to teaching youngsters the specific skills of Board membership/committee representation/ group spokesperson, etc. To serve on a Board, one must be familiar with what an "Agenda" is, what the "minutes" are, basic parliamentary procedure of taking action through motions, etc. Each role that we are asking young people to play has these specific sets of skills and expectations, which can be taught as they prepare for their new role.

Rhythm is the step where the young advocate learns about the "system." In a treatment program, it would be important to delineate which staff member is responsible for which areas, where to find policies and procedures, and the process for making changes. Understanding this bigger picture of how a program/organization/ group "rocks along" is a key step in learning how to have an impact.

Voice control lessons in advocacy consist of educating youngsters on several levels. It is important that they understand the tools available to them: inviting decision-makers to Board/committee meetings, sending a representative to meet with the decision maker, drafting a letter to a decision maker, developing a petition regarding requested changes, etc. It is equally important that young advocates learn how to control their voices (both literally and figuratively): issues and requests should be respectfully presented, and personal issues should be handled individually. Being an advocate means learning to speak for the group rather than focusing on one's own specific problem.

Practice is the final step in empowering young advocates. It is imperative that adult liaisons give supportive, direct feedback about the youth's efforts. Being given multiple opportunities to "try out" new skills is critical. It is also *imperative* that adults who are dealing with newly empowered young advocates begin to practice a new style of listening in order to hear these voices.

What do we gain by listening to the voices of the young people we are serving in our programs? As program administrators, we gain valuable partners in developing creative solutions to programmatic problems. Our Board is currently focusing on the area of spiritual enrichment. They are looking at ways of including very diverse religious perspectives and practices in our campus spiritual programs.

We also gain time as our consumer partners can often save us the trouble of implementing a change only to find that it doesn't work. As we seek ways of doing our work faster and better in response to our customer's demands, we want to increase the likelihood that our program "improvements" will actually improve the program.

Most importantly, we gain a direct communication line to and from our consumers, which helps to minimize problems of miscommunication. Recently in our residential program we ended the lunchtime availability of carbonated beverages. Fortunately we had discussed the proposed change with our Teen Board, explaining that we would need to comply with some Federal guidelines in order to receive funding

for our meal program. One option considered by the Teen Board was to reject the Federal funding in favor of serving sodas for lunch. The Board looked at the impact on this food budget loss would have and concluded that sodas at lunch were not so important. The Board members then interpreted this change to their peers, assuring them that their concerns had been heard, but the decision to eliminate lunchtime sodas would mean better meal choices overall. The change was implemented without difficulty.

As clinicians, we gain a new perspective on our young clients, and on our own actions. We know that people behave differently in accordance with the expectations of others, and many clinicians have been delighted to see their toughest young clients taking minutes of a meeting, exercising leadership as an officer, or calmly giving input about an issue. We also begin to see ourselves through the eyes of our clients and to learn about the many unanticipated consequences of our actions. *An important shift occurs when we begin to work with our clients as partners in their treatment, instead of working on them.*

As child advocates, empowering our young clients is an effective method for insuring ownership in the program and that all voices, child and adult, can be heard.

Cheri Villines, *Development Director for the Devereux Georgia Treatment Network.*

Building a Bridge for Youth Involvement

Martan Mendenhall currently serves as a board member for the Bridge Builders Project, a family advocacy organization located in Clark County, Washington. The Bridge Builders Project, with a mission of “Empowering Families with Voice, Access and Ownership,” has a board composed of local community members, including family and consumers of mental health services. The first youth ever to hold such a position, Martan brings both his perspective as a youth and his experiences as a consumer of mental health services to the project.

Martan was asked to be a member of the board by a friend. While he admits feeling intimidated to speak up at earlier board meetings, he soon realized, “the adults around the table wanted to hear what I had to say and encouraged me to contribute my thoughts and ideas. By believing in what the board was doing and feeling their support I become a very active member.”

As the youth representative he advocated for Bridge Builders to sponsor more youth centered activities. These discussions resulted in the development of an annual Children’s Pow Wow, a space where children and youth can speak openly about the issues of which they are concerned. Additionally, he has been instrumental in organizing more activities for families to participate in, especially around the holidays. Ultimately, Martin feels his contributions have helped “the board get a better feel for the needs of the children and youth the Bridge Builders Project serves.”

As a board member, Martan has acquired an array of skills. For example, “I have learned a lot about how to run an agency and gained many communication skills, especially feeling comfortable talking in a group.” Martan also feels he has learned patience and how to better manage his anger. He says he has realized the importance of having an open mind and hearing other’s ideas with which he may not totally agree. As a result of all these efforts on both his part and the board, his ability to work with other people whose opinions and ideas may differ, has increased dramatically. Lastly, Martan says the board has become like “a big family to me; they are there to help me when I really need it.” He is proud of the fact that, in his role as board member, he also serves as a mentor to other children and youth who reach out to him in need.

The promotion of youth involvement and youth leadership within agencies such as Bridge Builders supports many different goals. For the youth involved it inspires a sense of self-efficacy as they see their efforts manifest in real change that benefits themselves and others. For the adults involved it affords the opportunity to learn firsthand what youth feel they need and the best means by which they should be served. In a model of adult-youth collaboration, youth lose their primacy as the object of the services and gain a voice as a partner in youth and family centered services.