



Show Notes

Episode #4 – Best Business Practices in Aphasia Care: In Conversation with Lynn Maher Premiered on December 15, 2016

Today, Dr. Janet Patterson (VA Northern California) speaks with Dr. Lynn Maher about the business practices of a community aphasia group. Dr. Maher is in the Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences at the University of Houston and she is also a founding board member of the Houston Aphasia Recovery Center.

In today's episode, you will learn:

- How to find the best fit and engage people who want to be part of your community aphasia group
- How to balance the desire to build programs for people with aphasia with good stewardship and being fiscally responsible
- How Founder's Syndrome and Magical Thinking can both propel and stall your community aphasia group.

Dr. Maher, how did you first become involved in the Houston Aphasia Recovery Center and how did it get started?

When we moved to Houston about 16 years ago, I knew that there was a serious lack of support for people with aphasia. I was strictly doing research at that time and I just could not figure out how to get something started. Then, I got really lucky because about six years after I started at the University of Houston, I got a phone call from Rita Justice. Her husband had a stroke and had aphasia. She asked around and found out that there were no services for people with aphasia and, eventually, she found her way to me and said, "We have to start something." I told her, "You know, I've been waiting for your phone call for six years." So, that's how we got started.

There was just a small group of us and we simply collected donations from the founders. Then, we hired a consulting firm for nonprofits and that was probably the smartest decision that we made because there's so much about developing a non-profit and supporting a non-profit we simply didn't know. The consultants were able to walk us through how to set-up our first strategic plan: mission, vision, timeline, needs, and costs. With that direction, we started with a small drop-in group at the University of Houston. With the help of student volunteers, the group helped people with aphasia work on their conversation and embrace supported communication. It was great that the student volunteers got a chance to really get a lot of exposure in the discipline, too. While this group was happening, the rest of the board was meeting separately to

develop the organization's plans and forward our agenda. We held some fundraisers until we had the critical mass of people and resources that we needed to really move the vision forward and get some more formal organization.

Initially, we thought that we might do this whole project in conjunction with the university, but it turned out that it was better for us to simply be a distinct organization with our own 501(c)3 status. It simply made fundraising easier. In order to do that, we needed to get an accountant to help us with that. So, once we recognized we would need new skills on our board to help us grow, we started recruiting people that could help us develop according to our plan.

It took you a bit of time to actually pull all these people together and get the right people at the table, right?

It did. I ran the drop-in group for a couple of semesters and then we were able to pay someone else to run it. It took us a couple of years really to get the right group of people on the board. Finding the right way for people to participate is a big part of the skill. Some people have more time than treasure to offer and so we find the right fit for people who are willing to work with us. We got someone to be the head of our finance committee and help with financial management. We were also able to find someone who is an attorney to help us with some of the legal aspects. As I mentioned, we got an accountant. It took us a couple of years before we were ready to open the doors of our own place, but we had someone on the board who is a commercial real estate person and he was very helpful in finding a location for us. All of this planning for the shape of our board started back during our original strategic planning meetings.

One of the big questions was whether the executive director had to be someone who was a speech language pathologist or could it be somebody else. In the end, we decided that there was nothing about being a speech pathologist that actually made us good at developing a nonprofit and it would be better to find someone who had development and grantwriting skills. So, we originally set it up where the speech language pathologists would be in charge of the programs and the executive director would be in charge of the development of the organization. Originally, our executive director was Rita Justice and, since we had no money, she did it for free. But, once we had some financial resources, we hired an executive director and hired a development consultant - that allowed us to accomplish a lot of what we wanted without having a huge salary drain.

That sounds like it's an important piece to consider: who is on the board and what role will they play? How can they help us make sure that we've covered all of our needs?

That's right. Also, there were a number of times when we had people join the board or think they were going to join the board and then they ultimately decided that they didn't have the time to devote to that activity. That prompted us to develop our Community Board so that these people could still be involved in HARC. Periodically, we have board retreats where we can really focus on our strategic plan. As we've grown, we've made sure to gradually add the right people and to develop bylaws so that we have a functioning architecture.

