

# Supporting and Empowering Family Leaders

Meaningful family leadership and engagement is most likely to occur when family leaders feel supported and have the information they need to feel empowered to contribute.

Organizations can create this supportive environment by intentionally planning for and investing in support and mentoring. Every family engagement and leadership program needs at least one point person who is dedicated to supporting family leaders and will act as a mentor throughout the length of the project. The mentor will identify, recruit, and support the family leaders with regular check-ins, working to develop a connection with each family leader and build trusting relationships to support their full participation.



Depending on the number of family leaders involved in the program, the staff time to appropriately support them can be significant. However, without support all the other time and investments that go into the program won't be nearly as effective. As a result, it's important to adequately budget for staff support time from the beginning.

## Rooted in Trust

Effective support is rooted in trust. For some family leaders, this may be the first time they have been invited to a decision-making table where they are an equal and valued voice. For others this might be an extension of their previous experience. However, all will need time to build trust in this new space.

Family leaders bring their own lived experiences to decision-making tables. These perspectives are invaluable to informing public policy decisions and shaping programs. But for some families, these lived experiences can be steeped in trauma and feelings of individual failing and guilt. Families may also currently be benefitting from the program being discussed and have concerns that their honest feedback may have negative repercussions for their child and family. In addition, family leaders may have concerns about



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confidentiality and fear of being judged by professionals with whom their family is currently or may need to someday interact.

## Relational vs Transactional Work

In these situations, accounting for power dynamics is critically important. How can organizations create spaces where family leaders feel safe and empowered to be full participants?

It begins with a commitment to work that is relational and not transactional. Relational organizing is about building authentic connections with people. It's about creating relationships that are not about meeting a particular short-term goal, but growing trust, skills, and ultimately power together for the long-term. Ideally, family leaders will not only be empowered to meaningfully contribute to the current project, but they will gain the confidence and skills they need to step into other leadership roles in the community.

By contrast, transactional work sees interactions with individuals as a means to an end. It's about accomplishing an objective as opposed to investing in and supporting the growth of the individual involved. In family engagement and leadership, this can show up as inviting family leaders to participate in order to meet the requirements of a grant, but not structuring group interactions or decision-making processes in a way that their feedback is heard or meaningfully incorporated into the decisions being made. Family leaders can tell when they are merely there to check a box and when they are viewed as full partners with something valuable to contribute. This feeling will shape their participation and how much they are willing to engage in this project as well as future projects in which they choose to engage.

### Relational organizing takes more time and a willingness to bring ourselves more fully to the work. It requires:

- Being willing to listen as much or more than you talk;
- Having a genuine desire to get to know the person and support them in being successful;
- Creating a level playing field where the mentor is a trusted peer who can be a resource for answering questions and providing support in navigating meetings and programs, but who also clearly recognizes the value of what the family leader brings to the table;
- Being willing to take off the professional "expert" hat and share your own experiences in a way that is authentic and can feel vulnerable;
- Putting in the time it takes to build trust, knowing there is not a fixed timeline when this will be achieved.

When structuring staff support, informal conversational approaches are more likely than formal ones to be effective. Creating a dynamic of two peers, each experts in their own way, meeting to discuss shared goals can help with building trust. Things as simple as tone of voice can make a difference in whether a family leader feels comfortable. Genuine warmth, curiosity, and enthusiasm to get to know the family leader come through and can shape how the relationship develops.

## Structural Supports

At the same time, there are structural pieces the organization and mentor can put in place ahead of time that will make for more effective support. These include:

- Having a clear agreement that outlines what is expected of the family leader and what the family leader can expect from the organization and mentor
- Creating group agreements with respect to confidentiality and communicating those to both the family leaders and other participants
- Developing and implementing firewalls between any feedback the family leader shares and the services their family is currently or may in the future receive, and communicating those to both the family leaders and other participants
- Identifying resources and creating a plan in advance to help family leaders as needed with any trauma that may arise through their participation. This may include allowing a family leader to step back, creating space for them not to participate in a discussion or share their feedback in a different way, offering safe spaces outside of the meeting to talk through how it makes them feel, concerns it raises, etc. It may also mean referring them to community mental health service supports as needed.

