

# KEEP AN EYE ON THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

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*The elephant in the room refers to the presence of powerful unspoken agendas that underlie self-serving features of large organizations. In this narrative, the author describes her experiences with this phenomenon in a variety of human service organizations. The lesson learned is that success for an administrative social worker stems from his or her ability to manage the elephants running rampant in the organization.*

## **Systems Have Their Own Agenda and Culture**

The late author and feminist, Audrey Lorde wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>1</sup> This is one mantra I keep in mind at all times. My experiences in several public and private human service systems have taught me that regardless of the organization's mission—drug/alcohol recovery, mental health, health or women's centers—the system usually evolves into a self-serving entity. Those of us who attempt to manage, whip into shape or co-opt these entities do so at the risk of our own well-being.

I recall the time I diligently worked to monitor and assess staff competence. In the process I uncovered a system of deception concerning patient attendance. The counseling reports for some of the staff were consistently redundant. Several months later I noticed the same pattern on several of the staff's counseling notes.

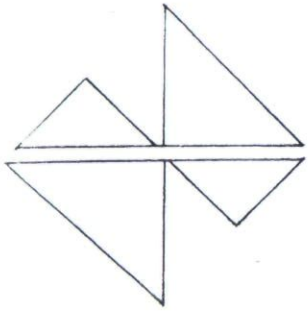
All of a sudden there was an elephant in the room. Was it possible the patient information was vague because the patient did not come to the appointment? I felt a gentle nudging of the elephant in the room to probe a little deeper. So I started checking the sign-in sheets. Unfortunately, my suspicions were confirmed. My first thought was that the patient did exist but was not signed in. Later, I discovered there were many patients with the same pattern.

I presented my finding to the director, who acted surprised and shocked. Later that week I was invited to a night meeting. Upon

my arrival I discovered those in attendance were six counselors, whom I had identified in my report, along with the director. The next couple of hours were spent facing the Spanish Inquisition. Each counselor took a turn threatening, intimidating and challenging my findings and me personally. My only thought was, "Ok, I am dead. This is it. No way can I fight all of these people." After everyone finished, the director asked me what I had to say. I said, "Are we finished? I've got a late date to make." The silence was deafening, I guess that comment was inappropriate. But so were the threats from the staff. The meeting ended, without comment from the director. I quickly headed to my car and the local bar. I danced the night away. The next morning it was clear to me, I was the problem, not the solution. I had inadvertently uncovered a system of deception and corruption that served the organization's existence. The choice I had to make was clear. Within a few weeks I resigned. I did not have a job but I had a clean conscience and I was still alive! I had dodged the elephant.

Organizational culture is the most difficult aspect of a human service agency to understand and even more difficult to change. The culture must be respected but should not drive the decision making. When decision making is surrendered to the culture, the agenda can take a drastic turn from client centered to system serving. The above experience is one example of this system serving pathology.





### I offer the following caveats

- The needs of the system should not outweigh the needs of the client system.
- The needs of the culture, if unethical, must be abandoned in favor of integrity, human dignity and fair representation of the minority view.
- The needs of the individuals in the culture also need to be respected and given equal and fair treatment.

If any of these tenets is violated, the social work administrator has to make hard decisions about whether to remain in that system and try to change it. The decision to remain without fighting the system suggests the social worker has been co-opted by money, prestige, fear or a combination of the three. On the other hand, the decision to leave requires a time of reflection and self-examination prior to moving on or entering another system.

I am not suggesting that organizational culture is impenetrable, but it is very resistant to change. Shaping or influencing the culture is a daunting task that requires a planned and organized approach, agreed upon by key actors in the system.<sup>2</sup> It is highly unlikely that a lone ranger (with or without a side kick) can take on the organizational culture.

### Politics

Social work education helps to develop administrative tools that can be skillfully applied to a wide range of private non-profit and public systems. There is an essential skill for working in the public setting: political finesse. I suggest that the social worker needs to use diplomacy in order to survive. Unlike the therapist who works in a genuine, transparent and empathetic setting, the social work administrator often finds herself in a hostile environment.

