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LEADERSHIP IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE: THE BALANCE BETWEEN ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY AND HUMAN-CENTERED CARE

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***Abstract:** Leadership in the social sphere represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that combines administrative competence with ethical sensitivity and human care. The contemporary social manager operates in a dynamic environment shaped by social change, digitalization, and diverse professional expectations. The paper explores the dual nature of leadership in the social sector – as an instrument of effective management and as a form of human-centered guidance and emotional support. The study emphasizes several core leadership roles: representative, managerial, mentoring, mediating, field-based, and supportive (through supervision and team development). Each of these roles reflects the balance between organizational efficiency and the need for empathy, trust, and psychological well-being within teams. Furthermore, the paper analyzes key challenges faced by social leaders today, including intergenerational workforce management, the impact of social media on professional identity, the development of a learning culture, ethical and empathetic decision-making, and the maintenance of emotional balance among staff.*

The paper concludes that effective leadership in the social sector requires a combination of strategic vision, emotional intelligence, and ethical integrity. Sustainable social services can only be achieved when management transcends administrative control and embodies understanding, compassion, and genuine concern for people - both service users and professionals who support them.

***Key words:** social leadership; management; emotional intelligence; empathy; ethics; professional development; supervision; social work management.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of leadership is characterized by its interdisciplinary nature and is subject to exploration from various theoretical and practical scientific perspectives. Leadership concepts are embedded in multiple fields – education, psychology, social sciences, and management studies (Radoslavova, L.). It is a frequently examined phenomenon within the social sciences. As Fiedler (1971) notes, “There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are theories of leadership – and there are almost as many theories of leadership as there are psychologists working in the field.”

Leadership, as a process, is grounded in the social nature of human society and represents a form of interaction among all individuals involved in it. The social dimension of leadership is determined by collective values and ethical standards within a given context, as well as by the degree to which the expectations and needs of the participants in the leadership process are met (Radoslavova, L.).

According to Kotter (1996), “Leadership is about defining what the future should look like, aligning people with that vision, and inspiring them to make it happen despite the obstacles.”

In practice, it can be summarized that the main characteristics of a successful leader in the present and the future are: inspiration, foresight and purposeful vision-building, the ability to create trust, respect and empathy, team cohesion and a creative organizational culture, as well as a commitment to continuous learning (Holsapple & Singh, 2004).

EXPOSITION

1. The Essence of Management in the Social Sphere

Leadership in the social sphere represents a key factor for the effective functioning of social services and for the sustainable development of social policy as a whole. It is not merely a managerial function, but rather a dynamic process of interaction between people, values, and social goals, in which the manager combines administrative competence with ethical commitment and human understanding.

By its very nature, social work is directed toward supporting individuals and communities in vulnerable situations, which places exceptional demands on the personality and professionalism of the manager. A manager in the social sphere must simultaneously act as a strategist, coordinator, motivator, and emotional leader, who understands human relationships, maintains team spirit, and ensures the psychological well-being of employees.

The contemporary social environment – marked by demographic changes, social inequalities, and digitalization – poses new challenges to the management of social organizations. This calls for a reconsideration of traditional leadership models and the development of a new type of leadership grounded in empathy, ethical reflection, communication culture, and the ability to manage emotions within the work process.

Leadership in the social sphere is manifested through a variety of roles – representative, managerial, mentoring, mediating, and supportive. Each of these reflects a different dimension of professional responsibility and emphasizes the need for an integrated approach in which organizational efficiency is combined with care for people – both for the service users and for the professionals who provide these services.

In this context, the present paper aims to analyze the leadership roles and challenges within the social sphere, examining their significance for the development of a sustainable, ethical, and human-centered professional practice. The emphasis is placed on the role of the social manager as a leading figure who balances between the demands of institutional efficiency and the need for emotional and professional support within the team.

The management of social services constitutes a process of planning, organizing, coordinating, leading, and controlling, directed toward the effective achievement of social objectives. A manager in the social sphere must possess not only administrative and organizational skills but also empathy, ethical sensitivity, and a deep understanding of the social reality in which the organization operates.

The Multifaceted Role of the Manager in the Social Sphere

The social sphere encompasses a wide range of activities – from policy development and the protection and promotion of human rights to the provision of care for children and older adults, support for persons with disabilities, and initiatives aimed at social integration, rehabilitation, and risk prevention.

This diversity of activities places high demands on managers in the social field, who must combine administrative competence with emotional intelligence, an understanding of human relationships, and the ability to maintain the psychological well-being of their teams.

Working with vulnerable groups, often accompanied by constant exposure to pain, loss, and social tension, can easily lead to emotional exhaustion and professional burnout. Therefore, a social manager must be not merely a supervisor or administrator but a supportive and empathetic leader, capable of creating an environment of safety, trust, and mutual support.

