

**ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTS**  
**For Including Special Populations In Leadership**  
**And Decision Making Activities**

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## WHAT WE ARE ALL ABOUT

There is little concerted research on identification of accommodations and supports to increase and enhance the participation of individuals from special needs populations in leadership and decision-making arenas outside of areas of physical accessibility and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (July 6, 1990). This guide has been developed using the sparse consumer accommodation research and informal interviews with knowledgeable individuals. Most interviewed individuals responded that ideal approaches are individual in nature but that there are also some general strategies that they find helpful. These general strategies are included.

While these appear to be special accommodations and they will, in reality, promote the effective involvement of individuals from special needs populations, these suggestions are not meant to be used for only those participants from special needs populations. Use of these strategies for structuring and presenting complex concepts and information will assist all members of a team to function more comfortably and effectively. While these competencies are specifically focused on working with people from special needs populations, they offer direction to any professional seeking to support empowerment of any group of individuals who have traditionally been disenfranchised and disempowered.

Individuals who may require accommodations and supports to enhance their ability to participate in leadership and decision making activities can be divided into three categories (Lobosco & Newman, 2001):

1) *individuals with physical and sensory disabilities* who are most likely to need physical accommodations and/or use of alternate formats for conveying information;

2) *individuals with cognitive, emotional, and language communications-related limitations* who may require more, different, and varied accommodations and supports of a conceptual nature; this group includes:

- a) children (in general), including students, youth, and minors;
- b) individuals with mental retardation, neurological impairments, and learning disabilities;
- c) individuals with mental health and emotional disabilities;
- d) individuals who do not speak the primary language of the culture (i.e. people for whom English is a second language in the United States);

3) *individuals with either undefined, secondary, or support roles* who might require assistance in defining their role and may need a variety of supports or may be providing supports to someone else; this group includes:

- a) individuals from under-represented groups;
- b) secondary consumers (i.e. the families of children/adults served by a program); and
- c) support personnel within the community support system.

## A NEW WAY OF THINKING & WORKING

### **I. Attitudinal and Philosophical Considerations**

- 4 In recognizing the importance of including individuals from special needs populations, it is also important to acknowledge the importance of an appropriate attitudinal and philosophical mindset for engaging those individuals. It is necessary to set the stage for their involvement.
  
- 4 It is essential to use "people first" language. As the phrase implies, such language places emphasis on the person, not the disability or special need. Don't say "disabled people," "the handicapped," or "retarded people." Do say "person with a

disability," " individuals with disabilities," or " individuals with mental retardation." Be aware of the fact that there may be some individuals with disabilities that are not readily apparent; therefore, it is important to not stereotype or use language that might be stigmatizing in nature.

4 Further, the National Center on Self-Determination and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership (2000) has identified several actions required to support self-determination in people with disabilities. These actions help to provide a climate where people who have typically been disempowered can transform themselves and become vital participants. These actions include:

- People with disabilities speak from personal experience, and so with authority and expertise. Their views should be valued, and not regarded as having less importance than views professionals have.
- People with disabilities and their families must be present and central at all planning and decision-making tables in program and policy development and refinement.

- Citizens with disabilities and their supporting networks and organizations must lead and be involved in developing and promoting policies and practices related to the provision of supports to enhance their participation in decision making and leadership activities.
- Inclusion of people who are at risk of exclusion or disadvantage on the basis of ethnicity, culture, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or other grounds must be assured.
- Negative, entrenched attitudes, both within and beyond services for citizens with disabilities, must be addressed.
- An understanding of disability as a consequence of societal organization and attitudes (the "social model") rather than the inevitable result of the individual's impairment (the "medical model") must be promoted.
- Other citizens must be encouraged and educated to recognize that people with disabilities are entitled to access, accommodation and supports as well as involvement in the decision making that affects their lives.

## II: Transforming the Professional Role To Support Empowerment

4 Organizations that have moved to providing supports have made a commitment to self-determination and grassroots empowerment and to ensuring the opportunity to exercise choice. Developing and enhancing these strategies and developing skills to support grassroots empowerment are at the heart of the support mission and present the greatest challenges to the field since they run counter to the way professionals have traditionally operated. The Family Empowerment Project at Cornell University has identified nine competencies for transforming the professional role to support empowerment (Dean, 1996). They focus heavily on facilitation rather than assessment and prescription. These nine competencies are:

- Ability and commitment to identifying strengths in people and groups;
- Genuine respect for diverse perspectives and lifestyles;
- A capacity to listen and reflect;

- An ability to subordinate one's own ego (to put one's self aside in the interest of the group);
- Skills and creativity in helping people become more aware and confident of their own abilities;
- Appreciation of when to step back and the ability to help the individual or group assumes decision making and action;
- Ability to analyze power relationships and help others to do so;
- Knowledge about how to gain access to information;
- Ability to reflect on and criticize ongoing processes, including one's own role in those processes.

## ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

### III: Physical Accessibility

- 4 As a result of the laws, regulations and the cognizance of the general public, more and more individuals with disabilities and special needs are becoming a vital part of the community. Thus, it is always important to investigate the amenities of the facilities

and discuss their ability to accommodate special needs. Included in these concerns is the physical accessibility of the facility.

Often adequate adjustments have not been made for individuals with disabilities to obtain access and use a facility. Ultimately, this leads to exclusion and just plain aggravation to the individual with a disability. There are many potential barriers. Listed below is an inventory of considerations that should be taken in planning for needed accommodations. For greater detail refer to [www.jan.icdi.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.icdi.wvu.edu).

- Physical barriers (steps, no ramps, elevators, narrow entries, bathroom location and features, etc.) - both practical and technical in nature.
- Accessibility of meeting site - including meeting room size, arrangement<sup>1</sup> of room, bottlenecks, etc.
- Auxiliary aids and services - These include services or devices such as qualified interpreters (manual and other spoken languages), assistive listening headsets, television captioning and

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<sup>1</sup> Participants should also be cautioned from rearranging rooms that have been set up to accommodate individuals with special needs.

decoders, telecommunications devices for deaf persons (TDDs), videotext displays, readers, taped text, Brailled materials, and large print materials.<sup>2</sup>

#### **IV: Accommodations**

- 4 Just as important as selecting the right meeting or conference facility is assessment of the adaptations and considerations a facility and the meeting planner has made to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Meeting special needs must be a priority and attention to making sure they are addressed should not get lost in the meeting planning details or the excitement of the event. When problems occur, it is difficult for an individual with a disability to find the planner and have the correction made, especially if it means bringing in equipment or services from another location.
  
- 4 Some important accommodations to consider when including individuals from special needs populations are:

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<sup>2</sup> Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, accommodations and auxiliary aides must be made available at no cost to the individual who needs and requests them.

- Providing adequate notice of tasks and meetings/responsibilities so that scheduling and transportation arrangements can be made;
- Provide or arrange transportation;
- Scheduling meetings outside of normal business hours - to accommodate availability;
- Providing immediate/fast feedback on meeting deliberations and assignments;
- Using a variety of formats (discussion, video, and speakers) to break up the meeting and keep the attention of the participants;
- Routinely re-visit the mission of the group and/or the intended outcomes of the task at hand;
- Provide the means/resources to cover the cost of participation (transportation, babysitters, respite, and support assistance);

- Try to provide a fragrance free environment (colognes, perfumes, lotions and so on) for those with chemical sensitivities (Cornell University Program on Employment and Disability, 2001);
- If food is provided, inquire about food allergies and dietary constraints and make appropriate accommodations.

## **V: Support Assistance**

- 4 Sometimes, the best accommodation, or assistance, that can be provided to an individual with special needs is a support person whose only job is to assist the individual with a special need. This individual might read meeting materials, take notes, explain difficult concepts, and/or assist with communication, transportation, or personal care. The support person can be a member of your own staff or someone who is already familiar with the individual that is to be assisted. This should only be done at the request of and/or with the agreement of the individual with special needs.

- 4 The support person needs to remember that their responsibility is to assist the individual with special needs - the support person should not participate in the deliberations and decision making except to provide the assistance needed to the individual with special needs. The support person needs to ask, watch and offer assistance to only the individual - not the group. It is usually appropriate to be quiet and not say a whole lot when supporting a person.
- 4 Several strategies for support people have been suggested; those suggestions include:
- Support people should follow the individual group member's agenda (not their own), even if they don't agree with that agenda;
  - Support people should accept their role as "employees" of the individual group participant;
  - Support people should be provided with training so as to enhance their jobs as support persons;

- Be prepared for changes in the person you are supporting and that they might change their mind about ideas;
- Respect confidentiality and remember that as a support person you might be given information that is confidential and that you should keep to yourself.

