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Upfront

The Knowing Doing Gap

Human service managers are not implementing strategic solutions

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STRATEGY

The Knowing Doing Gap

Human service managers are not implementing strategic solutions

In a perfect world, social service agencies would be adequately staffed, over-funded, and eager to serve an ever-expanding and diverse client base. Instead, many are nearly the opposite: overburdened, under-funded, and dealing with a chronically burnt-out and sometimes surly staff.

Academics in the field of social work have taken a close look at the problems facing “human service” agencies, such as mental health clinics, job training centers, and child welfare facilities, and have made numerous recommendations on how to improve service and performance. A recent study in *Administration in Social Work* (Vol. 26, 2002) found that managers of these agencies by and large ignore such recommendations. What’s worse, the reason for their inaction is sobering: Most are simply overwhelmed by the immediate problems facing their agencies; they wind up troubleshooting instead of searching for and implementing more systemic solutions.

Researchers Karen M. Hopkins and Cheryl Hyde, both associate professors at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, interviewed 115 managers at human service agencies that included health and substance abuse facilities, child and adolescent counseling agencies, and geriatric care



Managers identified the top challenge as competition from other agencies for clients.

centers, among others.

Managers identified the top challenges facing their organizations as “Competition from other agencies for clients and/or funding,” “Undercapi-

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talization – not enough funds to meet agency goals,” and “Interpersonal conflict between workers and administration” (Table, facing page). According to the authors, managers have been identifying these same challenges over the last 10 years.

The surprise, Hyde said in an interview, was the managers’ perceived solutions to their challenges. Despite research which says that the solutions lie in strategic planning, greater collaboration, and entrepreneurial behavior of staff members, the managers’ solutions centered less on long-term planning and innovative solutions and more on immediate salves for pressing problems. The top three solutions among managers

were “Staff development,” “Resource development through fundraising and grant writing,” and “Staff recruitment.” Strategic planning was recognized by just 27 percent of managers as a solution to their challenges (Table, below).

The authors note, for example, that while 40 percent said competition for clients and funding was a challenge and roughly 18 percent complained that the surrounding community was unaware of the services the agency provided, just 17 percent of managers reported using marketing to promote their agencies.

Where organizations reported collaborating with other agencies, managers “appeared to tap already-depleted networks, such as other struggling nonprofits or public agencies riddled with their own challenges.” Only 10 managers (about 8 percent) “attempted collaborative ventures with for-profit organizations for technical consultation, fundraising, and physical space.”

“It is distressing that there was little evidence that managers understand the importance of visionary and innovative responses to these challenges,” write Hopkins and Hyde. “Often, solutions did not match with the identified challenges.”

Hyde said she was sympathetic to the managers, many of whom are just treading water to keep their agencies afloat. Still, she believes that managers must do more to create a long-term vision. “It is shifting attention from a piecemeal approach to a more holistic long-range approach,” she says.

To achieve this, the authors recommend that managers receive further training and mentoring on developing long-term vision and strategy, create incentives that promote cre-

Challenges* identified by human service managers	Percent
Competition from other agencies for clients and/or funding	40.0
Undercapitalization – not enough funds to meet agency goals	37.4
Interpersonal conflict between workers and administration	33.0
Staff turnover/low retention rate of direct service workers	31.3
Low worker morale and burnout	31.3
Excessive client demand/high ratio of clients to workers	25.2
Facility is inadequate or in need of remodeling/maintenance~	24.3
~Lack of appropriate services	7.0
Client recidivism	7.0
Client families not supportive	4.3
Clients have a poor reputation in the community	4.3
Incompetence of management	3.5
Agency threatened with closure	1.7
Union negotiations	0.9

*NOTE: Only the top seven responses and the lowest seven responses are listed.

ative experimentation, and work in small development groups to revamp tired routines.

“Human service managers must begin to challenge themselves, and then their employees,” the authors write, “through purposeful communication and dialogue to open them-

selves up to learning, examining the big picture, thinking creatively and strategically about the future, and developing and testing innovative ideas.”

A solution, perhaps, that would benefit managers, staff, and clientele alike. *–Gerald Burstyn*

Managers' solutions/responses* to current problems	Percent
Staff development	46.1
Resource development (fundraising, grant writing)	44.3
Staff recruitment	40.5
Strategic planning	27.0
Management information system (MIS) technology to track outcome data	22.6
Advocacy in local community	20.9
Marketing to increase awareness of services ~	17.4
~Develop volunteer program	8.1
Interorganizational relations with for-profits	8.1
Advocacy with local government	7.8
Hire a consultant	7.0
Charge for services or increase fees	6.1
Defining agency mission	6.1
Interorganizational relations with foundations	4.3

*NOTE: Only the top seven responses and the lowest seven responses are listed.