



Notes from the Field: Continuing Education for Social Workers on Autism, Intellectual Disability, and Sexual Health

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An Examination of Leadership in Non-Profit Organizations: Does Degree Matter?

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Abstract

With core values of social justice, integrity, and cultural competence, social workers are uniquely positioned to promote the well-being of populations often served by non-profit human service organizations. This study aimed to examine whether there was a qualitative difference between non-profit leaders with a social work degree and those with a degree in some other field. Fifteen interviews were conducted with leaders of non-profit human service organizations. Results indicated that while there were some differences between social workers and non-social workers, there were also many similarities. Implications for the education and training of social workers are provided.

Introduction

Non-profit organizations provide an unparalleled value-based mechanism for innovation and social change. As such, they provide leaders of these organizations with a unique ability to not only redefine and conceptualize complex social problems but to effectively respond to them through the use of creative and bold solutions (Berzin, Pitt-Catsoupes, & Gaitan-Rossi, 2015; Shier & Handy, 2016). By adding social value and economic wealth, non-profit organizations often positively impact local, state, and national communities during the course of carrying out their missions (Felicio, Goncalves, & Goncalves, 2013).

In the U.S., approximately 1.41 million non-profits existed in 2013, contributing an estimated \$905.9 billion to the economy, or 5.4% of the GDP (McKeever, 2015). Particularly when considering that around a quarter of these are classified as human service organizations (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), organizational

leaders can make a significant contribution. With established core values of social justice, integrity, and cultural competence, social workers are in a strong position to promote the well-being of a multitude of populations experiencing discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other social problems through their work in non-profits (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008).

Non-profit Leadership Competencies

Non-profit leadership competencies encompass a wide range of cognitive and affective processes, knowledge, skills, and values. Variables including agency size, scope, mission, services, and cultural context further complicate efforts to establish a hierarchy of important competencies; however, despite variance, there is some transdisciplinary agreement regarding which competencies require mastery for effective human services administration (Hoefler, 2011). These basic skills include people skills, attitudes and experiences, substantive knowledge, and management skills, with people skills being most important and management skills considered least important (Hoefler, 2011).

The Network for Social Work Management (NSWM) utilizes 18 competencies for their human services management certificate program, with corresponding performance indicators for each of the following four domains: executive leadership (considered to overlay the other three domains and most related to organizational effectiveness), resource management, strategic management, and community collaboration (Hassan & Wimpfheimer, 2015). The eight specific executive leadership domain competencies include interpersonal skills, analytical and critical thinking skills, professional behavior, ability to maintain stakeholder relationships, communication skills, cross-cultural

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understanding, advocate for social justice, and facilitate innovative change (Hassan & Wimpfheimer, 2015). The NSWM competencies are inclusive of the basic skills while providing additional competencies for experienced and academically trained managers (Hofer, 2011). Considering that these competencies are not unique to social work, the implication is that social workers do not practice management in a way that is different than other professions.

Social Work Leadership Competencies

However, the literature suggests social workers do, in fact, practice leadership differently. Citing an important historical tradition of effective social work leadership, Brilliant (1986) suggested that in an effort to support oppressed client populations through promoting indigenous leaders, social workers of the '60s and '70s abandoned traditional management roles and business practices. Rather than working within unhelpful and discriminatory organizations, social workers addressed systematic social problems by working alongside clients outside of mainstream systems. Brilliant (1986) suggests that social work reestablish leadership competency through curriculum and field revisions, as well as program and policy skills development. The profession has answered Brilliant's call by developing an evidence base for social work leadership and management.

Social work researchers have shown increased interest in leadership and management in the past few decades; however, with a lack of any guiding conceptual frameworks, those that have been attempted often have unclear findings (Menefee, 2000; Preston, 2008). Menefee and Thompson (1994) established that rapidly changing and increasingly complex practice environments require social work managers to operate with a generalist set of skills emphasizing technological, fiscal management, and strategic planning skills. By 2000, Rank and Hutchison established a definition of social work leadership and nine essential social work leadership skills including community development, communication/interpersonal, analytic, technological, political,

visioning, ethical reasoning, risk taking, and cultural competence/diversity (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). Using content analysis of social work leadership articles, Holosko (2009) identified the top five cited core social work leadership attributes and ranked them. The attributes, listed in descending order, are as follows: vision (having one and implementing one), influencing others to act, teamwork/collaboration, problem-solving capacity, and creating positive change. A quick review of these "social work" leadership attributes indicates that all of these skills are required of managers of all professions. By using open ended, exploratory interviews, this study hoped to identify unique social work leadership attributes. Once established, these attributes could be used to build a clear model of social work specific leadership attributes that can be utilized to inform future research.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in leadership practices among executives in non-profit organizations in one Midwestern state. Specifically, this study aimed to describe any differences between social workers' and non-social workers' perceptions of leadership. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' university.