Managerial Roles in Social Work

Leadership in the social sphere is expressed through multiple interrelated roles that go beyond the classical understanding of management as the exercise of power and control. The social leader acts as a mediator between institutional requirements and human needs, combining administrative competence, professional ethics, and emotional intelligence. Within this context,

six key leadership roles can be identified: representative, managerial, mentoring, mediating, field-based, and supportive.

1. Representative Role

The representative function of the leader in the social sphere is related to their ability to embody the mission, values, and professional standards of the organization. The leader represents the social service in interactions with external partners – governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and community stakeholders.

In this role, the social leader acts as a spokesperson and advocate for vulnerable groups while simultaneously building public trust in the social system. The ability to represent the organization effectively requires communication competence, diplomacy, and strategic thinking, as the leader must balance the interests of diverse stakeholders without compromising the core ethical principles of the profession.

2. Managerial and Administrative Role

This role is associated with the organization, coordination, and control of activities within social service provision. As a manager, the leader ensures the effective use of human, financial, and material resources, plans activities, and monitors their outcomes and efficiency.

The managerial role also involves decision-making in a dynamic social environment, often characterized by limited resources and increased public expectations. The social leader must act as both a strategist and an analyst, capable of translating administrative requirements into practical and applicable solutions while maintaining focus on the human dimension of social work.

In the contemporary context, effective management is viewed as a combination of rational planning and emotional engagement, where the success of the organization depends not only on its structures and procedures but also on the motivation and satisfaction of its staff.

3. Mentoring and Coaching Role

The leader in the social sphere also fulfills the function of a mentor and coach, encouraging both the professional and personal growth of their employees. This role has a deeply pedagogical and supportive nature.

The mentor builds relationships based on trust, cooperation, and openness. Through supervision, individual discussions, and the sharing of experience, the mentor helps social workers to develop confidence, professional autonomy, and ethical sensitivity.

Mentorship is essential for preventing professional burnout and for fostering a culture of continuous learning within the organization. An effective mentor does not impose authority but rather inspires through personal example – demonstrating competence, resilience, and humanity.

4. Mediating Role (in Conflict Situations)

In the dynamic and emotionally demanding environment of social work, conflicts are inevitable – both among employees and between staff, service users, or institutions. In such situations, the leader must act as a mediator and balancer, capable of recognizing tension early and transforming it into constructive dialogue.

The mediating role requires a high level of emotional intelligence, impartiality, and communication competence. The social manager does not simply resolve conflicts but creates conditions for their prevention through clear rules, team support, and an atmosphere of mutual respect.

This function is directly related to maintaining the psychological climate within the team and is of crucial importance for the stability and overall effectiveness of the organization.

5. Fieldwork and Client-Focused Role

One of the distinctive characteristics of the social leader is their closeness to real practice. Unlike managers in other sectors, social leaders often participate directly in fieldwork – visiting service users, being familiar with specific social cases, and maintaining continuous contact with the real-life problems of people and communities.

This role lends authenticity and credibility to leadership, as the manager does not distance themselves from practice but understands it from within. Through active involvement in fieldwork, the leader demonstrates empathy, professional commitment, and serves as a role model for the team.

In this way, the social manager becomes a bridge between strategy and reality, connecting administrative decisions with the human stories and social realities with which the organization works.

6. Supportive Role (Individual and Group Supervision)

The supportive role represents perhaps the most humane dimension of leadership within the social sphere. It is manifested through systematic care for the emotional and psychological well-being of employees, implemented via individual and group supervision, counseling, and supportive communication.

The social leader recognizes that the quality of care provided to service users is directly linked to the well-being of those who deliver it. Therefore, they foster a secure environment in which team members can express difficulties, doubts, and emotions without fear of judgment.

Supportive leadership serves as a foundation for resilience and professional maturity – it builds trust, collegiality, and a sense of belonging

The Cycle of ‘Missing’ Leadership in the Social Sphere

Within the social sector, leadership development faces a recurring pattern often described as a “cycle of missing leadership.” This cycle reflects a systemic gap between the theoretical importance attributed to leadership and the limited practical mechanisms available for its cultivation. It perpetuates a professional environment in which social managers are expected to lead effectively but are rarely provided with the conceptual tools, institutional support, or experiential learning necessary to do so.

1. Insufficient Leadership Training

One of the key factors sustaining this cycle is the lack of structured leadership education within social work and related academic programs. Professional preparation often focuses primarily on social work theory, case management, and ethics, while leadership, strategic management, and human resource competencies remain underrepresented. As a result, many future managers enter the field with strong professional values but without the necessary skills to lead teams, allocate resources, or manage complex organizational processes.

