

Record

337

File Number

10302

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Title: Towards dignity and self determination

Original source: Service Brokerage Volume 1 Number 3

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/10/89

Publisher info: -

Abstract

Brian Salisbury was previously a broker with the Community Living Society in Vancouver, British Columbia. He describes service brokerage as the individual's need for a technical extension to develop a vision of a dignified and self determining life in the community. While not anti-professional, the broker is expected to be accountable to the individual and his/her right to make all decisions. Salisbury believes a good broker has an inherent commitment to the power and value of individuals and that such commitment is not the result of professional regulation. He goes on to discuss his perspective on brokerage.

Keyword: Individualisation

TOWARDS DIGNITY AND SELF DETERMINATION

The brokerage function, says Brian Salisbury, reflects the individual's need for a technical extension to develop a vision of a dignified and self-determining life in the community.

George Bernard Shaw once remarked that professions are a 'conspiracy' against the people they purport to serve. Indeed, if developments in the disability field can be taken as an example, this view is not so cynical.

More consumers than ever believe that the majority of social service professionals are overly clinical technicians who expect deference to their so called 'expertise'. Not surprisingly, people with disabilities also see a direct relationship between a lack of professional responsiveness and accountability, and the loss of control over their own lives. Although, in defence of professionals who do care, factors such as training, education, social and fiscal policies and restrictive organisational mandates often reinforce 'ownership' of the consumer in a subtle way.

Change, however, is on the horizon. People with disabilities are demanding professional involvement which does not confuse 'ownership' with 'support'. An alternative approach known as service brokerage, based on the right of people with disabilities to control their own lives, is attracting widespread interest.

Developed in Canada in the 1970s by parents of children with learning difficulties, service brokerage tackles The System's problems and challenges long held assumptions about the boundaries of professional practice in social services. The concept comprises two distinct yet interdependent components which aim at restoring decision-making power to the consumer:

- individualised funding allocated to the person on the basis of specific needs and service requirements

- an autonomous, community-based service brokerage agency, acting as a 'fixed point of response' which can, at the individual's discretion, serve as a critical link between the individual, funding body, service system, professionals and wider community.

The brokerage model also recognises the important supports, such as friendship and advocacy, which family and friends can provide in each individual's life.

Acting through its service brokers, the 'fixed point' makes professional planning supports available to consumers who request such a service. By providing information and technical advice, the broker assists the individual to make informed decisions. Brokers 'empower' consumers by assisting them to 'walk through' various community service systems, and to use their funding allocation in a more capable way.

Service brokerage is based on the principle that the proper role of the helping professional is that of an 'auxiliary'. While not anti-professional, the effective broker works informally with the individual, de-emphasising and demystifying the power of the professional.

On a deeper level, the brokerage function reflects the individual's need for a technical extension in order to develop a vision of a dignified and self-determining life in the community. The knowledge and information base which brokerage represents, combined with the purchasing power of individualised funding, provides the consumer with the resources necessary to achieve that 'vision'.

The broker is a skilled generalist who is able to combine well developed personal

qualities, a sound knowledge base and a variety of professional/technical skills. The broker's accountability is to the individual and his or her right to make all decisions. As such, the boundaries and requirements of the brokerage role differ significantly from those of traditional social service professions. It is these general requirements, along with a brief overview of training, which are the focus of this article.

Personal qualities and skills

From a consumer's point of view, the most important quality a broker has is a fundamental commitment to empowering people with disabilities (and their networks) while safeguarding basic human rights. The broker accepts, unequivocally, the consumer's right to make decisions impacting on his or her quality of life.

The planning process is facilitated in a way that does not impose the broker's professional judgements and needs. This can sometimes be difficult for the broker who, while acting in a caring and responsible way, also respects each person's right to 'dignity of risk'.

Can the broker's sense of personal commitment to the individual be developed and safeguarded? In my view, commitment is a feature of an individual's personality. It is not a function of education and training, or professional regulation. The only thing likely to keep the broker on track is adherence to a human (versus professional) value system that recognises the inherent worth and uniqueness of all individuals and their right to full integration, autonomy and self-determination.

Stated simply, values are the 'building blocks' of perceptions and attitudes, and ultimately human behaviour. Values thus play a central role in determining whether behaviour is ethical or competent, an important consideration for the broker who acts on the consumer's agenda. The broker requires other personal attributes and skills, including: tact, diplomacy, finesse, initiative, sound judgement, a high energy level, tenacity, empathy, listening skills, flexibility, objectivity, an ability to relate to others, warmth, sensitivity, patience, a

sense of humour, perseverance, integrity and trust.

Knowledge base

In striving to become a full and valued member of society, the disabled individual needs to develop several fundamental capabilities. However, because of the negative stereotypes and reduced status associated with the experience of disability, many people have few opportunities to develop these capabilities. The competent broker is familiar with the social and psychological processes through which people meet essential needs and develop their capabilities.

On a more pragmatic level, the broker understands relevant legislation, social policies and programs (and their associated criteria), and has insight into the politics of how large bureaucracies and systems work. Of equal importance, the broker is aware of available generic services and supports in the community and how they can be accessed. Sound general knowledge of the various fields pertinent to the community living needs of consumers is essential.

Professional and technical skills

The planning process itself is highly individualised, requiring an array of professional and technical skills, as well as the flexibility to work in different roles.

Depending on the consumer's wishes, the broker may be called upon to gather and interpret information, liaise with various systems and professionals, prepare a written plan setting out the cost and type of the individual's service requirements, identify appropriate services, negotiate for funding, prepare service contracts, or implement and monitor contractual agreements. These tasks call for problem-solving, mediation, community development, strategic planning and facilitation skills.

Over time, the broker provides technical assistance to professionals or community agencies, such as interpreting or translating the individual's needs and goals. The broker may act as a catalyst, identifying service gaps and recommending new or

modified service options to support the individual. As a personal agent and technical resource, the broker is also in a unique position to help mediate misunderstandings or disagreements between the individual and service systems. Additionally, the broker can assist in the process of developing or broadening an individual's personal network where this involvement is minimal or non-existent.

From an organisational perspective, the broker is self-directed and able to prioritise work tasks. A clear understanding of the boundaries of the brokerage role is critical. Confusing brokerage with advocacy or case management will only compromise the individual's interests and undermine the broker's credibility. The broker also strikes a balance between getting on with the job at hand and developing his or her knowledge and skill base.

Training

Brokerage is as dependent on personal qualities and sense of humanity as it is on an eclectic knowledge base or acquiring specific technical skills. Any discussion of brokerage is therefore incomplete without addressing the topic of training.

I became a broker having worked extensively in social services after

graduating with a social work qualification. While this 'eased' my transition, I am convinced that formal education alone (at either the university or college level) cannot provide all of the required training. There is no substitute for the 'hands on' experience one gets from working directly with people with disabilities, their families, and friends. This is not meant to suggest, however, that training programs should not be developed and one day used in conjunction with the supports provided by agencies themselves.

Service brokerage is a complex and demanding role requiring acceptance of the notion that professional 'power' can only result from effectively empowering others while enhancing their status. This 'new' orientation will clearly require ongoing refinement of the brokerage role, particularly in training. Wherever brokerage is developed, measures will need to be taken on an organisational level, with significant consumer input, to ensure that conditions and opportunities prevail in which the qualities and skills needed by brokers can be developed and safeguarded.

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