


# Leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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from the front line  
to the corner office

Most of you have probably pictured yourselves in the “corner office” one day. Getting that promotion (e.g., supervisor, manager or program director) is a common goal for many social workers; however, making the transition from a front line worker to an administrator position can be difficult. It is often challenging because the skills that made you a great frontline worker are not necessarily the skills that will make you a great administrator within your organization. In fact, as an administrator you will have a new array of responsibilities that will require a whole new skill set.


Unfortunately, there is usually little preparation for social workers transitioning into management positions (Cousins, 2004). Typically, past experiences with supervisors strongly influence how you will supervise others. Being a new supervisor comes along with a list of complex issues to tackle including how you handle your new role and how others receive it.

Striking a balance between responsibilities, support and inspiration of staff is critical to transitioning into your new role. As you make the shift into management, consider the following:

- » **TRANSITION INTO YOUR NEW ROLE SMOOTHLY.** To make a smooth transition to a management position, start with an organized work plan for yourself. This work plan should include key action items and timeframes. This tool can be useful in developing good time management and delegation skills. One of the many traps that new administrators can quickly fall into is doing the work themselves instead of delegating tasks to others. Another important approach to successfully transitioning into your new role is getting to know your staff. Begin by setting up individual or staff meetings.



National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street NE, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241



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» **SEEK OUT TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.**

Becoming a manager is a complex task and there is often little support or preparation for this role (Cousins, 2004). Despite the fact that your new role will require lots of new responsibilities, take the initiative and participate in professional development opportunities to strengthen your skills (e.g., communication, management, evaluation, etc.) with staff and support the achievement of their professional goals. These efforts can help you to become an effective and supportive manager.

» **RECOGNIZE THAT PERFECTION IS NOT NECESSARY.**

Transitioning to a new role takes time. It is important to remember that you do not have to be perfect. Administrators often miss signals, overreact, or are not responsive enough to staff needs. However, as a social worker in this new role, it is essential that you become aware of your own feelings including triggers, fears and concerns without becoming defensive. You can become an effective administrator by continuously evolving in your role through reflection and self-evaluation.

» **LEAN ON YOUR MENTORS.**

Responsibilities in your new position may sometimes become stressful. Identify or reach out to your mentors for professional support. Talking to others in similar roles can help to give you a fresh perspective and new ideas to tackle issues related to your new role.

» **DRESS THE PART.**

Your new position will likely require that you attend meetings with other administrators. Remember that your work is not in the field anymore so you want to make sure you dress professionally at all times. A professional appearance influences how others perceive you in your new position.

» **HOLD ON TO KEY SOCIAL WORK**

**VALUES.** Your new role may present you with some ethical dilemmas. Hold onto those key social work values to keep you grounded.

Transitioning to a new management role can be challenging. However, it can also be an exciting opportunity if you feel equipped for the part. Organizing your work plan, getting to know your team, achieving your own professional goals, and identifying your support network are just some of the approaches that you can begin to take to successfully navigate your new role.

**REFERENCES**

Cousins, C. (2004). *Becoming a social work supervisor: A significant role transition*. Retrieved from [http://humanecology.syr.edu/SocialWork/documents/Becoming\\_a\\_social\\_work\\_supervisor\\_001.pdf](http://humanecology.syr.edu/SocialWork/documents/Becoming_a_social_work_supervisor_001.pdf)

**NASW RESOURCES**

National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies provides information related to the social work workforce. This resource gives you access to information that can help to enhance professional skills. [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org)