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1 | Why study management?

This chapter outlines why it is useful for social workers at every level to know something of the discipline called ‘management’. It asserts that all social workers are managers of a kind and debates whether, to look at this the other way round, all managers in social work organisations should have a background in social work practice. Regardless of one’s views on this question, it does have to be accepted that today’s managers employ not only many skills which are transferable from practice but also others peculiar to the management world, in scope if not always in detail.

The relevance of management theory to social work

As social work organisations move through an era of fragmentation, discontinuity, contracting out and delayering, each staff member is finding a need to understand how organisational systems work. This is essential both to survival and to finding one’s own place in the scheme of things. It also makes sense among ever increasing managerial demands for detailed information and budgetary accountability. Every social worker is having to learn to think on a much broader canvas than has ever been the case before. This involves looking outwards to service users and resource providers – as well as to politicians who increasingly expect to set the agenda – looking back over work that needs to be monitored and reviewed, and forwards in order to plan and set aims and objectives. This breadth of vision is something that managers have always needed and the management literature has useful things to say on the subject.

Thinking like a manager also enables social workers to bring a critical eye to bear on their own organisations, the services they provide and the standards they set. When people are busy, they sometimes forget to stand back and reflect on how they are

perceived, especially by users. Developing a dispassionate approach to what is going on is beneficial; a detached concern helps to maintain a questioning, analytical stance regarding how services are delivered and received. Each time we approach the reception desk of an area office, or visit a group care establishment, it is salutary to ponder on how we would feel if we were a service user or a resident there. There is nothing sadder than to visit an elderly relative or a former neighbour in a home and find that, despite good standards of physical care, their individuality is being eroded because staff are not encouraged to consider their own behaviour in relation to the organisation's primary objectives. This always reflects on the skills, abilities and motivation of the managers, who may be preoccupied with financial profit in the private sector, short-term cost control in the public sector or simply seeking a quiet life.

Through studying management, too, we can try to prevent ourselves becoming mere instruments of managerialism or its scapegoat if something goes wrong. Some employers, for instance, have not been beyond disowning the judgements of their staff, even when their own position in the hierarchy made them ultimately responsible for training and supporting those individuals. The relevance of management studies to social work might lie in helping us to see when it is the system, not ourselves, that is at fault and when standards are not good enough and need changing.

Why all social workers are managers

The suggestion that all social workers are managers is probably, at first glance, not a welcome one. Similarly, those who are about to become managers may be facing the transition with mixed feelings – while keen to learn the techniques and gain the rewards of the competent leader, they may also fear losing touch with direct practice and perhaps becoming deskilled. The stereotype of a manager is of a person (disproportionately likely to be male) who has sacrificed social work values to the importance of filling in forms or gathering data on computer and who gives priority to what his manager in turn expects rather than what users and practitioners demand. Yet, in fact, many practitioner skills in social work are also managerial ones, and all social workers increasingly work to managerialist agendas, so the difference may be one of degree rather than of kind. It has been exaggerated by practitioners not

knowing what their managers really do and by a failure on both sides to appreciate that working to change an organisation is not so very far removed from the mainstay of social work itself.

The most obvious overlap concerns the management of people. Whether these be service users, carers, the general public or those who regulate service provision, management, just like practice, involves the ability to write and speak clearly and to engage in purposeful interpersonal relationships. So perhaps social workers who become managers have a head start here? On the other hand, believing that they 'should' have a flair for 'people skills' could embarrass those who are newly promoted, impeding spontaneity and making them self-conscious for a time. It may help to remember that managing people is at the heart both of providing services to users through social work methods and of organising and working towards the effective delivery of those services by others.

The principles and skills involved in managing personnel are common to all organisations – private, public and voluntary. The objectives may be different from one agency to another, and at each level within a department, but the means used in attempting to reach them remain constant. Engaging with and relating to people, helping others to achieve their goals, supervising their efforts, maintaining morale, consulting a wide range of sources prior to making decisions, problem-solving, and introducing and managing the process of change are just some of the tasks common to the practitioner and the manager.

There are also transferable skills from particular methods and modes of social work intervention. The systemic thinking which underlies the techniques of family therapy, for example, is just as relevant when trying to sort out the patterns of relationships which exist in larger systems such as organisations as it is in families. Equally, when leading a team, many of the ideas gleaned from groupwork also stand one in good stead. Just as Allan Brown (1992) proposes that those who have experienced mutually trusting, collaborative and creative teams make good groupworkers, so those with experience of groupwork are likely to contribute to positive team spirit and constructive co-working as facilitative team members or team leaders. Knowledge of group cohesion, openness, risk-taking and interdependence in groups can be transferred directly to the role of team manager, although the context and aims naturally differ from those experienced in groupwork intervention.

