02A Lesson Proper for Week 2

GETTING ACQUAINTED

As a newcomer, you have an ideal opportunity to gather information about your fieldwork organization. You will be introduced to many staff members, most of them eager to tell you about the organization and to answer your questions. You will probably be given a general orientation and offered print materials to peruse. Also, in the first few days of your internship, you will likely have some unstructured, unscheduled time that you can use to get acquainted with the organization and the people within it.

These common rituals and rhythms of getting started open the door for exploring and learning as much as you can about your field site. In some circumstances, the nature of the work may not allow for the luxury of a slow startup or a thorough orientation. Then you need to rely on your own observations, assertiveness, and resourcefulness to get oriented.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR AGENCY

Getting to know as much as you can about your agency early on not only helps you feel more comfortable and confident in your new setting, but also helps you understand and integrate your future experiences as they unfold during your internship. Some of the most useful and accessible means of gathering information about your field site in the earliest days of your placement are to

- Research the agency's website.
- Read pamphlets, brochures, or any other written information for distribution to the community.
- Look over the agency policy manual.

- Read any periodic reports that the agency prepares for its governing and/or
- Funding bodies—for example, budget proposals, annual reports, grant proposals, and so on.
- Formally interview or informally speak with key people in the organization, such as the agency director, the human resources director, department heads, and employees with, especially long seniority.
- Attend any of the routine meetings of the organization that you are allowed to attend.

Discuss with your field supervisor your interest in learning more about the agency and determine the sources of information that you can access in your organization. Of course, one of the best ways to learn about your organization is simply by being a good observer. Keeping your eyes and ears open and your mind engaged at all times is your best information-gathering tool.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CO-WORKERS

In your first few days in the organization, you may be overwhelmed with new faces and names, especially if your organization is large. Allow yourself some time simply to observe the various people working around you and their interactions. It is, of course, understandable that you might be nervous at first about approaching your co-workers for conversation. Try to identify those workers who may be especially approachable and take a few risks in extending a hand and introducing yourself. Of course, you will especially want to approach those workers whose jobs, education, or professional backgrounds particularly interest you in some way. Gathering the information for the exercises in this chapter will give you a good focus and an incentive for approaching your co-workers. Most professionals are pleased, even flattered, to find that a student is interested in their work. Nevertheless, in approaching staff members, be respectful of the fact that they may not have time for a lengthy conversation at that particular moment. It may be best to ask for a scheduled time to meet if you find that you have several questions to discuss.

As a general rule, you will enhance your experience in your internship if you try to stay in the flow of interaction within the organization, getting to know as many people as possible. If the staff has a gathering place for lunch and breaks, try to be there for those times as much as possible. If you have your own office, keep the door open rather than closed whenever you can. If your supervisor tells you that you may attend a certain meeting “if you would like,” attend it if at all possible, even if it is at an inconvenient hour. Make yourself as approachable and involved as possible, remembering that staff members, too, may have some anxieties and uncertainties about approaching you.

As you make connections with your co-workers, you are engaging in the essential, but generally untaught, career skill called *networking*. Networking is the art of using your interpersonal skills to forge links with others. Networking has been defined as “efforts to enhance and develop the social linkages that might exist between people . . . creating linkages among the various networks to promote more competent support, and mobilizing these networks” (Barker, 2003, pp. 293–294). In human service organizations, like all organizations, a great deal occurs through informal channels. Having good relationships with colleagues and contacts within multiple networks helps

you accomplish your goals as a human service professional, whether that is to provide services for clients or to facilitate community-level change. These relationships can also provide excellent sources of informal mentoring, support, and guidance for your own professional development and future job search.

In getting to know your co-workers, do not overlook support staff. Administrative assistants often have an excellent overview of the organization and know a great deal about interacting with clients and other community members based on years of experience. Maintaining a positive relationship with administrative assistants and other support staff also enables you to do your job better due to the support and information that they can provide (Thomlison, Rogers, Collins, & Grinnell, 1996).

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE IN THE ORGANIZATION

The process of clarifying your role within the organization most likely started even before the internship began. When you interviewed with your supervisor prior to the internship and discussed your placement with your faculty liaison, general ideas about your role and responsibilities as an intern were probably discussed. As you learn more about your agency and your co-workers, your own role within the organization will become clearer.