2. Lack of Role Models for Empathetic and Human-Centered Leadership

The absence of visible role models of compassionate and emotionally intelligent leaders reinforces this deficit. Young professionals, especially at the beginning of their careers, frequently encounter administrative or bureaucratic leadership styles rather than inspirational, participatory, or supportive ones. This lack of mentoring figures discourages the development of reflective and empathetic leadership practices, fostering instead a culture of compliance rather than creativity and engagement.

3. Limited Career Development Pathways

The professional trajectory in the social sector is often constrained by limited opportunities for advancement, which are usually tied to managerial appointments rather than to expertise, innovation, or leadership potential. Consequently, employees may advance to management positions without adequate preparation or support. This reinforces a technical and hierarchical understanding of leadership, rather than one based on emotional competence and strategic vision.

4. Weak Support for Continuing Professional Development

Another persistent problem is the lack of systematic support for continuous professional development among social sector managers. Few organizations offer targeted programs in leadership, strategic planning, supervision, or change management. Access to lifelong learning opportunities remains limited, leaving managers isolated and without platforms for reflective practice, peer exchange, or skill renewal. In the absence of such support, leadership capacity stagnates and innovation becomes difficult to sustain.

5. Leadership's Limited Influence on Practice Quality

Finally, leadership within the social sphere often struggles to influence practice quality in a meaningful way. Managerial energy is frequently consumed by administrative compliance, budget reporting, and procedural oversight, leaving little time for mentoring, motivation, and staff development. As a result, leadership fails to function as a transformative force capable of enhancing service standards, empowering teams, and improving outcomes for users.

Breaking the Cycle and Conclusion

Breaking the “cycle of missing leadership” in the social sphere requires a strategic, systemic, and long-term approach aimed at transforming the culture, structure, and priorities of professional education, management, and social policy. Achieving sustainable results demands coordinated efforts among educational institutions, organizations, governmental structures, and professional communities.

1. Education and Professional Preparation

A key factor in this transformation is the integration of leadership into higher education and continuous training for social professionals. Social work education should go beyond theoretical knowledge to include practical modules on management, communication, team dynamics, strategic thinking, and change management.

Such an approach would enable future professionals to develop early awareness of ethical, human-centered leadership and to enter the field equipped with the skills necessary for both management and social responsibility.

2. Organizational Culture and Shared Leadership

At the institutional level, there is a need to build an organizational culture that promotes shared leadership, mentorship, and reflection. When every team member has the opportunity to participate in decision-making and organizational development, an environment of trust, inclusion, and accountability emerges.

In this context, leadership ceases to be a privilege confined to management positions and becomes a collective process of learning, collaboration, and mutual support.

3. Support for Managerial Development

The creation of sustainable programs for continuing professional development is crucial for cultivating mature and effective leaders. Targeted training and supervision initiatives should strengthen strategic thinking, innovation, and emotional resilience.

Support for social managers must not be seen as an expense, but rather as an investment in the quality and stability of the social system.

4. Redefining the Leader's Role

Leadership should not be perceived merely as a mechanism of control but as a process of inspiration, coordination, and trust-building. The social leader acts as a mediator between institutional mechanisms and human needs, bridging policy frameworks with the lived realities of people and communities.

This requires a combination of professional competence, personal authenticity, and ethical sensitivity – a leader who does not simply manage, but inspires and unites.

5. Political and Institutional Commitment

Breaking the cycle cannot occur without governmental support and strategic vision. Leadership development must be recognized as a policy priority, supported by qualification programs, incentives for good management practices, and research in social leadership.

Leadership should be viewed as an integral part of social policy, ensuring the system's effectiveness, sustainability, and human orientation.

CONCLUSION

Leadership in the social sphere is an essential component of the effective functioning of the entire social policy system – from planning and delivering social services to shaping sustainable social models grounded in solidarity, ethics, and humanity.

It extends beyond organizational management and encompasses the ability to influence social processes strategically, build partnerships, and promote civic engagement and social justice.

The contemporary social leader must be not only an efficient manager but also a visionary figure, capable of uniting institutions, professional communities, and civil structures around shared social goals. This requires a unique combination of managerial competence, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and moral responsibility – qualities that transform the social system into a space of support, learning, and development.

The multifaceted nature of leadership demands the ability to balance administrative efficiency with genuine care for people – the two interdependent pillars of social policy. A true social leader understands that social change is not achieved solely through regulation but through inspiration, empathy, and personal example.

Only through strategic, empathetic, and ethical leadership can social policy fulfill its mission - to create equitable opportunities for all, to strengthen social trust, and to contribute to the development of a more humane and inclusive society, where care for people stands at the core, and leadership serves as the means to achieve it.

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