

10 Pitfalls That Parent Leaders Should Avoid

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Empowering parents to work alongside professionals in the work of improving outcomes for children and their families in education, healthcare and human services is the best way to see the kind of success that many want to see in schools, organizations, programs and projects. “Parent leader” is the term often used to describe those parents who are “consumers” who answer the call to use their time, talent and experiences to make a difference.

While this way of doing business is spreading like wildfire, there are some pitfalls that parent leaders might encounter. Parent leaders (and those who work with them) should try to avoid:

Becoming overcommitted – There are so many worthy causes and organizations out there. There are so many good things for parent leaders to do with their time and talent. Saying yes to too many worthy causes can overwhelm even the most energetic and passionate parent leader. Having too many commitments can prevent parent leaders from doing their very best. A parent leader’s reputation suffers as well as the worthy cause that they ultimately wanted to help.

Working on initiatives that are not a good fit – Parent leaders are passionate about helping other families. Aspects of their own journey often spark a parent to step up as a leader to help improve things. Before accepting a leadership opportunity, parent leaders should know what it is about that opportunity that speaks to them to ensure that it is a good fit. Parent leaders’ energy, commitment and participation will be fueled by their passion for that initiative if it something that they already care deeply about.

Having unresolved issues in their own situation – Parent leaders are sought after because they have firsthand experience with the system, organization or process that they are called to work on or help improve. Many times, parent leaders are still facing issues in their own situation. That will never stop. Problems arise when issues in the parent leaders’ own situation prevent them from remaining objective or from being constructive in their interactions with others. Parent leaders should try to find the answers and help they need so that they are not jeopardizing the success of the organization or initiative they have signed on to assist. Professionals will encounter parent leaders with unresolved issues. Those parent leaders who struggle in this area are often dropped or prevented from participating in more opportunities rather than risk experiencing something that would be detrimental to the organization’s efforts to move forward.

Operating with their own agenda – Parent leaders are called upon to assist professionals in the work of *their* organizations – not those of the parent leader. Parent leaders must be clear of the boundaries that they are working in. When a parent leader loses sight of what they have been called upon to accomplish, they risk derailing initiatives and alienating work team members. The relationship between parent leaders and professionals is a partnership. Professionals who are working with a parent leader functioning with their own agenda become apprehensive about continuing to work with that parent leader. The key for parent leaders is to align any personal agendas they might have with the objectives of any initiatives that they sign on to.

Anger (that is not constructive) – Parent leaders are sometimes fueled by anger. It is the kind of anger that can be constructive. Effective parent leaders use that anger to change an existing practice or process. This kind of anger can be converted into passion. When parent leaders are unable to channel their anger, they risk becoming ineffective. Parent leaders must make sure that they are making a positive difference when they are making waves.

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1. **Becoming overcommitted**
2. **Working on initiatives that are not a good fit**
3. **Having unresolved issues in their own situation**
4. **Operating with their own agenda**
5. **Anger (that is not constructive)**
6. **Being impatient with outcomes**
7. **Lack of training**
8. **Being no longer regarded as a parent, but a professional**
9. **Poorly defined expectations for participation**
10. **Burnout**

Being impatient with outcomes – Parent leaders want to know that the time that they are sacrificing away from their family is making a difference. It is important for parent leaders to learn that change takes time; sometimes so long that the efforts of parent leaders may not even benefit their own child or their own situation. Making sure that success and outcomes are clearly defined before signing on to an opportunity is essential to avoid becoming impatient.

Lack of training – Parent leaders are recruited but are often left to fend for themselves after signing on to initiatives. Don't be afraid to ask questions, seek help or request training.

Being no longer regarded as a parent, but a professional – Parent leaders start off as consumers of a service, program or at the school where their child attends. As a parent's leadership grows, so do their skills. It is often the case that parent leaders are hired to sustain family initiatives in organizations and programs. That experience remains valuable. What can get lost when parent leaders make this transition is a true consumer perspective. Things are likely different than when the parent leader experienced it as a consumer. The voice of current consumers must be preserved when trying to create change.

Poorly defined expectations for participation – The impact of parent leaders is usually positive and immediate. Parent leaders and organizations embarking on a new initiative are enthusiastic. It is important to define the role of the parent leader in the work ahead so that all parties know what success looks like. Parent leaders know right away when their input is not fully embraced. When recruiting a parent leader, expectations should be mutually agreed upon to ensure shared responsibility for the collaboration.

Burnout – Parent leaders can burnout for many different reasons. Circumstances such as remaining in a leadership role indefinitely;

being the only parent leader involved; or experiencing new personal challenges can all result in burnout. Some parent leaders have been in their roles so long that they become barriers to new parent leader voices. Recruitment for new parent leaders should be ongoing. Professionals who interact directly with families should always be thinking about recruiting a parent to work with them systemically. Personal connections and personal relationships are the best recruitment tool!