

I Love the Profession, but Hate Where I Work: Remembering the Value of Organizations in Social Work Practice

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Abstract: This reflection centers on a social worker's journey as a practitioner and as a witness to and participant of innovative and toxic social service agencies. The author implores practitioners and educators alike to consider that effective organizational practice is an essential part of social work practice. Thriving social service organizations where social work employees experience a sense of belonging and meaning is crucial to furthering social work's mission in the 21st century.

Keywords: social service organizations, social work education, social work macro practice, nonprofit organizations

Imagine that you and your colleagues are taking a much needed coffee break, discussing the challenges and rewards of the social work profession. The conversation drifts to topics such as social justice, passion, equity, and access. People are energized and there is an optimism in the room as you all sip your coffee. Members of the group speak about their desire to make the world a better place. They argue about the unjust systems and structures that prevent people in the community from thriving. People discuss the challenges of working with certain populations, or with policies designed to help these populations. The positive energy in the room dissipates as the complaints emerge. Inevitably, the topic of the conversation then shifts to the state of the organization. People express their frustration with leadership. They bemoan poor communication, micro-management, and passive-aggressive supervision. Before the group breaks, one member comments: "What happened? When I go home I spend a significant portion of my time feeling frustrated with agency policy and how I am treated by my supervisor. This isn't why I became a social worker. I feel bitter and burned out. It's the culture of this place that makes me consider leaving the profession. The organization poses the biggest challenge for me."

Social workers are employed by a wide array of organizations: public, nonprofit, for-profit, and hybrid. Acting as agents, they receive sanction and authority from the organization. Organizational philosophy and setting may affect how they practice and what barriers they may face (Furman & Gibelman, 2013). According to Jaskyte (2010), there is a correlation between a social service agency's organizational culture and its client outcomes. The culture of an organization drives the innovative practices that can help an organization thrive in the future. In addition, the culture of an organization impacts the daily experience of social workers at agencies. The various dimensions of an organizational culture affects "respect for people, team orientation, stability, aggressiveness, and attention to detail" (Jaskyte, 2010, p. 125).

Organizations, organizational management, and organizational change are central concepts in social work. While these are central concepts, students do not realize their importance until they work in the field as full-time professionals. In communities all over the country, people face a

variety of social problems that create the need for organized action. Organizations are the primary setting for social work practice and the vehicles for social change, but all too frequently, they pose obstacles to achieving social justice and meeting human needs. Human service organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate tangible social value to the people they serve (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). As macro social work practitioners deal with human service needs and larger systemic issues in the social environment, they use the collective power of human service organizations to promote well-being and progressive policies and mechanisms in the social environment. To overcome social problems, social workers must understand and develop skills to function effectively in and through organizations (Furman & Gibelman, 2013). Social workers should be open to efforts to increase efficiency and apply relevant practices from business and public administration, while challenging and resisting practices and policies that can disempower both workers and clients.

The Organization as Our Cause

Abramovitz (1998) writes that social work has a unique purpose in that it deals with individual and societal issues. Social work engages problems at the individual “case” level and at the societal “cause” level. Rothman and Mizrahi (2014) have recently implored the profession to “recalibrate the imbalance between micro and macro practice” (p. 1). This reflection seeks to build on the concept of recalibrating our profession from a case-driven profession to a case AND cause driven profession. Too often, social workers seek an interconnection between organizations as the “cause” and the individual, group, and community with whom they work as the “case,” rather than seeing the individual as the “case” and society as the “cause.” Organizational culture, climate, values, and processes can empower or cripple employees who make up the organization (Jaskyte & Dressier, 2005). As a social work educator and practitioner for nearly two decades, I have participated in conversations where some fellow social workers communicate frustration about their organization. People feel hamstrung by policies and organizational culture. As a profession, we need to refocus our energies on creating better organizations for people and training social workers to be organization change agents.

In order for organizations to change, leaders of social service agencies need to use a combination of micro, mezzo, and macro skills. They need to view the organization and its employees as a system of change. For example, Jaskyte (2010) found that executive directors create consensus and collaboration in their organizations when they are explicit in their efforts to mentor, encourage, and recognize accomplishments of an employee. These processes do not happen on their own. They involve relationship building, rapport, active listening skills, and careful assessment. Executive directors must engage in a form of direct practice or micro work with the employees of their organizations, as well as with the populations those organizations serve. In order to do so effectively, executive directors require organizational skills (Busch & Hostetter, 2009).

