Social Work Leadership: A Missing Ingredient?

LEADERSHIP is a major theme in the literature of organizational behavior and in business management training, but until recently it was essentially a "nontheme" in social work training. A review of social work publications suggests that training for leadership is not stressed, although the concept of leadership appears in the literature sporadically.

Leadership is an important concept for any profession, both in the romantic vision that it suggests of bold new directions and in the pragmatic consequences that follow from its practice. Although the term itself is not without ambiguity, social workers are unlikely to deny the value of the leadership role. The idea of leadership carries with it the idea of setting a pace or influencing others, and it is my assumption that any profession would want to do this. Indeed, one of the issues that concerns us as social workers frequently is our leadership role vis-à-vis other professions. We are concerned that in interdisciplinary teams we are rarely leaders and that training in other professions such as law and medicine confers higher status and pay on practitioners and promotes leadership in community roles.

This article considers why leadership, which seems so significant an aspect of the professional role, has not received more attention in social work training and in the professional construct. Although the concept of leadership is not emphasized in the literature of other professions, such as medicine and law, these professions have more effective access to powerful political and economic interests and enjoy a relatively higher leadership position in a variety of arenas than does the social work profession. In the past, social workers achieved positions of influence and leadership; we need to consider why this seems to be less true at the present time and what social work training can do to help overcome this lacuna. Like social work, other professions, such as nursing and education, face the question of professional status and notions of leadership.

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A significant aspect of the role of professional social workers involves leadership activities with small groups and in the broader community. This article analyzes the construct of leadership embodied in management literature and the emphasis placed on training for leadership in organizations. The author contrasts social work's past history of leadership with the present gap in leadership development. She proposes ways to strengthen education for leadership in schools of social work.

In training for leadership, schools of business and management use a vast literature, drawn from social psychology, industrial psychology, and organizational behavior, to reinforce the notion that their graduates will be leaders. Because these schools train for leadership in an organizational environment, their message has particular significance for social workers who also practice within organizations.

THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

Despite its prevalence in the management and organizational literature, leadership remains an elusive concept. Generally, however, discussions of leadership in the management literature focus on the leader in an organizational setting and are related to goal-directing behavior. One commonly cited definition of leadership is "the process of influencing an organized group in its effort toward goal setting and goal achievement." This definition is somewhat limiting, however, because it ties the notion of leadership to formally organized groups. It is more appropriate to accept the broader definition of leadership as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group toward goal achievement in a given situation." In the broader definition, leadership involves the interaction of three main factors: the leader, the follower(s), and the nature of the situation. This definition is, to a large extent, value neutral: It does not include a normative statement about the quality of the goal as "good" or "bad," and it does not refer to the means by which the process of influence takes place. Instead, the definition focuses on the issue of influence as the critical component of leadership.

The first question in dealing with leadership and professional training in leadership is, By what means does the influence take place? Or, put differently, how does a leader succeed in leading? Extensive volumes have addressed this question, but, overall, theories of leadership can be characterized as falling into three categories:

1. Consideration of the personal characteristics that leaders are presumed to possess, such as intelligence, physical attractiveness, sense of humor, and above-average amounts of energy. This group of theories is described as trait theories.

2. Consideration of the behavior of the leader and of his or her leadership style. This group of theories is referred to as behavioral theories and uses some form of a bipolar scale, on which authoritarian, task-oriented behavior is at one extreme, in contrast with a democratic, process-oriented leadership style at the other extreme.

3. Consideration of individual needs and motivations in organizational settings. These settings are defined relative to tasks and to more elusive factors, such as group
Leaders are creative, take risks, and promote innovation and... growth.

TRADITION OF SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP

Social work's apparent de-emphasis on education for leadership needs to be contrasted with its past history. Certain social workers have manifested leadership both within and outside the profession. We have had leaders of great significance to the development of the profession and of professional expertise; and we have had some who achieved a prominent place in the community at large. Indeed, social work's growth as a profession was marked frequently by both kinds of leaders, although it was the community leaders who influenced public policy and, in general, conveyed the positive historical image of social work. In particular, Jane Addams, Edward T. Devine, and Florence Kelley, and to some extent, Mary Ellen Richmond earned reputations beyond the social work community, influencing the course of social welfare and the quality of life in our country in a broader sense. As Schorr and Baumhefner noted, "The early history of social work in the United States reflects a strong drive toward reform and promotion of the common welfare."

