

Leadership Characteristics Among Social Agency Executive Personnel

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Statement of the Research Problem

By addressing the need for substantive information regarding desirable social agency executive leadership characteristics, this research focuses on an important contemporary administration and social policy issue for the social work profession and the vulnerable clients it has historically served. Social work educators writing from the late 1980's to the present (Cupaiuolo, Loavenbruck, & Kiely, 1995; Faherty, 1987; Hart, 1988; Neugeboren, 1987; Patti, 1987; and others) note that there is an increasing loss in social service agency executive position of social work-educated persons to those educated in other disciplines, particularly those focused on business, such as the MBA's, MPA's, and MPH's. The result of this loss is that 1) vulnerable clients are losing the advocacy of social work-educated agency executives who have historically developed and maintained social policies and programs for the economically poor, politically disenfranchised, and socially overwhelmed; and 2) the social work profession itself is losing members in agency executive positions (Gibelman, 1995). These losses come at a time when United States neo-conservative ideology is increasingly hostile toward vulnerable clients and when agency executives must operate in "less gentler and kinder" environment.

This research begins the discussion by asking what leadership characteristics are needed to operate today's highly complex organizations within an increasingly hostile political, economic, and social environment, so that the social work community can take action to educate and train prospective and incumbent social work-educated persons to better compete with those of other academic disciplines for social agency executive positions. It does so in two ways. First, following the advice of Stephen Homes, when commenting on finding an appropriate replacement for NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks, "Times had changed, and new times demanded a new type of leadership" (New York Times, August 23, 1994), it assesses new leadership needs within the context of today's environment. Second, responding to Hopps' comment (1986) regarding the need for a new integrative leadership paradigm because of this changed environment, a model of social agency executive leadership was developed.

Research Questions

The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of the leadership characteristics desirable for today's social agency executive. Since this is exploratory research, no formal hypotheses are posited. However, the research question is driven by three study questions. The research question is: What are desirable leadership characteristics for contemporary social service agency executives? The three study questions that drive the research question are discussed in the Methodology section which follows, along with the relevant statistical analyses. The research question and study questions are formulated within a background of contexts for leadership in the contemporary environment and changes in leadership theory since the 1940s.

Because social agency executive leadership characteristics are at least in part dependent on the environment, consideration was given to the contexts of contemporary leadership. Four specific contexts were scrutinized. They were: 1) the political, economic, and social context (offering challenges for social service agencies); 2) the Massachusetts context (the geographic focus of the study, within which exist specific social service leadership challenges); 3) the professional context (embodying challenges for social work-educated agency executives and social work education); and 4) the theoretical context (which incorporates desirable leadership characteristics from the literature review and four useful social science theoretical paradigms).

This study addresses specific desirable leadership characteristics for today's social service agency executives, discussing some of the major trends in leadership theory, primarily from World War II until the present, and also examining personal leadership and leader-in-environment theories and their relevance to today's executives. Since the 1940's, leadership theory has moved from an emphasis on personal leader qualities, such as leader traits and leader behaviors, to an emphasis on leader-in-environment qualities and skills. Some of the leader-in-environment qualities and skills noted in the contemporary literature are: quantitative analysis skills; an understanding of economic principles; contingency skills and leader developmental level. Both personal leader behaviors and leader-in-environment leadership qualities and skills are considered in the analysis. In addition, the study looks at some contemporary socio-demographic characteristics of today's agency leaders before considering the three study questions that frame the research and the specific research variables of the study analysis.

Methodology

To respond to the Research Question, a survey was sent to the executive directors and senior clinicians of 245 Massachusetts social service agencies (thus, 490 respondents). The survey asked the respondents to define their perceptions of ideal social service agency

executive leader behaviors and leadership qualities and skills. The results of their responses were statistically analyzed by three study questions. The first question was: What are the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary social service agency executives? This question, designed to gain a better understanding of the population studied (i.e. incumbent Massachusetts social service agency leaders), was analyzed with descriptive statistics. The second question asked: What leader behaviors are desirable for contemporary social service executives? This question was analyzed using factor analysis to compare these social service leaders Massachusetts surveyed to subjects representing other career disciplines regarding twelve personal leader behaviors. The third question was: What are the relationships among personal leader behaviors, leadership qualities and skills, and socio-demographic variables in desirable contemporary social service agency executive leadership? This question was analyzed using multiple regression analysis to assess the relationships among specific socio-demographic variables, personal leader behaviors, and leader-in-environment leadership qualities and skills.

