



Consumer reps on committees

Description

One or more consumers (or past consumers) are members of formal decision-making structures within the organisation. The role of the consumer representative is to provide a consumer perspective and take part in organisational decision-making.

How it works

A consumer representative is a user or former user of a particular service who identifies as a consumer, and who has a formal position on a relevant decision-making body within the organisation such as a Board or Committee of Management.

A consumer representative would normally have a clear position description which identifies their role and responsibilities and defines their status in relation to decision-making processes. Often, their status will be similar or identical to that of other members of the committee. Representatives are accountable to the organisation they represent and to the organisation's key stakeholders.

In some cases a consumer representative may have a defined relationship of consultation and/or representation with their constituency, the consumers. In this case it is vital that the representative is accepted by other consumers of that service to advocate on their behalf. The role may involve, but is not limited to:

- Protecting the interests of consumers, service users and potential service users;
- Presenting how consumers may think and feel about certain issues;
- Contributing consumer experiences;
- Ensuring the committee recognises consumer concerns;
- Promoting consumer rights and commenting on assumed reciprocal responsibilities;
- Reporting the activities of the committee to other consumers;
- Ensuring accountability to consumers;
- Acting as a watchdog on issues affecting consumers; and
- Providing information about any relevant issues affecting consumers.

Induction and training are provided and ongoing support may be required to maximise the representative's ability to contribute.

Consumer representatives generally carry out their role on a voluntary and unwaged basis. However, consumer representatives need to be adequately resourced through the reimbursement of expenses, remuneration and training and development.

Degree of participation

Consultation.

Timeframe

Medium to long term.

Resource level required

High.

Information, training and support are required to enable consumer representatives to participate in committees and to ensure representatives maintain a relationship with their constituency. Resources are required to reimburse representatives' expenses; to recruit representatives; to clarify their roles and define the terms of reference on committees they may sit on; and to identify and address skills deficits.

Strengths

Consumer representatives are able to provide a consumer perspective which often differs from a bureaucrat, industry/sector, academic or professional perspective. They have the potential to provide regular direct access to consumer views at the highest decision-making levels within organisations.

Building consumer representation into the Board of Management may help management and the broader organisation to stop thinking of clients as "others"; it helps to break down "us and them" dynamics.

This strategy is potentially empowering to the consumers who take the representative role.

Weaknesses


Consumer representatives on committees may appear tokenistic when not accompanied by other consumer participation mechanisms. Tokenism, defined as one person on a board or committee to represent an entire class of people, is one of the most common participation pitfalls for well-intentioned organisations.

Limiting consumer involvement on boards or committees to one person means that the consumer has no natural allies on the committee, making involvement an intimidating or potentially threatening experience (Glasser 1998).

Being a consumer representative on a Board of Management may require skills beyond the consumer's own personal experiences. Constant resourcing, including ongoing training and development, is often required. Most people find committee processes obscure and initially at least, are likely to feel uncomfortable and unable to contribute effectively.

Participation on a Board or committee can be demanding in terms of the time commitment required from individuals. It may be difficult to sustain on an unpaid basis, especially for consumers with other commitments.

Example

 Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) is a Melbourne-based organisation working with people who experience or are at risk of experiencing homelessness. MOSS works for change through individualised assistance, advocacy, community development and research. Since its inception, MOSS has placed a high value on consumer input and participation. This is reflected in a variety of ways including active Consumer Reference Groups, consumer focus groups and consumer representation on the Committee of Management.

MOSS's Committee of Management is responsible for overseeing the management of the agency and setting the strategic direction. Committee of Management meetings are held on a monthly basis. MOSS's constitution establishes that out of 12 positions on the Committee of Management, 4 are set aside for consumers / ex-consumers.

MOSS has clear policies which cover the operation of Committee of Management meetings and which establish the expectations of consumer and non-consumer Committee members. In general, consumer representatives have the same status and role description as other Committee members.

Conflict of interest may be an issue for consumer representatives (as for other members of the Committee), and Committee members who are current clients of the service may be asked to stand aside

from discussions involving staffing issues (e.g. staff disciplinary proceedings). Consumer members of the Committee are not seen as formal representatives of the agency's consumers.

Information on consumer participation opportunities is provided to consumers from the outset of their involvement with MOSS and staff encourage

clients to become involved in the organisation. Where consumers express an interest in becoming involved, staff will assist with capacity building support to enable them to do so. Often involvement may be a stepped process; for example, starting by participating in Community Development activities, then becoming involved in one of the Consumer Reference Groups, and some consumers may eventually become a member of the Committee of Management.

Reimbursement of expenses (travel, childcare, etc.) is provided for consumer representatives as for other Committee members. Each consumer representative has a general member of the Committee assigned as a mentor / buddy; the mentor's role is to provide support and explanation to enable the consumer representative to understand and contribute to Committee proceedings. Consumer representatives are assisted to identify areas of skill development required, and participate in the Committee's general performance appraisal processes.

An ex-consumer is currently co-chair of the MOSS Committee of Management (January 2008).

Tips

- ☞ Clarify representatives' roles and the terms of reference of the committees they sit on.
- ☞ Selection processes need to ensure that representatives have sufficient stability in their lives to participate, plus personal qualities relevant to participation in a group setting.
- ☞ Build a relationship with a consumer advocacy service or consumer support organisation who can support the person's involvement.
- ☞ Be aware that putting consumers on a committee is usually a long-term strategy and always involves reciprocal obligations. It means a significant commitment from your organisation in terms of time, communication, support and training.

For more information...

- More information on Merri Outreach is available at <http://www.merri.org.au>
- <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/#I>. "IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH CONSUMER PARTICIPATION: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS". pp.70-71. Viewed December 2007.
- See also Information Sheet #19: Consumer advisory groups.