4 The person who is organizing the meeting needs to monitor and deal with the support people. Addressing conflict of interest is critical to self-determination. If individuals with disabilities are ever to attain a degree of freedom then those freely chosen to assist them will also need to be free. Organizers should:

- Be sure that the support person is competent and fulfilling the consumer's needs;
- Get materials out early to both the support person as well as the consumer (Board Café, 2000);
- Offer a training program to prepare individuals with special needs (and their support persons) for what will occur in meetings and deliberations as well as to clarify the goal of the group and their specific role(s);

- Offer a training program for support people;
- Schedule breaks during the meeting (at times other than the breaks for all meeting participants) so that the support person and the consumer have an opportunity to go over material together; and

[NOTE: It was suggested that a curriculum be developed determining what qualifications are needed in a support person as well as the support person's responsibilities/role (Goldstein, 2001)]

- Never ask someone to assist an individual/family unless that person is invited and remains totally committed to the individual with a disability and not to existing "services" or organizations.

[NOTE: Those who assume these new roles will have to embrace the principle associated with rejection overt or unconscious conflicts of interest. This is sometimes a long and arduous process (Nerney, 2001).

4 The success of this strategy both begins and ends with the relationship between the support worker and the individual they are assisting. The support worker is similar to a foreign or manual/sign language interpreter; this job is to relay information

without intruding on the individual's responsibility as a member of the group.

## **VI: Pre-Meeting Preparations**

4 An initial step when preparing for the event is to arrange a pre-meeting program for all staff. Supplying a projected agenda and identifying special needs as well as a course of action for unforeseen circumstances will make the meeting proceed more efficiently. Both the participant and the staff will be able to resolve problems with little inconvenience and time.

### 4 Providing Personal Assistance

- Give an overview of the individual's special needs (privately) to the personal assistant before the start of the meeting.
- Identify a specific staff member who will be available to answer questions or address the concerns of the personal assistant.

### 4 Meeting Planners/Coordinators

- Make adjustments in meeting room (sufficient room, rearrange furniture) before the start of the meeting.
- Have a list of contact numbers of people who can supply special equipment in case an unplanned necessity arises.

## DEVELOPING AGENDAS & PRESENTING INFORMATION

### VII: Agenda Development

- 4 When a meeting or an event is being planned, it is important to insure that the needs of all participants are being considered. In doing so, the format and expectations of a meeting should be clearly stated and followed. Often unknown circumstances result in schedule changes. When this happens, it must be communicated clearly to all members of the meeting (Board Café, 2000).
- 4 Individuals with disabilities often need more time to move around and/or may need special hearing or visual communications. As a result, when changes are made to the agenda or meeting logistics, a special effort must be made to inform all participants (and their support personnel).

4 In planning meetings and events, special care should be used in developing the agenda. The agenda should provide a structured and logical progression for the deliberations. Don't skip around - each agenda items should build on a prior piece and/or cover a different element of the problem at hand. In short, the agenda should provide an advanced organizer for participants.

- Make sure meeting packets clearly identify agenda items as well as who is presenting the information and what packet materials relate to each agenda item - and, where possible, the desired outcome for each agenda item.
- Make sure that all packet materials (including updates and overviews) are brief and usable.
- Increasingly, individuals with disabilities with access to computers have found that receiving agendas and meeting packet materials electronically allow them to use screen readers to review the information and prepare for meetings.

## VIII: Structure The Material To Be Presented-In Writing And Verbally

4 For a variety of reasons, it is oftentimes necessary to assist individuals from special needs populations to build a cognitive structure to assimilate new materials with what they already know. Thus, there should always be a clear and logical flow to the presentation with each piece of new information carefully presented so that the relationship to information presented previously is clearly made. Presenting the same materials in various modalities will also help individuals with different learning styles or processing impairment. Use of concrete examples will also help individuals to understand how complex concepts play out and make essential cognitive linkages. Failure to do so will cause confusion and frustration.

- Use clear and logical steps when introducing materials
- Use more than one format when presenting an idea
- Use concrete examples when making a point

## **IX: Use Clear, Simple, And Concrete Language In Presentations and Materials**

- 4 This suggestion must be carefully distinguished from simplifying materials and presentations. While individuals with special needs (as well as most other meeting attendees) would appreciate clear and simple language, with concrete examples, in meeting materials and presentations, some would be offended if the material content were simplified. Efforts should be undertaken to revise difficult material so that it is presented using clear language and concrete examples without over-simplifying the issue - this is very different than "dumbing down." Additionally, presentations and materials should be free of acronyms and jargon.
  
