Knowledge Briefing

PSDP - Resources and Tools:
Being a social work leader

Introduction

This knowledge briefing explores what is currently known about the constituents of effective social work leadership and management. It draws on a literature review undertaken as part of the preparatory work for the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP).

A key finding of the review was the scarcity of literature relating specifically to leadership and management in social work contexts. Within the literature that does exist, there's a clear tension between generic management programmes and professionally-specific and value-based programmes, such as those for social work leadership and management.

This knowledge briefing seeks to address this gap, and highlights what social work leaders and managers need to know, feel and do in order to be effective. It begins by outlining what makes an effective social work leader and manager, including the importance of a social justice value base, the distinction between leadership and management, and the core characteristics of good leaders and managers.

Models of leadership and management compatible with a social work value base are then outlined, and the briefing concludes by identifying what social work leaders and managers need in order to sustain their effectiveness.

What makes an effective social work leader and manager?

In a recently conducted systematic review of the social work leadership and management literature, Peters (2017, p102) concluded:

'Despite the clear need for strong leaders in the managerial and executive positions of human service organizations, there are very few courses that teach the leadership skills that are needed for the administration of human service provision in the context of client needs, employee needs, organizational needs and changing political climates.'

This statement highlights the distinctive and challenging nature of social work leadership and management, which requires a particular awareness of complex and competing human-centred demands in a professional context with a value base that promotes social justice. Important to note, too, is that a change in role, such as from social work practitioner to manager, is often emotional, not just procedural.

A value-based leadership and management identity

The first priority for social work leaders and managers is for them to recognize the value base of the profession they are leading and managing:

'The challenge, then, for management is posed in the questions: how do managers advocate for social justice in organisational terms? How does management serve the values of the profession? Social work ethics apply as much to management as they do to the profession's commitment to challenging the structures in society that contribute to social exclusion, marginalisation and disempowerment (Webster, 2010, p501).'

Social work leaders and managers, like social work practitioners, find themselves having to manage what can feel like competing tasks. On the one hand they have to respond to the demands of managerialism and the 'burgeoning bureaucracy' (Keen et al, 2014, p66) associated with it. On the other, they need to maintain a, 'focus on respecting individuals and their differences and recognising their worth and potential capacity, and the perspectives of individual context combined with social context, which underlie social care and social work (Keen et al, 2014, p66).

Reflective prompts:

What is your response to the idea of leadership and social justice being linked together?	Can you identify any examples from your own experience where leadership and social justice are linked (or where they are not and you would like to think further about this)?	What enables your leadership and management practices to be underpinned by a commitment to social justice?	What support do you need to achieve and sustain this?

Practice scenario: supervision and social justice

Fatima is an experienced social worker responsible for supervising Gareth, a newly qualified social worker completing his Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.

Fatima has noticed that after supervision sessions with Gareth she often feels quite disorientated and, as she describes it, 'woolly headed'. She has noticed this doesn't feel very comfortable and that to avoid feeling like this she has become quite 'bossy' and task-focused in supervision. In response, Gareth seems to be even less engaged in the supervision process and discussions.

Fatima has the opportunity to reflect on these dynamics and realises that her behaviours are not making a positive impact on Gareth's conduct in supervision. Rather than persisting with her punitive approach, Fatima decides to discuss how the supervision makes her feel, to see how Gareth responds.

When Fatima shares her concerns and makes herself vulnerable by acknowledging she is not sure how to address them, Gareth is able to acknowledge how overwhelmed he is feeling, which might explain why Fatima feels 'woolly headed' after supervision sessions.

By minimising the power dynamics in supervision and becoming vulnerable herself, Fatima is modelling an important characteristic of socially-just supervisory practice for Gareth.

Hopefully, the experience will enable him to replicate what he has learned, and behave in a socially-just way in his encounters with children and parents.

Leadership versus management identities

Here's a colloquial turn of phrase for distinguishing between leadership and management, 'Leadership is all about "doing the right thing" and management about "doing things right"' (see the table below, which also appears in the 'What makes an effective leader?' learning tool in this section of the website).