## Empowering Conversations

When done well, mentoring support will not be a single conversation but a series of conversations. However, the conversations will all share a common goal: empowering family leaders, building their skills and confidence, and providing them with the information they need to be a full and equal participant.

## Family Leaders as Experts

Family leadership starts with helping family leaders to see themselves as the experts they are. Decision-making tables filled with people who are considered to be experts in their professional fields can be intimidating. Without a title or trained expertise, family leaders can sometimes wonder what they have to bring to the conversation. As a result, they may be cautious to speak out and share their perspective.

Professional experts can bring a more abstract lens, data driven perspectives, and expertise gained from the implementation side of a program. Family leaders can bring stories, lived experiences, and the perspective of what it is like to navigate programs. Both types of expertise are needed in developing programs that are effective and meet their intended goals.



A critical role of the mentor is to ensure that the professional experts understand the value of family experts and hear their feedback in the spirit in which it is intended and without being defensive if it is different than what they expected. The other side is that the mentor must ensure family leaders understand how valuable their participation is to the success of the program and the ways in which their input will be incorporated in decisions.

## Connect the Personal to Program/System Change

For some family leaders, this will be their first time sharing their personal experiences and perspectives in a decision-making setting. An important piece in successful family engagement and leadership is helping the family leader make the connection between their personal experience and creating program/systems change.

The first step to this can be creating a space where the family leader feels safe to share their story. This may be in one-on-one conversation with a mentor, in a family leader breakout group, or another small group. After they share their story, they can be encouraged to talk through what their takeaways were from that experience:

- What worked well?
- What didn't?
- What could have been done differently?
- Do they feel their experience was one that was unique to them or common to other families?
- What would they like decision makers to know?

These questions can be useful in helping family leaders draw connections between what they've experienced, the program/ system in which it took place, and how the program/ system might function differently to create an even better experience for families. Being able to frame their stories alongside the lessons they hope decision makers will learn from them is the first step in connecting the personal to program/ system change.

## Provide Context

In working to situate their experience within the broader program/ system, family leaders may need to know more about the context in which these decisions are being made.

Family leaders may only be familiar with the part of the program/ system with which they have interacted, whereas professional experts may be familiar with the broader scope of the program/ system.

The mentor should provide background information on the broader context for family leaders, either through a group training or through individual conversations. They should also make clear for the family leader that they are always available to answer context/ history questions whether before, during, or after the meetings.

Having conversations about what decisions are being made and any relevant history is also necessary. Prior to meetings where decisions are being made, the mentor should walk through what is likely to be discussed,

provide any relevant history, and answer questions. If the participant has had personal experience with the area being considered, the mentor should encourage them to be sure to share their experience and perspective.

Jargon and abbreviations can also be a barrier to full participation. During group meetings, the mentor should actively encourage all participants to refrain from using jargon and ask people to provide the definition when it is accidentally used during a meeting. The mentor should also discuss commonly used jargon as part of the providing context conversation and consider providing a definitions sheet for reference.

The goal of these conversations is to ensure the family leader feels as prepared and confident as possible to make their own contributions to decision-making conversations.

## The Support Cycle

Family leader support is an iterative cycle with each interaction building on the one before it.

Ideally, this will be a series of conversations including:

- Recruitment meeting
- Introductory meeting
- For each group meeting:
  - Materials distribution
  - Pre-meeting check-in
  - During meeting support
  - Post-meeting check in
- Mid-point check-in
- Conclusion/ evaluation check-in



The conversations will look different at each stage of the process, but they will all involve building trust and serving as a resource.