Research Design and Procedures

This was a qualitative study that sought to determine whether there were any differences in leadership perceptions based on academic degree. Once the study was approved by the university's IRB, the third author located all non-profit organizations in one Midwestern state. The third author then made initial contact with the identified leaders, based on information obtained from the non-profit organizations' websites, via email inviting them to participate in an interview. If a response was not returned within two weeks, a second email invitation was sent to the potential participant. If a response was returned,

participants were sent the informed consent form via email and asked to sign and return the informed consent form prior to conducting the interview. The third author conducted all of the interviews in order to ensure consistency in the interview process. Copious notes were taken on a laptop by the third author during these interviews. The interviews took a semi-structured format, which allowed some flexibility in the interview process. Once all interviews were conducted, the third author separated the interviews between those who had a social work degree and those who had a degree in another field. He then used open coding, allowing themes to emerge from the transcripts. Next, following consultation with the first author, these themes were collapsed into subthemes.

Participants

This study employed a non-probability, purposive sample of non-profit leaders in one Midwestern state. Websites of non-profit organizations in this state were scoured to determine leaders based on title (e.g., Executive Director, CEO). Ultimately, there were 94 non-profit organizations identified in this state, which resulted in a sampling frame of 85 individuals. Leader contact information could not be determined for the other nine identified non-profit organizations in the state.

Data Collection

Data were collected via telephone interviews with non-profit leaders who agreed to participate in the study. Participants were asked questions related to the focus of service delivery at his/her agency, position within the organization, years of experience, and other demographic data (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, degree) prior to answering questions specifically about leadership. Participants were then asked to answer 16 questions related to their definition of leadership, evaluation of leadership, as well as the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to be an effective leader.

Analysis

Interviews were typed in Microsoft Word by the third author. Using a grounded theory approach with open coding methodology (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), the third author initiated the analysis process. Open coding allows the researcher to generate themes as they arise in the text. Following the initial coding by the third author, the first author then reviewed the identified themes and collapsed them into subthemes. These collapsed themes were shared with the research team and all authors agreed on the set of themes presented in the results section.

Results

A total of 15 interviews were conducted with non-profit leaders in one Midwestern state. These interviews ranged from 45-75 minutes, with the average interview taking approximately 60 minutes. Each interview was conducted by the third author in order to ensure fidelity in the interview process. Detailed notes were taken for each interview, which were typed into Microsoft Word.

Demographics

A majority (n = 12, 80.0%) of participants identified as female and Caucasian (n = 15, 100.0%). A majority (n = 8, 53.3%) held an advanced degree (i.e., Master's), while 46.7% held only a Bachelor's degree (n = 7). A majority (n = 12, 80.0%) of participants held a degree in a field other than social work, while 20% held a social work degree (n = 3). Participants reported having 3 to 35 years of experience in leadership, with the average being 18.2 years (SD = 10.8). Further, they also reported being in their current leadership position from 6 weeks to 30 years, with the average being 10.4 years (SD = 6.0). More detailed information is presented in Table 1 below.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Attribute	Non-Social Work		Social Work		Overall Sample	
	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)
Sex						
Male	3 (25.0)		0 (0.0)		3 (20.0)	
Female	9 (75.0)		3 (100.0)		12 (80.0)	
Education						
Education	4 (33.3)				4 (26.7)	
Social Work	0 (0.0)		3 (100.0)		3 (20.0)	
Science	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
Public Health	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
Business	2 (16.7)				2 (13.4)	
Music/Art	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
Communication	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
History	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
Urban Planning	1 (8.3)				1 (6.7)	
Bachelor's Only	6 (50.0)		1 (33.3)		7 (46.7)	
Master's Degree	6 (50.0)		2 (66.7)		8 (53.3)	
Years of Leadership Experience		18.0 (10.5)		19.0 (14.5)		18.2 (10.8)
Years in Current Position		10.5 (9.2)		9.7 (6.0)		10.4 (6.0)
Position with Agency						
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	3 (25.0)		0 (0.0)		3 (20.0)	
Executive Director (ED)	7 (58.3)		2 (66.7)		9 (60.0)	
Program Director (PD)	2 (16.7)		1 (33.3)		3 (20.0)	

Non-Social Work Themes

There were eight themes identified by those individuals with degrees in areas other than social work. First, Leaders must have experience and knowledge in their field was noted by 12 participants. This theme was further broken down into three sub-themes: (a) Leaders should have experience on the ground/in the field (n = 10); (b) Leaders lead by example (n = 5); and (c) Leaders should be willing to continually learn (n = 3). For example, one participant (Interviewee 1) stated that “Much of the knowledge I have now was gained on the ground floor...The circumstances that led me to this position was very much a push by someone who saw potential in me to be even more of a leader than I had already been.” Participants with non-social work degrees valued working from the ground up and gaining the trust and support of their colleagues.

