

Essential Business Skills for Social Work Managers

Tools for Optimizing Programs and Organizations

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Preface

Yes, I have written a book that combines the fields of business and social work – two subjects that do not often go together, I realize. Admittedly, some in our field may have an adverse reaction to my embrace of business practices. Still, my experience tells me that the trend is unavoidable despite what may be ideological objections from some in the social work field. Having pursued my Master of Social Work (MSW) and Master of Business Administration (MBA) in recent years and managed various social work programs and projects in the process, it continues to concern me how few business management concepts – most often taught in MBA programs – are explored in social work educational programs and utilized by social workers in the management and leadership ranks of human service organizations.

Social work managers often wonder why “those MBAs” are taking over the leadership of human service programs and organizations. I believe social workers are losing leadership ground to other professionals because we are not learning enough about the business side of our work, which has become a necessary aspect of successful social work management.

It is widely known that many social workers find themselves in supervisory and management positions within a few years of graduating from MSW programs. Many of these jobs are in nonprofit human service organizations in which, increasingly, business acumen is necessary to maintain grants and donations, start new programs, market services to clients, supervise the finance function, understand the external environment, and so forth. Even within public sector settings, many of these business skills are still relevant and necessary. Yet, our training generally does not place enough emphasis on the depth of management acumen a social worker needs to succeed as an organizational manager and leader.

Therefore, I present you with this introductory book describing these necessary business management skills in one place. I’ve written this book for students and social work managers

from my perspective as a fellow social work manager. There is a saying in management, “it’s lonely at the top,” which describes the feelings of isolation that managers and leaders experience as they advance within organizations. I have felt this way plenty of times in my career. My hope is that this book can help minimize some of the loneliness that you may feel as you rise in your career.

My students and colleagues often ask me why I decided to pursue an MBA after my MSW. I usually tell them that I wanted to run a nonprofit organization and needed to obtain more business management skills than were taught to me during my MSW program in order to land the job I wanted. Each day in my role as a nonprofit manager and executive (and still today in my administrative academic position) I have drawn on the knowledge base of my MBA training as well as the social work foundation of my MSW. I find this combination to be optimal for managing a human service operation.

Additionally, students in MSW classes that I teach have asked me if getting an MBA is required to move up the ladder in social work management (they know that I have one and want to know my “inside opinion”). The MBA is an arduous albeit rewarding path to take, but admittedly it’s not for everyone. I truly believe that this book could help you forego, or at least delay, the MBA. Getting an advanced business degree may not be as necessary as some might think to reach the top of a human service organization, and believe me when I tell you that it is quite expensive to pursue this path!

In summary, this book should help social work undergraduate and MSW students, and early-stage social work management practitioners (1) understand the essential business skills needed to manage programs and organizations; (2) improve their overall management toolkit for finding a better job or getting promoted; (3) serve as a desk reference for managers to

troubleshoot various real-world situations; and (4) ultimately, gain parity with other managers and leaders holding MBA or other management degrees and working in the human service space.

For teaching purposes, this book would be most appropriate for social work macro practice courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Specifically, this book could be used as a supplemental text for macro practice foundation courses. The first chapter, for example, could be a useful assigned reading to help students understand the changing nature of social work management. The appendix case profile and discussion questions could be used as a teaching tool (or an assigned class project) for the macro practice foundation course.

Additionally, some schools of social work offer courses in human resource management, financial management, and so forth. The chapters in this book that deal with these specific topics could be assigned reading in these types of courses. The suggested learning exercises included at the end of each chapter could serve as class assignments.

To the students using this book in class and to others practicing social work management, I trust that you will find this book helpful as you navigate your career as a social work manager. If I can be of any assistance to you along the way, please do not hesitate to let me know. Keeping our professional network alive and strong is a key to our success in the field of social work management.

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