The Key Ingredients Of Optimal Partnerships Between Service Users And Families And Their Possible Human Service System Partners

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The Quality Of Current Partnerships in Human Services

As our modern human service systems have grown and become more complex and entrenched they are much harder to direct and influence both from within and from without. Not surprisingly, if these systems lean too much towards to the agendas of embedded vested interests other than service users and families, then it can result in some measure of disenfranchisement of the very people that such systems were originally created to benefit. In the worst instances, it can mean the collapse of the integrity of such systems in regard to their mission to be a secure source of support and assistance to the people made dependent on such systems. These collapses happen quite regularly as can be witnessed by the many scandals that beset services that “should not have” happened but end up taking place nonetheless.

One of the safeguards that can help keep such systems honest and in line with their sanctioned purposes is the strong presence of service users and families in the various governing partnerships that actually guide the system’s conduct at the personal, local and other levels in such systems. The presence of service users and families simply in advisory roles will unfortunately not have this effect, since such roles fall short of the kind of governance roles that can actually direct what services do. However, if the partnerships that exist in these governing and quasi-governing partnerships are faulty, then their moral and practical utility as upholders and even champions of the ultimate well being of service users and families will be lost. Some of the failures that can beset them have their roots in a failure to understand and abide with their moral and ethical responsibilities towards the best interests of service users. Consequently, it is important that these partnerships be of good quality and that the active ingredients that lead to good partnerships be identified and supported.

The Prospects For Both Ethical And Optimal Partnerships

The term “partnership” is often used quite casually, almost as if its actual meaning is obvious. The reality is quite a different matter, as partnerships are relationships and relationships can routinely be hugely variable and complex. It is no different with “partnership relationships”, as these can vary widely in terms of how effective and satisfying they are. When viewed from the position of ordinary citizens trying to relate to today’s many agencies and systems, the possibility of being in some sort of decent, honorable and productive partnership with them can often seem elusive. However, this does not mean that they are not interested in such a relationship with the services and professionals that they have to rely on. Rather, they are typically baffled by how they might create such a trusted relationship.

This recognition that professionals, services and systems are hard to “partner with” is not illusory, as countless service users, families and ordinary
citizens will typically have any number of stories to share about their misfortunes in such “partnerships”. It is also true that many of the people who occupy professional and service roles will also have had their own difficulties with partnering with service users, families and others or in persuading the systems that they are in to behave more honorably towards service users and families. What needs to be recognized is that, as a culture, we have had little collective experience of managing such modern systems, since these systems are historically relatively new to us. In fact, our dependence upon such systems really only goes back at the most for several generations, with the vast number of today’s services only appearing on the scene in the last thirty years or so. So, it should not surprise us that we see so much by way of poorly conceived and executed roles and partnerships with citizens, service users and families given how new the challenges of getting “right relationship” are in this emerging context.

With all such novel challenges, it can be expected that most of us will not initially perform well with something that is unfamiliar to us. However, this can change as we gain greater experience and proficiency with the task. We are now at a period in our history where we could expect to have learned from our experiences and begun the process of repairing whatever shortcomings had beset the partnership between citizens and service bureaucracies. Unfortunately, that kind of learning does not appear to have taken place to the extent that we might have hoped for. This can be seen in the continuing sense among many service users and families that they are not in the kind of partnerships with services that they would consider to be fundamentally sound. Similarly, many people who have roles in such systems also feel that they do not have the kinds of partnership relationships with service users and families that they would consider optimal. This suggests that we may have ample scope for improving these relationships.

