

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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the value of social work mentoring

mentor: a trusted counselor or guide (Merriam-Webster, 2012)

Mentoring is an invaluable component of every social worker's career. Many individuals choose the profession of social work because they have been inspired or advised by a social worker or a mentor (Whitaker, 2008). After choosing the profession, though, social workers must continue to make career choices and respond to a variety of unanticipated challenges. A social work mentor can provide support and perspective in multiple aspects of your career:

› **Insight on career transitions.**

Direct practice is but one of many social work career choices. Mentors also support social workers in administration, education, policy, research, and community organizing. A social work mentor may be especially helpful if you are considering a switch from direct practice to a mezzo- or macro-level role. The perspective of a mentor may also be useful for social workers nearing retirement or wishing to decrease their work hours to focus on personal priorities.

- › **Understanding of practice specialization opportunities.** The breadth of the social work profession appeals to many people. That same breadth can prove challenging to a student or emerging professional struggling to find a niche. A social work mentor can provide information not only on working with various client populations, but also on the diversity of settings and roles in which you can serve specific clientele.

- › **Identification and enhancement of professional strengths.** Though many social workers have some qualities in common, each professional possesses a unique combination of assets. A mentor can reflect those qualities and help you consider how to use your strengths to create and maintain a fulfilling social work career.



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Having and serving as a mentor need not be exclusive; as your career progresses, you may want to consider becoming a mentor to another social worker.

› **Recognition of, and strategies to address, professional development needs.** Every social worker finds some aspects of practice more difficult than others. You may thrive in one-on-one interactions but have difficulty with public speaking, for example. A mentor can provide feedback on your learning needs and help you identify strategies to meet those needs.

› **Navigation of workplace dynamics.** Social workers often anticipate client-related stressors but may underestimate other challenges inherent in the work environment. A mentor can help you maximize your effectiveness in the midst of complex workplace dynamics.

› **Identification with the profession.** Many social workers work in host settings or interdisciplinary teams in which client's psychosocial well-being is not regarded as primary. You may even be the lone social worker in your organization. Such situations pose unique challenges for social workers, who must educate their colleagues and advocate for clients while maintaining collaborative relationships and supporting the mission of their employers. A social work mentor can help you stay connected to the profession.

» **FINDING A SOCIAL WORK MENTOR**

Many social workers develop and maintain trusting relationships with supportive professors, field instructors, or clinical supervisors. Other social workers find mentors through structured programs within NASW chapters, organizations devoted to their practice specialties, or social work alumni networks. Such programs are often tailored toward recent graduates. Some employing organizations even offer mentoring for new employees. A mentor may also be a peer, such as a respected colleague, or someone working in a role that appeals to you.

» **MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS**

Some mentoring relationships are structured, with regularly scheduled meetings or conversations; others are flexible and may vary in intensity. What's important is to find a balance that works for both your mentor and you and to recognize that the relationship may change over time in response to one or both of your circumstances. You may also find that you develop mentoring relationships with more than one social worker at a time or over time. For example, one colleague may provide guidance in professional publishing, and another when you transition from direct practice into administration.

Don't overlook the value of informal mentoring. A person need not hold the title of *mentor* to be a valuable asset in your professional development. The social work profession is replete with dedicated individuals eager to help their colleagues succeed. If you approach your career with that mindset, you will find multiple social workers who enhance your professional growth.

» **PASS IT ON**

Having and serving as a mentor need not be exclusive; as your career progresses, you may want to consider becoming a mentor to another social worker. Not only does mentoring promote the social work profession—a mandate of the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2008)—but it also supports social work retention, an overwhelmingly popular imperative of the 2010 Social Work Congress (NASW, 2010). Check with your local NASW chapter or alumni network about volunteer mentoring opportunities. If no mentoring program exists in your area, consider creating one, or just take the time to nurture a supportive relationship with a less experienced social worker or a colleague in transition. When you do, you'll realize how much your own mentors have taught you.

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