

CASE EXAMPLE 2:

FROM CLIENT ADVISORS TO CLIENTS AS LEADERS

BACKGROUND

Client engagement is nothing new at Bread for the City. A recent internal report outlines more than 30 projects in which clients are active in more ways than just receiving services. To name a few examples: Bread's clients regularly facilitate cooking workshops, lead wellness classes, plant gardens, testify at city commissions, and attend coalition meetings. Some might consider these acts of "giving back" a natural outcome for the thousands of clients who come to this \$8-million multi-service agency in Washington DC. CEO George Jones sees it differently, "Our mission is to alleviate the suffering caused by poverty and to rectify the conditions that perpetuate it. Engaging our clients is the pivotal piece that will make meaningful impact on this mission." In the past few years, George has pushed this vision of deliberate client engagement and leadership building within Bread for the City. This case study highlights one example, the Client Advisory Board (CAB), and discusses ongoing challenges and concerns as Bread implements this strategy.

HOW IT WORKS

The Client Advisory Board was originally founded in 2009 as a training ground for clients to join Bread's board of directors and as a space for clients to give feedback to Bread independent of the board. Since then, the CAB has moved beyond its original vision but remains one of the few spaces at Bread that is composed of clients from a diversity of programs with an explicit intention to build client leadership.

Staff recruited clients from different programs to join the CAB, which consisted of about 20 members. As an indication of his commitment to the CAB, George attended all the meetings. When he was on sabbatical leave, another executive would join the meeting in his place. After Joni Podshun was hired as the first

staff member of the budding Client Engagement and Advocacy department, she increased the capacity of the CAB and supported its processes through facilitation, agenda preparation, and meeting reminders. Joni recalls the difficulties, "Many people when they first joined the CAB really had developed survival tactics for themselves that were about aggressively promoting their ideas or perspectives. CAB members developed an agreement that the CAB is an open process for any client to learn about the opportunities that they have at Bread and the resources at their disposal. That was a really big deal for people that this wasn't just about their project, but about something bigger." To strengthen group dynamics, the CAB developed ground rules and community agreements that would guide the group in working together.

BEFORE:

Clients who wish to be involved participate in individual program opportunities.

5% SHIFT:

A Client advisory board was formed to bring together clients from different programs.

IMPACTS:

A client-centered structure has helped clients to share and build new skills and to transform their individual voice into a collective force.

CAB's ability to work together immensely strengthened through a six-month-long Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in partnership with researchers and students from George Mason University in nearby Fairfax, Virginia. The research team, composed of 18 CAB members and a few other clients, came together through a recruitment process and decided to explore current and ideal client engagement at Bread. The team discussed research methods and agreed upon an appropriate community research process. They conducted more than 60 interviews with clients, staff, and board members, culminating in a team presentation to more than 200 people at both of Bread's service sites.

The CAB is still in the process of figuring out what exactly their roles should be within Bread. George has some ideas, "I think they should be a space to hold Bread accountable — a real facilitator for community engagement/empowerment." As a result of the research project, the CAB is now split into different committees to begin working on recommended projects. In the meantime, the CAB is leading an effort to organize a large client town hall that will engage clients on Bread's and CAB's current progress and direction.

RESPONSE & IMPACTS

The Client Advisory Board has become a community space for clients to access resources beyond the immediate services that Bread offers. Concretely, CAB members have used their experience and skills gained from serving on the board and participating in the research project to get jobs.

The CAB is a training ground for leadership where new projects are nurtured and developed. Through the support of Advocacy staff, one person even received a grant from City funds to lead garden clubs in his neighborhood. Another long-time client and CAB

member, is leading the development of a time-banking project that builds on existing strengths and assets in the Bread community. The project would encourage clients to contribute their skills and time to Bread, and in return receive other goods and services from staff and other clients.

Ultimately, leadership building is about providing the opportunity for human dignity and respect. The CAB empowers individuals to have a voice — not only to have one's ideas heard and implemented, but to transform that individual voice into a collective voice. The CAB provides a forum for working together to collaborate with others toward a common goal. It has been a space where people can feel their own power beyond themselves. George comments on the transformation that he has observed, "It is the commitment and dedication they have to CAB. At the end of the day, it's not just about them, but about creating something new for this community in terms of work."

An immediate impact of clients becoming more involved is that the relationship between clients and staff may

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Ensure that staff has multiple opportunities to share and discuss the impacts of increased client engagement.
- Create an opportunity for clients to develop voice as individuals and as a collective.
- Think of client engagement as a tool for building leadership beyond the organization.

be forced to change. Clients, who before were just coming in and leaving, are now staying longer to access the resources that CAB and Bread have. They have more ownership of the space, which has not always been embraced by staff. George explains, "I've got people at Bread who have been here for 20 years, who dedicate their lives to serving community folks and the community. There was an assumption that they would be completely flexible around this idea of sharing the power with this group. It doesn't play itself out that way so easily. There's a kind of discomfort that surfaces almost immediately around roles and boundaries." George is addressing these concerns by providing opportunities for staff to learn together and to discuss how these changes will affect them. In the past 6 months, all of Bread's staff has completed the Undoing Racism workshop by New Orleans group People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. George is setting aside time for all staff to come together to discuss what they have learned and how the trainings will be applied to Bread's work. In May 2013, staff again came together to discuss how client engagement and advocacy priorities in Bread's strategic plan will be operationalized within Bread.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

What informal or formal structures are in place to support clients working together?

If clients were more active in advising your organization, what would be some benefits for you or your organization? What shifts around roles and boundaries might you anticipate?

What knowledge, skills, or abilities might you (or your organization) need to develop to support this shift in roles and boundaries?