This discussion of whether partnerships are satisfactory and effective for those involved in them revolves around our assumptions about what would constitute more ideal partnerships as well as what we may believe makes partnering productive. Consequently, a certain amount of what we may believe or perceive may be quite subjective in nature. Nonetheless, it is always surprising just how universal the features of good relationships are. This is likely due to the fact that we are deeply similar as human beings when it comes to us being treated in a manner which we feel is deeply honorable and respectful. It is useful in this regard to name to the kinds of qualities and conduct in partners and partnerships that most distress us and then to use these to help articulate what would make for good partnerships. Some suggestions in this regard now follow.
Examples Of Some Key Ingredients Of Optimal Partnerships

**Respect For The Person(s) Involved In The Partnership**

There is something in us that tends to be hurt and damaged when it is not given proper regard. This is more than ego or vanity, though this may also be wounded by a show of disrespect. It is more that human beings are at their best and tend to thrive when they are treated in a valuing way. This hunger for value could easily be dismissed as a “frill” by some, thereby relegating it to merely a matter of personal preference rather than this being a fundamental need of people. People do seem to need to be valued by others and this is shown or demonstrated in respectful conduct towards oneself or others.

Typically when disrespect is shown to a person, it can produce anger and outrage on the part of the person who has been treated poorly. Disrespect engenders feelings of being diminished by the perpetrator and may produce hurt and woundedness and a sense of being offended. Obviously, disrespect may be seen as a kind of assault on a person’s value and worth and may provoke the disrespected party into a defensive posture, given that they may believe themselves to be threatened and attacked. As insults to the person accumulate, this can produce the kind of obstinacy and anger where the person may well strike back, given how hard it may be to “turn the other cheek”. Sometimes the mistreatment may be subtle, such as being kept waiting or it may be more overt such as instances where the person is entirely ignored, not introduced or whatever. Nonetheless, all of these are disrespectful.

**Trustworthy Conduct Between Partners**

The basis of a partnership is normally found in various forms of beneficial cooperation. This kind of cooperation becomes very hard to sustain if one side or the other believes that the other side is not acting in a trustworthy way. Untrustworthy conduct may take many forms such as saying one thing and doing another, being two faced, misrepresenting matters as being other than they are and so on. All of these have at their root, a failure to act with integrity. Integrity refers here to an inconsistency between words and deeds that has its roots in a failure of character. This failure may be more than the failings of a given person, it may at times extend to the *de facto* code of conduct or even the morality of the structures of the institution that the person represents.

When trust begins to erode, then it becomes typical for the party who is aware of untrustworthy conduct to begin to protect themselves and their important interests by becoming more suspicious, acting more defensively and in general becoming more wary, fearful and skeptical of the other party. All of this diverts energy that might have gone into positive forms of cooperation into mistrust and self-protection, thereby adding a burden that must be overcome if
the relationship is to eventually flourish. Further, once trust is broken, it is much harder to rebuild.

**Mutually Empowering Conduct By Partners**

It is a kind of maxim that many people can be expected to have difficulty using power and authority well. Similarly, many social institutions, including service bureaucracies, may also collectively be so obsessed with their own agendas that they are unable to operate in such a way that would result in them sharing authority and decision-making and working to integrate the priorities of others into how they operate. Naturally, this kind of “my way or the highway” ethic that may even become an unconscious working feature or precondition of some partnerships that will not do much to strengthen partnerships, but it would certainly work to undermine partnership with others through the creation of a disempowering way of working.

Sometimes this pattern will become so deeply institutionalized that those involved in such disempowering partnership arrangements may become so habituated to the pattern of one sided abuse of power that they no longer recognize it as problematic and simply accommodate to it as a kind of political and moral “given”. This would certainly be the case in regards to many consultative processes involving citizens, service user and families that are entirely reflective of the agenda of those commissioning the consultation. The problem is not merely one of an unequal distribution of power, it may also be reflective of the inability of those holding the greater amount of power to be able to conduct themselves in such a way that power or its absence does not become an issue, but rather that resolving the interest of the partners is what gets priority.

**Unity Of Values And Vision Of Partners**

The possibilities for partnerships that are going to work particularly well are greater when those involved are committed to similar values and vision. This requires that the parties involved share fundamental philosophical beliefs and worldviews. This is not meant to suggest that inherently ethical partnerships cannot exist in the instance of parties that “agree to disagree”, but rather that such internally divided partnerships are burdened by a tendency to pull in different directions and this exacerbates the frictions that come with fundamentally different outlooks. A key issue in this regard, in relation to human service system partnerships, would be whether the parties share the same degree of concern with service users and families and the critical issues that they face in their lives.