When you think about HARC and the phrase "best business practices", what does that mean to you and your boards?

I think it depends on who you are speaking to. One of the things that we were committed to was the idea of developing a critical mass of people and resources before we embarked on something new. So, it's been slow growth and slow expansion, but we feel that it makes more sense to do it this way rather than starting with our big picture and trying to fill it all in at the same time. This means rolling out programs slowly from two days a week, to three, then four days a week.

I also think that checks and balances are good. There's the executive director who oversees everything, but there's also the finance committee that makes sure that we're sticking with our budget and maintaining our financial goals. And then, in addition to that, we have the Program Committee to analyze the programs and communicate to the rest of the board how they're being received. It's a reiterative process of developing our plan, then executing, evaluating, and revising as needed.

HARC has a board of directors, a professional advisory board, and a community advisory board. What role do persons with the aphasia and their family members have in these groups?

It depends on which board you're talking about. Many of the members of our executive board are either family members of people with aphasia or know someone who has aphasia. And so that's how they're connected. There are also quite a few family members and people with aphasia who are members of the community advisory board. For the professional advisory board, it is really people who have expertise in the area of aphasia. That board was critical when we were first starting and I'm so grateful for their guidance and it's such a comfort for me to know that I have them to call on if an issue were to arise and I would need their expertise. The fourth committee that we're still developing is our community partnership board. This is comprised of organizations who are supportive of HARC. We have partnerships with area hospitals and some area universities and so we're trying to formalize those community partnerships and understand everybody's role.

Also, before every board meeting, we have a moment or two where one of our participants speaks with the board about their experiences. We educate the board about that so that they understand more and are more involved. People with aphasia are our partners and they also participate in all of our fundraising activities as well.

That comment that you made about educating the board at the beginning of every board meeting strikes me as interesting because that can have a ripple effect throughout the community. The members of the board learn something about aphasia at the HARC board meeting and then later they interact with someone and can educate that individual and help spread the knowledge about aphasia. Is that how it all works?

Yes. I think that happens and I think that every board member and staff member has their elevator speech ready to go. I just think that meeting with people with aphasia and the people who participate in our programs just helps everyone remember why we're involved and why we're doing this. One example of this is that next week we are presenting a poster describing one-year outcomes of HARC programs for about 60 of our participants.

What business ideas and practices are in place to sustain HARC?

With each strategic plan that we develop, we set goals for how we want to grow and expand and what we need to do in terms of personnel. Then, periodically, other board members will be called into action depending on what it is we're working on. There's a constant effort for development because that's what makes us sustainable - a continued effort for fundraising, grantwriting, new connections, and our annual fundraising activities. We have a luncheon every year. It's a major fundraiser for us, but we also have smaller fundraisers, too. Recently, we've instituted a young professionals organization which is a new direction for nonprofits to make sure that they are growing committed supporters at the young professional stage. This helps them grow into becoming board members or contribute in other ways as their careers develop and become more stable.

In terms of sustainability, it's about looking ahead and planning for new resources but also making sure that we have people in place that can step in because our board terms are limited. So, we have to constantly be doing board development and attracting new people who might want to want to help us out.

What is an important lesson that you learned in the process of creating and sustaining HARC?

There's something called Founder's Syndrome. It refers to the tendency for people who've created a nonprofit or center to have difficulty letting go as that center evolves. And so, for me personally, I think that's the biggest lesson: learn to let go. HARC is a living, breathing organization and respecting that sometimes that means just stepping aside and letting it go in a direction that's different than what your vision was. It's not wrong, it's just different. Letting it grow in that direction can be hard when you've put time and effort in, but you've got to trust other people to take it where it's going to go.

What is one of your proudest moments in the story of HARC?

I'm so proud of everything that we've accomplished! But, there is one story that merges both of my passions - serving people with aphasia and providing them with services that they need; and preparing the future generation of speech language pathologists so that they they'll take over. We have a few activities that have paired students from my class and HARC. Later, after they had graduated, they came back to the center and started a program on Fridays to serve Spanish-speaking people with aphasia. And I'm just so proud of the fact that they were influenced by their experience as students and want to come back and give back in such an important way.