As the director of a small non profit organization, I became involved with a community network of professionals. One

aspect of being a dark-skinned African American is that everyone notices you, when you come in and when you are not present. I discovered early in life that sometimes I am the elephant in the room simply because of the color of my skin.

I have tried to balance the "color effect" in my community contacts, but it is like that commercial about EF Hutton: when the lone racial-ethnic minority speaks, everyone listens. That is not to say everyone agrees, not at all. Some people listen to be adversarial, others to be patronizing and others to learn what "they" think. Since there is no way to get out of speaking for the African-American community, I found myself the *de facto* representative of all African-Americans in many professional networking meetings. Never mind the fact that the organization I managed served less than 10% African-Americans; I still represented African-Americans in the community at large. Although this can be a very powerful position, sometimes it backfires, as it did in the following event.

In attendance at a professional conference in the Caribbean, I was excited to meet a newspaper journalist who showed several of us around the island. He promised to give us a tour as long as I gave him an interview. The elephant, was invisible to me at the time, but it was there. Well, I still have the paper with the interview from hell. In it, my description of African-Americans in the United States was slanted and exaggerated by the journalist, and to my dismay, the leaders of the organization all read the article. To this day I am banned from the organization. (Or should I say I am too embarrassed to attend its events?)

Nevertheless, external politics, advocating for one's community of origin is a required external political activity for the racial ethnic administrator. She may be faced with remaining an invisible catalyst to ensure the needs of the community remain part of the system's vision and focus. This may require



assisting the community to advocate for itself by writing letters, holding demonstrations, confronting the power structure and other strategies to keep the system accountable to the community. Learning how to marshal or manipulate political capital can assist the administrator in future endeavors.

There are those who are anxious to sabotage or undercut the social work administrator's efforts. This may be the result of self-advancement, value conflicts, misguided goals or discipline envy. Political finesse is an essential administrative skill, because all persons in the system do not abide by the social work code of ethics.

One of my experiences involved managing a small clinic within a network of several clinics. All the administrators were social workers, but the other staff and upper management were members of other disciplines. Soon after arriving I discovered the elephant in the room. It was a code of conduct that relegated social workers to second class citizens. Through the use of the job description, we were restricted to certain tasks that limited the full scope of our work. During meetings we received lip service validation for our work, but in practice it was clear we were not valued or respected. It was an oppressive working situation that resulted in burn out, nervous breakdowns and in one case, the disappearance of a social worker. Staff and administrators from the other discipline felt superior.

### **Staffing**

One of the most difficult tests for a social work administrator is performing the job with inadequate staffing. It has been my observation that social workers tend to promise the world, despite limited staffing to carry out the tasks. This will cause staff turnover and burnout, and result in even greater staffing shortages. Therefore the social work administrator must develop supplemental staffing.

One of my director positions afforded me the opportunity to use eight graduate students who were theology, psychology, communications and social work majors. We developed one of the most productive work groups I have ever managed. The crossover in talents, skills and personalities allowed me to create a mobile training unit that spanned the state of California. It was a unit that received rave evaluations from police, community leaders and government officials. It epitomized the belief in people achieving their potential as a value we need to have for staff as well as clients.

The team we developed used the strengths of each person to establish a high level of trust and interdependence. I hired staff who knew more than me about statistical evaluation, subject matter content and writing skills. What a relief it was to have people support my efforts. The greatest strength of an administrator is to know his or her weaknesses, admit it and hire people who have the needed skills.

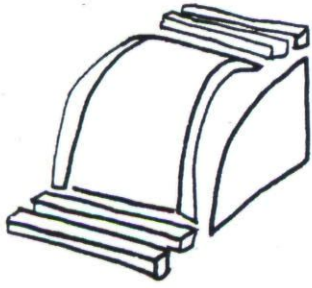
Other solutions to staffing I used were to look for supplemental staffing from government funded programs such as the TITLE V and SCSEP (senior employment program). It is a mainstay for locating seasoned workers. Some training may be required, but there are other benefits such as good work ethic, excellent attendance and loyalty. If funding becomes available, hiring the already trained senior is a return on investment. Community workers assigned by the court can also assist with other appropriate and non-confidential assignments.