A further good preparation for management is the role of the care manager. Undertaking assessments and coordinating packages of care within tight budgets has become a core task for many front-line practitioners. Valuable skills developed include those of bargaining, mediating, negotiating, liaising and advocacy in order to make the best use of resources. And one could certainly argue that social workers who have become more financially aware, even without holding the purse strings of a fully devolved budget, will make better managers later on. There will be less of a divide to cross than in the days before unit costs of service were known, when social workers were largely unaware of the direct impact of resource restraints and decisions to refuse services were taken much higher up the hierarchy than may be the case now.

For those social workers who are budget holders, there may be some worrying issues to be resolved. For instance, there may be inherent contradictions in orchestrating community care packages within resource limitations while also acting as an advocate for better client services overall, or in balancing a user's needs and wishes while also shopping around for the least costly forms of care. Although we may not argue with the need to keep the taxpayer in mind, there is the problem that, when professionals are given financial responsibility, they may become distracted from their fundamental aims. As Priestley (1998) demonstrates in respect of care assessments of disabled people, these frequently appear to be budget-led rather than truly needs-led, and the discourse of 'need' is in any case contentious since it usually covers only personal and domestic tasks, not assistance in having a social life, for example. It remains to be seen whether direct payment schemes will give service users more access to real choice and whether social workers will learn from disabled people that they do not have a monopoly on defining need.

Although these narrowly financial concerns may be recent, the management of resources has, in fact, always dominated the social worker's tasks if we count within this the management of time and of self. Frontline workers devote many hours to travelling, attending meetings, negotiating, doing 'admin' and referring on. It is startling how many social workers and their managers are unable to ration themselves across a working day or week or to delegate effectively. While the theme of the 1980s was to assume that managers should be available at all times and respect was reserved

for the 'workaholics' (the 'lunch is for wimps' ethos), the managers of the future (and ideally all workers) should be noted for their capacity to reflect on what they are doing and to draw boundaries around the energies available for their career and those available for personal and family commitments. (Lunch is back in fashion, as is building exercise and 'quality time' into the day.) Self-management of this nature is one way of preventing stress-related illness.

As well as managing resources, social workers and social care staff at all levels participate in meeting required standards. In child care policy and practice, for example, individual social workers are told very clearly what information they need to gather about children and families in the Assessment Framework, the Looked After Children (LAC) Assessment and Action Records, and the national codes and guidelines for both foster care and the residential care of children. Standards for adult services, too, are enforced by independent scrutiny and all services are being drawn into National Service Frameworks to ensure effective working across professional and organisational boundaries.

Standards and procedures are equally a part of a new ethos in the voluntary and private sectors. Most voluntary organisations have to comply with Charity Commission requirements and often the obligations of a compact and/or contracts with the local authority, and all independent providers operate within a contract culture, which means that staff have to be constantly aware of quality standards and required managerial practices. Nor do freelancers escape from procedures, guidelines and form-filling. Trainers, consultants, mentors and other self-employed people who use their social work qualifications and experience to work from home are increasingly expected to operate their own quality controls to nationally recognised standards and the contracts they obtain for their services typically require this to be the case.

A final reason why we would argue that all social workers are managers is that each person in a department can be an instigator or a contributor to change and innovation. These do not always have to come from outside; changing the agency from within occurs quite frequently and one need not always be in a position of power to influence agency practice. If we view organisations as psycho-socio-political systems and study people's behaviour within them, we are then in a good position to change our working practices, especially if, in their current form, they are adding to the burdens of users,

carers and others. Undertaking projects for Post Qualifying and Advanced Award programmes in social work or for an MBA is one opportunity that increasing numbers of people have had for standing back and thinking about a focused area of work where they can be particularly influential.

What is special about managers?

It may be that some readers will disagree with the assertion that social workers are practitioner-managers. It could fairly be pointed out that being a manager consists of more than undertaking managerially dictated duties; there are specific tasks involved, not least enabling others to get work done and carrying forward the overall aims of the organisation. So let us consider a few of the ways in which managers' functions are distinct.

