

# The MSW at the Head of the Table

## The Trend Away from Social Work Leadership is a Potential Risk for Agencies

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The current sense of the direction of executive leadership of social service agencies points to the steady shift away from leadership by professional social workers. I will explain why I think this is occurring. And while it is understandable, there are also reasons why this trend poses risks for social service agencies.



Paul Levine

Do not assume that the leadership position of a human service agency requires someone with mostly social work skills. Because if the profession is synonymous with those skills, where are they in the curricula of social work schools? Where are leadership, strategic planning, fundraising, risk management, fiscal management, quality improvement, and board development? CEOs spend large percentages of their days performing these functions—or supervising others performing them. As budgets grow with services, the responsibility for clients' lives, the agency's financial resources, and organizational survival are in the hands of the CEO.

Non-social workers can and do lead agencies. They do it best by being terrific listeners, quick studies, and "analytic types" who are confident in their intelligence, willing to take positions, respectful of knowing that there is a lot out there they do not know. They often have a combination of traits: humility and confidence. Some may have had some

practice experience. They may have worked as direct care staff, or have a related degree. So, you might ask, what is the problem? Why does not having a professional social worker at the helm pose risks?

First, social workers see clients through a kaleidoscopic lens. They factor in issues that other professions purposely try to view as constants so

that they can focus on what they consider to be most salient. For example, special education needs to focus on learning and behavior patterns within a learning environment. Social workers rarely see their clients without thinking about all the impinging psycho-social forces: their economic situations; ethnicity, race,

religion; their psyches; family dynamics; relevant systems and bureaucratic rules; and medical health. This broad perspective enables an

Executive Director to determine how to focus the agency's efforts internally and public advocacy externally.

Second, social work is a skilled profession. It is vital to know if the organization and staff are providing services skillfully. A professional social worker understands the helping process—not all progress is smooth. The quality of the work is not always evident to the non-social worker. Also, a social worker knows the nature of the work. This means understanding the challenges staff face: what it will take to successfully engage a homeless substance abuser; the intensity

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of a psychotherapy session; the anxiety of a child welfare home visit; the counter-transference in working with acting out or seriously mentally ill people. Without that experience of having been there, the nature of the work is unknown to the leader of the organization. Social service agencies lose their potential for maximum effectiveness when their CEO has not shared the experience of the work.

Is it possible for a chief program officer to be there for the executive and fill some gaps? Of course it is, but it certainly is qualitatively different if the CEO is a professional social worker. □