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with individuals with degrees in non-social work fields was Leaders nurture and support their staff. This sentiment was held by 11 of the participants. This theme was broken down into four subthemes: (a) Leaders know and support their staff (n = 7); (b) Leaders accept responsibility (n = 7); (c) Leaders are not afraid to work hard and get their hands dirty (n = 4); and (d) Leaders should be team players, not egotistical (n = 3). One of the most powerful quotes here was given by Interviewee 2, when they stated, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Working with every individual is different, and asking the questions of what they need to succeed is important then delivering on those things...” It was clear from participants that one cannot be an effective leader unless they can demonstrate care and compassion for their employees.

The third theme that emerged from the data was Communication, both sending and receiving, is an important skill for leaders to demonstrate. This theme was referenced by 10 of the interviewees. Interviewee 7 stated, “What’s different here is we focus a lot on communication skills and being open. We have conversations and trainings on good communication and relationship

building. We have ground rules for how we address tension and challenges.”

Theme four was Leaders foster independence and trust (n = 8). This is exemplified by the following comment: “She allowed me to try and possibly fail...so I would go to her and say here’s an idea. She would ask questions to make sure that I had thought through the idea. Then she would ask what I needed or what support I needed...she let me try things. I go to do lots of things” (Interviewee 13).

The fifth theme, which was referenced by 7 participants, was Leaders are self-aware and emotionally intelligent. This theme was exemplified by Interviewee 6 who stated, “Having enough personal confidence and insight to be able to take it a little bit and know when to say, ‘wow, that person might have a point,’ versus others being fully deflective. Not really tough skin, but personal insight into strengths and weaknesses...”

Theme six was Leaders must demonstrate character and integrity. This theme was referenced by six interviewees. Interviewee 4 stated, “I would say the most important value is integrity, and by that I mean that in serving the public interest and the interest of my employees and in support of our organization, I strive to be the same person no matter what room I’m in. I strive to be authentic.”

The seventh theme, which was referred to by six participants, was Leaders are effective decision-makers. This was best encapsulated by Interviewee 8’s comment, “a leader has to be decisive. They have to be willing to take that responsibility because it is their responsibility...if something goes wrong the board is not going to talk to one of our foster parents or counselors about it. They are going to talk to me and wonder why I allowed the situation to develop where that was possible. I have that responsibility. I have to be decisive then in making decisions when necessary that prevent those things from happening.”

The last theme was with respect to vision and mission of the agency. Four participants mentioned that Leaders are visionaries or have a strong vision. Interviewee 2 shared that

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“leadership is the ability to bring people together to cast a shared vision and make progress toward a shared goal.”

Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples

Major Theme	Subthemes	Text Examples
Leaders must have the experience and knowledge in the field (<i>n</i> = 12)	Leaders should have experience on the ground/in the field (<i>n</i> = 10)	<p>“Much of the knowledge I have now was gained on the ground floor, as I said. Especially, again, in this position that I hold now. The circumstances that led me to this position was very much a push by someone who saw potential in me to be even more of a leader that I had already been.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“A true understanding of every aspect of the jobs and not in the way...I’ve had this conversation with several people. I don’t need to know the nitty gritty details, but I need to know details of what’s going on so I can make sure it’s working properly. I also have to be able to go the person who knows the nitty gritty details if I need to learn that. I use the car example. I don’t need to know every detail of a car to drive it, but I need to know who to go to if the car isn’t working.” (Interviewee 13)</p> <p>“I’ve been in this position for 16 years, but I have been in the health care field for 40 years since graduating from college...so, I think that the experience of putting in your time on the ground floor is important. It gives you perspective and an understanding of people that might be your subordinates in the future.” (Interviewee 1)</p>
	Leaders lead by example (<i>n</i> = 5)	<p>“I would define leadership as setting a good example for the staff that you supervise...and I like to lead by example. I think that’s an effective leadership style” (Interviewee 10)</p> <p>“Leadership is being a role model for your employees and what you want them to do. Just like a parent is modeling for kids how to act and what to do. If I want them to own up to mistakes, I need to do that too.” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“We have an ethos here where our CEO takes out the trash. We don’t ask anyone to do anything we wouldn’t do or wouldn’t try ourselves. I appreciate that example of doing the work and having a positive work ethic.” (Interviewee 7)</p>

Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples Continued

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
	<p>Leaders should be willing to continually learn (n = 3)</p>	<p>“I try to keep a balance of going into the trenches, if you will, to see the aspect of other jobs but not spending so much time there that I can’t do my job. I’ll be honest with you. I have heard from many people that they have a concern with me because I didn’t start out and work my way up because they don’t think that I know what’s going on. That’s certainly something I’m trying to work on to figure out how to get the answers they don’t think I already have.” (Interviewee 13)</p> <p>“First to be a leader you have to possibly at one point in time have been a follower. Being willing to learn...they say born leaders and that’s true but you have to have observation so that you can correct yourself if needed. That’s extremely important...” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“I will say for me in my position, especially because I didn’t start at the bottom and work my way up, humility is huge. I have to acknowledge what I don’t know. I can’t pretend like I know everything. I have to admit what I don’t know. That’s what I told them from the state. They are the experts, and I want them to teach me. I rely on their willingness to teach me.” (Interviewee 13)</p>
<p>Leaders nurture and support their staff (n = 11)</p>	<p>Leaders know and support their staff (n = 7)</p>	<p>“I see it as my job to make sure they have the resources or materials necessary to do their job.” (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>“I believe a leader should be there to provide support and assistance and make decisions as needed, but providing support is critical.” (Interviewee 15)</p> <p>Leadership is, “bringing out the greatness in others, creating an environment where people are able to succeed and build and move forward. You know, how I take on leadership is that I want to work as hard as I can to provide what is needed for people to do their jobs...” (Interviewee 13)</p> <p>“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Working with every individual is different, and asking the questions of what they need to succeed is important then delivering on those things. I think a leader should get to know his or her staff and the people they work with, assess what is needed for them to get the job done, and then deliver on those needs.” (Interviewee 2)</p>

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Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples Continued

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
	Leaders accept responsibility (n = 7)	<p>“I am a big believer that I am accountable to my employees. They are accountable to me, but I am accountable to them too. My success is dependent on them. There is a lot of mutual dependence.” (Interviewee 7)</p> <p>“I think he cared more about saving face for himself than his staff. I couldn’t trust him. I couldn’t trust him not to throw me under the bus if something went wrong.” (Interviewee 13)</p> <p>“Ownership is important. Own your success and own your mistakes. People see that. They see people who try to pass responsibility for their failures and who try to take credit for the hard work of others. I think it’s important to own your mistakes.” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“At the end of the day the buck stops with me. So, whatever that decision is, no matter how small or large it stops with me. So, I’m responsible and take responsibility for that.” (Interviewee 1)</p>
	Leaders are not afraid to work hard and get their hands dirty (n = 4)	<p>“...he wouldn’t pitch in to do any job. He would show up to events about 5 minutes before, and he would leave about 5 minutes after. He didn’t help set up or tear down. It wasn’t because he had other things to do. He just thought those jobs were beneath him.” (Interviewee 13 – provided in example of poor leadership)</p> <p>“I’ve been on the floor scrubbing. I don’t do that all the time, but it makes an impact...if they see the leader willing to do that, it gives them more motivation to do their jobs.” (Interviewee 10)</p> <p>“That’s extremely important, and not to ask someone to do something that you wouldn’t do yourself.” (Interviewee 3)</p>
	Leaders should be team players, not egotistical (n = 3)	<p>“...an interest in teamwork not just being a winner in the spotlight and claiming all the glory.” (Interviewee 7)</p> <p>“Valuing a teamwork atmosphere. It’s about the whole team and less about who has what title.” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“I think the important pieces are the CEO’s and vice presidents have to make decisions, but they no different from other employees. I’ve seen leaders fail when they place themselves above the staff.</p>

Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples Continued

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
		<p>Leaders are not more special than the rest of the staff. You have to have knowledge, but I've seen people fail from putting themselves higher. We all work for the same company. People don't like to follow someone who thinks they are above or better than the people they lead." (Interviewee 5)</p>
<p>Communication, both sending and receiving, is an important skill for leaders to demonstrate (n = 10)</p>		<p>"What's different here is we focus a lot on communication skills and being open. We have conversations and trainings on good communication and relationship building. We have ground rules for how we address tension and challenges." (Interviewee 7)</p> <p>"I think that understanding group dynamics is something that a good leader needs and understanding the challenges and opportunities that are there...I think understanding group dynamics and doing team building...is important." (Interviewee 14)</p> <p>"It all comes down to communication, both written and verbal communication...and how to interact with others with different communication styles is critical." It all comes down to communication and to understanding the situation." (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>"I am a firm believer in an open door. An open door means, to me, that I am available and make myself available to people, that no employee is too low on the ladder to have a conversation with me. To be an effective leader you have to be approachable and your employees need to appreciate that they are valued." (Interviewee 1)</p>
<p>Leaders foster independence and trust (n = 8)</p>		<p>"...one that had a significant effect on me in allowing people to do their job, giving them the proper authority and materials and support in other ways to allow them to do their job understanding that they may not make every decision the way the supervisor would, but it's their responsibility to make decisions within the philosophy of the home. So, as long as they are working within that and understand the parameters, they have the authority to make a number of decisions." (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>"...one that had a significant effect on me in allowing people to do their job, giving them the proper authority and materials and support in other ways to allow them to do their job understanding that they may not make every decision the way the supervisor would, but it's their responsibility to make decisions within the philosophy of the home. So, as long as they are</p>

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Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples Continued

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
		<p>working within that and understand the parameters, they have the authority to make a number of decisions.” (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>“I had a male director at the time. He was really good about letting me work autonomously. He did not micro manage. He would let me be the planner and bring to him my ideas. He would always have the final say but very few times did he say, ‘no that’s not a good idea.’” (Interviewee 12)</p> <p>“She allowed me to try and possibly fail...so I would go to her and say here’s an idea. She would ask questions to make sure that I had thought through the idea. Then she would ask what I needed or what support I needed...she let me try things. I go to do lots of things. If I believed in something, she was willing to let me try.” (Interviewee 13)</p>
<p>Leaders are self-aware and emotionally intelligent (n = 7)</p>		<p>“Leadership is recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, and working with others to ensure that organization is accomplishing its goals.” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>“Having enough personal confidence and insight to be able to take it a little bit and know when to say, ‘wow, that person might have a point,’ versus others being fully deflective. Not really tough skin, but personal insight into strengths and weaknesses, and I can communicate that with my staff.” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“I will say for me in my position, especially because I didn’t start at the bottom and work my way up, humility is huge. I have to acknowledge what I don’t know. I can’t pretend like I know everything. I have to admit what I don’t know. That’s what I told them from the state. They are the experts, and I want them to teach me. I rely on their willingness to teach me.” (Interviewee 13)</p>
<p>Leaders must demonstrate character and integrity (n = 6)</p>		<p>“Leadership is something that is ever changing. It starts with integrity, trust, and having trust in your subordinates.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“I would say the most important value is integrity, and by that I mean that in serving the public interest and the interest of my employees and in support of our organization, I strive to be the same person no matter what room I’m in. I strive to be authentic.” (Interviewee 4)</p>

Table 2. Non-Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples Continued

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
		<p>“I think a leader, in order to be appreciated, respected, and truly effective, the people who work under them need to have confidence in them. That if he tells them something that can count on it being true. They can count on them being honest. If they say I will be there tomorrow at 10:00 they can count on that being true unless something unforeseen and beyond that person’s control happens. They can count on him to follow through on his work.” (Interviewee 8)</p>
<p>Leaders are effective decision-makers (n = 6)</p>		<p>“I would add that a leader has to be decisive. They have to be willing to take that responsibility because it is their responsibility...if something goes wrong the board is not going to talk to one of our foster parents or counselors about it. They are going to talk to me and wonder why I allowed the situation to develop where that was possible. I have that responsibility. I have to be decisive then in making decisions when necessary that prevent those things from happening.” (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>“I am an ultimate decision maker. I think that helps people feel secure. My team feels secure that I will listen to them and can discuss the issues and ultimately make a decision with their input. I can do down for bad decisions. I won’t put them under the bus.” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“...I am not afraid to make decisions, even those that are unpopular, but I am not a dictator. I take other people’s points of view under consideration.” (Interviewee 2)</p>
<p>Leaders are visionaries or have a strong vision (n = 4)</p>		<p>“The executive director at the time was a very dynamic woman – very big picture, grand vision...” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>“Leadership is the ability to bring people together to cast a shared vision and make progress toward a shared goal.” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“I think that strategic clarity and planning is a part of leadership.” (Interviewee 14)</p>

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Social Work Themes

There were three themes identified by those individuals with degrees in social work. First, Leaders nurture and support their staff was indicated by all three respondents. This theme was further broken down into three subthemes: (a) Leaders should know and support their staff (n = 3); (b) Punitive leadership leads to fearful work environment and a lack of motivation (n = 2); and (c) Leaders should be willing to get their hands dirty (n = 1). For example, one participant (Interviewee 6) stated that “the knowledge you need is knowing your staff and knowing who you are leading. Knowing how to communicate with them and what style of leadership they need. Because if you can’t lead or motivate them you are not going to meet your end goal. Specifically, in my role with a small staff to get a lot of work done, you need to know who they are and what motivates them.

