What Exactly Is Human Services Management?

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What exactly is human services management? On the one hand, the field is bounded by the common mission to meet the social welfare needs of vulnerable populations, reduce social inequality and advocate for social rights. On the other hand, it is awash with practice principles and models imported from business administration and New Public Management (NPM). These include, for example, entrepreneurship, branding and market niche positioning, revenue generating strategies, contracting out, logic models for program development and evaluation, and performance-based accountability systems (e.g., Brody & Nair, 2014; Kearns, 2000). I argue that it is inescapable that the logics that guide these two respective fields—human services for meeting common human needs and advancing social rights, and management practices for revenue optimization, efficiency and organizational growth—are in conflict with each other.

The human services field is expected to embrace values that enhance human dignity, counter discrimination and social stigma, and offer services to reduce suffering and social inequality. To meet these values human service organizations are supposed to institute practices that offer clients needed services, honor and promote their social worth, treat them as subjects to work with rather than objects to be worked on, and ensure that the receipt of services is not made contingent on acceptance of self-blame. The organization is also expected to give voice to the oppressed and marginalized, and to advocate for stronger social rights through political action. To embed these practices in a supporting organizational structure, hierarchical relations are minimized, power is equally distributed among the staff, and the clients have a major voice or say in setting organizational policies. Human services management, based on these principles, epitomizes Mary Parker Follett’s notion that an effective organization is relational rather than structural (Ansell, 2009). By structural she meant organizations based on hierarchical relations where power is used over individuals, especially to control those in the lower rungs of the organization who have little say in the decision making processes. In contrast, a relational organization is based on a system of interdependencies in which the interactions of individuals with each other (including clients) are the building blocks of the organization. Power is shared with all members of the organizations who thus have an active voice in the decision making processes. Several concrete examples include feminist organizations such as rape crisis centers, child care cooperatives and centers for independent living.
In contrast, the logic of the managerial practices adopted from business administration and NPM are imbued with neo-liberal values which celebrate the supremacy of the market, the virtues of privatization, and the spirit of entrepreneurship (Harvey, 2005). The underlying logic that guides these practices is maximization of resources, competitive advantage, efficiency and growth. The image of a successful organization is that of a well-oiled, highly productive and efficient machine. Managerial practices upholding this logic generate new forms of Taylorism. That is, work is structured to optimize productivity, increase the volume and speed by which clients are processed, reduce costs, and achieve prescriptive performance measures imposed on the workers by top managers. Client–worker relations become highly scripted by performance benchmarks and information processing algorithms. These are rationalized as “best practices” based on the latest research on effective interventions. The clients, in turn, become commodified; they are viewed as sources (or hindrances) of revenue, and are relabeled as consumers or customers.

Of course we want our human service organizations to meet the needs of their clients and do so effectively and efficiently. We want the organization to be sustainable, and we want the organizations and their staff to be accountable for their actions. Nonetheless, the management practices that emanate from business administration and NPM are likely to undermine and subvert the human services logic. While they may use the rhetoric of the human services logic to justify themselves, they, nonetheless, displace them in the daily management of the organization. This is particularly evident in the apparent managerial obsession to specify detailed performance measures and scripts for the worker–client encounters to meet them. Below the surface, these performance measures are built on a set of assumptions about the causes of the clients’ problems, the desired outcomes and most efficient “best practices” to achieve them. Who then determines what the causes of the clients’ problems are? Who defines what are the desired end results, and the best practices to attain them? I contend that when organizational practices are controlled by business and NPM logics based on competitive advantage, productivity, and efficiency, it is the top managers who are granted the power to make these decisions. Guided by these logics managers are more likely to emphasize diagnostic categories, desired outcomes and “best practices” that are deemed to be cost-efficient, ensure greater “success” in the eyes of key stakeholders, and strengthen the market position of the organization. In contrast to Mary Parker Follett’s vision of human service management as shared power and mutual accountability, the clients’ rights and capacity to actively participate in making such decision are ignored as are those of their workers. The actual experiences of the clients and workers, while inherently critical in validating or questioning these decisions, tend to be decoupled from them. The perspectives of managerial elite are privileged while those of workers, and especially clients, are marginalized.

A potentially pernicious consequence of managerial preoccupation with organizational maintenance, performance measures and efficiency is to distort the decision making and practices of the workers who are pressured to meet them. Invariably they are more likely to prefer clients and problems that enable them to score well on these criteria. As a large body of street-level research has shown, they do so through “creaming” desirable clients and “cooling out” those deemed to be difficult, require intensive worker-client relations and a high investment of resources in their treatment or care.

Moreover, the pursuit of efficiency in the human services, with its emphasis on cost savings and high productivity, upholds the myth that human service organizations can do more with less. It risks emasculating the very service technologies that have shown to be effective when coupled with a high commitment of resources. As Paul Brodwin (2013) pointed out, social workers who are expected to follow the treatment prescriptions of Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) struggle to do so while having high caseloads, limited resources, and pressures to meet unrealistic performance measures that mostly stress patient compliance with medication. The workers’ daily practices consist largely of very brief encounters with their clients, ensuring they comply with their medication while responding the best they can, with very limited resources, to the clients’ daily struggles and crises.
A considerable portion of the workers’ time is devoted to mindless paperwork spelling out treatment goals, performance benchmarks, action plans and reported outcomes that have little bearing on their daily work. Yet, without such paperwork the program cannot maintain its funding. Invariably the workers resort to various means to coerce their clients to comply in order to achieve the prescribed performance measures. As a result, ACT in practice is a mere shadow of what ACT professes to be. Taken together, when street-level practices give preference to “desirable” clients, they create an inequitable internal system where by the clients who need the services the most may be least likely to receive them. As such they undermine the core tenet of the human services logic which is to maximize the redistribution of resources to the most vulnerable. In particular, in an era of increasing social inequality, the human services logic should drive the organizations not toward cost-saving strategies but rather toward strategies to increase the flow of resources to their clients.

