

# Strengthening and Supporting Family Leaders in Feeling & Flexing their Power: SUGGESTIONS FOR MENTORS

Even at the most welcoming tables, the “magic” of family leadership happens only when family leaders fully feel their own power and feel ready to flex it through meaningful participation in the group’s shared work.

While the decision to fully engage ultimately rests with the family leader, there are ways mentors can help support them in feeling comfortable to do so. Much of this will be done through the one to ones that make up the mentoring support cycle outlined in the *Supporting and Empowering Family Leaders* tool and in *The Art of Effective One to Ones*. However, occasionally the mentor may feel like it’s more effective to provide some of this support to all the family leaders at the table at the same time in a special check-in session. Either way can be effective and depends on the needs and dynamics of the family leaders in the group.

## A few suggestions to keep in mind:

**Commit to being an ongoing source of support** – It’s hard to overstate the importance of making sure family leaders know you have their back. When a family leader has a strong, trusted connection with their mentor where they feel comfortable asking questions and seeking advice as needed, they are going to feel more confident in fully engaging. This is especially true when the mentor has taken the time to walk through materials and answer any questions prior to the meeting.



Leading up to the meeting, you can help family leaders prepare by discussing the logistics of the meeting and asking them what they’d like to share related to the items on the agenda. Becoming a thought partner as they consider what their contribution to those discussions could be helps the family leader feel comfortable and prepared. This may mean helping them think through how their own story relates to the items on the agenda and what kind of changes their experiences inspire them to want to help make happen. Tips on how to do this can be found in *The Power of Storytelling*.

The ongoing cycle of support is essential to encouraging full engagement. Various tools can be helpful in creating this including: *Supporting and Empowering Family Leaders* and the accompanying checklist, *The Art of Effective One to Ones*, and the *Family Leadership and Engagement Initiative Partnership Agreement*. Family leaders’ power and importance in the project should be laid out in the agreement and reviewing it can be an effective place to start power building conversations.



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**Support is not “one size fits all”** – How you provide support to a family leader will vary and the relationship established with that family leader will play a significant role in providing that support. Building the relationship with the family leader will help you to tie their personal experiences to the encouragement you are providing, develop an understanding of what level of support they may prefer, and make the interaction feel authentic.

**Be their #1 Encourager and Cheerleader** – If we’re lucky, we all have that person in our life who is our encourager and cheerleader. They may be a family member, friend, colleague, or professional mentor, but they are the person you turn to when you have an important interview, presentation, or other upcoming event. The person who reminds you how qualified you are and tells you that you’ve got this.

In this situation, the mentor is that person for the family leaders. This means:

- Reminding them of why they personally were asked to participate in the first place.
- Emphasizing the unique expertise they bring as a family leader and the value their voices will add to the conversation.
- Providing encouragement during the meeting whether that means making a point to thank them for what they shared during a break at an in-person meeting or in a virtual meeting sending a note in either the group chat or directly thanking them for chiming in and that you appreciate what they shared. Little signs of support matter a lot.

**Be a Partner in Planning What Comes Next** – After each meeting, continue the cycle of support by being a place where the family leader feels safe to debrief and evaluate. It can be useful to ask specific questions such as:

- How did they feel it went?
- How did they feel about their own engagement?
- Are there things they wanted to share but didn’t know how?
- Are there things they would like to do differently next time?

If specific barriers or challenges are raised, see if they are ones you can help address or if you can support the family leader in talking through their concerns to find solutions.

If the family leader seemed uncomfortable participating in the last meeting, you might use this as an opportunity to again warmly tell them how important their voice and perspective is and say you noticed they were a little quiet at the last meeting, followed by asking if there is anything you can do to help them feel more comfortable speaking up. You might ask if there was anything that made them uncomfortable and what could have been done differently. When this conversation is done well, it will make the family leader not feel guilty or chastised for not participating, but rather come away feeling wanted and supported in participating more next time.

At the end of the day, only the family leader can decide how much they want to participate and how comfortable they feel sharing. But with thoughtfulness and enthusiasm, mentors can make that process more comfortable and empowering.