Other resources to investigate are academic internship options from all disciplines. For example, public relations departments may have the right person to develop brochures, write new articles, and prepare public service announcements.

Finally, community based volunteer placement agencies often have a wealth of volunteers. Many are retired professionals



who are anxious to assist human service organizations in accomplishing their missions. Some organizations maintain their own core of volunteers.



### Funding

Securing money is perhaps the easiest task for a social work administrator with grant writing skills. I try not to allow the lack of money to limit my vision. There are funding streams both internal and external to the system. Many administrators assume grants are no longer available, so they allow their program and staff to suffer. On the contrary, just spending a few hours a week searching the web can assist the administrator in securing educational videos, supplies, staff training funds and staffing resources.

In preparing a grant proposal for one human service organization, I worked with the fiscal department to set up a budget that allocated specific costs for each indirect cost. This was necessary because the grant did not allow for indirect or administrative costs. In hindsight I probably should not have written the grant with those constraints. The madness started after the proposal was approved for funding because upper management, including the fiscal department, wanted to know what their cut was. When I reminded them about the reimbursement plan, it was as if everyone developed amnesia. No one remembered the formula we had used to calculate job percentages, reimbursement estimates for the fiscal department, or the subcontracting plan for staff. Consequently, in violation of the terms of the grant, the agency decided to handle the grant like all others, until the first year audit failed and the state stepped in to correct the problem. My saving grace was that I did not sign any checks or give spending approvals. I just managed the budget, and kept receipts and good records. In the end, I restrained myself from saying, "I told you so!"

I have held jobs in a wide range of settings and grant writing has been a routine part of

my job. In each position I have succeeded in securing funds. However, the two pitfalls were that I sometimes did not "stick to knitting"<sup>3</sup> and did not remember that all elephants want food (money).

With reference to the first point, the organization has specific goals and objectives linked to staffing and tasks. There were times that I stretched myself too thin trying to accomplish projects that were tangential to the mission. Concerning the second point, I often forget that most people and organizations are not as concerned about the intrinsic value of services and resources for staff; they want to see money come into the system, or more specifically, their paychecks. For most people, the project does not generate enthusiasm without remuneration. The consequences for me failing to see the elephant was that I found myself trying to get buy-in of important staff too late. It is especially difficult to get other departments to buy-in if they do not receive financial benefits, only extra work.

Grant writing and securing additional money can sometimes be the easiest part of social work administration. But, spending the money can also be a problem, depending upon the type of system you are trying to negotiate. I recently learned that public sector entities are the most difficult when it comes to incorporating outside funding. Because of this, one of my grants took two years to get off the ground.

I had a contractor from the Midwest, a group of technical experts—housed in another department, needing to get bids for anything purchased over \$1500 and no direct staff assigned to manage the grant, except me. Talk about setting yourself up to fail; this grant was the handwriting on the wall. I have no idea how I managed to complete the project after three years and many tears. During each change in the fiscal period I had to monitor and track the location of the funds, and I almost lost the funding to the umbrella



organization. To summarize, you need to know spending criteria, protocols for sign-offs, budget years and how to get around all of these pitfalls before securing funds for a large organization.

### **Time Management and Burnout**

Many social work managers have time cards that reflect 60-70 hours per week. The social work administrator may not come in at 8:00 am sharp; however, you will usually find him or her burning the midnight oil trying to complete the range of tasks and assignments. This working pattern is often the result of social workers serving as managers as well as line staff. Social work direct practice skills are significantly different from social work management tasks. Many social work managers are trained clinicians, but the reverse is usually not true. Therefore, social work administrators do not have a sufficient number of qualified subordinates to whom to delegate projects.