The organizational system, or the “cause,” cannot be separated from the “case” or the social workers in the organization. In this special issue of *Reflections*, much has been written about the dichotomy between the “case,” or the individual, and the “cause.” (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016). As a social work profession, we are right to think and act on the issues that exist in the

community and society. Yet, there is evidence that we have done this without learning how to be effective leaders in our organizations, causing some of our own to experience frustration, burn-out, and fatigue. My goal has been to help the social work profession be intentional about developing leaders and administrators in organizations so that social workers can thrive.

Therefore, as a social worker concerned about the well-being of people and organizations, I share a vision of how change in our organizations can transform them into thriving spaces for both social workers and our consumers.

When Organizations Think and Act on a Bigger Level

As an MSW intern, I worked for an organization where the executive team regularly met in individual and group meetings after each grant application, project, and program. During these meetings, organizational roles and hierarchy were not observed. These meetings led to program and organizational innovations which changed the way we engaged the community, funders, and other stakeholders. These meetings were unusually refreshing to me. While I had taken courses in administration, I had never learned how to create an organizational environment where all employees were given the opportunity to have a voice at the table.

The executive director created a cohesive group environment in which everyone could express their frustrations, excitement, and concerns about any initiative. I learned so many group leadership skills by watching him lead such meetings. He fostered an open, collaborative environment and modeled for me the effectiveness of an organizational culture where the focus was not on role and personality, but on achieving organizational excellence.

Later I worked full time for a small nonprofit housing corporation. Each week, one staff person led the meeting during which s/he would seek feedback regarding a “wicked” question that they were facing in their work. Questions included, “How do I best interact with this funder?” and “What is the best way to develop rapport with this consumer?” The staff member would present his or her case and then would receive real-time feedback. Although one person was the focus of the group, each group member was able to glean new ways to approach the “wicked” questions they were facing in their respective roles in the organization. Finally, the staff member presenting the situation would receive valuable insights into their professionalism or oral and written communication skills. These “wicked” questions laid the foundation for pieces of my work in my macro courses today: students and instructor exploring how best to deal with interpersonal and organizational dynamics with consumers, other social workers, funders, and other community stakeholders.

The executive director’s leadership style and attitude promoted open feedback and communication. He invited the staff into such conversations to improve how all stakeholders (staff, consumers, funders, etc.) experienced the organization. While the board shaped the organization’s future, he was an articulate advocate for a healthy and thriving workplace. He knew that the employees of the organization were the means by which the organization could engage in the affordable housing work. He saw the staff as the veins and arteries through which the “blood” of the organization flowed. As he would say, “Without happy employees, you won’t find happy consumers.” This example highlights the effective interconnection of micro, mezzo,

and macro competencies that result in a thriving and healthy organizational environment. My experience as a member of that organization still shapes how I approach students, faculty, and fellow administrators as a higher education administrator.

Over the course of my career in macro social work, I have talked with students at the BSW and MSW levels who are working at an internship in the field. Despite experiencing the highs and lows of being emerging social work professionals, these students express the gratitude that comes from working with people in the field. However, what they report about their experiences as interns or employees of an agency is much more concerning. They express concerns about the way their supervisors are treated by the board or by the executive director. Some students observe the devaluing of employees through passive aggressive behavior, inconsistent rules and expectations, salary inconsistencies, favoritism, and a lack of communication. Some students share with me that when their supervisors have weak boundaries and are demeaning about the consumers they serve, it affects their commitment to the profession. These students will say something like: *Dr. Fernando, I want to be a social worker. I'm not sure if I can work for other social workers. What's the deal? What happened? I don't want to end up like her (or him). Yeah, I know I need to get stuff done at work, but do I respect my supervisor? No way. They've got too many issues.*

This comment leads me to a rich conversation about leadership, management, and the opportunity for this student to begin the process of “managing up” in an organization. These conversations allow us to not marginalize “our own” at the cost of helping those community members who are at the margins. Conversations like these are needed for social workers to deconstruct the structures and systems of a social service organization. Sadly, conversations like these may not happen as much as students would like.

