Savvy Practitioners and the Organizational Context

What you need to know, and why, to navigate your organization and serve your clients well
Organizational Culture

• What assumptions—about change, strengths, problems, and clients—underlie the organization’s approach?
• What language do people use to talk about the work?
• What expectations are communicated, and how?
• What are the organization’s core values, and how do these influence the environment?
• How might the culture be received by those unfamiliar with the organization?
In practice

In some organizations, the culture is one of ‘practiced busy-ness’, where anything less than excessive overwork (and frequent complaining about the same) is perceived as slacking. This can be not only toxic for workers, but also detrimental to clients, who may feel that they are burdening workers by asking for help.
Power and Why It Matters

• Who makes decisions?
• Where is power located, and how does it align with the ‘official’ power centers (and not)?
• What approaches work best to leverage power to get what you need for your clients?
• Is power tightly held or broadly shared?
  – What power do direct service workers hold?
  – What power do clients wield? How can you increase it?
In practice

Successful social workers know to whom to go to address concerns within their organizations. This isn’t always (or even usually) the CEO, so identifying who gets listened to and who can access resources is an important part of practice. Workers who feel powerless cannot ‘empower’ others, but those who know how to resolve problems within their organizations are better prepared to respond to clients’ needs.
Rules and How to Navigate Them

- What governs who is eligible for services? Where is a ‘gatekeeping’ role played, and how do clients navigate this?
- What sanctions are in place, and what appeal process is available to contest them?
- How does the organization work within externally-imposed rules to deliver needed services to clients? What is the response when workers and clients hit ‘brick walls’?
Social workers face a simultaneous ethical obligation to follow agency rules (unless they violate the Code of Ethics, when whistle-blowing may be required) and to serve clients. When these conflict, skillful practice can help workers find ways around these dilemmas. Regardless, understanding the limitations of what the organization can/will do for clients helps workers to plan interventions.
Learning, Adaptation, and Change

• What is the organization’s history, and how does this shape its operations today?
• How are new ideas integrated into the organization? How has the organization overcome challenges or adapted to change in the past?
• How does the organization identify and learn from ‘failure’? How is this experienced?
In practice

You are a new ‘input’ into the organization, and understanding how this entity has responded to novel situations before can help you not only interpret but also deal with what you experience. Similarly, you can better anticipate resistance to new ideas (yours or clients’) if you know how they have been received in the past.
Building Your Organizational Skills

• Start with self-assessment, so you understand your ‘fit’ and think about how others see you
• Ask questions—you are a student, so it’s more tolerated!
• Experience other organizations, as a volunteer, Board member, employee, client
• Study the organization’s history, governance, and communications
• Consider your organization a resource, and make it your job to access it successfully for clients
• Consider your organization a ‘target’, and apply your skills to pursue your desired aims
But if I want to be a private practitioner....

- You will still deal with organizations. All the time.
  - Insurance companies
  - Clients’ schools, employers, health care providers
  - Professional associations, regulatory bodies
  - Resources on which your clients depend

- Your social work education will be compromised if you struggle to work within the constraints of your practicum organization.
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