Even so, interns can often suffer from some degree of role ambiguity. Because most interns have previously held jobs and understand what it means to have a job, they often expect the internship to be similar. An internship tends to be distinctly different from a job. When an organization hires a staff member, there is generally a clear job description that identifies a set of responsibilities for that employee and a significant workload associated with the position. The agency in this case has a clear set of needs that the employee is expected to fulfill. Some internships are developed in a similar way, with a clear job description, a narrowly defined role, and/ or possibly a major project that the intern is assigned with the expectation of delivering a “product” at the end of the term. Most internships, however, are much more flexible and perhaps even somewhat vague in their expectations of students. Although this can be a bit unsettling for students who would like more structure and role definition, there also can be great learning advantages to a more open-ended approach. Less defined internships can work very well as long as all concerned remember that the intern is a student who is there primarily to learn. For example, a more flexible internship might allow you to move from one department to another and from one worker to another in order to be involved in the most valuable learning experiences as they emerge.

Unfortunately, in some cases, there are times when interns enter organizations that are overwhelmed with the demands of daily operation and, as a result, the intern’s role is not given sufficient clarity and focus. If this is the case two to three weeks into the internship, you should discuss your concerns with your field supervisor and faculty liaison. Often faculty members have a history of working with the organization and can provide information to help you place your own experience within the larger context of the “typical” student experience there. Faculty liaisons generally want students to handle such issues as independently as possible, but when it is appropriate, they can also advocate for students in order to help ensure that their learning needs are met.

KNOWING THE AGENCY’S MISSION, GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

A clear statement of an organization's mission, objectives, goals, and strategies is central to its efficient functioning. These elements may be predetermined through legislative or funding mandates or may be determined more internally by the staff, administrators, and/or board of directors. Your understanding of your field site will be enhanced by examining each of these components of its identity.

Human service agencies often have a formal, written mission statement on their websites and/or in the first pages of their policy manuals. The prominence of this statement reflects its importance to the agency's identity. The mission statement of an agency sets out the rationale for its existence, explaining whom the agency is intending to serve and the community needs or problems that it seeks to address. The mission statement also conveys important information, directly or indirectly, about the agency's philosophy of helping and the values that underpin its efforts.

Some organizations are dedicated primarily to providing services directly to individuals and families. Work within these settings is sometimes referred to as *micro practice*. Other organizations are dedicated to strengthening systems and communities in which people live, creating environments in which people can thrive. Work within these organizations is often referred to *macro-practice* (Bruggemann, 2014). As you read the mission statement of your organization, which of these approaches is described? Do not be surprised if you see a combination of these two levels of practice reflected in the mission statement since many agencies include both micro-and macro-practice elements.

The mission statement of an organization serving recently released inmates, for example, might include language about providing support for those individuals and their families as well as language about working in the community to reduce barriers to re-entry. This "both/and" approach to helping is an ideal form of practice that acknowledges the roles of both the individual and the environment in personal well-being. Similarly, macro-practice environments, though focused on issues in organizations, communities, states, or even on national of international issues, also generally include direct contact with client populations. In keeping with the basic tenet of "acting with, not for" others, macro-practitioners typically work hand-in-hand with individuals from the affected populations in their efforts toward systems change.

For example, a crime prevention organization that mobilizes community members to organize and take action to achieve that goal includes elements of micro-practice when the community participants are empowered and develop new skills through that process.

Closely related to the agency's mission are its goals and objectives, as well as the strategies used to meet them. The agency's goals can often be found close to its mission statement. The goals of the agency describe the outcomes that it is trying to accomplish, often using broad, difficult-to-measure terminology. The goals are effective in giving the agency direction toward the long-term achievement of its purpose. In contrast, objectives are written or discussed in more specific, measurable language and are effective in focusing and directing more immediate efforts. For example, an agency may have the goal of assisting homeless people in the community and the objective of reducing homelessness in the community by 10 percent within two years. Many agencies have written goals and objectives for the organization as a whole as well as for each department of the agency, while other agencies are less formal and comprehensive in their administrative methods.