Managers	Leaders
> **Plan:** Set objectives, forecast, analyse problems, make decisions and formulate policy. > **Organise:** Determine what activities are required to meet objectives, classify work, divide it up and assign it. > **Co-ordinate:** Inspire the staff to contribute both individually and as a group to achieving the organisation, objectives. > **Control:** Check performance against plans, develop people and maximise their potential to attain agreed outcomes.	> **Give direction:** Find a way forward and communicate a clear direction, identify new goals, services and structures > **Offer inspiration:** Through ideas and articulate thoughts that motivate others. > **Build teamwork:** Use teams as the most effective form of leadership, spending time building and encouraging collaboration. > **Set an example:** Model what leaders do and how they do it. > **Gain acceptance:** Act in ways that inspire acknowledgement of leadership status in followers.

With this distinction in mind, social work leaders are required to be visionaries (Tafvelin et al, 2014), 'who act as role models and who inspire practitioners in contexts of turbulence and uncertainty' (Ruch and Maglajlic, 2019, p5).

The danger for social work leaders and managers lies – in the face of growing and relentless demands associated with the austerity agenda, i.e. financial pressures, increasingly complicated social problems, greater demand for services and resources, difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff and so on – in the reduction of their professional remit to one that prioritises procedures and bureaucracy over people and relationships.

This danger is exacerbated by the fact that newly appointed managers are often more familiar with management practices than best practice in leadership, resulting in management activities being prioritised over those associated with leading.

Conversely, the management functions of being organised and ensuring objectives are met may seem mundane compared to the leadership functions of being a visionary and inspiring others. So there's a risk that management responsibilities will be overlooked for the 'glamour' of leadership. However, management functions are essential for all teams, and may be the aspects of practice that have the most direct impact on children and families.

Leadership and management tasks must, therefore, go hand-in-hand, as both have a vital contribution to make to effective practice. It is essential that social work leaders and managers do not fall into the trap of thinking that leadership is superior to management; good social work practice with children and families requires both effective managers and leaders. And practice supervisors need to draw on these distinctive skill sets, depending on the circumstances being faced.

The risk of a rift emerging between leadership and management identities and activities underlines the vital importance of stable and accessible support structures (discussed further below) in order to enable frontline leaders and managers to resist prioritising one aspect of their identity over another.

Reflective prompts:

How do you ensure that you place equal importance on the leadership and management aspects of your role?	Do you find one aspect of this dual role easier than the other? If yes, why might this be?
Does your organisation place more importance on one or other leadership or management?	What do you need for yourself and from your organisation to balance the value and attention given to leadership and management roles and responsibilities?

Core leadership and management competences

A range of core competencies are associated with social work leadership and management, which can be categorised as those that are about 'doing' and those that are about 'being'. Table of social work leaders' and managers' competencies (Applewhite, 2017, p307).

'Doing': procedural competencies

Focuses on technical and professional communication skills such as project management, presentation skills, and the ability to articulate and implement steps to attain goals.

'Being': personal competencies

Focuses on personal and interpersonal skills and qualities, including self-awareness, compassion, motivation, and a commitment to social justice and community collaboration.

Aspects of 'doing': supervision

> workload allocation and time management

> human resource management and development

> communication and interpersonal relationships

> financial development and management

> culturally responsive management practices

> policy analysis

> problem solving

> prioritizing and planning

> experimentation with new ideas

> evaluation

> governance and ethics

> programme development and organizational management

> public / community relations.

Aspects of 'doing': self-awareness

> compassion

> collaboration

> engagement and motivation

> empowerment

> support and enablement

> emotional intelligence

> fairness

> inspiration

> a commitment to ensuring learning, innovation and quality improvement for all staff.

Another way of categorising the requirements of an effective social work leader and manager is based on Bernotavicz et al's work (2014, p404):

Leadership and self-knowledge.

Leadership is based on self-awareness providing the basis for transparency, authenticity, integrity, and trust. Leadership is a process not a property or trait of a person.

Leadership and management.

The concepts of leadership and management are interdependent, overlapping, complementary, and vital to organizational success, and the terms should be used interchangeably.

Leadership and position.

Leadership is not reserved for positions at the top of the organization, but may be exercised by people at all levels of the organization.

Leadership and followers.

Leadership does not exist in a vacuum. Leadership exists only with the consensus of followers. Leaders need to balance order and stability with adaptive and constructive change.

Leadership and development.

Since leadership is not an innate ability, it can be developed through careful training and coaching.

Find out more about these concepts in the 'What makes an effective leader?' learning tool.