First, while managers and social workers both control resources and exercise authority, the extent to which they do so differs. Second, the social worker is a specialist in delivering the services from her/his particular domain, whereas a manager's tasks relate to the organisation as a whole or at least one section of it. Thus, those who control group care services would take into account additional factors when deciding to allocate a place in an establishment to an older person, including the overall policy of the agency and the total number of people competing for the resource. Managers have to make decisions and be concerned for clients whom they have never met. Third, although practitioners keep an eye to the future when planning their work on a particular case, top managers have a macro-interest in the future of the whole organisation, ensuring that it will remain a going concern to meet future needs while also dealing with ever changing current circumstances. Fourth, social work and management processes share a concern for problem-solving and enabling, but the degree of authority in organising people to get work done is greater for line managers. In addition, styles of leadership and the performance of managerial tasks, such as the exercise of authority through decision-making, have an effect on other people's performance, not simply one's own; thus, the size of caseloads, the allocation of work and the supervision of it are usually part of the duties of team leaders and senior members of staff. Finally, the selection and orientation of new staff, although involving the team, is normally a specific task for people in management positions.

Before we move on to explore another side of this coin, by questioning if all managers should be social workers, let us recap the position so far:

1. Managerial administration is the process of *organising resources to get work done* and, at this level of generality, all social workers are involved in it.
2. Although certain roles carry the title of manager, team leader or senior, in every organisation each person is part of the administrative structure and is thus administratively, as well as professionally, *accountable for the work they do*.
3. At the same time, managers who have this title have specific functions that are *essential ingredients of their role as administrators*; some of these are different in degree rather than kind from the work of social workers, but others are related to the authority which is exercised.

Should all managers be social workers?

Is it necessary for those who develop and maintain social welfare organisations to be qualified social workers? When social services departments (SSDs) were first created, it was thought that those heading them should, if possible, be qualified in social work and, ideally, be experienced and/or trained in administration (Seebohm Report, 1968). At that time, many top managers were promoted through the practitioner ranks and only a few were from other professions. Management training and qualifications were poorly developed; experience and ‘political’ ability were seen as the key requirements. The rise of the managerial ethos in the 1990s undermined this position, with generic management training and skills coming to the fore. At the same time, SSDs themselves started to diversify and increasingly employed a variety of professionals, notably nurses and occupational therapists, to undertake roles in adult services. More recently, not only have social work-qualified managers started to disappear but also the social services as a separate entity. Various forms of restructuring have taken place. In England and Wales, children’s social services are splitting away from adult services, with Children’s Trusts now bringing children’s social services and a range of other services for children and young people, such as health and education, together in one, new organisational

structure. In some, Care Trusts perform a similar function for adult services. At the same time, social workers are increasingly employed outside these settings altogether, in multidisciplinary teams of various kinds. In all these examples, there is no reason why the team or organisational managers should be from a social work background.

In the voluntary sector, there are equally significant changes. Charitable organisations have had to become more businesslike, more competitive in an age of contracting out, are held to account for their performance and are reliant on marketing their image and their work in order to sustain an income; their managers face new challenges accordingly (Jackson and Donovan, 1999). Of course, there is enormous diversity among voluntary bodies in the UK and only a fraction have a social work identity or even employ qualified social workers, although, at the same time, there is a continuing trend for local authorities to contract out public services to voluntary sector provider agencies. The question of who their 'managers' should be is therefore complex. The private sector has also increasingly entered social care, as a provider of a wider range of services, bringing its own ethos of customer relations and financial management. It is not uncommon for managers to run their own care homes or be employed in relatively small businesses. A social work qualification would not be high on the list of requirements for such a position.

All these developments radically change the balance of the argument about what is needed in a manager. When even well established charities are having to look for figureheads who are good at 'fronting' their organisations, the idea of being professionally qualified in social work may seem almost irrelevant. And the emphasis on commercial or business 'success' may dictate a different set of priorities and skills from those traditionally valued by organisations which see themselves as preventing human distress and working in partnership with users – for whom there may be little public sympathy or support.

