

Leadership in social care is currently being promoted at a level never before seen in the sector. The challenges of meeting the performance assessment while ensuring the demands of service provision are being met. Over four weeks in 2004 CareandHealth magazine ran a series of articles on this subject. I kicked off the series.

TITLE: Leadership and Pro-activity

Recently I led a discussion on *the purpose of social work* in our Care Trust, with a group of social workers. Excited by the interest of one particular social worker I suggested I send him some useful information and website links. This led to his reply "Don't send that to me, send it to the chief executive or the exec team."

The experience described here is not unique in my own experience nor does it relate singularly to social workers or social work. It is however a common element of the view that many social workers have which is that while they can provide a critical view, often appropriately so, the actual responsibility for changing the organisation is for those at the top.

This is not to say that social workers don't lead the way on some things. Drawing on my experiences and knowledge of social workers in mental health teams, I know that social care staff were often left carrying a disproportionate number of the heavier cases. Evidence exists to back up these perceptions. Peter Huxley from the Institute of Psychiatry refers to his research that shows this. This type of experience has led many in various aspects of social care to feel that they already go over and above the call of duty. It creates the sense of being undervalued that pervades social work and stifles pro-activity.

There are however many social workers - either still in practice or as managers - who do not just look to others to solve problems but try to find ways to do so themselves. These 'pro-actitioners' recognise that the social work value - that of being a change agent - does not need to be restricted to the context of fieldwork practice.

Social work leadership nationally is strengthened by local people being proactive practitioners in local contexts. People who seize opportunities to improve the quality of care for services users and the work place experiences for staff. One of my first experiences of this proactive approach was being managed by my first supervisor Martin Smith after I qualified as a social worker.

Martin felt that it was important to have a clear picture in mind as to what 'quality' meant and to measure performance against that. This influenced me then and continues to do so now. One of the early impacts of Martin's leadership was something that, with hindsight, was an act of leadership but at the time was what I thought was right in providing a quality service.

When the Care Programme Approach (CPA) was being introduced to mental health, Buckinghamshire County Council produced a form in triplicate. Many members of the team felt that this was a bureaucratic exercise and those who were interested never got round to using the form. I used the form for one of the service users who had raised many challenges for the team and copied it to colleagues who were also contributors to the care plan.

For weeks after this they spoke about the usefulness of having all the information about the plans for the individual in one place. This stimulated further commitment to using the form within that CMHT. Clearly this was not a masterful stroke of leadership genius but it enabled people to see the benefits in making progress in that particular area of work.

Much of the literature on leadership draws on military. Debates rage about the difference between management and leadership. These concepts are important but for a social worker in a busy duty team or in a specialist team, feeling cut-off, more basic questions spring to mind, such as: "Who's protecting my interests as a social worker?". Incidentally this is precisely the question that prompted this series of articles.

The challenges in protecting social workers interests arise from two key points; a) there are many (and potentially divergent) interests in the name of social work or social care; and b) sometimes our view of what is in our best interest is limited by the knowledge that we have- we sometimes cannot see the bigger picture because of our position. These two points introduce a risk that the people being led do not identify with their leaders. We end up relying upon history to justify the actions that are unpopular at the time. Maybe remote and distant figures are not the best people to pin our hopes for leadership on to.

Let's return to the opening paragraph. The idea that it is the role of other people to drive improvements because of their role or status can potentially rob social work of some budding leaders.

Stephen Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* notes "Be Proactive" as the first habit. This is one feature that has marked out leaders from the rest. And the great thing about being proactive is that we can all do it. I continue to adopt this thinking in my everyday life. So even though I could adopt many perspectives when discussing leadership I have settled by choice on Leadership and Pro-activity.

The catalyst for this series of articles was the question mentioned earlier: "Who is protecting my interests as a social worker?" A group of colleagues and I determined our own answer. "We are!"

The group of colleagues to which I refer are part of a learning set for directors of social care in mental health trusts. The pro-activity goes back to my appointment as director of social care in August 2002. However, while I showed pro-activity, it is others who have stated that I showed leadership.

When I was appointed I spoke with a colleague who was also a Director of Social Care and together we generated the idea of starting a national learning set. We used our networks and managed to find people in similar roles. We also managed to secure support from the National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE) for someone to facilitate the learning set meetings.

During one of our learning set meetings I mentioned that I sometimes felt that we do not have a visible national leader for social work. I was clear that I meant social work – the profession –not social care generally. I put forward a proposal to the group that we invite a discussion on this with all the heads of the recently-formed organisations for social care arising from the document *A Quality Strategy for Social Care* published by the Department of Health in April 2000. We also invited other key players, for example from the Association of Director Directors of Social Services (ADSS) and British Association of Social Workers (BASW). I

brokered assistance from the Modernisation Agency, NHS Leadership Centre and they facilitated the event as well as providing the venue and support.

In May 2004 a group of us met (and some contributed in advance by telephone). Many ideas were generated and some pre-existing ones had further life breathed into them. The most influential aspect of the discussion for me however was the conclusion we reached about the model of leadership that we needed now in social work and social care more generally.

The debate centred on whether we needed a symbolic figurehead or a more distributed model of leadership. We recognised that it was not necessarily one or the other but were convinced that many excellent leaders work at various levels within social work and these should not be overshadowed by a single figure. As noted earlier, these high profile leaders can sometimes face the risk they are seen as remote and unrepresentative because of the breadth of views amongst their constituents and the difficulty marrying their knowledge of the bigger picture with that of workers at the grass roots.

The challenge I faced on the May morning was that I, like many social workers, started with the question "Who is protecting my interests as a social worker?" By the end I realised that I had begun to be the answer for myself. The course of events that brought me to the table with these national players was my attempt, with the support of colleagues, to not just ask the question but to search for the answer. But for all the possibility of me feeling I had done my bit I left the event with the message "We need local people to rise to the leadership challenge".

So back to me then it seems. And you!

References

Covey, Stephen (1990) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*; Steven Covey; Simon and Schuster

Dept of Health (2000) *A Quality Strategy for Social Care*

Biog Box: [with pic]

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Pull quote: "Social work leadership nationally is strengthened by local people being proactive practitioners in local contexts."