Which models of leadership and management are most suitable for social work?

No one leadership and management model stands out in the literature as the 'preferred approach'. The conviction that social work leadership and management should be aligned with a commitment to social justice, and social work values more broadly, is clearly supported by the literature, and has repercussions for the types of leadership and management models that are compatible with this alignment.

The predominant models referred to are those which are democratic in nature, and emphasise inclusive, distributive, collaborative, transformational, appreciative and participatory approaches to leadership and management.

Attention to group participation and power dynamics is seen as essential to protect and promote, 'the professional nature of the work and the values inherent in social work and health care practice' (Leonard et al, 2013, p174).

Distributive and participatory leadership and management

The distributive model of leadership and management is the result of a recognition that one person can't encompass all aspects of leadership and management roles. In this model, the sharing of tasks should not be seen as an abdication of responsibility but, rather, a demonstration of humility, trust and confidence in others' talents and perspectives.

Distributive models embrace the individual leader and manager's strengths, whilst simultaneously drawing on others' strengths as needed. This allows the leader to exercise their best leadership capability while engaging others in theirs.

As part of a distributive model, social work leaders and managers have four key tasks which, depending on their individual aptitudes, they can share with those who have complementary skill sets:

Sense making. Understanding and mapping the context in which an organisation and its people operate, in order to recognise its unique contextual complexities.	**Relating.** Building trustworthy relationships with others through inquiry, advocacy and connection.
Visioning. Collaboratively identifying a compelling image of the organization's future.	**Inventing.** Developing new ways to realise the collective vision.

Developing and exercising a distributive mindset and skill set is, 'crucial to effective team working, staff development, collaboration and partnership within an interprofessional context' (Leonard et al, 2013, p173).

Reflective prompts:

How easy do you find it to adopt a distributive approach to leadership and management?

What gets in the way? What would help you to be more distributive?

Of the four elements of a distributive leadership and management style (detailed above), which do you feel more confident about and which less so?
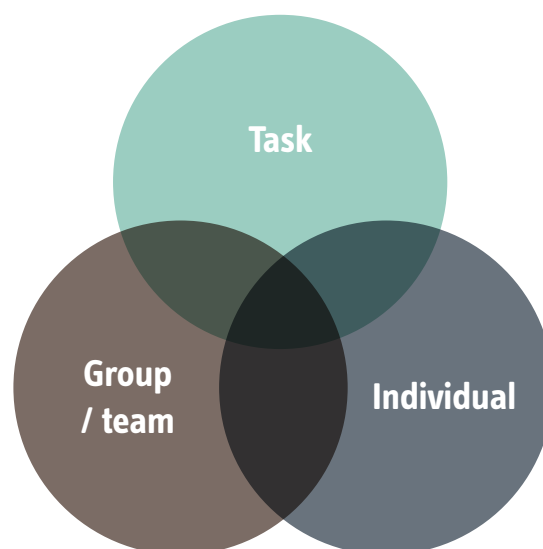
The action centred leadership model

Action centred leadership (Adair, 1973) recognizes the multidimensional nature of leadership and management roles. Social work leaders and managers are required simultaneously to respond to the task, the team, and the individual:

The task needs work groups or organisations to come into effect because one person alone cannot accomplish it.

The team needs constant promotion and retention of group cohesiveness to ensure that it functions efficiently. The team functions on the 'united we stand, divided we fall' principle.

The individual's needs are the physical ones (salary) and the psychological ones of recognition, sense of purpose and achievement, status, and the need to give and receive from others in a work environment.

The task, team and individual needs overlap. If any of them get disproportionate attention at the expense of the others, dysfunction will arise. Whereas achieving the task builds the team and satisfies the individuals.

If the team needs are not met because (for example) the team lacks cohesiveness, then the performance of the task is impaired and individual satisfaction is reduced. Similarly, if individual needs are not met, the team will, again, lack cohesiveness and performance of the task will be impaired.