History appears to be cyclical. After the period of the 1920s, with its increased emphasis on professional skill and technical expertise, the 1930s saw the emergence of a climate favorable to social workers and to "friends" of social work concerned with social reforms. Individuals identified with social workers, such as Harry Lloyd Hopkins (as head of federal public welfare programs, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration) and Bertha Capen Reynolds (as director of the merchant seamen's trade union) became high-level administrators and were able to influence social policy nationally as a result of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. In the 1960s, there was a resurgence in the profession of social workers acting as reformers on the national level and in the community with case workers and group workers practicing as advocates for disadvantaged groups and individuals and assuming leadership roles in the civil rights struggle. War on Poverty, and Model Cities programs.

LEADERS AND MANAGERS

Much of the management literature seems to treat leadership and management as interchangeable terms resulting in a normative interpretation of leadership as "good management" or management that is effective. In the classic article that asked, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" the author Zaleznik answered in the affirmative. Managers may solve problems and keep organizations functioning, but leaders have special qualities.

In the context of a profession, moreover, leadership must be considered as a bifurcated function. That is, it embodies activity within the profession or in relation to particular positions that workers fill in organizations and it may apply to roles in the outside world, across the boundaries of the profession into the arena of public policy.
CURRENT ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Why is it that although social work history reflects a tradition of leadership, social work leadership in recent years is not comparable in emphasis or scope? Why is it that although textbooks on organizational behavior and social psychology include extensive discussions of leadership since the mid-1950s, leadership has no prominence in the social work curriculum? Given the evident importance of leadership in the arena of service delivery and social policy, what factors inhibit inclusion of the concept of leadership in social work education programs?21

The Great Divide

An initial response to the questions above is that the social psychology and organizational literature have occupied for a long time the opposite side of a great divide that separated the business world and corporate value systems from the social work profession and social work values.22 In the social work literature, discussions regarding leadership, as with other aspects of management training such as tools of accountability, management information systems, and strategic planning, were considered as part of the business spectrum and not of the service world. Issues addressing budgeting and information systems, however, found a niche in social work literature and training more easily than did the broader sociopsychological theories of leadership, which would seem to be more compatible with social work's traditional emphasis on interpersonal skills.23 Although the profession's apparently easier acceptance of ideas related to accountability may result largely from outside demands such as those of the government, there also seem to be internal reasons for the reluctance of the social work profession to absorb the concept of leadership.

Values, Personalities, and Practice

Although in schools of social work the various fields of practice have experienced fluctuations in student enrollment and student interest, direct practice with individuals, families, and groups (or casework, which includes group work) is still the bedrock of the profession, drawing the largest number of students. Yet, in many respects, students may be the individuals least interested in the concept of leadership roles and the least prepared to assume such roles. As venerable an authority as Charlotte Towle wondered whether social workers (by which she apparently meant caseworkers) had an affinity for the "constricted personality," and Varley is cited as concluding that social workers tend to "take a moderate position on behavioral situations reflecting value conflicts."24 Rein and White suggested that social workers are reluctant to recognize use of power and tend not to wield professional authority based on status and position. According to Rein and White, most social workers are not comfortable with the idea of power, which they generally exercise in behalf of those least able to defend themselves, namely, their clients.25

Although Hess and Williams found that students who specialize in organizing and planning are more change oriented and dominant in practice than are clinical students, in a recent article, Cournoyer reported that regardless of method or setting assertiveness is not enhanced by graduate social work education.26 Clearly, it is difficult to be a leader if one is unassertive. Cournoyer's finding may be attributable to the quintessential value that community workers, as well as social caseworkers, traditionally place on client self-determination. Social service agencies and schools of social work promulgate this high valuation. Even in community organization practice, the social worker's role is defined primarily as that of enabler, mediator, and broker, often to the exclusion of more aggressive roles. In many agencies, social workers who act as committee staff members are encouraged to be seen and not heard.27

Ideological Constraints

A liberal—at times, radical—social reform ideology prevailed in social work in the exciting "go-go" climate of the 1960s, at the same time as the organization and management literature was developing concepts of leadership and influence. In keeping with its democratic and liberal view, the social work literature developed the paradigm of egalitarian participation in decision making and the policy of entry into the profession at all levels, including the paraprofessional and associate levels. Throughout this period, the paradigm of the social worker remained that of enabler and mediator for an open group process, and the group was often led, at least nominally, by a nonprofessional or by an indigenous leader. Access to new careers and opportunity for new groups through career ladders became official dogma of the profession,28 thereby lessening emphasis on standards and knowledge that would strengthen the profession's leadership role by investing it with special expertise and status. During this period, social workers and social work schools struggled with ideological commitments to egalitarian ideals that made the concept of leadership, and especially that of professional leadership, difficult to absorb and may have prevented it from emerging as salient during the 1960s.

