

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL SERVICES TEAM INTEGRATION AND HEALTH

1. *Meet Every Day*

Many working teams in the social services fields spend time and money on so-called bonding activities (such as whitewater rafting) designed to help people become more familiar with each other. Almost universally, such practices do not work: they are superficial, brief, and contrived. Conversely, effective team integration derives from the same kinds of experiences as those that contribute to good family and community relationships: time spent together every day. Ideally, the team should meet at the beginning of every day for a meeting of about fifteen minutes. This is a time to hear about personal or professional items that may impact upon the day, to hear how people are doing generally, and simply to chat. It is extraordinarily difficult for a team to work well if a daily meeting is not held.

2. *Meet Once Every Season, and Once Per Year*

Longer meetings, such as planning sessions (one day) and retreats (two or three days) are also essential. We all spend too much time putting out fires in daily work to think about the big picture, but it's in the big picture that our vision of our work will eventually manifest. Without a sense of that vision and how it is unfolding, the work becomes drudgery.

3. *Place Boundaries around the Work*

In any social service setting, social service workers (who typically have poor boundaries anyway) face the occupational hazard that the work begins to find its way into all the areas it does not belong. This is why the typical career-life of a social service worker in a given position is less than five years. Burnout happens (see next item). The best way to avoid this is to create clear and strong boundaries in the work (energetic reinforcement, for example: see item 6). Create set hours for time with students/clients and stick to them. The sign on your door should say when you are in and when you are not. Fight for your space and time. Otherwise, it will be taken from you.

4. *Avoid Burnout*

Expect some type of burnout every three to five years. It's simply part of the territory of working with emotional situations (especially with children). Pay attention to the warning signs – compassion fatigue, cynicism, emotional shutdown, erosion of boundaries, health problems, guilt, depression – and try to catch them early, when there is still time to take a break. Know when you need a rest. If you miss the signs, you will damage yourself and others (obviously). Consider burnout as an occupational stage, not as a disability. Simply catch it early (transforming it from a potentially crippling experience into a relaxing break).

5. *Debrief*

In any context where emotional intensity is the norm, daily debriefing is a minimum requirement for all staff. You need to be able to go into the office of a colleague, shut the door, and talk for a few minutes about what has just happened. You also need to be able to call dependable mentors and peers (paid or otherwise) who will give you supportive and ethical feedback and advice. Without such support, you simply cannot preserve both your empathy and your presence.

6. *Practice Energetic Reinforcement*

Depending on your point of view about the nature of human interaction, you may or not believe in the energy system. But even if you do not subscribe to a model of energetic interaction, you are certainly familiar with the psychology of body language, boundaries, and personal space. Use a practice (before you meet with challenging students/clients, for example) that gives you the sense of being protected from emotional or energetic material you do not wish to absorb.

7. *Participate in Health Practices*

In the world of social services, counseling and education, successful teams have a few things in common (such as the previous items). Among the commonalities is commitment, as a group and individually, to some type of health and wellness practice (yoga, Tai Chi, running, gardening, whatever). The activity itself matters little; what's important is the intent to share and deepen team relationships by way of mutual activity.

8. *Train Together*

In the social services, psychology, and counseling arenas, things change quickly (and with many disagreements). As such, ongoing professional development is an absolutely essential requirement for professionalism. Team members who train together assist the team in two ways: personally, by way of enhanced skills and contributions; and synergistically, by way of deepened relationships.

9. *Avoid the Dynamic of the Unresolved*

The consistent poison in most organizations involves unresolved team dynamics, historical conflicts that have gained weight by repeated telling, small squabbles that fester into serious interpersonal difficulties. The most effective way to diminish your sense of purpose and to compromise your professional direction is to become involved in such scenarios, which typically do not end and which routinely fracture organizations. It's important to know when to fight, and when to stop fighting. Resolve things if you can; but if you cannot, move on from the issue.

10. *Fight the "Corrosion of Character"*

For many reasons (historical, economic, cultural), modern business practices have the tendency to erode traditional work values such as loyalty, commitment, and team cohesion. Large organizations have great difficulty resisting this corrosion of character (a phrase from the sociologist Richard Sennett), but individual teams can make different choices: at the local level, where a high degree of daily autonomy exists. The skills for management and team integration at the local level are soft skills - effective communication and conflict resolution, mostly - and should be taught to every team member.