Reflective prompts:

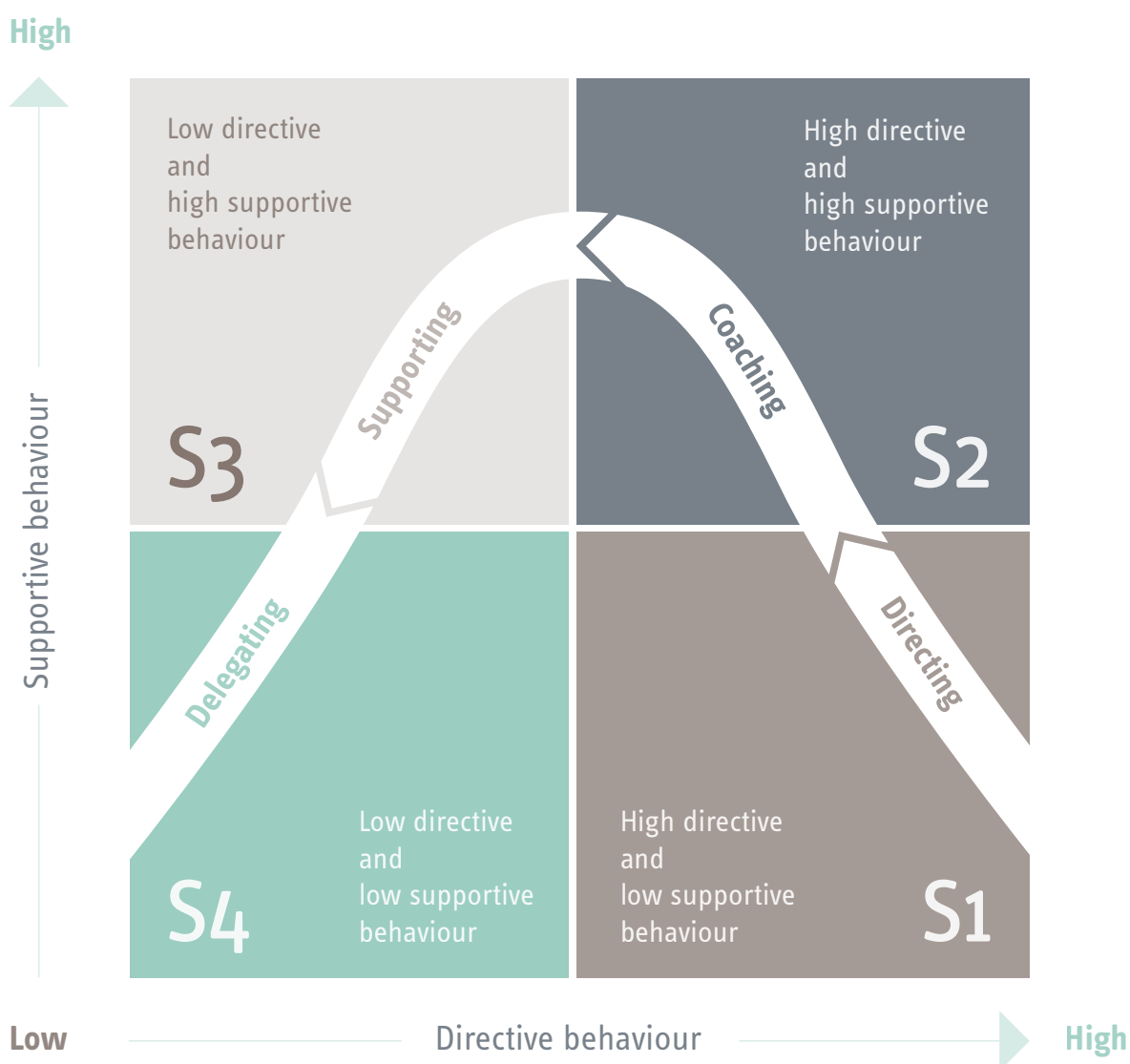|		
Which of the three sets of needs – individual, task and team – do you attend to more in your supervision practice?	What would help you to pay equal attention to all three sets of needs?	What do your supervisees pay more attention to? Does this need addressing?

The situational model of leadership and management

In recognition of the diverse degrees of professional maturity within any one social work team, leaders and managers need to exercise their professional discretion in choosing leadership and management approaches that fit an individual's circumstances.

This requires leaders to know their team members and understand their levels of maturity. Different situations require different approaches, and depend on things like a supervisee's confidence, the task in hand, and the context, all of which determine the best style of leadership to adopt (i.e. delegating, supporting, coaching and directing – see the model below).