- 4 There are also some tips to keep in mind when making verbal presentations supported by media:
  - When using overheads and PowerPoint - be sure to read all words and explain graphics
  
  - When using flip charts & whiteboards, explain what is being written - ask participants to review and be sure to read the entire posting out loud

- Use readers when asking participants to review production materials
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Keep the lights on at all times
- All interpreters are to sit near the front [NOTE: Be sensitive to need to switch interpreters every 20 minutes]
- Do not speak with your back to the group or cover your mouth (also clip facial hair to allow better visual access for lip readers)

## **X: Use Graphics And Symbols In Meeting Materials: Use Large Print And Audiotapes**

- 4 This can be helpful only if it is done properly. This involves making sure all symbols and graphics are uniform from meeting to meeting. The same applies for the color of the paper used for specific pieces of the packet. Graphics and symbols should also be carefully chosen so as to convey the message without taking away from the seriousness of the material. To further help

individuals who are hearing and visually impaired follow the format of the conference, enlarge the printed materials and use audio tapes when the individual indicates such a need.

- Use copiers to enlarge printed materials
- Be prepared to offer materials in Braille ([www.hotbraille.com](http://www.hotbraille.com) for free Braille services)
- Tape materials onto cassettes
- Use foreign and manual/sign language interpreters at presentations where this is requested
- Inquire about Computer-Assisted Real-time Translation (CART) - a court reporter enters the speaker's words into a computer that displays them as text for the participants (1-800-272-6272 for a list of certified CART reporters)
- Make materials available in large print, Braille, tape and diskette upon request.

## Facilitation & Group Process

Facilitators should be sensitive to people with special needs. When leading a group discussion facilitators must be aware of limitations of participants, skilled at stimulating the decision making process and an experienced catalyst.

### **XI: What Tools Should A Good Facilitator Possess**

- 4 Use lunches and breaks to develop relationship & assess understanding/needs of individuals and of the group (Cone, 2001).
- 4 Competencies for facilitators
  - Knowledge & skill in facilitating group process
  - Being a skilled trainer
  - Knowledge of, belief in, and commitment to self-advocacy and self-determination
  - Skill in accessing community resources
  - Knowledge of both political and service systems

- Proficiency in problem solving/conflict resolution techniques, generating alternatives, and developing action plans

4 Some of the most critical training needs for facilitators (Cone, 2001):

- Strategies for developing leadership skills
- Problem-solving techniques and strategies
- Developing listening skills
- Understanding group process and facilitation

## **XII: Use Small Groups For Discussion And Allow Plenty Of Time For Questions and Comments**

4 In small groups, people's views can be easily expressed and have a noticeable impact. As the group gets larger this is diluted and creates frustration. Less vocal people may be more hesitant to participate in the discussion and should be encouraged to present their views. When they do participate, they must also feel that their views are heard and appreciated.

- 4 One issue to be aware of occurs during the "reporting back." What often happens is that the report back discussion tends to focus on areas of agreement probably because the temporary groups tend to go through an initial relationship building phase that places a lot of stress on consensus. The reality is that your average small group session rarely gets to the next stage of group development - one that allows difference to be acknowledged and the dilemmas this poses to be worked on - these dilemmas are often the core of what really needs to be addressed. The facilitators should recognize these signs and guide the group passed this barrier.

### **XIII: Involving Children and Youth (Jennifer Smith, HFRP, 2001)**

- 4 At times children and youth are present during decision-making activities. Although many of the accommodations and support systems remain the same there are special considerations that must be considered. When a staff member is addressing a child they must speak directly and clearly while still letting them feel they can openly express their views.

- Involve them in planning the meetings/events and put them in supported leadership roles
- Listen to what they say and ask for
- Skip the jargon and avoid stereotyping
- Feed them - and be sure that it is "kid food"
- Provide transportation
- Clarify group goals and specific roles
- Preparation and readiness
- Training and support
- It is important for them to see the outcomes of what they do/their involvement
- Compensate them for their work - there are various options that can be used as compensation
- Make it more than work (be sure that they have fun doing it)

## BEING PREPARED & DOING A BETTER JOB

- 4 One way to improve meeting/event planning and outcomes is to hear from participants. After the meeting, it would be insightful if a follow-up survey was performed. Participants should be asked how well their needs had been met and if there were other ways of assisting them to more fully participate (Board Café, 2000). It is likely that a telephone or face-to-face inquiry will yield better results than a paper survey requiring written response. This kind of direct feedback will give coordinators a guideline for future meeting and accommodations planning.

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