That is a big piece of the puzzle.”

The second theme that emerged from those with a social work degree was Communication, both sending and receiving, is an important skill for leaders to demonstrate (n = 3). As Interviewee 9 stated, “there should never be a time when they [the staff] aren’t able to contact me if they need to...I also seek feedback. If I am working on a policy that affects them, I try to communicate with them so I’m not thinking one sided.”

Lastly, Leaders must have the experience and knowledge in the field (n = 3), was the third theme. The most powerful quote that best represents this theme is “Being on the ground doing that work. The people you work for teach you...I have a master’s degree, but basically all my knowledge comes from working with people...I think the knowledge that I have that helps me lead this coalition comes from my time in direct service” (Interviewee 11).

Table 3. Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
Leaders nurture and support their staff (n = 3)	Leaders should know and support their staff (n = 3)	<p>“I would define it as someone having the ability to bring out the best in people so that they can be the best they can be...I think that leadership is being a person who...provides a venue for growth and nurtures it.” (Interviewee 11)</p> <p>“Knowing...how interactions can lead staff to feel empowered versus a failure. I want my staff to feel empowered like they can do good work.” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>I think the knowledge you need is knowing your staff and knowing who you are leading. Knowing how to communicate with them and what style of leadership they need. Because if you can’t lead or motivate them you are not going to meet your end goal. Specifically, in my role with a small staff to get a lot of work done, you need to know who they are and what motivates them. That is a big piece of the puzzle.” (Interviewee 6)</p>

Table 3. Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
	Punitive leadership leads to fearful work environment and a lack of motivation (n = 2)	<p>“There was no communication with the staff really unless she was reprimanding someone...the agency under her became very stagnant. There wasn’t a lot of motivation to go above and beyond...we wouldn’t take initiative or do anything other than what we were told to do because we were afraid...” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>“He would wait for you to make a mistake then jump. Getting called into his office was like getting called to the principal’s office...everyone was afraid of him...the way we were being supervised made you feel like someone was looking over your shoulder all the time instead of being nurtured.” (Interviewee 11)</p>
	Leaders should be willing get their hands dirty (n = 1)	<p>“She was driven...and not afraid to get their hands dirty. All my supervisors have been willing to do anything they ask others to do. My supervisors have always been the type to walk beside me and their staff.” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“Hard work, someone not afraid of hard work, integrity, and humility. I think all of those things lead to people putting trust in you which means more trust in your organization. That means that you are more likely to achieve your mission.” (Interviewee 6)</p>
Communication, both sending and receiving, is an important skill for leaders to demonstrate (n = 3)		<p>“I have an open-door policy. My staff has my office phone number, my cell phone number, and my home number. There should never be a time when they aren’t able to contact me if they need to...I also seek feedback. If I am working on a policy that affects them, I try to communicate with them so I’m not thinking one sided.” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>“Listening! I should add that to being a leader. Listening twice as much as they speak. They should have a lot of knowledge, but you have to listen more than you speak.” (Interviewee 6)</p>

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Table 3. Social Work Themes, Subthemes, and Text Examples

Major Themes	Subthemes	Text Examples
<p>Leaders must have the experience and knowledge in the field (<i>n</i> = 3)</p>		<p>“I definitely think it was from being on the ground and taking the time. I [used] to be in the position of people who I supervise.” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>“Being on the ground doing that work. The people you work for teach you...I have a master’s degree, but basically all my knowledge comes from working with people...I think the knowledge that I have that helps me lead this coalition comes from my time in direct service.” (Interviewee 11)</p> <p>“I think I learned more in my one year internship than the 5 years it took to earn the degree. Definitely feet on the ground is important. You learn in the classroom then learn how to apply those skills in the workplace.” (Interviewee 6)</p>

Discussion

This study highlighted some of the qualitative differences in effective non-profit leadership between leaders with social work degrees and those with degrees in other fields. While there were some similarities between social workers and non-social workers with respect to important themes, such as the importance of nurturing and supporting staff, effective communication, and possessing knowledge and experience, there were also some differences noted. Based on close review of the interview notes and a comparison of emergent themes between the two participant groups, it is possible to draw a few conclusions concerning similarities and differences between leaders with an educational background in social work and those with an educational background in a different field.