There is another potential impact of the business logic on the organization’s values. NPM, enforced by government agencies that contract out mandated services to nonprofit and for-profit human service organizations, is rationalized by a neo-liberal logic that shifts responsibility for social welfare from the state to the market, and from collective to individual responsibility. In particular, it views reliance on the safety net as an erosion of self-sufficiency and the work ethic. Therefore, social problems are framed as arising from personal moral failures rather than from societal inequalities and social structural deprivations. I suggest that when human service organizations embrace a business or an NPM logic they also become susceptible to the neo-liberal logic that attributes social problems to personal failings rather than to structural forces and prejudices solutions in favor of personal transformation. For example, Teresa Gowan (2010) tells us that homeless agencies most often diagnose homelessness as either sin or sickness but seldom as a system problem such as lack of affordable housing and jobs. These diagnoses then generate interventions sorted into “best practices” that are institutionalized in the organization, yet rarely offer a permanent solution to homelessness. Seldom are they overtly challenged by the workers whose performance is evaluated by the degree to which they conform to these practices. Indeed, the workers, as their clients, may be quite aware that these “best practices” are unrealistic, ignore the complexity and unpredictability of the daily living issues their clients face, and are not backed by needed resources to adequately address them. Not surprisingly, like their vulnerable clients the workers become frustrated and disillusioned. They experience what Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant (1992) called “symbolic violence”—forced to internalize the dominant values even if these values actually oppress them.

The latest fad in the arsenal of neo-liberal management ideologies and practices sweeping the human services field is “social innovation.” It is the idea circulating among powerful stakeholders (e.g., policy makers, government officials and foundations) that human service managers must be entrepreneurial, creative, and implement new programs to solve social problems because current practices are at best lackluster or ineffective. Therefore, they make receipt of resources contingent on demonstrated “innovativeness.” It places human service managers between the rock and the hard place. In several studies managers tell us that they do have the expertise and the experience to provide responsive services to their constituents, but what they lack the most are the resources to do so. Pressing them to innovate in new programs may actually divert precious resources away from what they know how to do best and get them into ventures with uncertain results. I would also argue that the emphasis on entrepreneurship is a way to skirt the issue that the organizations are starved of needed resources: when funders insist on “innovation” they implicitly blame lack of service impact or effectiveness not on their own reluctance to provide adequate resources to ensure service effectiveness but rather to the program logic itself.

How can human service managers remain true to the human services mission of their organization? They have to acknowledge that they operate in a highly politicized environment in which management ideologies and practices are an expression of the power relations in the organizational field in which they are located. In other words, they have to recognize that the field, be it mental health or child welfare, is organized by rules of the game, including sanctioned management
practices, that are instituted and enforced by powerful stakeholders and organizations in the field. These rules allocate different degrees of power to the organizations in the field which, in turn, determine the degree of isomorphic pressures they will face to comply with the dominant management practices. Managers have to be cognizant of these rules of the game, and how they may distort the very mission they aspire to achieve. Yet, these rules are not static, and can be altered through political mobilization. In other words, human service managers have to become active political actors in order to effectively advocate for their constituencies. By being political, human services managers can exploit the inherent contradictions within the neoliberal logic and the ambiguities in the management tools they are expected to employ. Contradictions such as effectiveness vs. efficiency, organizational autonomy vs. government controls or client choice vs. mandated service create political opportunities that managers can exploit to advance the well-being of their clients. In many instances managers can decouple the services they wish to protect from the required external performance measures imposed on them. In other instances they can manipulate the management tools which they control to advance a more social justice perspective. Managers can also resist management practices that contradict their social justice mission by declining to accept the funds or contracts associated with them.

It means that managers need to shift from an orientation that emphasizes technical rationality to an orientation that emphasizes the values for which the organization stands. To do so, first and foremost, managers need to be reflective and be critical about their own organizational practices. They need to think about whose interests their organization is serving. They need to question the very diagnoses or cause-effect relations that guide their service technologies—especially when these diagnoses locate the causes exclusively in the individual. Second, to be reflective requires that they create a dialogic community in which staff and clients, who are normally shut out in policy decision making, have a strong and unhindered voice in critiquing organizational practices. Without such a feedback loop, the exercise turns into a sterile process of “strategic planning.” Therefore, managers have to actively engage their staff and clients in shaping the policies of their organization. Third, they have to embrace the importance of advocacy as a critical management tool. Advocacy requires taking risks and speaking truth to power. Therefore, managers cannot do it alone. They need to join coalitions and endorse social movements and advocacy organizations that share their values. There is power in coalitions and collective mobilization which may shield them from retaliation. The ultimately successful struggle of coalitions of leaders, workers and clients of AIDS service organizations to advocate for the right to receive adequate services is such an example. Fourth, they need to seize on political opportunities when major stakeholders come to realize that current solutions to social problems do not work. A good example is the ability of homeless coalitions to convince policy makers and public officials in several cities that the solution to homelessness is not more services but rather more housing, that is “housing first.” Rather than stressing cost savings and efficiency, they need to build the case for more generous funding to improve the services needed by clients.

Undoubtedly, this is a tall order because the neo-liberal logic is powerful not only in framing the definition and desired solutions the organizations are expected to adopt, but also in allocating the resources to attain them. Nonetheless, this logic, as other logics facing human service organizations, is riddled with contradictions and ambiguities that can provide the political space and opportunity to challenge them and promote alternative logics through political action.

REFERENCES


