

Questions from the Microboards Australia webinar

1. How do you find people for a microboard when a person has no family or friends and the main people involved are paid staff?

Originally microboards were designed for this purpose – to figure out whether a group of people could be attracted to an individual who was profoundly isolated for the purpose of supporting the process of getting them out of an institution and into the community. David Wetherow (<http://www.communityworks.info/articles/microboard.htm>) reflects on this process:

The very first Microboard was developed on behalf of a man who had spent several decades in a large institution....The first Microboard members were three people who were connected with a Lutheran church that had become our friend's 'home church'. When prospective Microboard members asked us, "What do you us to do?" we described the functions of the Microboard (and the role of the individual members who formed the corporation) in the following way:

- a) Listening deeply to John, in a spirit of respect and alliance;*
- b) Being a friend (spending time with John, visiting his home, opening your home to him, etc.);*
- c) Introducing him to other trusted people;*
- d) Introducing him to trusted community circles and associations (church, clubs, etc.) to which you belong or to which you have personal connections;*
- e) Helping him find ways to make contributions and offer his gifts to the larger community;*
(etc - there are more, but these are the roles which relate to building relationships for the person)

If we can find some existing connections, then part of the role of the microboard formation group is to be including the person in their own social networks, and in this way new connections can develop and grow.

It is actually quite rare to find people who have no connections at all – usually there are at the very least people from the person's past who often did want to stay in relationship with the person but didn't know how. This is such a common theme that relationship facilitators have a name for the role played in re-energising these past relationships – 'The Reconnector'.

'The role of the Reconnector is to re-establish past relationships.

This is a logical place to start.

Family, friends from the past and people previously in paid roles already have some understanding of the person's life experience.

They may have an interest in rebuilding the relationship.

Very often, people did not want to end the association, but for a number of reasons were unable to maintain it'.

(from a presentation by Linda Perry, CEO of Vela Canada, Blue Mountains Sept 2015)

So we can start by looking to the past, as well as to any groups or places in the community the person may presently have a connection with. We don't discount other people with disability either if these are the connections the person has mainly had. The quality of the relationship is

the most important thing, so if there is a housemate or friend at a day program or who they went to school with who is interested, they can also be part of the microboard.

If there really isn't anybody to help get this started, then our work is to start building friendships and connections for the person. In general, the most likely way this will happen is when the person is included in a group in their community, for a long enough period for people to get to know them – in our experience this is usually between 3 and 6 months. It could take a year or more of intentional work getting the person connected.

Facilitating friendships can be skilled work – for some people it can come naturally, but if not, then relationship facilitators will need opportunities for teaching and coaching. Microboards Australia can provide opportunities for this learning for people who are interested.

Microboards aren't designed to be a crisis response strategy, but sometimes there might be an urgent situation where a person isn't safe and needs support right now – and we'd also tackle this. A couple of times we have drawn on parents or other family members networks to create a microboard group quickly, or we might look in the community for people who are interested in getting to know the person. This would be unusual, but still possible. Clearly we'd expect strong support from the Catalyst in this kind of situation to safeguard everybody.

2. Who forms the microboard?

Microboards Australia assist with the formation of microboards in Australia. In general this tends to be a complex task which is ideally supported by somebody with experience and who is in a paid role. Microboards Australia has a Catalyst role whose job it is to coach people through the process of forming a microboard. Whilst there may be some situations where families or the people involved are able to form the microboard themselves, this still needs to be done in relationship with Microboards Australia to make sure that the principles and practices of the Vela Microboard model as trademarked in British Columbia are upheld.

Microboards Australia can provide Catalyst support to form microboards to any location as long as there is phone or internet access. Several groups have also organised two day workshops with us to assist in getting started – as well as in WA we've run these in the ACT and recently in NSW. In response to demand, we are looking at the possibility of employing and training microboard Catalysts in other states next year – we'd be keen to hear from anyone interested in this.

Its important to remember that microboards are sustainable because they are part of an overarching organisation and extended community who are committed to being there in the long term future should assistance be needed. Without a relationship with the parent organisation there are risks to the sustainability of the model. For example, in British Columbia there are a number of microboards who have kept on supporting the person after parents have passed away, but they have needed support from Vela BC to do this.

3. Are there any microboards in Australia for a person who is older and looking towards retirement?

Not at this time. We've heard there are microboards in North America assisting older people to stay in their homes and to avoid going into aged care facilities which sounds awesome to us – we'd be keen to explore this further if there were interest.

4. What is the advantage of a formalised microboard over an informal network?

The process of formally incorporating a microboard, and of its members making a legal commitment to supporting the focus person, seems to make microboards more sustainable than informal networks, which tend to struggle in the longer term without a paid facilitator in place (it sounds like informal networks may have a 4 – 5 year lifespan without paid support to help them function, whereas there are a number of microboards now who have been functioning for many years and in some cases for decades). Incorporation probably protects against the possibility of a group losing its way because the legal requirements of formal roles (for example Chair, Secretary etc) mean that the group can't stop functioning without due legal process being followed. Having an annual AGM is a good check in to make sure the membership of the microboard is working as it should and a natural exit/entry point for members. If somebody wants to leave the board, and this would leave the group with less than the legally mandated number of members, the group is legally required to appoint a new member.

5. How do you plan for succession, given microboard members may come and go?

Part of the role of the microboard is to include the person in their own social and other networks, so if the group is functioning well there are growing connections. Its also good to plan for diversity in microboards for example having a range of age groups. As part of the role of the microboard is to support the person's inclusion in their community, there will naturally be a growing number of people who are potential candidates as microboard members.

The more that we promote microboards and people see the great results of having one, they are more attractive they become. So far keeping microboard membership numbers healthy hasn't been a challenge. If it really does become tricky for a group, then Microboards Australia can step in to assist.

6. What reporting/accountability requirements to funders have of microboards? Are funders interested in outcomes or only outputs?

To date in WA we have been operating under the shared management system, so we've had the same reporting/accountability as anybody else – because of our system, this has been outcomes based as well as output.

We are just in the process now of exploring how microboards will work under the NDIS, so watch this space. Our expectations (and hopes!) are that there will be significant interest in outcomes when it comes to reporting and accountability.

7. Is a microboard eligible for funding from the NDIS on behalf of someone who already has funding or would be eligible for the NDIS?

We're a bit unsure if we have understood this question correctly, but we are just now exploring this question about the relationship between microboards and funding. We don't yet have

microboards in any of the trial sites where the microboard is managing the funding. Our understanding currently under the NDIS is that an individual who was self managing can direct their funding to their microboard to manage if they wish.

8. Do microboards run/manage a person's support services, or are they solely about supporting the person's decisions and direction?

Every microboard is tailored to the individual they support, so it depends. They may manage support services in a range of ways from recruiting and training staff to negotiating and managing relationships with agencies who provide services to the person. If that's not what the person wants or needs, then that can be about supporting the person in other ways.

9. If a peer network wants to have a conversation about microboards, how do you recommend they do this?

They could watch this webinar, or there other webinars on the Microboards Australia website (<http://youniverse.org.au/our-work/webinar-series>) for more information. We are also available to talk with groups via Skype/Facetime/Online meeting platforms.

Unfortunately Microboards Australia isn't a funded organisation so we do need to charge a fee for services, however we try to keep these reasonable.

We are currently trialling a range of coaching packages so let us know if you are interested in getting started on forming your microboard!