Organizations as Containers

Growing up in Sri Lanka, I was fortunate to spend time with the Missionaries of Charity, a religious order founded by Saint Mother Teresa in 1950. Saint Teresa is renowned for her work in Calcutta and the transforming approach she espoused through her care of the marginalized in India. The nuns who took the formal steps to join her order were no different. They came from all over the world to Sri Lanka to care for the poor, the dying, the oppressed, and the destitute at Shanti Nivasa (Shanti's House). Watching these foreign women learn the local language and become one with the communities they served was humbling and inspiring, providing me with an early vision of service and leadership. I remember washing and cleaning the latrines with these women. In spite of our lowly duties, I enjoyed listening to them reflect on their service. Many of these conversations have stayed with me. I specifically remember talking with the nuns about what motivated them:

Our order and sisterhood is our container. It keeps us joyful and secure. The values, beliefs, and practices that we share together—from washing dishes to singing hymns before bed—are the most important practices we share. It's the practices and the people-in tandem with each other—that make our commitment to this life filled with joy and peace. (Personal communication, November, 1991)

I have pondered these potent words in my work as a social work practitioner and as an educator. In my work as a scholar and practitioner in nonprofit organizations, the motivation of these nuns rings true. Like the Sisters of Charity, the social service agency is the container for the social work professional by its shared values, expectations, and policies. The container can both literally “contain” us, but it can also be a space where our employees can grow, transform, and become their best selves. Kelloway and Day (2005) discovered that workload, ambiguity of job description, career trajectory, work schedule, and job control are some elements which determine healthy workplace environments. Such workplace stressors undermine employees and cause them to feel undervalued.

Follow the Donors at Your Own Peril

Organizations often run into the risk of “the tail wagging the dog,” where the funder is the tail and the organization is the dog. When funders create external pressures in an organization, it runs the risk of shifting the mission of an organization. Funder dollars come with their own expectations, accountability, and compliance obligations. What happens next is that social service agencies can develop a tunnel-vision and spend too much of their time meeting funder expectations and reporting requirements and lose sight of their overarching mission and purpose. Frankly, this is as true in social work education as it is in social service agencies. We might chase grants, but without a strategic process end up pursuing spending the majority of our time administering the grant rather than attending to valuable aspects of a program’s mission. While such decisions do not possess “right or wrong” outcomes, how do these grants come back to benefit our students? During the past three months, I have interacted with social work educators who are unprepared to negotiate the challenging balance between ideology of social work education and the market-realities of higher education. These leaders find themselves swinging like a pendulum, where their pursuit of grants overrules the mission and identity of their schools. One educator told me: “I am just going after the money. I’ll figure out how it works for our program later. I need to do this in order to keep up with institution X.”

A student once commented to me, “The funding is much more important than me. I am told that I need to get the work done, because ultimately, the funder is the most important person in the room. I didn’t think that I would hear this from a social worker! My own growth and capacity is invisible to them. The board is concerned about the community, but ultimately, money talks.” Social workers’ adherence to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics obligates them to balance the tension between conflicting commitments to both the consumer and organization (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). We need to live with the tension of valuing the consumers on our case load, the funding requirements, and the social workers who connect them.

From Funder-Centered to People-Centered

How does one create an organizational environment where employees feel a sense of belonging and meaning while continuing to pursue funding? Most social work graduates will assume management responsibilities, such as supervision or budget responsibility, within several years of graduation (Watson & Hoefler, 2016); and most social workers report having had some

management responsibility during their careers (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Faced with enormous need and limited resources, social workers must bring skill and an ethical commitment to the effective stewardship of resources and management of paid and volunteer workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). However, in any organization, there needs to be a balance between meeting funder demands and providing opportunity for social workers to develop professionally. In my experience, this balance is not a reality. Pfeffer (2005) has written that nonprofits are supposed to be “people-centric” organizations. Ironically, he states that the leadership of such institutions is more concerned with the “case” (the clients and the donors), than the “cause” (the organization and the people that make it go). Pfeffer (2005) writes that employees often feel that they are the last on the priority list after the funders, board of directors, and the consumers the organization serves. Research indicates that this promotes a high burnout and turnover rate among nonprofit employees, including social workers. He states that regardless of whether employees work for for-profit or non-profit organizations, they need to experience a sense of community and value in the work they do. Pfeffer (2005) indicates that training, transparency of finances, and comparative compensation are practices that characterize “people-centered organizations” (p. 2).