High

Supportive behaviour

Low directive and high supportive behaviour

S3

High directive and high supportive behaviour

S2

Supporting

Coaching

Delegating

Directing

Low directive and low supportive behaviour

S4

High directive and low supportive behaviour

S1

Low   Directive behaviour   **High**

As the model above illustrates, leadership and management behaviours are dependent on the circumstances of individual team members, and the extent to which they require support and / or direction:

Directing. Defining roles / tasks, close supervision, making decisions, one-way communication.	**Coaching.** Defines roles / tasks but encourages input. Communication is two-way, but decisions are ultimately made by the leader.
Supporting. Routine decisions are passed down. The leader facilitates and is involved with them, but not overly controlling.	**Delegating.** Followers decide on the level of leader involvement in decisions and problem-solving.

You have the opportunity to apply this model directly to your role in the 'Situational leadership' learning tool in this section of the website.

Reflective prompts:

Make a list of the people you are responsible for and consider where each of them is located on the graph above.	People are dynamic, of course, and the position of an individual will move over time, but generally they will identify with one position more than another at any given point.	Identify a team member whose performance concerns you. In the context of the above model, what would you need to do to move them to a more effective position? How would you achieve this?

Supporting and sustaining value-based leadership and management

A common struggle for newly appointed social work leaders and managers is the transition they're required to make from being a practitioner to becoming a value-based leader and manager.

Ward and Bailey (2016, p2072) refer to, 'the continuities and fractures between practitioner and managerial identities' (continuities meaning the professional values associated with social work, fractures meaning the disjunctures that can arise with the change in role and responsibility).

This recognition is an important one and requires on-going attention to avoid a regression to a practitioner identity on the grounds of familiarity. The transition into the first line manager's role and task, which Patterson (2015, p2085) has described as, 'a bridge spanning the divide between direct practice and strategic management', needs to be understood as a gradual process.

Once in post and transitioning into the new role, it is imperative that social work leaders and managers receive on-going support to develop their leadership and management skills, and to sustain their effective management and leadership practices.

To this end, a range of resources can be accessed, according to what is available within the organisational context. These include:

action learning sets

mentoring and peer mentoring arrangements

professional coaching

communities of practice

management development programmes

peer observation

360-degree stakeholder feedback.

Of particular value are opportunities for experiential learning and reflection on everyday management and leadership issues that acknowledge, 'change on both a personal and a professional level' and, 'the emotional as well as practical dimensions of stepping into management' (Patterson, 2015, p2074).

Reflective prompts:

Where do you get your energy from for your leadership and management role?

What, at this specific point in time, do you identify as being your primary professional development need? How can this be met?

Concluding thoughts

Becoming a social work leader and manager is both an exciting and daunting prospect. The crucial aspect of continuity, common to the roles of both social worker and social work leader and manager, is a shared commitment to a social justice value base.

This commitment shapes common professional behaviours that are respectful, empowering and collaborative. Whilst, for practitioners, these behaviours are integral to the relationships they establish with children and families, for social work leaders and managers, they are core to their relationships with the social work practitioners for whom they are responsible.

These continuities can mask the significant shift that is involved in taking up a social work leadership and management role. The challenge, then, for newly appointed social work leaders and managers is to recognise and hold onto these continuities whilst establishing their new professional identities. Drawing on the relevant leadership and management models can assist in this transitional process, as can accessing the appropriate sources of support.

There is no doubt, if the transition goes well, that the impact of effective social work leaders and managers on staff wellbeing and performance (and, by implication, the wellbeing of children and families), will be positive and significant. And that is something to be excited by.

Key learning points:

Becoming a social work leader and manager is a gradual process, not a one-off event.

The continuity between being a social work practitioner and becoming a leader and manager is reflected in common commitment of both roles to the values of social justice.

Being a social work leader and social work manager are distinctive roles but of equal value and importance.

Effective social work leaders and managers use leadership and management models that emphasise inclusive, collaborative, distributive, participatory, appreciative, and transformational approaches.

To remain effective, it is essential that social work leaders and managers have access to reliable and regular support systems.

Reflective prompts:

How do you ensure you are adhering to value-based leadership and management?	Which of the social work leader and manager competencies do you most want to develop further?
Which models of leadership and management do you find most helpful?	Which sources of support do you, as a social work leader and manager, consider to be most valuable?

Further reading

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