Moreover, just as good teachers or good nurses do not necessarily make good managers, experienced social workers may not make an automatic transition, either. The specific tasks of management administration outlined above, and the broader perspective that is required of social work leaders, are not part of everyone's equipment. If we look back to the Introduction, it was suggested that administration combines the three elements of *direction* (long-term

planning), *management* (sustaining the system as a going concern) and *supervision*. If, as we said, these correspond with three general levels in the hierarchy, then we might be able to answer the question by proposing that, in large organisations, the two top tiers primarily call for sound management (and are precisely the levels at which staff are increasingly studying for MBAs), while the supervisory roles are best carried by those who have competence in the professional activity they are supervising. Interesting backing for this view comes from a study which shows that third-tier social service managers mainly do have professional qualifications, but that their thinking may well turn to obtaining management training once they begin to move up the career ladder; they begin to identify as managers rather than as social workers (Lawler and Hearn, 1997). Nevertheless, it is only in the most senior roles that professional managers are starting to be seen, that is, those who have trained in generic management skills and have chosen to use them in the public sector, as opposed to those who have risen through the ranks to a top-level management post.

The appointment of people with social work qualifications and backgrounds to key posts in Primary Care Trusts, combined local authority departments and other multidisciplinary settings demonstrates that social workers have a great deal to offer at all levels. Their experience in relating to other professionals and their organisations equips them well for managing multidisciplinary teams, and they benefit from the fact that both management and social work are all about people and relationships. It would be a shame if more social workers did not aim for the top, including women, black staff and others who have traditionally been under-represented at that level. Adding mentoring, management training and skills on the way up can only help. Whoever is given the role of manager, a solid grounding in the nature of the service being provided, credibility with staff and an understanding of the roles of those in direct contact with the public are essential.

Whatever the position held in a social work organisation, there are certain commitments that all managers have to make and particular challenges to address, as listed below:

1. Despite, and in some senses because of, the breadth of issues tackled in the personal social services, this is nevertheless a highly *specialised field*.

2. Social workers have their own *skills, knowledge and values*. As professionals, their expertise in planning and decision-making within their own field has to be acknowledged and mirrored in the way the agency involves them in administrative processes.
3. Any plans for developing services or rethinking the agency's mission (that is, its purpose) need to reflect the *equal opportunities goals* that have become part of social work's traditions, including a commitment to anti-oppressive practice.
4. If the manager comes from a different occupational background, credibility might be established more readily by showing a genuine willingness to learn about social work's *current professional concerns and practices*.
5. The importance of *relationships* needs to be highlighted: between service users and workers; among team members; with other disciplines; and also with numerous local, regional and national bodies.
6. What distinguishes human service management from that in non-service sectors is the fact that many agencies are dependent upon other organisations; planning has to take into account the *restraints* imposed by legislation and policy imposed from outside, as well as those inherent in relying on others to purchase or provide services.
7. Management approaches in social work cannot always be the *rational* and *tidy* ones suggested in some of the management literature. Service goals may contradict one another (for example caring versus controlling antisocial behaviour) and there are additional demands in making services holistic and appropriate rather than fragmented or impersonal, as well as in matching them wherever possible to the felt needs of a particular community (for instance in providing home care services which are acceptable to people of varying ethnic backgrounds).
8. Human services operate in *turbulent environments*, frequently subject to political whims and media-led changes, therefore long-term plans have to be flexible.
9. While coping with all this uncertainty, the manager of a service organisation also has to recognise that staff work from imperfect theories and conflicting ideologies about the

‘causes’ of human behaviour, they are called upon to tackle unpredictable and unknowable events and they increasingly focus largely on the ‘heavy end’ of human distress and need, as in child protection and mental health services. This makes *staff care* and *staff development* particularly important in social work, but also means that any requests from management are likely to be experienced as yet one more demand from those who are not actually involved in doing the frontline job.

10. Perhaps most importantly, the commitment of social work managers must not be to the organisation as an end in itself or to their own personal ambitions. The *raison d'être* of social work is its *service users and the general public more widely*; consequently, the focus has to be on high quality services and on supporting, developing, monitoring and guiding the work of the professionals who implement them.

The challenge to management outlined in this book is to harness management theories and those styles in social work which are best suited to the developments of the new millennium. The time is overdue to flush out managerial approaches which may have sounded impressive or ‘macho’ in their day but which have proven unable to balance the requirements of a principled and intelligent workforce, a vulnerable but potentially self-determining body of users and their carers and a general public which, while committed to the maintenance of high quality welfare services, also cares about community safety, good stewardship of public (or charitable) money and the public mandating of trends in social policy. If this makes management sound as if it is all about listening to, and working with, an infinite variety of people while undertaking a taxing job, then social workers ought to be extremely good at it! And, of course, many of them are.

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