Additionally, when serious philosophical disagreements exist between partners, there is also the burden placed upon their relationship by the ongoing necessity for the parties to negotiate their differences and coordinate their
responses, since this eventual harmony does not come as naturally to the parties. Not only is this resolving of internal disagreements time consuming, labor intensive and prone to irritants and insensitivities, it also can aggravate the problem the parties may face in being able to address the needs of their constituencies and followers.

**The Coherence And Integrity Of Partners**

It is possible for partners with relatively similar philosophical outlooks to tolerate some measure of incoherence and lack of integrity in the conduct of each other, since few people are as coherent as we might prefer. Nonetheless, the degree of the kind of conduct that might be described as being “incoherent and lacking in integrity” needs to be relatively marginal in nature and not involve key elements in the partnership relationship. If partners cannot trust each other to behave in dependable and predictable ways, then it can be expected that this will bring tensions to the partnership relationship. It will also burden it unnecessarily with all of the energy that will need to go into both repairing instances where a lack of integrity has occurred. Further, it also will likely lead to a greater degree of precautionary monitoring of the partners by each other in order to detect possible future instances of incoherent conduct.

It is not uncommon for partnerships where one or both partners might behave in ways that lack integrity for the relationship to become strained and for some measure of estrangement to then enter the picture. If this conduct persists or even expands in scope, it can precipitate any number of unhelpful but understandable reactions from the party that feels wounded by this conduct. These could include anger, frustration, mistrust and alienation. Obviously, adding such potentially damaging emotions to an already strained relationship does not augur well for the future of that partnership.

**Good Communication Between Partners**

Even where the parties in a partnership share much in common, the full potential of these similarities can be squandered if the people involved do not communicate effectively with each other and thereby capitalize upon these underlying advantages. Good communication helps build mutual understanding and paves the way for joint thinking and action, both of which are essential for effective partnerships. In contrast, when communication is fragmented and lacking finesse, it can lead to misreading of the other with all the missteps that may ensue from erroneous mutual appraisals within the partnership.

Poor communication can extend to key allies that the partnership relies upon, thereby compounding difficulties that may have had their origin in the qualities of the principal partners and their inability to effectively communicate with each other. Honest communication is a key ingredient in
successful relationships because it helps unite and strengthen those involved and the interests that they represent and champion. It does this by ensuring that each is in tune with the other, thereby enhancing whatever is taken on together by them. It also means that genuine differences are authentically engaged, thereby heightening the likelihood of progress.

**Shared Priorities And Agendas In Practice**

Even when the parties share many common values, these may lack any substantive meaning if they are not, in turn, mutually transformed into shared operational priorities and agendas. In this respect, values must take form in practice in order to have anything beyond abstract meaning. Values that are transformed into actual behavior have the promise of becoming “lived” values because they are applied to practical circumstances such that some order of importance is underlined and heightened. This usually means the setting of priorities through action, not just words.

In partnerships where notably vulnerable people and their wellbeing may hang in the balance, it is all the more important that the key partners share a workable sense of the importance that will be placed on progress with their needs, potential and issues. This means forging common agendas and conclusions as to what is or is not important that can guide how scarce energies, resources and opportunities will be sought and guided. These shared and “lived” priorities, once established, then serve to provide the directions that will shape the decisive focus of the partnership.

**Capacity For Providing And Mobilizing Leadership**

The core task of key partnerships that may guide how service systems should operate is both to provide and mobilize leadership on the issues that confront the service system and the people entangled in it in service user and family roles. The capacity to generate and sustain alliances and support for the shared priorities of the partnership is crucial to whether it will make progress with advancing its priorities. The interrelationship between leaders and their supporters is a complex one, with the mandate of the leader being deeply dependent upon their credibility with current and potential supporters. An absence of leadership abilities and finesse within the partnership can quite readily mean that the partnership can fail to have its priorities embraced by supporters, thereby weakening the partnerships prospects.

