NASDDDS Blog

Advocate Voice: A Blog By Max Barrows and Hasan Ko

Reflections on Leadership

Let's work together to make sure that no matter how long we've been doing our jobs, we always keep learning new ways to do things. As Directors, we respect your need for things to run smoothly. But as advocates, we are not interested in keeping things the same. We want to change the way things are.

State Directors Tip List for "Lifting Up" Peer Leaders

- Supporting self-advocates to be leaders begins with supporting us to believe that we can be leaders and that we can make change happen. Our confidence plays a big role in being a leader. If we do not have confidence, we will not want to say anything.
- It is not just about teaching leadership, people with disabilities need OPPORTUNITIES to be a leader.
- Have high expectations and avoid making assumptions about what a person can or cannot do. Don't just ask us to handle only small or not-so-important jobs. Try not to be surprised when we say something brilliant, when we dress nicely, or when we are well organized.
- When picking people for a committee, look beyond what a person is good at. Make sure they're part of a self-advocacy group and really understand our community. It's tempting to choose someone who has strong communication skills, but we want you to find folks who are really involved in the self-advocacy movement.
- Allies may need to take a moment to slow down and step back. Some might think it's quicker to take charge and make things happen. But really, that just makes self-advocates feel passive and uninterested.
- Offer support for peer mentoring. A peer is someone with lived experience who shows how leaders act and speak. They lead by showing us what to do. Working closely with a peer mentor allows us to get timely feedback. When we're with peers, it's easier to share ideas. This creates a safe space where we can be honest about what we're doing.
- Remember transportation can be a problem. Please plan for that.

Self-Advocates Leadership Tip List

- Leaders live in the future. Avoid only focusing on problems. Focus on how life can be better for people with disabilities. Describe what our lives could be like if we had enough support to work.

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- Every time we meet, let's remember two things:
    1. Understand and talk about the things that matter.
    2. Take a moment to get to know the people we're meeting. Sometimes, we're so busy thinking about what we need to do that we forget to connect with others. As leaders, it's important to have good relationships with the people we work with.

- Think about the saying "Leaders come in all shapes and sizes." Support self-advocates for leadership who represent everyone in your community. When you have people from different backgrounds, it might take time to make sure everyone understands what's happening. Some might not speak English as their first language or use verbal speech to communicate.

- Sometimes, we might look to people in power to know what to think and do. But remember, state officials often need to follow their leadership, and people with disabilities have our own ideas and plans. It's important to be careful about who we listen to during meetings. We should talk things over with our peers before we share our thoughts or agree with a policy.

- Get used to being okay with silence. Most non-traditional ways of communicating take more time. Resist the urge to talk when someone is thinking about what to say. For quiet people who have a hard time speaking up, when we feel you'll give us time to talk, we're more likely to say what is on our minds.

NASDDDS and Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA) began a partnership in 2021 to ensure advocate voices have a seat at the table as we support our members. The mission of GMSA is for people with developmental disabilities to educate peers to take control over their own lives; make decisions; solve problems; and speak for themselves. Another purpose of Green Mountain Self-Advocates is to educate and make the public aware of the strengths, rights, wants, and needs of people with developmental disabilities. Find out more at www.gmsavt.org.

Max Barrows is Outreach Director for Green Mountain Self-Advocates, a position he has held since 2007. He mentors youth and adults with developmental disabilities to speak up for themselves and become leaders. GMSA is a lead partner of the Self-Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center (SARTAC). Max leads SARTAC's technical assistance team assisting local and state self-advocacy organizations across the nation.

Hasan Ko is a professional at Green Mountain Self Advocates and a leader of their work on including people with disabilities from diverse backgrounds. Hasan says, "No matter where we come from, we have the right to be ourselves in our own way." Hasan mentors peers in his local self-advocacy group. He represents GMSA on national projects.

The perspectives and opinions presented in this blog do not necessarily represent NASDDDS and are purely those of the authors.