

Common Mistakes in Engaging Diverse Family Leaders

As organizations work to increase family engagement and improve equity, they can often make errors that impact their efforts to build trust with the communities they want to reach out to.

By understanding some of these common mistakes and learning to avoid them, organizations can have more authentic and inclusive family engagement.



Tokenism

Tokenism is making only a symbolic effort to include family leaders or underrepresented groups by recruiting a small number in order to give the appearance of engagement.

What Tokenism Looks Like in Practice

Tokenism is a lack of equitable representation. This can include having only one family leader participating in an initiative, or only one family leader from a specific population or cultural group.

The Impact of Tokenism

Tokenism can make the family leader feel isolated or feel that they have to be the sole representative of an entire cultural group's experiences. This can place a lot of pressure on the family leader and can even cause family leaders to disengage. Another danger of tokenism is that it can result in hearing very little from communities with the greatest risk or worst outcomes.

Avoiding Tokenism through Equitable Representation

Just as there are usually multiple voices from majority groups represented in health care change initiatives, it makes sense to have multiple voices from underrepresented groups. This allows for a sense of safety among these participants and a variety of perspectives that can enrich the outcomes of your work.



Learn more about avoiding tokenism by exploring the Representation domain of our research-based family engagement framework at familyvoices.org/FESAT/infographics.



Paternalism

Paternalism is making decisions on behalf of others and presuming to understand their needs while restricting their power and autonomy in decision-making processes.

What Paternalism Looks Like in Practice

Paternalism can look like assigning family leaders to menial tasks in an initiative and limiting their participation in decision-making, often with the assumption that having more robust participation will be “too much” for them. Paternalism also occurs when leaders of an initiative ask for feedback on a plan they have developed and completed in the absence of the people most affected by the success of the plan.

The Impact of Paternalism

In practice, paternalism can look well-meaning because people who have knowledge and experience are trying to solve a problem. However, solving a problem *for* people rather than *with* people often results in missteps that can waste time, efforts and money by identifying solutions that don’t actually work for the people you want to reach. Paternalism can also make family leaders feel underutilized and unappreciated because they have limited participation and leadership in solving problems that are important to them.

Avoiding Paternalism through Meaningful Engagement

The phrase “nothing about us without us” is a direct response to paternalism. Sharing power is one way to avoid paternalism through meaningful engagement and co-creation. Family leaders should be engaged in leadership roles in all aspects of an initiative, from planning an initiative, setting its goals and objectives, implementing the plan, measuring the outcomes, and sharing the impact of the work.

It is also important to understand that communities have their own knowledge and solutions to the problems they experience. Engaging with communities and learning from them, rather than assuming they need to learn from you, can help you connect and build trust.



Learn more about avoiding paternalism by exploring the Impact domain of our research-based family engagement framework at familyvoices.org/FESAT/infographics.



Exploitation

Exploitation is treating family leaders unfairly or inequitably in order to benefit from their work or ideas.

What Exploitation Looks Like in Practice

Exploitation occurs when families are expected to share their knowledge and expertise without equitable compensation from the initiative or organization. This can mean expecting family leaders to volunteer their time while the professionals involved are being compensated, or compensating families at a rate that is inequitable.

The Impact of Exploitation

An underlying assumption with exploitation is that lived experience has less value than professional knowledge and experience. This is often felt by family leaders, who can feel undervalued when they are expected to share what they know, often including trauma they have experienced, with little or no compensation. Exploitation can ruin opportunities to build trust and can eventually push family leaders away from the work of transforming care.

Avoiding Exploitation through Equitable Engagement

Equitable family engagement requires a commitment from an initiative or organization to compensate families fairly for their work and contributions. This involves having buy-in from organizational leaders and developing policies and payroll processes to compensate family leaders.

Just as professionals have an expectation to be compensated at regular intervals, family leaders should have clear expectations for when their compensation will be processed and paid. When developing family compensation processes, it is important to ensure that your organization is paying family leaders in a timely way for their work. Delays can have a particularly great impact when you are engaging disadvantaged populations.



Learn more about avoiding exploitation by exploring the Commitment domain of our research-based family engagement framework at familyvoices.org/FESAT/infographics.