Though the present leadership challenges facing service systems are formidable, it is not always the case that their mere presence as weighty tasks needing to be addressed will necessarily result in sufficient attention being given to them. If you like, many leadership challenges are not taken up irrespective of their intrinsic importance, simply because they do not capture the commitment that is needed to address them properly. Consequently, it is
often the case that considerable leadership must be offered and developed if the challenges to be eventually addressed and impacted. Obviously, partnerships that can offer and sustain leadership will perform measurably better in terms of their effectiveness.

**Advocates As “De Facto” Partners With Elements Of Service Systems**

Though many people will immediately think of advocates as necessarily being independent from service systems, this may be somewhat misleading. Advocates, out of necessity, must form alliances as much as anyone else if they are to make headway with the issues that are important to them. Though they must preserve their independence in order to maintain their integrity as advocates, they must also win support for their advocacy agenda and this sets the stage for advocates to enter into whatever alliances on given issues that offer the most promise for forward movement on their agendas. This makes advocates “players” and shapers in terms of system performance, though their tools are necessarily those of people whose position is outside of the system, yet nonetheless engaged with that same system as vitally as are those whose roles locate them within such systems.

Advocates can have tremendous influence on how systems evolve and address issues through their ability to highlight what is important and in the interests of those who are reliant on that system. This influence is possible because of the values they uphold and the constituencies that share and endorse these same values. Advocates are never far from the governing bodies that shape the character of these systems, though they are often not sufficiently credited with their impact on system changes nor are they properly seen as being vital partners in upholding both the moral and practical focus of such systems.

**Ethical Partnerships And The Standing Of Service Users Within Them**

As most people will acknowledge, not all partnerships are equally beneficial. This is no accident, as partnerships are only as good as the people that form them. Further, the quality of partnerships can vary from the exemplary to the deeply deceptive and disappointing. Obviously, the kinds of service system partnerships that will bring our current systems back into a proper alignment with what is crucial for service users and families will have to be based on a common value system that places them as central and important in practice, rather than just in easily adopted rhetoric. One cannot rely on the often appealing and fancy words that are sometimes used to legitimize partnerships to be sure that these partnerships are sound and beneficial. To achieve that outcome, these partnerships need to be more closely examined as to their actual conduct and priorities and whether these are ethical in nature.
This examination of the extent to which a given partnership is ethical and beneficial can be assessed most directly by seeing whose interests the partnership ultimately most serves. If the interests of service users and families are constantly subordinated to more powerful interests and agendas, then there would most certainly be a cause for worry. Similarly, if their voices are persistently ignored and masked to favor illegitimate agendas, this would also be a sign that something is very amiss at the level of the basic ethics that are the foundation of that specific partnership.

**Common Signs That A Partnership Is Both Ethical And Fruitful**

There are typically many signs that are indicative of the underlying ethical character of a given partnership. It is important to see these as indicators of the presence or absence of the kind of practical moral leadership that eventually yields measurable progress in the world. These signs include the following;

- **The Partnership Engages In Truthful Dialogue**

  It is difficult to have much confidence in the integrity of a partnership when its relationship to truth is dubious at best and when it actively misleads and deceives through what it says. Whereas, when what a partnership says and does consistently fits the proven facts of situations, then one can have a great deal more certainty that its integrity is in good order. Lies and manipulation, while often initially successful in taking advantage of the good will of trusting and earnest people, will always end in disillusionment and bitter disappointment. However, alliances and partnerships that do their best to remain essentially truthful in their words and conduct, may not always be without fault, but lacking authenticity and genuineness will not be one of their failings.

- **The Partnership Is Transparent**

  The fact that most people are excluded from access and insight into the workings of a given partnership is worrisome, as it indicates a failure in that partnership to maintain the kind of transparency that assures to all observers and participants that things are what they seem. Further, a partnership that deliberately conceals and misrepresents its true working cannot be a partnership that will uphold the kind of honorable ethics that most people would instinctively trust as being genuine.