First, both participant groups stressed the importance of leaders providing support for their staff. Both groups felt that this was critical to “getting the job done.” However, social workers appeared to be more concerned with “knowing their staff.” Only 3 out of 12 non-social workers discussed this phenomenon compared to 100% of social workers. One might conclude that “knowing their staff” is a necessary component of effectively supporting staff. Therefore, while both participant groups agree support is critical, only those with a social work background seemed to recognize the importance of providing support that is targeted to staff needs. Interestingly, support relates to the formerly established constructs - Holosko’s (2009) core attributes of collaboration and influencing others to act as well as Rank and Hutchison’s (2000) core attribute of cultural competence/diversity.

Second, non-social work participants seemed to prioritize the effective leadership and management of the organization while social workers may be more concerned with meeting the needs of each individual client. This may be reflective of a tendency among social workers to prefer direct, micro practice. As one non-social work participant noted, “I worked very closely with a colleague who had a social work

Often feminized values such as caring and nurturing are minimized while masculinized values such as competitive advantage and profits may be emphasized despite the negative outcome for staff and clients.

Further, macro-level practice (e.g., the management of an organization) may simply not be of interest to many social work graduates. As one non-social work participant stated, “I don’t think social workers, in particular, are interesting in management, running an organization, and getting stuff done to keep the place running and the lights on...they [social workers] didn’t get a lot of education about systems of government, public policy, and how to interact with legislature or government” (Interviewee 15). This finding is in line with findings that early career social workers are not holding management positions or participating in leadership activities in high numbers (Choi, Urbanski, Fortune, & Rogers, 2015). However, considering that all social work graduates have applied policy competencies in the classroom and in field, this is a concern. Lack of interest in leadership is also evidenced by the fact that non-social work participants were more likely to discuss the importance of vision, mission, and organizational efficacy than social work participants. This finding is in direct opposition to Holosko’s (2009) identification of vision (both having one as well as implementing one) as a core attribute and Rank & Hutchison’s (2000) core attribute of visioning. It is possible that if specifically questioned about visioning, social work leaders may have shared that core attribute.

Third, both social work and non-social work participants appeared to highly value communication skills and leadership by example. Responses suggested that the ability to communicate effectively with staff (including listening to staff) was a very important aspect of leadership. Additionally, leaders should not separate themselves from staff. Both participant groups discussed the need for leaders to chip in with even the most menial tasks (e.g., taking out the trash).

Ultimately, it might be safe to conclude that both social work and non-social work leaders of

social service non-profit agencies have more in common than differences. However, differences do still exist, especially in prioritizing individuals over the vision or management of the organization. This is an important topic that should continue to be examined, especially in light of the fact that only three of the leaders identified had a social work background. It leads to further investigation into whether this is a result of social workers not wanting to assume leadership positions within these organizations or if they are being overlooked for those with other backgrounds (e.g., business, public administration).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size ($n = 15$), including a low percentage of social work respondents ($n = 3$, 20.0 %). The time-limited nature of the research project coupled with the duration of the interviews were barriers to including more participants. As a result, these findings are not generalizable to all non-profit leaders. Future research should replicate the study with a larger sample size, potentially with more geographic diversity to further inform these findings.

Implications

With growth and expansion of non-profit organizations and the subsequent retirement of the baby boomers, there is a nationwide shortage of qualified non-profit leaders (Hoefer & Sliva, 2014). Perhaps social work leaders can regain some of the non-profit management positions lost to other professions over the past several years (Wimpfheimer, 2004) through professional emphasis on the unique skills that social work professionals bring to management. The first step is to develop clarity and research evidence regarding not only differences between social work leaders and leaders of other professions, but also the quality and effectiveness of social work leadership.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The finding that social workers are perceived as lacking interest in macro practice, leadership, and management must be addressed, and some authors have verified that early career patterns hold this to be true (Choi et al., 2015). This perception must be addressed in order to increase the number of social work leaders. Strategies such as clarifying and showcasing relevant social work educational and work experiences, coaching and mentoring social work professionals for leadership, and developing strong training and succession planning that includes leadership development for social workers are all necessary to change this perception.

Perhaps through increasing knowledge regarding the transferability of core social work skills, practitioners can more effectively transition to management positions. For example, a core social work competency is “Engage in policy practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). The identification, assessment, and application of social policy knowledge is established core curriculum content for all social work program graduates, and connecting policy skills directly to management skills needed in non-profit agencies would help solidify a social worker’s confidence in their ability to perform these skills as well as the importance of them in achieving both agency and social work goals.

