

Social Work: From Direct Practice to Administration



Dear Social Service Practitioners,

The growing complexities of social needs call for social administrators* across the public and private sector to have a good grasp of the “psychographics” of clients and the work of frontline social service practitioners. This will help them to craft policies and manage social service agencies in a way that better accounts for the needs of both clients and workers. It is not uncommon to hear of frontline practitioners taking on these roles as they carry with them the necessary experience and skills that can value-add to these positions.

In this letter, I will elaborate on the benefits of having social work practice background in social service administration work. I hope to discuss some strategies to facilitate the transition from frontline social work practice to policy, administrative and managerial roles. It is my hope that social workers would consider taking up these leadership positions to strengthen the service orientation and philosophy for social administration.

Social administration in the curriculum of social work education programmes



The current curriculum of social work education covers social policy and planning, programme evaluation, models of accountability and social research. These components are part of good social administration, policy thinking and programme design. They collectively enhance administrative competence. The challenge then is to provide ongoing professional training for both clinical and administrative methods even after formal education ends, and to enable more social workers to be more familiar and competent at these no matter their specialization.

What will augur well for social services in the future is a balance of social administrators trained as social workers and social workers trained in administration. It is useful to consider how to better support social workers, who primarily have practice-focused education and field experience, transition into policy and administrative roles.

Same Same...

Many skills, which are often said to be missing amongst social administrators, can be acquired through direct practice and can contribute to good social administration. These include skills such as communication, problem-solving, empowering others, and self-awareness (Ryan Tolleson Knee & Jeff Folsom). Social administrators and managers, for example, must be self-aware and understand how their personal biases and perceptions may affect the way they shape policies and the way they relate to and manage their staff. The skill of empowering others can also prevent the micro-management of staff and encourage staff to take ownership of their work.



* In this article, social administrators refers to those in administration positions. They are decision makers concerned about the well-being of a total system versus one particular client. The work requires knowledge about social policy and the delivery of services. The work may include working on budgets, designing programmes to fulfil the needs of the population, evaluating the effectiveness of existing programmes, identifying areas that lack support, managing overarching strategy for the community or department and working on policies. (Taken from "Social Work License Map")

Social workers with direct practice experience are also well-equipped for policy positions. As mentioned in an earlier letter¹, policies that are informed by practice can better solve problems, meet needs and improve the wellbeing of people and communities. The systems approach to assessing clients' circumstances can aid social workers in policy positions to better identify the macro and systemic barriers to change, and thereby shape policies in a more nuanced way.

Social workers who take on the role of social administrators also carry with them important values and perspectives, which can bring social policies as well as organisational practices into greater alignment with social work values. The danger with having these positions filled by managers trained in other disciplines and with little or no experience in the social sector is when these "mainstream" business managers do not share social work values and end up prioritising cost-effectiveness over client-centredness (Wuenschel, 2006).



... But different

While there are transferable skills between direct practice and social administrative work, there is perhaps one key difference between the practitioner's philosophical orientation and that of the administrative priority that a social work direct practice practitioner needs to be very conscious of. This difference arises from the context of their responsibility and accountability. As Andrea Freerksen (2012) writes, "certain philosophical orientations that are valuable in clinical work act as hindrances in administration". For example, social workers who are clinically orientated tend to focus on the "here and now" which may hinder their ability to be future-oriented and to plan strategically for the larger system (Perlmutter, 2007). The focus on client-centeredness, self-determination and priority in quality service may also conflict with administrative priorities of resource management and agency priorities (Freerksen, 2012). For example, applying self-determination and a client-centred perspective to manage staff and their personal problems may go against organisational policies, blur boundaries and threaten productivity (Tolleson, 2014).

The lack of formal training in organisational management such as budgeting, public relations and staff management, also poses a challenge for direct practice social workers who take up administrative and managerial positions. It can be argued that they often "lack the analytical skills and methods knowledge necessary to evaluate services and complete performance measurements" (Freerksen, 2012). Exercising authority is also something that may not come naturally for direct practice social workers. A study on the difficulties faced by transitioning workers found that "the use of authority, particularly as it implied directing, supervising, and changing subordinates, was the most difficult area of adjustment for respondents when they assumed their first administrative job" (Patti et al., 1979).



These differences and challenges are not surprising as there is a fundamental realignment of focus for the direct practice worker who takes on an administrative role to be less on the client but more towards the health of the agency (Freerksen, 2012). How then can direct practice social workers best transit into the role of social administration? What are the necessary preparations that they need in order to flourish as a social administrator?

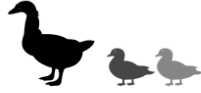
The transitioning process



As with all transitions, accepting change and being comfortable with not knowing what the learning curve is will be the best way to adapt. There is a need to learn a large number of new skills and to re-learn how to apply the same skills to a new context. Being conscious about the new role and yet being reflective in the transitioning process will help with making time to learn while "letting go" of what might have been the previous motivation and satisfaction derived from direct work. While some transitioning practitioners retain a client caseload initially, this is often difficult to sustain in the long term if one is to focus and do a job well.

¹ "Social Work, Social Policy and Social Change":
Part 1 <https://tinyurl.com/socialworkpolicychange1>
Part 2 <https://tinyurl.com/socialworkpolicychange2>

Organisations and departments should help direct practice workers adjust to their new role as social administrators by appointing them mentors, preferably social work practitioners who have successfully transitioned to become good social administrators. These mentors are crucial to help them navigate ethical and moral dilemmas, better understand organisational structures and politics and to learn how to adapt their direct practice perspectives and behaviours to new situations that managers encounter (Tolleson, 2014).



It is also important for transitioning workers to go through training and preparation before they take on their new roles. These learnings can take place through informal sessions such as job shadowing more experienced colleagues or formal training in social administration that includes executive coaching and extensive reading and research. The purpose of these trainings is to help transitioning workers to be clear about their new job scope, what is expected of them and how to “reconfigure their personal paradigms or collection of internal perspectives, beliefs, values, and feelings so they are more closely aligned with their current career reality” (Tolleson, 2014).

Taking up the challenge

While there are many challenges a social work practitioner will face in adapting to an administrative role, there are lots in the social work training in terms of knowledge and skills that one can draw from to become an effective social service administrator. The direct work practice background can be an asset as it serves as the lens that such an organisation will need to deliver well for social service clients. Social work education programmes should consider how they can better prepare social work students for both direct practice and administrative roles.

It is a satisfying experience to be able to imbue the orientation of any agency with the social work perspective. More specifically, it is about being able to shape and ensure that the delivery system reflects a deeper understanding of the clients and appreciation of the specific provision of good social services.

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- 6 Ryan Tolleson Knee (2014) An Analysis of Direct Practice Social Work Perspectives and Behaviors in Middle Management, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 38:2, 146-157, DOI: 10.1080/03643107.2013.859196