Practice and Reality

Although social workers did not give much attention to the theoretical construct of leadership in the 1960s, in some respects that decade represents a high point of leadership by social workers in public policymaking and in the community. Social workers helped to define some of the flagship programs of the decade, including the influential organization, Mobilization for Youth, and the War on Poverty, as well as the Social Security Amendments of 1967, which brought open-ended funding to the social services.29

Social workers, however, were always vulnerable, and the 1970s saw attacks on the programs that were developed in the 1960s. Perhaps, in the face of adversity, the profession's weaknesses in leadership became especially evident. During the 1970s, unlike physicians, who continued to resist changes in their practice, social workers scurried to find new arenas as old ones were cut back, and the public sector became less popular as it became more vulnerable.30

Political Issues and Political Skills

Closely related to the ideological dilemmas of the social work profession are key sociopolitical factors that put constraints on clients and on professional activities.31 Social workers suffer from a sense of powerlessness based on their connection to disadvantaged populations, and they work in agencies in which they often feel helpless to bring about change. Moreover, as a profession largely dominated by women and open to minorities, practitioners' sense of powerlessness is reinforced by their general lack of status in society. To counteract this sentiment, the social work literature has developed concepts addressing change from below, which emphasize individuals' attainment of political and even manipulative skills so as to change organizations.32

Although social workers need to learn political skills and how to work for change from below in an organizational environment, the content of the social work curriculum must be viewed relative to the managerial leadership role stressed in the business school curriculum and to the train-

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Socialization and Supervision

Supervision has long been considered an essential ingredient of social work practice and training since the profession's early efforts to become professionalized. Overall, supervision is tied to the casework practice model of direct service and is seen as involving one-on-one supervision or suggesting a counseling relationship. There is, however, also a strong tradition in the profession of criticism about the controlling nature of supervision. As far back as the 1950s, supervision was criticized for being endless and without specific aims and for fostering dependency. Because supervision was originally conceived of in educational and supportive terms, according to Stiles, the profession is reluctant to look at the "administrative role of supervision" as primary. Although debate has raged over what constitutes an appropriate proportion of educational support as opposed to administrative direction in supervision, supervision has continued as a system exerting tight control on the quality of social work practice and on socialization into the profession. For instance, although the social work literature now discusses new forms of supervision, even in clinical practice situations, some students are still subject to excessive control in the field, which allows for inadequate professional growth or development of initiative. Evidently, social workers need to develop ways to balance more effectively needs of accountability with students' need for autonomy in professional practice.

The problem exists outside as well as from within the profession. For example, efforts to get mandated insurance coverage for social workers in New York State in parity with other mental health professionals led the National Association of Social Workers in 1984 to support legislation that mandated six years of supervised practice after the MSW degree. It remains to be seen whether this legislation will result in more professional autonomy in practice or merely in more training.

PROFESSIONAL UNCERTAINTY

It is commonly declared that the program and politics of the Reagan Administration are responsible for the hard times faced by the social work profession. Nevertheless, many of the problems we face as professionals predate the current administration and may result in part from internal dilemmas and value issues inherent in our profession. We appear to have given up turf to other groups willing to take it. Thus, although the number of programs in public administration has increased, social work jobs in the public sector increasingly have been declassified. There has been an increase in the number of business schools with programs that emphasize the management of nonprofit organizations in the human services. And, there are increasing numbers of non-social workers, including psychologists and urban planners, taking what might have been social work jobs in service delivery or policy analysis. On the other hand, our own professionals increasingly seem less motivated to make a commitment to help poor and disadvantaged people; instead, they look for work in settings outside the traditional social work context, such as in the corporate world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although it is difficult for social workers to accept, the following statement holds true, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." We may indeed be fighting a constantly uphill battle against the odds, but there have been periods in the history of the social work profession when social workers took on leadership roles. After all, programs in schools of law, medicine, and even public administration seem to be flourishing, despite cutbacks in government funding. Social workers must stop feeling so beleaguered and must get to the business of building on strengths. One way to do this is to pay more attention to the concept of leadership in theory and practice. How can schools of social work help in developing leadership potential? In the following paragraphs, five recommendations are set forth to provide some beginning answers.