Considering that most social work managers are promoted from within agency ranks of direct social work practice, it is not surprising that these managers use skills taken from practice in their managerial roles where these skills may be ineffective (Knee & Folsom, 2012; Shanks, Lundstrom, & Bergmark, 2014). Through supporting social workers to develop specific managerial skills to supplement their social work skills, mentors serve an invaluable role in professional development (Pomeroy & Steiker, 2011).

Along with increasing opportunities for learning and practicing leadership roles, mentoring goes hand in hand with a strong succession plan (Gothard & Austin, 2013). Strong strategic planning, a leadership skill in its own right, must include discussions between executive directors and the board of directors as to how succession will be handled, including the pros and cons of various types. Identification and grooming of in house employees should be a strong component of that discussion because retaining and developing leaders requires substantial support, training, and commitment from all involved (Gothard & Austin, 2013).

Implications for Social Work Education and Training

Early social work graduate career patterns demonstrate that new graduates are rarely moving into leadership positions and only about half were participating in at least one leadership activity within 15 months of graduation (Choi et al., 2015). In order to increase interest in leadership, social work program curriculum changes are recommended. Increased macro content is needed to meet the needs of non-profit agencies. One strategy, developing administration-related assignments within existing courses, will assist students in learning important knowledge and developing skills without adding more courses (Watson & Hoefer, 2014). For example, administration topics such as the Affordable Care Act or the Individuals with Disabilities Act's impact on non-profit agencies and managers may be used for policy analysis. Topics for research courses could include literature reviews examining management or leadership theories and single-subject designs developed around management practices encountered in field settings. Additionally, there are some service learning and curriculum models that hold promise in simultaneously increasing community and student leadership development. Both the WE-Lead Model of community leadership development (Majee, Goodman, Adams, &

Keller, 2017) and the Social Change Model of Leadership (Iachini, Cross, & Freedman, 2015) offer specific examples of partnerships that can benefit students and communities. Given research findings that management effectiveness is enhanced when theory bases are utilized, it is important that students are provided a management theory base (Fisher, 2009).

Apart from explicit curriculum, there are some implicit curriculum strategies that are indicated. Student mentoring (Collins, 1994; Guitterez, 2012) and professional advising (Watson & Hoefer, 2014) are important aspects of social work education that must be attended to when attempting to increase student interest in leadership roles in agencies and communities. Most social work programs place a high value on student led community service organizations and service learning activities, which provide a space for students to apply leadership theories and strategies in real life situations while under faculty mentorship. Additionally, field placements may provide requirements for leadership including mentored leadership practice possibilities. Faculty advisors should encourage students to take part in these leadership activities and others as part of their professional development plan.

Implications for Future Research

Some have postulated that social work values and ethics are highly marketable assets for MSW graduates (Watson & Hoefer, 2014). Similarly, others have described the urgent need for social workers and social work values to be active in agencies. Initiating important organizational improvements and positive social changes, specifically those related to increasing organizational diversity and reducing discriminatory and amoral behaviors, fits well with social work ethics (Bloom & White, 2016; Walter et al., 2017). Social work has a long tradition of leaders with strong social justice perspectives, and reviving that tradition serves our profession and society well (Brilliant, 1986). In line with a social justice framework, effective leaders must demonstrate strong self-awareness

and have the capacity to visualize an agency without institutional racism in order to effectively change the status quo, and social work has long worked toward social change in the areas of human rights and social justice (Walter et al., 2017). Self-awareness is key because discrepancies between leader and follower ratings have been shown to impact organizational culture in negative ways, particularly when the leader overestimates their skill (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, Sklar, & Horowitz, 2017). Leader visioning is important due to its ability to inspire followers (Molenberghs, Prochilo, Steffens, Zacher, & Haslam, 2017) and to assist the leader in planned development of leadership skills and identity (Regan, 2016).

Unfortunately, these previously identified social work leader characteristics—social work ethics and values, strong leader self-awareness, and a focus on visioning—were not identified as primary traits for leaders in this sample. However, because these constructs are deeply embedded within social work practice orientations, it may be that social workers did not think to mention these characteristics. Consider the finding that social workers care about clients and staff to the detriment of the agency. This respect for the dignity and worth individuals, empowerment practices, and social justice come directly from the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008). Future research exploring these specific attributes in more depth is indicated in order to accurately ascertain their use by social work leaders.

Conclusion

The findings discussed here indicate that there are differences between social work and non-social work non-profit leaders; however, questions about other previously considered leadership attributes remain. Replication of this study with a larger, more diverse sample is warranted. At a time when social work leadership is experiencing a resurgence, the strong implications for social work education, training, and practice make this research question a timely and important one.

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