### RECRUITMENT MEETING: Best done in person or via zoom

- Brief introduction to the organization
- Explanation of what the decision-making group is trying to accomplish and how family leaders will be part of this effort
- Ask if this goal is something that they would be interested in being part of achieving
- Walk through the partnership agreement explaining what the commitment of the family leader will be,

what they can expect from the organization, and how they will be supported (stipends and other supports along with staff support)

- Answer any questions
- Ask if they are interested in participating

### **INTRODUCTORY MEETING: Best done in person or via zoom**

- Spend time getting to know one another-ask more about how they came to be involved in this work, what they are passionate about or why they want to get involved, and be prepared to share your own story with this work
- Provide background and history about the program, organization, coalition
- Review the goals of the effort and how family leaders will be involved
- Walk through briefly who else will be involved and what perspectives they bring- a directory with participants' pictures, name, organization, and title can be helpful
- Discuss what to expect at the first meeting
- Answer any questions they might have
- Talk about what would make participating work best for them and what barriers they might experience in fully participating.
- Discuss any logistical needs with regard to participation such as forms, stipends, etc.

### **FOR EACH GROUP MEETING:**

- **Materials distribution:** All meeting materials including agenda and background materials should be provided to participants with enough time for them to review them at their own pace. Based on the barrier assessment, the materials should either be provided electronically or be mailed to the participant. If the family leader is not comfortable reading in English, translated materials should be provided.
- **Pre-meeting check-in:** Can be done via phone or zoom-Once the family leader has received and had time to review the materials, the mentor should schedule a brief check-in to walk through the materials, answer any questions, and highlight what the primary questions and topics will be for the meeting. The mentor should encourage the family leader to weigh in when they have things they want to add. Prior to the first meeting, the mentor should ask whether the family leader feels comfortable introducing themselves or if they would like to be introduced.
- **During meeting support:** The mentor should sit near the family leader/s to answer any questions, provide clarification as needed. When jargon is used or greater context is needed, the mentor should ensure it is addressed.
- **Post-meeting check in:** Can be done via phone or zoom-The mentor should schedule a brief check-in a few days after the meeting to see how the family leader felt it went, answer any questions that have arisen, review the decisions that were made and make sure the family leader understands how their input

is affecting the decision-making and what contribution they had for that meeting. Ask the family leader:

- How it felt and what could be done differently next time
- If there was anything that kept them from fully participating or made them uncomfortable
- If the family leader did not weigh in where they had previously indicated they wanted to, the mentor could gently ask why they chose not to share and if there was anything that could have been done to make them more comfortable participating.

Follow up with outcomes of the meeting as they become available

- **Cycle begins again** prior to the next meeting.

## **MID-POINT CHECK-IN: Best done in person or via zoom**

- Mid-way through the project period, the mentor should schedule a longer check-in to discuss how the project is going, how the family leader feels about the progress and their participation, revisit whether any additional barriers have come up, and discuss what could make it a more rewarding experience for them.

## **CONCLUSION/EVALUATION CHECK-IN**

- At the conclusion of the project, the mentor should schedule an exit interview to discuss how the family leader felt about the project and the outcomes, whether they felt supported to participate fully, what they would recommend doing differently. This is also an excellent time to explore if/ how the family leader would like to be involved moving forward. Are there additional family leadership opportunities with the organization or with partners in the community with whom you could connect them? Ideally this experience will be one step of many on their leadership journey.

## **Buddy System**

In addition to formal staff support, it can be helpful to pair a family leader with another participant with professional/ system expertise as an informal mentor. This provides the family leader with another friendly face at the beginning of the process and another resource point for context questions as the decision-making moves forward. Prior to the first meeting, the mentor can ask the family leaders if they would be interested in a buddy. If so, the support person should poll professional participants to gauge interest in serving as a buddy and pair the family leader up with the volunteer who would be the best match. An informal phone call between the two prior to the first meeting would be the best way to launch this connection. If that is not possible, pair them up as early in the process as possible.

## **Investments Pay Off**

Like most relationships in life, growing a supportive connection with family leaders can take time and a personal investment. But the payoff from building authentic connections in the success of your program and the long-term leadership capacity added to the community is incalculable. And the mentor providing support will come away with a richer, more nuanced understanding of the shared work being done with families.