Solving Social Work’s Critical Leadership Problem

Barry Rosenberg, Professor of Practice
Today’s Agenda

• Too many human service organizations are poorly led
• Too few social workers lead human service organizations
• Social workers are & can be exceptional human service leaders
• How Brown School addresses the problem
My Career Path

• 1975, MSW  State University of New York at Albany
• 1975 – 1979 Regional Director, B’nai B’rith Youth Organization, NYC
• 1979 – 1993 Jewish Federation of North Jersey (final 8 years as CEO)
• 1993 – 2012 President & CEO, Jewish Federation of St. Louis
At the Brown School

- Chair, Social Impact Leadership Concentration
- Chair, Management Specialization
- Director, Center for Human Service Leadership
  - At Delmar Divine
  - Executive Education
  - Organizational capacity-building
Small Business & Social Ventures Fail at High Rates

- Poor leadership impacts start-ups & existing organizations
- 65% of new businesses fail within 10 years
- 40% of social enterprises last less than one year
Case 1 – Two Years to Extinction

- Organization serving adults with mental disabilities
- Revenue mix of per-capita government funding & earned income
- Over several years, deficits eroded reserves, heading toward bankruptcy
- Board & management blamed insufficient government funding
Two Years to Extinction (cont)

- Board: well-meaning, without needed knowledge & skills
- Director: caring, advanced from secretary, lacked skills
- Symptoms:
  - Out of date, conflicting bylaws, policy manuals, job descriptions
  - Nepotism resulting in excessive, but incompetent administration
  - Poor staff training
  - Failure to collect accounts receivable
  - Safety violations
  - No executive evaluation
  - No-show board members
- Funder mandated consultants
Additional Causes of Weakness

- High service demand & insufficient resources
- More nonprofits competing for limited resources
  - Often small, with limited staff
  - Unable to attract top talent
  - Weak strategic, financial HR, fundraising skills
  - Limited investment in training
  - Lack of affluent, influential board members
  - Poor morale, high turnover, frequent funding crises
- Many (not all) deliver poor or mediocre services that fail to achieve impact
Organizational Capacity & Infrastructure for Quality Services

• Stable organizational structure
• Strategic, creative leadership
• Careful planning
• Skilled, well-trained professionals
• Appropriate technology
• Well-designed systems & operating processes
• Ongoing evaluation
• Collaborative networks
• Effective marketing

... So much more
Nonprofit Starvation Cycle

- Donors prefer service, not infrastructure
- Funders set unrealistic “overhead” ratios
- Organizations claim they can meet ratios
- To do so, they under-invest in capacity
- Forces reliance on unrestricted dollars
- Infrastructure improves performance
- For-profits recognize need for infrastructure
Impact on Employee

• Frustration if social workers can’t provide quality services
• Adverse impact on career goals, satisfaction & well-being
  – Over-worked, under-appreciated
  – Inadequate salaries & benefits
  – Lack needed equipment, training, supervision
  – Burnout, turnover, change careers

*Effective leadership & management is an ethical imperative*
Why Few Social Workers in Leadership

- Historically, human services led by social workers
- Social work emphasized clinical & other micro roles
- Perception that social workers lack skills & traits needed
- Board chairs preference for MBAs
- However, understanding the human service “context” is required
Upper Echelons Theory

- People at the top have the most influence
- Leadership approach is shaped by education & career path
- MBAs train for large, for-profit, market-driven organizations
- MBA’s likely lack:
  - Deep knowledge of causes & evidence-based interventions
  - Training in human behavior, community development, social policy
  - Understanding of human service environment
  - Social work ethics & values

Therefore, other factors equal, social workers will make better CEOs
For-Profit Competition

• Growing competition in fields previously dominated by non-profits
  – Senior adult care
  – Employment training
  – Mental & behavioral health

• For-profits responsibility to maximize shareholder value
  – Will they elevate client needs in relation to profit?
  – Will they skim the “best” clients?
Case 2 – Loss of a Critical Agency

- Impact of poor leadership, lack of contextual knowledge & profit motive
- Jewish senior adult agency
- Old, crowded, inadequate for changes in patient services
- Board: lacked expertise in senior services, desired show-piece
- Fired social worker CEO
- CEO: financial & operational skills, lacked expertise in senior services
- $64 MM facility, too big, wrong patient mix, inadequate fundraising, debt
- HUD took back loan. Eventually sold for $34 MM
- CEO convicted of fraud
Leadership Pipeline

- Insufficient pipeline to replace aging human service leadership
- People advance without adequate training
- Social work students not interested, resent required courses
- SW Schools offer little training
- SW profession generally silent on leadership & management
- Don’t recognize importance of training, limited in-service
- Normative pattern: graduate, direct practice, supervisor, senior manager
Why the Resistance?

- Never considered. Dominant image is direct practice
- Don’t believe they have managerial / leadership personality
- Discomfort with money
- Discomfort with business
- Discomfort with power & influence
Perspectives on Money, Business, Power

- No money, no mission!
- Business skills are generic. Can be used for good or bad
- Discomfort with power & influence is more understandable
  - Power corrupts
- Power as potential energy. Ability to influence values, beliefs, behavior
- Influence as kinetic energy

*If I could give you the power to eliminate poverty, racism, domestic violence … would you take it?*
Solution

• Profession must expand training & aggressively pursue leadership
• Ability to shape organizations & services with evidence-based practice, values of social justice, equity, client-centeredness
• Prepare students for inevitable management responsibilities
• Prepare students for career mobility & salary advancement
• Prepare students to manage themselves within organizations

 Needed: equivalent of MBA for human services
Brown School Example

- Management Specialization since 1984
- First Social Entrepreneurship Specialization
- All MSW students take required course in management
- New innovative Social Impact Leadership concentration
- MSW – MBA Joint degree
- ??% of students in one of these programs
- Students pursue multiple interests
Examples of Success

• Alex Goodfellow, MSW 2013
  – Director, Programs, Planning & Strategic Planning, Little Bit Foundation
  – Executive Director, Share our Spare, Chicago

• Nikki Doughty, MSW 2014
  – Development Director, City Academy
  – Head of School, City Academy
  – Associate Director, Institute for School Partnerships, Washington Univ

• De Nichols, MSW 2014
  – Award winning activist designer
  – Harvard Loeb Fellow
  – Senior User Experience Researcher, YouTube
  – Author, The Art of Protest
Mary Parker Follett

• Social Worker in Boston, early 1900’s
• Innovator
  – Department of Vocational Guidance
  – Roxbury Neighborhood House
• Leading theorist on organizational management
• Advisor to President T. Roosevelt
• Lecturer London School of Economics
• After years of obscurity, her work is now re-discovered