Leadership characteristics were divided into personal leader behaviors and leader-in-environment leadership qualities and skills. Leader behaviors were assessed using the ideal form of the LBDQ-XII questionnaire developed at Ohio State University. These leader behaviors included the six task-oriented behaviors of Production Emphasis, Initiation of Structure, Role Assumption, Persuasion, Representation, and Superior Orientation, and the six person-oriented behaviors of Tolerance of Freedom, Tolerance of Uncertainty, Consideration, Reconciliation, Integration, and Predictive Accuracy. Four leader-in-environment questions were developed from the literature review. They included: Contingency skills from Fiedler (1967) and House (1971); Quantitative Skills and An Understanding of Economic Principles from Faherty (1987); and Leader Development Level (Achiever or Strategist) from Torbert (1987). These sixteen variables were considered in the analysis, along with certain socio-demographic variables (agency position type [executive or senior clinician], gender, and educational discipline of the respondent [MSW or non-MSW], and years since terminal academic degree).

Results

Seven conclusions address the findings within the environmental context.

1) The socio-demographic data provide three important findings which have implications regarding timing, locus, and direction of executive education and training. The first finding, that executive positions are most often held by persons who acquired their terminal academic degree an average of 14 years before the data were collected, suggests that incumbent executives may need post-graduate education and that contemporary administration course work should be adjusted to meet the demands of today's marketplace. The second finding indicates that social agencies continue to discriminate against women--particularly with respect to attaining and holding executive positions, suggesting the need to prepare female candidates to counter stereotypes. The third finding underscores the fact that social work-

educated persons do not dominate in social agency executive positions, leading to the suggestion that the profession could do more to prepare and "sell" its prospective and incumbent executives.

2) Certain personal leader behaviors are relevant to social agency executive leadership today. They are Production Emphasis, Imitation of Structure, Role Assumption, Persuasion, Representation, Superior Orientation, Tolerance of Freedom, Tolerance of Uncertainty, Consideration, Reconciliation, Integration, and Predictive Accuracy.

3) Certain leader-in-environment executive leadership characteristics are also important today. They are: contingency skills; quantitative skills and an understanding of economic principles; and leader development level (achiever or strategist).

4) The multiple aggression analysis indicates there are really two different types of social service agency executive leader functions, one focussed on the internal operations of the agency and determining client needs, and the other focussed outside the agency toward resource providers. Each of these two executive functions requires a different set of desirable leadership characteristics and the skills of a different leader developmental level.

5) Social work-educated executives must understand the contemporary social service delivery environment.

6) Executives could be educated to fulfill a new leadership paradigm described in this dissertation as a model of social service agency leadership which integrates executive leadership characteristics with the executive role and agency goals.

7) The social work-educated agency executive has an important political role to play in developing and transforming social policies to more effectively meet the needs of vulnerable clients.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This dissertation was partly a policy analysis addressing the problem of the loss of social work-educated agency executive positions, which has resulted in both a loss to traditional and potential social work clients and a loss to the profession itself. As a result, a model of social service agency executive leadership--a new integrative leadership paradigm (Hopps, 1986) to address the "new times" (Holmes, 1990)--was developed. This model consists of three interdependent categories: 1) an agency goal of effective policies and programs for vulnerable clients; 2) the functions of the executive role which include social policy influence, resource development, and agency administration; and 3) executive leadership characteristics which include personal leader behaviors, leader-in-environment leadership characteristics, and social work values and ethics.

The significant recommendations emerging from the research is that social agency executives should acquire and strengthen the leadership qualities and skills described in the dissertation. Although there is only one significant recommendation emerging from this research, it has far-reaching implications for the social work profession. These implications focus on the education community which might be expected to lead the initiative for social agency executive leadership education and training; and on the executives themselves, who are being asked to address social work ethics in an increasingly marketized and privatized workplace. First, academic and professional organizations such as NASW and CSWE, as well as social service agencies that assist vulnerable populations, all have a role to play in developing prospective social work-educated executives. Because of the keen interest in the subject, some implementation guidelines for executive leadership education and training have been included in the dissertation. Second, even while assisting agencies to maintain appropriate profit margins in an increasingly privatized market, executives should: a) acknowledge ethical beliefs; b) learn a process of ethical decision-making; c) learn negotiation strategies (Reamer, 1990); and d) reframe certain widely-held beliefs (Fisher and Ury, 1983). Grouped together, these strategies form a network of values-orientation and decision-making skills to guide social work-educated executives.

Given the many competing demands on its resources, the professional social work community may believe it is unable to invest in agency executive education and training. However, as Gibelman (1995) reports, "Social workers have an important role to play in defining the social work profession of the future. The profession is . . . affected by . . . the direction it sets for itself." If social work does not compete with other professions for executive positions, vulnerable clients will be affected and the profession will lose the opportunity to retain the social agency executive positions it has held for many decades in the past. Macarov (1991) agrees, stating that "Only insofar as we try to influence the direction that the future will take are we exercising choice, rather than resigning ourselves to the inevitable, or--to be more precise--to capriciousness."

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