As a member of the board of a local educational organization, I frequently talk with the executive director about the ways she can make her organization people-centered. In the past two years, the executive director holds regular meetings with staff members so that their voices are heard. This also allows them to respond to the mission and direction of the institution. She regularly updates employees about the fiscal health of the organization, showing them the overall fiscal health of the foundation and how the budget planning process is tied to the strategic plan. She comments, “I notice people are more willing to save money on small things like coffee and paper because they see the larger fiscal picture of the organization. They know that our office supply budget can eat up a majority of our operational expenses.” The board creates opportunities to hear from the staff, which in turn shapes the strategic planning process of the board. Moreover, throughout the year staff connect with each other through team-building exercises, lunches, and informal gatherings. The foundation has developed a pattern of inviting employee participation and communication. This demonstrates a commitment to being people-centered. The executive director notes, “It’s really the small, basic things that make the difference. We talk as social workers about building a healthy rapport with our consumers. For some reason, we don’t think this is important for our employees.” In order to empower the populations and create social change, we need to value and treasure those very social workers who are bringing about empowerment and social change.

The Hole in Social Work Education

As a prospective social work student, I saw the gap in emphasis on healthy organizations. I found myself confused by how I fit into the landscape of the profession. My fellow colleagues were excited about the prospect of learning about micro practice, while my mind overflowed with enthusiasm about systemic reform and community change. Because of my non-western, non-white background, I experienced social change occurring at the macro level first, in the context of a collectivistic, communal cultural milieu. I was eager to use my knowledge, skills, and abilities as a social worker to make change at the community and organizational level. This

conviction continued throughout my time as an MSW student, when I focused my academic work on community organization.

I learned about community assessment, organizing, community development, and participatory methods to engage populations social workers attempt to serve. As a graduate student, I read articles and books in which I saw the terms “communities” and “organizations” joined together. In the NASW Code of Ethics and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS), communities and organizations are mentioned in the same phrase (CSWE, 2014). However, while communities and organizations might be conjoined in our textbooks and foundational documents, in reality the organizational system and the community system are two distinctive identities which intersect. Therefore, in the organizational system, the way that one practices micro and mezzo components is different than in a community context. In the community context, one might engage with government, the local community, and business constituents. However, in the organizational environment, one might interact with these constituents and others such as funders, employees, regulatory agencies, etc.

My personal experience supported the notion that the intersection of micro and mezzo components within the organizational system requires specific competencies. Social workers understand that engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation are ongoing components of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with, and on behalf of, diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The EPAS 2015 standards #6-#9 speak to engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating practice on a multiplicity of levels. However, other social work scholars have agreed that there has been an under-emphasis on organizational leadership, culture, and development training for the social worker (Wilson & Lau, 2011; Watson & Hegar, 2013). While it is imperative that all social workers incorporate the ability to practice on the micro, mezzo, and community levels with a diverse set of constituents, they also need to develop the capacity to practice in the organizational context.

While organizations serve communities, the organizational environment is a separate and distinctive arena. The social work profession has appropriately chosen to focus on the social, economic, and environmental problems for which organizations are created or are sustained. However, it lacks vision for the importance of thriving social service organizations. Without healthy organizations, social work will not be effective in empowering the individual, group, and community cases we seek to change. In order to lessen the frustrations social workers express about social service agencies, the profession must view the organization as an important context for change.

