

# Ways to Prevent the Misuse of Person-Centered Planning

## Drawing on the Work of Michael Smull, John O'Brien, and Other Founders of the Field

*Outline created, content edited and reviewed by Allen, Shea & Associates • Researched by Anthropic AI • For individuals, families, and service coordinators • September 2026*

Person-centered planning started as a quiet act of resistance. It asked services to start with the person, not the program. Michael Smull, John O'Brien, Beth Mount, and others built this approach over decades. Their early writing still guides good practice today. As person-centered planning spread, it began to change. Its founders warned this could happen and named the ways it happens. This article summarizes their warnings. It also summarizes what they have recommended to prevent them.

## 1. What Person-Centered Planning Was Meant to Do

Person-centered planning starts with listening. It asks what matters to a person, and what matters for their health and safety. A good plan reflects the person's own values. It is built through relationship, not through a form.

John O'Brien describes this as a different kind of world than the usual service system. He calls it a "lifeworld," built on relationships and mutual care. He contrasts this with what he calls "system world." System world runs on rules, funding categories, and standard procedures. Good person-centered planning can exist inside a service system. But it depends on people choosing to protect it.

Source: [John O'Brien, "The Trouble With Person-Centered Planning"](#)

## 2. How It Gets Misused: Patterns to Watch For

Michael Smull and Susan Burke Harrison named specific ways person-centered planning gets misused. These patterns still show up today.

### Superficial Understanding

Some planners focus only on surface-level choices. Examples include a favorite food or a favorite color. This skips the harder work. That work is understanding a person's core values and what matters most in their life.

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### Coerced Consent

Some people feel they must agree to any conditions. This is common for people leaving institutions or restrictive settings. Their agreement may reflect a wish to leave, not a real preference. The plan then reflects staff power, not the person's voice.

### Reliance on Labels

Some planners choose a living situation based on a diagnosis. This ignores the person's own individuality. A label is not a life plan. Two people with the same diagnosis can want very different lives.

### Program Practices in New Language

Some organizations adopt person-centered words. But their daily practices stay the same as before. This creates plans that sound person-centered. The actual supports still come from a fixed menu of program slots.

### Not Enough Time and Effort

Good planning takes time. Rushed planning produces shallow plans that miss what truly matters to someone.

Source: [Michael Smull, "Person-Centered Planning and Perversion Prevention" \(summarized\)](#)

### Planning as a Compliance Tool

John O'Brien names a larger risk. Systems can absorb person-centered planning as a tool for their own purposes. In this pattern, the plan exists to document a choice. It is used to match a person to services that already exist. Satisfaction surveys or funding limits are then used to explain away any gap. The gap is between what a person wants and what they get. O'Brien warns this can happen even with good intentions. The pull toward compliance is built into how systems operate.

Source: [John O'Brien, "The Trouble With Person-Centered Planning"](#)

## 3. Why This Matters

These patterns are described by Smull and O'Brien as predictable pressures. Every organization faces limited funding, staff turnover, and audit requirements. These pressures push planning toward speed and documentation. Without deliberate effort, planning drifts toward what is easy to measure. It drifts away from what is hard to measure: a person's own vision for their life.

### 4. Ways to Prevent It

#### For Organizations and Systems

- Train staff in the values behind person-centered planning, not only the paperwork
- Give staff time in their schedules to build real relationships
- Track whether people's lives are changing, not only whether forms are complete
- Protect space for staff to raise honest concerns about unmet needs
- Avoid using satisfaction scores alone to claim a plan is working

#### For Individuals and Families

- Ask to slow down if a meeting feels rushed
- Say when a proposed plan sounds like an existing program, not a real choice
- Bring someone who knows you well to add context to your history
- Ask for your own words to appear in your written plan
- Request a follow-up meeting if your plan is not being carried out

#### For Facilitators and Service Coordinators

- Spend real time listening before writing anything down
- Ask about the person's history, relationships, and daily rhythms
- Separate what you observe from what a label suggests
- Write the plan in the person's own words where possible
- Return to the plan often, not only at the annual review
- Name any gap between what is wanted and what is offered

### Closing Note From the Founders

O'Brien does not offer a simple fix. He argues that protecting real person-centered planning takes ongoing, conscious effort. He describes it as choosing, over and over again, to notice a person's presence and wonder. This choice resists the pull toward routine and paperwork.

Smull's answer is more practical. He calls for deep listening, respect for individuality, and continuous engagement over time. Both point to the same conclusion. Person-centered planning stays alive only when people actively protect it.

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### Sources and Further Reading

Source: [John O'Brien, "The Trouble With Person-Centered Planning" \(2013\)](#)

Source: [Citizen Network summary of O'Brien's paper](#)

Source: [Michael Smull and Susan Burke Harrison, "Person-Centered Planning and Perversion Prevention" \(1993, summarized by Allen, Shea & Associates\)](#)

Source: [John O'Brien, Connie Lyle O'Brien, and Beth Mount, "Person-Centered Planning Has Arrived – Or Has It?" Mental Retardation, 35, 480–484 \(1997\)](#)

*This article summarizes the ideas of the cited authors in plain language. For their full arguments, read the original sources linked above.*