



Words of Advice...

*from Linda Horton-St. Hubert
and Geneva Morrison*

10 STEPS FOR BEING A SUCCESSFUL ADVISOR

1. *Begin with yourself.* You can't participate effectively as an advisor until you have yourself together. Think about how you present yourself. Develop an understanding of how you come across to others. Strive to be positive.
2. *Learn about the community.* Learn who the people and programs are and what they do.
3. *Develop the big picture.* Educate yourself about the issues that concern all people affected by the service system. Think beyond your own family.
4. *Develop new skills.* Attend conferences (especially the free ones). Learn about computers, about public speaking, about how organizations work.
5. *Assume the best about people.* Providers are not the enemy. Build bridges, don't burn them.
6. *Learn to collaborate*—with providers and other consumers.
7. *Be prepared.* Do your homework. Read what they send you. Ask questions.
8. *Learn to say "no."* Don't take on too much. Know when you need a break.
9. *Share the spotlight.* Suggest other families who can also participate in advisory activities. Provide encouragement to them.
10. *Go to the dump-yard.* Get rid of old prejudices and stereotypes. Keep an open mind and an open heart.

Telling Your Story

A skill you will use often in your role as an advisor is story-telling. Family leaders are frequently asked to share their stories. These stories are an important and precious resource for family members in their advisory, leadership, and support activities.

Your story of your experiences with the service system can be a powerful tool for bringing about constructive change. When you share your story with providers and policy makers you deepen their understanding of the issues, increase their sensitivity to children and families, and help them make decisions that lead to more supportive policies and practices.

As an advisor you will have the opportunity to share your family's story in many different circumstances and settings. You may be asked to tell your story at a committee or advisory board meeting. You may be invited to speak to a group of providers-in-training, to give a formal presentation at a conference, or to provide testimony to elected officials.

The way you present your story can have a long term effect on the way people view you, your child and family, and other families in similar circumstances. Therefore, it is important to give some serious thought to why and how you want to tell your story.



Words of Advice... from Geneva Morrison

I started telling my story.

The more I shared it, the more healing I received for myself.

Before you agree to tell your story, consider the following questions:

- What am I willing to share?
- What do I feel is too private to share?
- What does my family not want me to talk about?
- What will my story teach those who are listening?

It is very important to think through these questions and issues before you are called on to share your personal experiences. Sometimes reliving these private family experiences can be painful. Planning ahead for what you will share, and how you will share it, will help you feel more comfortable when the time comes to tell about an event in your family's life. Remember, your story is a precious resource—use it thoughtfully and wisely.



Words of Advice...
from Mona Freedman

We begin every Interagency Coordinating Council meeting with a family story. I think it helps build trust between families and providers, and reminds us of the real purpose of our work.

Before you agree to tell your story, you should also gather as much information as possible about what is expected of you and what you can expect. *Table 4—Before You Tell Your Story: Some Questions You May Want To Ask* presents some questions to help you gather the information you may need to make a decision about whether or not you want to tell your story.

Table 4

BEFORE YOU TELL YOUR STORY: SOME QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK

- When do you want me to speak? What day? What time? For how long?
- Where do you want me to speak? What site or city?
- Who is the audience? How many people will be there?
- Can you assure my confidentiality?
- What's the theme or topic?
- What part of my story do you want to hear?
- Is there a message you want me to leave them with?
- Is there reimbursement for child care and transportation?
- Is there an honorarium?
- Do you need an answer today? If not, by when?

If you decide to accept the invitation to speak, think carefully about the message you want your audience to remember. Your story is a rich and complex one. Be sure to pick the parts that are relevant to the situation or audience, and try to focus on two or three main points. Finally, organize your thoughts. You might even want to jot down an outline of your remarks. The most important thing, however, is to speak from your heart—be authentic, be respectful, and be constructive. You'll be wonderful!

For more guidance and ideas about speaking in public see the section on *Providing Training* on page 54.

Table 5

WHEN YOU TELL YOUR STORY: THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ✓ Know who your audience is and prepare with it in mind.
- ✓ Practice ahead of time.
- ✓ Use only two or three main points in your story.
- ✓ Use your own style.
- ✓ Use people-first language.
- ✓ Look at your audience.
- ✓ If you are comfortable doing so, share pictures of your child or family.
- ✓ Leave time for questions and answers.
- ✓ If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
- ✓ Let the audience know your boundaries.
- ✓ Be honest.
- ✓ It may be helpful to put highlights of your story on note cards as a reference during the presentation—but avoid reading from them.
- ✓ Expect that some people who hear your story may be deeply moved. And remember, you might also feel emotional when you tell your story.
- ✓ Consider taking a friend, family member, or supporter with you. They can help with any problems that arise and sit up front so you can focus on a friendly face.

Table 6

A CHECKLIST FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

- Handle differences in a timely manner, as soon after the event as possible.
- Stay in the present—do not focus on the past.
- Separate the event from the person, focusing on the incident at hand, not on personalities.
- Take responsibility for helping create the problem. Few conflicts are the sole responsibility of one person.
- Use “I” language, not “you”, “we”, or “they.” Speak from your own experiences and take responsibility for your own ideas and feelings.
- Take care in making inferences and drawing conclusions. Describe the event as you experienced it, relate your feelings, and state the specific changes you would like to see.
- Listen carefully. Climb into the other person’s shoes and try to understand his or her perspective, no matter how foreign it may be to your own thinking. Remember—others feel as passionately about their ideas and feelings as you do!
- Recognize others for their efforts and willingness to engage and care about each other.

Adapted from May, James (1995). *Change: A Catalyst for Conflict and Growth. Advances*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp 18-19.

Table 7

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING YOUR BALANCE

- Evaluate your goals and priorities frequently. Are you meeting them? Is the time you're investing making a difference?
- Put your family first. Apply the twenty-year rule—will this have mattered to my family twenty years from now?
- Set priorities—decide what issues need to be tackled first.
- If you are in a paid staff position, strive for a clear, meaningful, and realistic job description that is flexible and can change over time.
- Set limits on travel, committee assignments, and conference presentations.
- Recognize that your colleagues—other parents and providers—have much they can teach you.
- Insist on having access to key leaders and decision makers.
- Find an experienced family member or provider to be your mentor.
- Stay in touch with other families. Involve other parents to ease the burden of representing the consumer perspective.
- Have patience, courage, and a sense of humor.

Table 8

TIPS FOR SERVING ON AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

- Ask for directions to the meeting. Allow plenty of time to get there.
- Find out if parking is available and where to park.
- Get a phone number to leave with your family or sitter.
- Read materials you've received ahead of time.
- Ask the members to introduce themselves if they haven't.
- Take notes—they will help you remember later.
- Ask questions—there is no such thing as a dumb question. Someone else probably has the same question and feels too shy to ask.
- Ask for explanations of acronyms or confusing terminology.
- Observe body language—you'll pick up a lot of clues about how people are feeling.
- Attending regularly will help you to clarify the issues, understand the group's dynamics, and learn who is an ally.
- Know yourself—be clear about your values and priorities.
- Get to know the providers and learn about their perspectives.
- Offer to share your community resources and networks.
- Listen.