Over the past ten years, I have found myself in conversations with social work faculty—many of whom are clinicians—unsure as to how they should teach an introductory or advanced macro course. Rothman (2013) notes that due to limited resources and enrollment in MSW management concentrations, such courses are being taught by clinical faculty. Consequently, we hinder our macro students when clinical social workers teach outside of their areas of expertise. These clinical faculty have never participated in a strategic plan or a capital campaign, and may be unfamiliar with the leadership and nonprofit management literature. Therefore, the administrative and organizational curriculum they embed in their courses is outdated or

irrelevant for a 21st century context. I have presented on administration pedagogy and research at the Council on Social Work Education annual meeting. I have frequently enjoyed long conversations with graduate and doctoral students who yearn to be exposed to the latest literature related to workplace environment, conflict mediation, leadership, and effective donor engagement. Sadly, these students—the future of our profession—search for this literature on their own as they do not receive this curriculum in their courses, and lack specific training in their internships.

I have also had the opportunity to shape the minds and hearts of social work students who come into my macro courses convinced that a future clinician does not have a need for macro practice. In my macro courses, I dedicate a significant amount of time to developing students' organizational management and leadership skills. My courses highlight the need for organizational mentoring, managerial, interviewing, networking, conflict resolution, and team building skills. When I started out as a social work educator, many of my courses centered on community organization. However, after years of emails from former students and conversations with field instructors, I grew convinced of the need to spend more time on organizational leadership and development curricula for my students.

In *Crucibles of Leadership*, Thomas (2008) writes: “People discover new, hidden, and often captivating things about play when they practice. Virtually every one of the leaders I interviewed found something deeper and more meaningful in their play once they seriously committed themselves to the notion of practice. Learning in any domain, leadership included, is not likely to occur without a desire to learn and the willingness and discipline to practice, practice, and practice.”

Practice is one of the major reasons why people from all backgrounds decide that they want to become a professional social worker. They want to practice in certain countries or with certain populations and settings. Throughout social work curriculum, there are opportunities for students to develop clinical skills, group leadership skills, and community organizing skills. For example, Bogo, Rawlings, Katz & Logie (2014) have written a textbook about developing clinical skills through an assessment tool called the Objective Structured Clinical Examination. This is a valuable tool that enables social workers to develop skills in motivational interviewing in field placements. Social workers from all settings have participated in clinical simulation to improve their interactions with clients.

However, there is a noticeable gap in the organizational simulations for program directors, managers, supervisors and executive directors. As has been written in Lynch & Versen (2003) and Fisher (2009), social work clinical supervisors often make the mistake of engaging in therapeutic problem solving when they are faced with personnel and human resources challenges. A supervisor must treat employees ethically and legally and should not engage in therapeutic discussions when faced with personnel decisions. This not only happens in the social work field, but also in the academy, where deans, department chairs, and directors need to address personnel issues surrounding social work faculty and staff.

As part of my macro courses, students engage in a number of supervisor and supervisee

simulations. Topics explore leadership themes such as work performance, professional conduct, sexual harassment, workplace conflict, etc. These simulations allow students to receive feedback on their verbal and non-verbal communication skills, their ability to communicate agency policy, their conflict resolution, and other skills vitally important for their professional development. A former student reported:

From dealing with uncomfortable situations such as how to fire an employee, educating me on the far-reaching implications of organizational policy as well as furthering my efficacy of macro social work practice, this course developed me as a professional in every sense of the word. I am a better clinician and person because of the “sharpening” work that this practice class gave me. The “practice” in this class was tough! I left class sometimes worn out and drained. But...it gave me a great foundation for game day—I am ready for daily ups and downs of a social work career! (Personal communication, October 28, 2016)

I recently spoke to a group of students in an MSW program. Many of the students in the room were enrolled in the clinical concentration. I went around the room asking them about their long term career goals. While some of them were strongly interested in starting their own private practice, the majority of the students wanted to be leaders of an organization in the future. I asked them if they had received training on topics such as budgeting, fiscal management, managing staff, etc. No one raised their hand. This is the challenge that is before us. While the majority of social workers might choose clinical or micro “case” work in the future, social workers need to be trained so that they can effectively lead the “cause” of our social service agencies. Healthy agencies create healthy outcomes for our consumers.

Social work has a bright future. There are many opportunities for the social work community to make a significant difference. Professionals who tackle issues such as depression, suicide, or health care must work in environments where they are engaged and developed effectively, in organizations that are not solely driven by donors. When executive leaders facilitate the growth and capacity of their employees, social service organizations will be greater generators of social innovation, change, and restoration.

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