

as a whole. Social work managers in human service organizations are often stereotyped as conservative and unwilling to "rock the boat." However, research has demonstrated that this perception is no longer valid, if it ever was. It was found that higher-level "administrators devote more time to advocacy and are more politically active than other social workers."¹⁶

Promoting a climate of client advocacy within an organization also entails helping others to fulfill their professional obligations as advocates for change. Being a good role model goes a long way, but it may not be enough. Specific actions often can be taken. Managers may be able to help to write client advocacy expectations into staff members' job descriptions and develop personnel policies to protect staff members who advocate for change. They may also be able to provide continuing education on advocacy methods for staff members to teach them, for example, which methods are most effective and what legal protections are available to them.

Case Example

Amber was a supervisor in a large daycare center that employed several social workers. One of the social workers who she supervised, Jerome, was accused of sexually abusing a four-year-old girl who was a client at the center. His accuser, the child's parent, demanded an investigation. The local child-protection unit of the Department of Social Services thoroughly investigated the complaint, concluded that there was no indication that abuse had occurred, and closed the case as unfounded. No criminal charges were filed. Jerome, who had been suspended from work until he was cleared of charges, was reinstated. The director of the organization called him in and expressed her delight that Jerome, who was regarded as an excellent worker, had been found not guilty of the charges. She assured him of her complete confidence in him. Jerome returned to his job and again demonstrated the competence and dedication that he had shown in his previous work.

A year later, Jerome's former wife sued for full custody of their three-year-old daughter. In a deposition, she charged that Jerome had "inappropriately fondled" the child during a recent visit and that she suspected that he had been sexually abusing her in the past. She also initiated criminal charges against him that were reported in a local newspaper. The chairman of the board of directors, who knew about

the previous charge, called the executive director at 7:00 AM on a Saturday. The executive director immediately called Amber and demanded that she meet with Jerome at 9:00 the following Monday morning to learn more about the situation. Despite the fact that the newspaper notice gave few details and did not mention Jerome's place of employment, the executive director was fearful of a telephone call from a parent and wanted to have all available information to be able to respond to inquiries.

Amber was very anxious as she anticipated her meeting with Jerome. The meeting did not go well. Jerome unequivocally denied any wrongdoing. He had a ready explanation for his former wife's charges: His wife's sister had recently been involved in a child custody battle and had gained custody of her children after threatening to charge her husband with sexual abuse. He explained that his former wife, who had threatened to "get" him anyway, was simply trying a tactic that had worked well for her sister.

Amber felt herself getting annoyed with Jerome's seeming lack of concern about the charges. She didn't seem to be able to get him to understand the potential harm that the allegations might cause the center. He remarked that he felt that Amber was "making a big deal over nothing." He demanded, "So, what do you expect me to do?" Amber replied, "Perhaps you

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Case Example

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should consider resigning. If the executive director asks for your resignation, I certainly cannot support you." Jerome left and slammed the door. Later, the executive director expressed satisfaction with the way that Amber had handled the matter.

Jerome tendered his resignation. But before he left, he gave the other staff members his explanation of his wife's charges and also told them that Amber had requested his resignation. Three staff members came to see Amber to request that she ask Jerome to reconsider. She stated simply that she could not discuss a personnel matter with them.

On his last day on the job, Jerome came in for his exit interview. He told Amber that he had generally been pleased with his job at the center and with her as his supervisor. But he felt he had not been treated fairly when his wife's charges were made public. In his opinion, Amber should have supported him since "people are considered innocent until proven guilty."

By this time, Amber was no longer angry with Jerome. She told him that she personally believed that he was innocent, as did the executive director and other staff members. But as a manager, she had to consider the best interests of the center, which, she feared, could be destroyed by charges of sexual abuse. Jerome just looked disgusted and shook his head. He glared at her, and walked out. Amber believed that the whole messy business was over. It was not.

Within the next three weeks, the other two men on the staff resigned. In their exit interviews, they told Amber that the job just was "not worth the risk." They knew that, as males, they were particularly vulnerable to reputation-destroying charges of child abuse. But prior to Jerome's problems, they had believed that, if charged, the organization would come to their defense and support. They no longer believed this. They stated that they could not work for a leader who would not serve as their advocate when needed.

The departure of the three men and the general animosity of the remaining staff made Amber's

job very difficult. She hired two new social workers (both female; no males applied) but both the two new employees quickly adopted the attitude toward Amber that the others exhibited. She suspected that they had been "oriented" by Megan, the staff member who had been most openly supportive of Jerome.

Amber held a special meeting of her staff to discuss morale problems. She stated that she felt that she owed them an explanation for her actions. She told them that, while she could not reveal the specifics of their conversations, she believed that Jerome's resignation was best for the center. Besides, she emphasized, she had not asked for his resignation; it had been his decision. Megan sarcastically replied, "Obviously, Jerome remembered your conversation a little differently."

The meeting accomplished little. If anything, the other staff members were even angrier. When three additional months passed and she began to feel even more isolated from the group, Amber left to take another job. The staff clearly no longer trusted her and she felt that her ability to be an effective supervisor had been irreparably damaged.

Discussion Questions

1. Was Amber's suggestion that Jerome consider resigning appropriate? Why or why not?
2. What were Amber's ethical obligations to Jerome, to her organization, and to the organization's clients?
3. How did meeting her ethical obligations produce an ethical conflict for Amber?
4. Were the other staff members justified in reacting to Amber's handling of the situation the way they did? Why or why not?
5. What might have been a better way for Amber to handle her second meeting with Jerome?
6. What characteristics of a healthy organizational climate were damaged by the way that the situation was handled?