Curriculum. Curriculum is perhaps the most significant area with which to begin in building education for leadership. Knowledge about leadership skills in small groups and training in the process of leadership should become important ingredients of every student's education, whether in direct service or in social administration. All students would have some exposure to community issues and community work, and they would learn about leadership within organizations as well as specific ways to influence community decisions about social welfare. In the study of leadership theories, students would find that some of the concepts in the group work curriculum are valuable for encouraging leadership skills in work with therapeutic groups, self-help groups, and task-oriented groups, such as committees and boards. Effort should also be made to strengthen the social reform ideology in the curriculum, because even for clinical practitioners, commitment to social reform helps illuminate direct practice and is an attribute that clearly distinguishes social work from other professions. Courses on organizational development and professional ethics should pay considerable attention to the concept of leadership as it applies to social work practitioners and should stress the important relationship of research to informed practice, which is another critical arena for social work leadership.

Fieldwork. During the 1960s the idea prevailed that social workers should be more than just bureaucrats and clinicians, that they were responsible for advocating in behalf of their clients, even if doing so entailed personal risk. The cautious social work students of the 1980s often do not understand that responsibility. One way to develop leadership in the profession is to encourage social workers to take risks and to teach them that thoughtful risk-taking and assertive behavior is an appropriate aspect of practice. Close liaison with fieldwork agencies should be developed around this concept, and open discussion of the issues it raises should help to strengthen leadership in the field.

Supervision. Closely related to field instruction is the issue of supervision. Despite the considerable amount of literature warning against "controlling" aspects of supervision and in favor of consultative peer supervision, students in the field frequently encounter situations in which the mode of supervision borders on counseling for students or in which the students' initiative is discouraged. If leadership is to be developed, social workers must be given more autonomy, commensurate with their individual maturity level and with the task. In this way, some supervision would be provided in a peer, or consultative, mode. Therefore, when faced with complex case situations, workers or students in field practicums would have more
intensive one-on-one supervision in the initial learning periods, but would also be allowed to grow and broaden their concept of practice.

Community workers have always been less closely supervised, which is something of an organizational secret in the profession. We need to face this issue directly, in educational settings and in the social work literature. Requirements for accountability in the context of community work are generally mediated by the fluid nature of the practice setting. The social work literature and programs in education should discuss more fully variations in supervision. Additional research should also be done concerning models of supervisory practice, which maximize capacity-building for effective independent practice.

Process, Consensus, and Conflict Suppression. Social workers need to learn to deal with differences among themselves and to create a climate in which disagreement over difficult issues is acceptable. Schools of social work should encourage more tolerance of ideological as well as intellectual differences and should counteract tendencies toward group thinking. In view of the pressures facing the social work profession, including a tight job market, we have to consider flexible approaches to challenges, and we must listen carefully to new ideas. This does not mean giving up cherished values that are the basis of professional ethics, but it does mean being prepared to rethink traditional patterns of behavior, curriculum, and course structure, and the relationship of the school to the outside world.

Program Development and Policy Formulation. Schools of social work working along with significant human service agencies, such as departments of social services and public welfare, have the opportunity to take a leadership role in the field through new forms of service delivery, program development in the community, social welfare research, and special training programs. The schools should develop these opportunities to the greatest possible extent, because such programs provide students with leadership models and enhance the community as well. At a time when financial support is badly needed, the programs also may provide funding under work-study arrangements.

ACHIEVING LEADERSHIP

It is necessary to make one final statement about developing social work leadership. Social work students increasingly find themselves in the difficult position of practicing in environments that are inhospitable to the social work profession or that have different patterns of behavior and different value systems. Social workers who want leadership roles in such environments—whether in hospitals or in other work settings, such as the corporate sector—will have to keep the values of the social work profession and maintain their roots in the social services. At the same time, these workers must adopt a style and a mode of communication that will make practitioners more effective with different groups. Only if we succeed in creating professionals who can maintain this balance, can we achieve leadership in the seats of power.

If we are to socialize students into leadership roles in their work units, in their agencies, in their communities, or in the broader arena of the social policy development, we must begin where they are—in the schools. Students should study theories of leadership and the role of social work leadership; they should be given practice in leadership role playing and in field situations; and they should be provided with stimulating models of leadership behavior by teachers and mentors in school and in fieldwork. They need a sound education in thinking for themselves, which is the best training for the future.

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Notes and References


6. Theories of trait emerged during World War I and continue to emerge periodically. See Burke, "Leaders: Their Behavior and Development," for findings that the potential for leadership includes posses-

37. W. Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, art 1, sc.2. l. 134.


40. C. Argyris, Interpersonal Competence and Organizational Effectiveness (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1962); See, also, Hersey and Blanchard, Management of Organizational Behavior, pp. 52–56, and pp. 149–175.


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