- **The Partnership Is In Constant Relationship And Genuine Dialogue With Service Users And Families**

  A relationship only exists and benefits people when it is actively pursued. When the users of service systems, particularly those with the lowest
status and least opportunity to express themselves are brought into that partnering relationship and when their voices are subsequently upheld, one would not be wrong in concluding that this is a relationship that honors service users. In contrast, when we see service users taken for granted and excluded from meaningful ongoing engagement in the partnership, we are seeing a very different kind of partnership i.e. one that will perpetuate their essential unimportance to the system.

The Partnership Honors Its Promises And Keeps Its Word

Though it is always difficult in governmental and other complex systems contexts for players to make and keep commitments due to the intervening of all manner of other players that do not fall under their control and influence, a partnership that nonetheless seeks to keep its word will still be more ethical by comparison than one that fails to make this a distinctive feature of its conduct. People, quite rightly, have more security and faith in people that keep their word and good cause to be suspicious of those who say one thing and do another. Though many may convince themselves that they can play fast and loose with a principle as important as this one, they will ultimately discover that the ultimate truth of actions does matter.

The Partnership Continually Focuses Upon The Real Issues In People’s Lives

It can often be the case that many partnerships start out with a reasonable grasp of what it is that people in the service user role experience and need in daily life. However, over time they gradually begin to yield to agendas that begin to overshadow the fundamental priorities of service users. In failing to give more status to these priorities while assisting in the substitution of these by other priorities, the partnership gradually severs its claim to be a beneficial partnership in direct proportion to the extent that service users are left behind.

The Partnership Authentically Shares Power And Influence With Service User And Family Leaders (Within The Partnership)

The presence of key service user and family leaders within a partnership typically reflects a priority being placed on them being integral to how the partnership works. It is also underlines the seriousness with which that partnership both composes and conducts itself in regards to the importance of the voices of service users and families being a prominent safeguard to a potentially wayward system. It is also significant in such instances that power is shared rather than exclusively held in the hands of those that have risen the highest in such systems.
The Partnership Acknowledges Its Failings And Limitations For What They Are

Though it is normally difficult for most people to precisely own up to others regarding the failings and limitations in what they do. This is particularly so when these shortcomings are embarrassing to acknowledge. Nonetheless, it is also impressive to people to find that such people are “straight shooters”, as this helps them trust and even admire such persons more than they otherwise would because of the strength of character involved in taking appropriate responsibility for their conduct. It is also true that the taking of responsibility may require both courage and integrity, particularly when what has to be owned up to is painful and unflattering to acknowledge.

The Partnership Avoids Entanglements With People And Parties Whose Long Term Integrity And Priorities Are Dubious

It is often observed that one can ascertain much by examining closely who a person associates with. Poor choices in allies, particularly in regards to persons or parties whose conduct has historically been antithetical to the well being of people who use services, would rightly be seen as a threat to their interests. This would be even more the case if such a presence were central and long term factor in the partnership. A partnership that carefully and consistently avoids alliances with people and parties who are likely to be hostile to fundamental interests of service users and families, will likely be much more faithful to such needs and priorities.

Conclusion

Though it is understandably always difficult in everyday life to achieve ideal partnerships, this does not mean that the task of defining better and worse partnerships is inherently futile. If partnerships within human service systems are to become more ideal when it comes to their loyalty to service users, then it becomes very important to be able to distinguish what would make a given partnership superior or inferior as the case may be. The clearer we are about the kinds of partnerships that will best serve the needs of often very powerless and devalued service users and families, the more able we will be to gradually strengthen ourselves to live up to these ideals. Relationships are not good simply because they exist, they are good because how they operate and what comes from them is good. From good will come more good, so it is always important to strengthen that which is good. This is only possible when we can tell the difference between good and its impostors.