leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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navigating large service systems

All modern organizations, as never before, are in need of competent managerial leaders, who bring more than their technical abilities. They require people who can survive and help organizations prosper in a world of constant change and intense competition. Organizations need leaders with both technical competence and interpersonal excellence (Edwards &Yankey, 2006).

Working for a large complex organization such as in child welfare, juvenile justice, hospital, veteran services, community mental health center, industry, or any other human services can be a source for upward mobility for social workers. The job prospects and possibilities for leadership development in these organizations can be vast. However, because many people have limited knowledge of what social workers do and the kinds of jobs they hold, these positions present opportunities to educate others about the role of social work in the organization.

The appeal for many who enter the profession of social work is the interaction with people and the many challenges that confront them from both a micro (individual) and macro (systems) approach. Social workers are more than likely to work in organizations that provide human and other social services. These work sites are public (governmental), non profit (non-governmental organizations, NGO), and proprietary organizations. They have structure, culture and management that

influence how services are delivered and more importantly how social workers are able to do their professional work.

Organizational culture is shown to influence not only employee attitudes and behaviors, but also quality of work, client satisfaction, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The ability to managing workplace culture, leadership and organizational structure, while simultaneously delivering professional social work services is crucial for success in large organizations. Social workers often find themselves balancing the demands of helping people while simultaneously being responsive to the systems in which they work. Sometimes the expectations of clients and the demands of the workplace are challenging, unstated, and occasionally conflictual. For example, social workers in health care systems, where the institution emphasizes cost containment strategies, may find themselves challenged in meeting the needs of the patient and the health care setting's

expectations to move the patient through the system in a timely manner. Another area of practice in large systems is child welfare, in which the duties of social workers are influenced by the law. Often, social workers in the child welfare systems are confronted with meeting multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of interacting with clients, colleagues, and other professionals both within the agency and external.

» DEVELOPING A CAREER STRATEGY

Developing a strategy for their careers is an essential step for social workers, particularly those in large systems. Learning about the organization and possibilities for professional growth can be an important component in establishing a career path. Preparing for this step involves thinking about career goals and developing a personal plan to achieve them. A mentor can be helpful in providing guidance through this planning process. A current work place may provide the opportunities for career and leadership development.

In large organizations, such as state and federal government agencies, there may be career development resources and opportunities available for selected employees who demonstrate leadership potential. Information about these programs is usually located in the human resource department.

» LEARNING THE CULTURE OF THE LARGE SYSTEMS

- › Learn the decision-making process in the agency and for the particular course of action you are interested in pursuing.
- › Learn who has the formal authority for making decisions, as well as who has informal influence with the decision makers in the organization and department.
- › Build your social capital by developing positive exchange relationships with other members of the organization and with organizational decision makers.
- › Build your social capital by establishing your expertise and competence in managing particular problem areas.

When necessary, draw on your social capital to accomplish your objective- and remember to rebuild it. (Hardcastle, Powers, Wenocur, 2004).

These are a few points to take in consideration in trying to understand and influence organizations. Remember it is helpful to be clear and articulate, formulate questions, and think through what you would like to achieve on a professional and organizational level. Also, another valuable lesson is that every person has the capacity to demonstrate and exhibit leadership. Often, leadership is displayed in everyday activities, in which a person shows their ability to act and behave in ways that are goal oriented and can encourage others to do the same (Blau, & Mallery, 2010).

However, aspiring leaders need to be mindful of other considerations when pursuing leadership opportunities in a large organization. One should consider the political operations of the organization, including the role of unofficial policies in influencing decision-making and agency operation. Also, competing for limited resources can create conflict among colleagues and both the potential benefits and consequences of competition should be weighed.

Each leadership journey is filled with choices, different paths, ups and downs, and ambiguity, but identifying a guiding philosophy will help to navigate this sometimes turbulent adventure (Blau & Mallery, 2010).

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