

## *Dear Students of Social Work,*

Social workers do many things. Primarily, we bring about changes – in the lives of individuals, families and communities. We don't do magic. We work alongside people.

There are 3 simple steps that we aim to do in some of the work that we do to help others help themselves. They may be simple but each step goes a long way in developing the thinking towards carrying out any role or assignment that you may have.

### **1. We always seek to inform**



Knowledge is a tool that is often the trigger of change. What information or knowledge we pass on to people and the purpose of informing becomes important. In order to pass on good information effectively we must first learn the content and context. So before we even begin to inform our clients, the community or the groups we belong to, we have to first spend time learning about, researching and evaluating the information. We then move on to arrange the information in order to effectively communicate them. This requires an astute mind. It is about serving information in the right dosage, at the right time, to the right audience in an appropriate medium. It sounds easy but good communication requires planning and effort. It is a discipline to distil information and prepare to communicate. It requires effort, training and lots of practice to hone this skill.

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### **2. We advocate**



We spend most of our time advocating in the interests of those who are less able to help themselves, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged. We advocate so that the lives of the disadvantaged can be better. We advocate so that what they do to help themselves is reciprocated with more help to uplift them and to develop their potential. We advocate at the systems level, at the community level and at the individual and family level.

To advocate includes supporting, backing up, promoting, campaigning, sponsoring and speaking on behalf of. It usually refers to doing something to strongly and publicly support someone or something or a policy. To varying extent, most of us do some advocacy some of the time. The challenge about advocacy work is when we are raising awareness about social issues and resources. In these situations, the stakes go up and tensions and competition starts. Equilibrium is shaken and attention rises. Advocacy by itself is neutral. It is the framing of the issue and the approach which oftentimes determine the outcome of advocacy. In advocacy, context matters in order for the discussion and negotiation, be it of values, resources or timing, to be constructive.

Advocacy is a good skill to develop. It starts in the family, in school and later in adult life at the workplace. Some may not call it advocacy but we know that it is about advancing a cause or a theory for change through raising awareness which may or may not result in action. It is a skill worth sharpening because when it is done poorly, it can cause more harm than good. It can cause tensions leading to destructive repercussions.

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### 3. We unite



It is not a surprise then that some social workers would place a premium on unity. Most will seek to unite wherever possible. Being united is not the same as being in agreement or having everyone agree on being the same and agreeing to the same things. It is about sharing core values that drive the way we respond and make decisions that impact others beyond ourselves and being respectful of differing and divergent views. It is derived from deliberate thought and appreciating different perspectives. It is a unity that comes from respect, esteem and care for others and showing responsibility towards others and the environment.

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So how are these simple steps of 1 informing, 2 advocating, and 3 uniting, relevant to bringing about change or improvement? Well, the first point about informing is about seeking knowledge, processing information so that it can be translated and passed on to others so that they can become more informed and make informed decisions. How you communicate is a skill that you can develop over years and make into an art.

Secondly, to advocate for the disadvantaged, you have to first understand the issue deeply and reflect on your response at your personal level before you demand action of others. Nothing like walking the talk to gain the credibility to exact attention or action from others.

Thirdly, to unite people as much as you can, you need to believe in the value of respect and divergent view points. This is so as we live in diversity and complexity all around us. We start from the position that we have far more similarities than differences. It is more constructive to pay attention to shared values and common spaces. We should also protect the space for common good and dare to stand out to be positive, optimistic and contribute.

Ang Bee Lian

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\* Adapted from the graduation speech at SCGS to inspire young people to consider social work as a profession