Agencies employ specific strategies—programs, services, and activities—to fulfill their missions and accomplish their goals and objectives (Bryson, 2004). The strategies include not only externally directed services and programs but also behind-the-scenes, in-house efforts as supervision, fund-raising, staff training, continuing education, and other activities that are necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the organization.

Collectively, the mission, goals, objectives, and strategies of the organization reflect the organization's philosophy and values. In some cases, this philosophy is explicitly stated in the mission statement, while in others it is more implicitly suggested. Often, it is the agency's strategies that are most telling in this regard. Several agencies might serve identical populations and seek identical outcomes but have vastly different ideas and philosophies about how to reach those goals. Consequently, their strategies will be vastly different as well.

For example, in the case of three programs serving teens with substance-abuse problems, each might pursue its goal of helping clients become drug-free by different approaches. The first might encourage the youth toward spiritual transformation and reliance on a Higher Power. The second might use traditional psychotherapy in combination with carefully administered psychotropic medications. The third might engage their clients in outdoor adventure experiences, physical labor, and group work. Whether or not their philosophies are spelled out, clearly there are different ideas and values operating in each agency's understanding of the nature of the individual's problem as well as the strategies that are thought to be most effective in promoting change.

The philosophy and values of an organization are compellingly powerful determinants of *how* the agency goes about accomplishing its goals. As you examine your agency's mission statement, identify the philosophy and values that seem to guide the agency's work and shape its identity.

KNOWING THE AGENCY'S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Your agency, unless it is very small or very new, probably has an organizational chart that identifies by job title the various positions in the agency and reflects who reports to whom within the system. The organizational chart conveys information about how the agency is organized to accomplish its work. Divisions, departments, and programs within the agency appear on the chart in such a way that the various units of the organization and how they relate to one another become clearer.

Larger and more traditional organizations tend to follow a highly bureaucratic organizational structure, resulting in a chart that resembles a pyramid. The bureaucratic pyramid structure results in a vertical organizational chart, showing one person at the top, many people at the bottom, and an assortment of midlevel managers, coordinators, program directors, and supervisors in between. Smaller organizations and those with less traditional, nonhierarchical management philosophies often have organizational charts that are more horizontal than vertical. These organizations use more peer supervision and collaborative methods of organizing and conducting their work.

An equally important factor to consider in organizational structure is the nature of the formal organization as compared to the informal organization (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss, 2006; Sweitzer & King, 2014). Although the agency has an official organizational structure that reflects who reports to whom, who works with whom, and who has power relative to whom, the actual working of the organization does not always conform to this official structure. The patterns of communication, relationships, and influence that emerge in the day-to-day work of the agency are

referred to as its *informal* organizational structure. The informal structure of the agency consists of a set of unspoken rules relating to every aspect of agency life, including how staff members relate to one another, how they relate to clients and community members, how decisions are made, and so on. In general, organizations tend to function most effectively when the formal and informal organizational structures closely correspond to one another.

Often informal roles develop in organizations that take staff members into activities that fall well outside their job descriptions. This "role drift" can create confusion about who is to do what and can even spark conflicts among staff over "turf" issues. In some organizations, however, this role flexibility can be valued and appreciated as staff members may feel supported by colleagues extending themselves in these ways. When role drift occurs to the extent that staff members assume tasks that go beyond their qualifications and skills, the informal roles of the organization have become problematic (McKenna, 2004). As you observe your organization, pay attention to the informal roles that have emerged I the organization as well as to the formal roles and any role drift that might have occurred.

Your careful observations of your agency's formal and informal operations can be helpful in guiding your own behavior. Your ability to "fit in" with a particular organization will be enhanced by your ability to discern and follow the currents and crosscurrents of its formal and informal operations. Situations arise each day that can leave a student feeling confused as to when to do what: Is it appropriate to talk to someone other than my supervisor about a given concern? Should I dress differently on days of particular events or meetings? Should I answer that phone or let it ring? By being a careful observer of the informal operations and interactions within your agency, you will probably be able to figure out how to conduct yourself in most situations. Another good rule of thumb is "when in doubt, ask." Your supervisor is the most obvious resource but certainly not the only one. Draw upon the relationships you are developing in the agency and raise questions as they arise.

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