Our body, mind and spirit will eventually manifest the side effects of bad work habits. Unless social work administrators take seriously the need to balance our lives, we may not live to see retirement. I am frequently amazed to read the names of social work administrators who die before retirement or soon after. We applaud their success, achievements and impact on the quality of life for others. But the value of self-sacrifice has to be balanced with moderation; the drive to serve has to be balanced with a drive to survive. Today, I have chronic pain, perhaps because I did not heed my need for self-care. I failed to balance my work ethic with learning how to play as hard as I worked. Now I am forced to rest and adopt a new, more careful work paradigm.

There are many people who told me, "if you drop dead tomorrow, the system will go on." I hate to admit this is probably true, because I always felt what I did made a big difference. The truth is that if I did a good

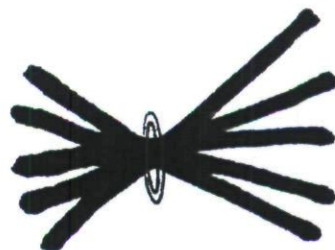
job, I should be able to leave and work will continue smoothly. Only time will tell the outcome of my efforts.

What we as social work administrators need to discover is how to balance our personal lives with the macro systems we attempt to manage. If my personal life is not in order, perhaps my success with the macro system will not be as effective. Taking an ecosystems perspective as a social work administrator may be the solution to finding true homeostasis. As we create interventions to manage the macro system, these or similar strategies must be applied to our lives.

Whether we golf, meditate or enjoy our significant other, building healthy infrastructures will help to alleviate the human costs associated with managing large systems. Perhaps our true successes are shown in how well we survive the systems we manage, not our success in changing them.

Social work administrators will need to closely monitor their own strengths and the tools needed to negotiate various human service systems. In some cases those who are wise will learn which systems to tackle (circus elephants) and which to avoid (wild raging bull elephants). Despite collaborations, negotiations and administrative tools, managers will have to learn and use personal survival techniques to work in the 21st century organization.

This narrative has helped me to focus on my 25 plus years in social work. I remain optimistic about the potential for social work administrators to accomplish great goals and improve the quality of life for workers and clients. However, on-going self examination and management of multiple goals and agendas are essential tasks for survival and success.





### Homage

This paper is a homage to Tessie A. Cleveland, DSW, MPH, who served as a mentor, elder culture-keeper, and friend. I offer a tribute to this great social work warrior who fought a good fight until the end. For those who did not know her, she was the consummate beleaguered administrator. I had the great blessing of working with her, learning under her, and growing as a result of her leadership.

Dr. Cleveland helped me to understand that African-American administrators cannot forget they represent a host of underrepresented and disenfranchised community voices. Many of our natural and spiritual gifts are drawn from the universal consciousness of our ethnic community, and it is to that community we must ultimately remain true. The successes and failures we experience as administrators will impact the future prospects of community members. The question was once asked, "Am I my brothers' or sisters' keeper?" The answer is an emphatic yes!<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the racial/ethnic administrator is constrained to accomplish multiple agendas: manage the organizational system, advocate for the community of origin, address the needs of the client and maintain professional standards and ethics.<sup>5</sup> Tessie Cleveland was that type of administrator who used her talents and skills to intervene on multiple levels. On the organizational level she established a social service delivery system that addressed the full range of client needs from advocacy to direct intervention. This required creating and managing interdisciplinary networks, acquiring resources from external sources (funding and staff), community relations and routine staff development activities. She accomplished these tasks along with proving leadership in the community, serving as a consultant, mentor, instructor and coach for students and professional social workers. Helping people achieve their potential was her prime directive, and she worked tirelessly to achieve that goal.

Many people feel she left this plane of existence too soon because there were more lessons to learn from the "consummate administrator." However, I trust and believe that she ultimately accomplished what she was assigned to do. She successfully demonstrated excellence in combining the full set of micro to macro social work skills. Her life, accomplishments and professionalism represent the model social work administrator. Most importantly she taught me how to keep an eye on the elephant in the room.

### References

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