

Managers in social work – on becoming a manager and learning to lead

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In Sweden, as in many other countries, most social work managers are drawn from the ranks of practitioners, and many are promoted on basis of their skills as social workers. There are no established paths of management training for these managers, and few schools of social work offer comprehensive postgraduate education in management/administration. In this paper, I intend to discuss how managers in the Swedish personal social services (PSS) describe their promotion to management positions, whether they have received post-qualifying training, their opinions on this training and how they value other ways of gaining managerial competences. The managers in focus are those who have the everyday responsibility for child protection, social assistance and treatment of substance abusers within the PSS in Sweden. The empirical material consists of (a) qualitative interviews with 24 managers in six Swedish municipalities and (b) questionnaires distributed to a random selection of 900 managers around Sweden. The results from the survey indicate that most managers are experienced social workers. Several interviewed managers describe that they have attained managerial positions as a result of circumstance rather than as a consequence of an active choice. In-service training (organised/paid for by the local government administration) is provided for a majority of the managers. Often, the in-service training focuses on generic leadership skills and is delivered by private management consultants. Although the majority of managers have undertaken in-service training, they tend to prefer other, practice oriented, sources of knowledge for attaining managerial competences (e.g. experience and skills gained through colleagues/superiors). This will be discussed in relation to the character of the in-service training, the lack of academic alternatives and the knowledge base of social work.