



Book Review: Empowering Workers & Clients for Organizational Change

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Book Review: Empowering Workers & Clients for Organizational Change

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“Empowering Workers and Clients for Organizational Change,” by Marcia Cohen, MSW, PhD and Cheryl Hyde, MSW, PhD, is designed as a textbook for social work students studying topics related to advocacy and change within human services organizations. The authors’ focus is the creation of change in human service organizations. They stress that social workers are obligated to recognize organizational gaps and/or inefficiencies in client service delivery. The authors explain that in order to most effectively empower clients, the structures within the organization that block optimal client service delivery must be changed through the work of the social worker. The text supports and expands the idea that social workers can be agents of change even in positions that are typically viewed as powerless, such as when one is a student.

The authors describe student social workers in organizations as “low power actors.” As such, they have minimal connections or influence. So, in order to empower student social workers in affecting client centered change within their organizations, effective strategy must be laid out regarding how to recognize ineffective policies and/or practices and how to change them by utilizing relationships with people in influential positions. There is consistent encouragement throughout the text for the social worker to stay involved and aligned with more powerful people in the organization in order to gain influence and power for themselves.

In order to empower a “low power actor” to affect change within an organization, the authors provide a comprehensive and informational overview of how human service organizations operate in response to the larger environment and within the organizational system itself. For example, a

particularly insightful description of how organizational culture is transmitted to new employees is useful for the student who has little or no experience with organizational culture. These processes are a) recruitment of members, b) orientation and socialization activities, c) reinforcement of appropriate behaviors and punishment of inappropriate behaviors, d) removal of deviant members, and e) strategic use of communication.

Change strategies through Force Field Analysis

After laying the foundational framework for how organizational power and culture is created and maintained, the authors shift focus to the strategies to be used by low power actors to identify problems within an organization in order to affect the changes necessary to enhance service delivery to clients. This methodology, identified as a “force field analysis,” is explained in detail and demonstrated in case studies throughout the book. This tool is based on psychological field theory, developed initially by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. This theory conceptualizes stability in any system as being a dynamic equilibrium (Lewin, 1951). There are always forces such as people, economics, culture, environment, etc. that both resist and support change to the system. Once the system reaches an equilibrium, another force will soon challenge that balance, and the cycle begins again.

According to the authors, the key to facilitating change within an organizational system is to identify these forces within the organization. These forces will certainly be personnel, but also could include culture or policies. They explain in detail how the “driving and restraining” forces

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must be identified and manipulated in order to bring about the desired effect. The authors emphasize the importance of identifying the people who appear to have some degree of power or control within the organization that allows them to advocate for the identified change, a “driving force.” Equally important is identifying those people who may resist or be a “restraining force” in the attempt to create the desired change.

The authors contend that developing alignments with these “driving forces” and then joining with them on a common goal for change makes the chances for successfully changing a defective policy more likely. An example of this strategy is the usage of the “change tactic” (pp.45, 61). The idea behind this tactic is to gain key and effective “social capital” in order to influence the balance of power and create change. The authors contend that when confronted with evidence and supportive data, those in an administrative role will act to facilitate and implement the desired change. In support of their empowerment strategies for organizational change there are anecdotal case studies presented by other authors, including former students of the authors, which are examples of students or new workers creating some degree of policy change by utilizing the force field analysis model.

Critique

The authors present clear and thorough information regarding the political structure of modern social service agencies and provoke thought about the realities of “mission driven” human services. For example, the situation in one particular case study in which services are secondary to subjective budget constraints is an all too common scenario. This text is well structured, clear in its explanations, and provides insightful and honest information regarding power structure, communication, and organizational culture.

The force field analysis model promoted by the authors is a straightforward method of decision making. Identifying obstacles and supports is a fundamental strategy when promoting a new idea

to which resistance is anticipated. However, in the context of students or new employees in organizations, this model may be unrealistic.

While few would argue the noble sentiment of new social workers striving for change, it is short sighted to encourage social workers at an entry level to take this kind of risk. Success in attempting these relational linkages is presumptive on the part of the authors. It would have been more helpful to provide more information to the student regarding the perceptions of the people with power or authority.

It is likely that many of these “forces” have ideas about hierarchical boundaries and “earned respect” that may not make them receptive to ideas from inexperienced workers. It is unwise to assume that the people with power in an organization, who have likely been in the field for some time, have professional respect for the ideas of a student or new employee. Given the authors’ stance about the importance of recognizing power structure and communication within agencies, it is surprising that the issues around the apparent aggressiveness of these tactics were not more thoroughly addressed. For example, given the probable generational differences between new workers and stable personnel, the authors neglect the expectations that administrators of another generation may have about inexperienced employees demanding to be heard and their opinions highly valued so early in their careers.

The feasibility of front line staff, or “low power actors” as they are defined, being able to maintain these strategic alliances is somewhat naive. Although the thoroughness of the force field analysis template is impressive, it carries the assumption that an inexperienced social worker has developed the critical assessment skills necessary to make judgments about relationships and influence that requires some broad degree of practice wisdom. The likelihood of these relationships being as effective as needed to affect any level of meaningful change would be unusual.

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