

Why I Founded The National Network for Social Work Managers

By Robert T. Maslyn, CSWM

Founder, The National Network for Social Work Managers © June 2002

I founded The National Network for Social Work Managers in 1985 when I convened a group of about 40 Social Work Managers in a Chicago hotel and declared:

“The Network for Social Work Managers hereby exists. If any of you are here to debate whether or not a network should or shouldn’t exist, that is not the purpose of this meeting -- that would be the meeting across the hall. The Network exists because, in the true spirit of Washington D.C. advocacy, I have named it, created a letterhead for it and secured a post office address for it. Therefore, it exists. The purpose of this meeting is to determine how best to proceed and grow it.”

Someone in the group (I believe it was Florida’s Jim Mooney) stood up and offered, “And we need to pay dues; I’ll start, here’s \$5.”

I subsequently designed The Network logo, initiated the nonprofit incorporation of The Network in Virginia (and still get the bill for the annual fee), served as the first President, created the ***Social Work Executive*** newsletter, created ***The Exemplars: The National Management Excellence Awards for Social Work Executives and Managers***, the ***socialworkmanager.org*** website, and spent an inordinate amount of time recruiting and building the new organization. While many people made critical contributions along the way and merit recognition, I am clear about one thing: if I had not organized The Network, it would not have existed.

That was 17 years ago and in reviewing the historical records, I find that it is less clear why I founded The Network.

Many key players were critical and each brought their own reasons for supporting the concept of The Network.

Paul Keys emerged as a soul mate in The Network’s creation because it was his management workshops that validated the idea. Hal Benson, as our first Executive Director, came forward to sustain our early conferences. Judy Brotman, as the first full-time Executive Director, arrived at just the right time to take the Network beyond infancy. Len Stern provided not just a boardroom for our Board but also very wise counsel. Len Hirsch taught us well about the politics of ethics and the ethics of politics, and that management by definition was also political.

Felice Perlmutter, as the teacher she is, succeeded in moving many a direct service social worker into management through Network workshops. Chauncey Alexander gave

meaning to our Lifetime Achievement Award by lending his name to the Award but also extended savvy to our Board through his strategic prowess. John Paul Peter and KidsPeace sustained funding and also provided marketing leadership. Mutual of America's leaders over the years have supported the Network through thick and thin, true to their allegiance to the public service professional. And there are many others to name. Indeed, I would be remiss not to mention my own wife, Krista, who at the time, was a newly-minted MSW who had joined me at that Chicago meeting and who today, as a supervisor in child abuse and neglect for the City of Alexandria, Virginia, is a Social Work Manager herself.

But what prompted me to found The Network? Why the name "network" and "social work management" instead of "association" or "social work administration"? Why wasn't it a part of NASW? Why Bob Maslyn as opposed to anyone else?

Six Compelling Imperatives for the Founding

In 1985, I founded The National Network for Social Work Managers, based on six compelling imperatives, under the tagline "Breaking New Ground." As Social Work Managers:

- 1. We needed our own professional home.** No professional association existed that addressed the needs of Social Work Managers. There was no professional home to cultivate the people and nurture the knowledge base of Social Work Management.
 - a.** Yes, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) could have been that home, but despite repeated attempts to do so over many years, the message was always the same: Social Work Management was not a priority. In a wider sense, the schools of social work generally mirrored the disinterest, at best venturing into social work administration or policy.
 - b.** What we wanted was Social Work Management, embracing all the leadership ideas that "manager" and "executive" connoted, much more than the limited vision of "administrivia," and paper-clip counting that "administration" seemed to infer, and competitive to MBAs and other disciplines who acted like they owned the word "management." Yet we also found that the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and other such associations, while embracing "management" more than NASW did, were disinterested in the "social work" aspect.
 - c.** The professional "home" we needed had to be more a network than a traditional association. We were mindful that Social Work Managers, if you will, "lived" in many professional associations, predicated on the nature of the work they did: from aging to children's associations, from welfare groups to entrepreneurial ventures, from health institutions to consulting firms. We found that many seemed to leave NASW and make

other professional choices of associations. We did not want to compete with such choices but be complementary to such choices. Indeed, we encouraged Social Work Managers to retain their memberships in such bodies and view the Network as their complementary professional home that connects it altogether in a bigger picture, that enables them to reach beyond their everyday concerns to connect with other Social Work Managers who share the same fundamental values but who practice in many areas. A good professional home, like any home, would refresh their professional soul.

2. **We needed to cultivate a leadership corps that networked with each other and elevated social work values into management decision-making.** Human services in general continued to be under attack as wasteful, un-businesslike, bureaucratic, and unresponsive to an overtaxed and exasperated public. Courts and elected officials often inserted themselves into the vacuum of Social Work Management and, for better or worse, set strategic directions based on values not necessarily rooted in social work values or public service management. We needed to create a network that didn't overly focus on internal association concerns but primarily enabled networking to occur, to better position Social Work Managers into future public leadership positions. We had to make Social Work Managers the appointed or elected leaders in Federal Agencies, in State Agencies, in cities, counties, towns, in national professional voluntary and nonprofit associations, in for-profit ventures and consultancies, and in every leadership opportunity feasible that may impact social policy. No such leadership corps existed, except erratically and informally. We could do better.
3. **We had to insert "Social Work Manager" and "Social Work Management" into the public conversation.** Typically, when a degreed social worker moved into a management position, the common perception was that the social worker "left" social work and "entered" management, and therefore was no longer a social worker. Some in social work and in other professions viewed the term "Social Work Manager" as an oxymoron and were hostile to it. That had to change. The idea that social workers can and do manage and do it well had to be promoted based on demonstrable results on the record. We had to honor and publicly recognize our best, reveal our standards, and coach our own to exceed those standards.
4. **We had to make the case that "Social Work Management" mattered in managing public social programs well.** Some in management commonly believed in "neutral competence," such that a generically educated manager could manage anything, without having any prior programmatic knowledge. We believed that the humanistic underpinnings of social work values animated our management style and direction, and that creates effective results. We believed that it mattered if a Social Work Manager was the leader of a public social program versus a leader from any another discipline. The case for that belief

had to be made more visible to the public and the public agenda.

5. **We had to connect social work, management and political science as allied skills and value sets.** The myth that social workers are professionals and professionals do not engage in political management had to end. This is not so much about partisan politics as it is about the political arts as an inherent element in the public arena. Social Work Management embraces social work, management and political science as allied skills and value sets; the blending of all three inspires us to make a difference in social programs. Think Jane Addams and you think Social Work Manager.
6. **We needed to structure a network so we could connect the many Social Work Managers who had ventured beyond "traditional" social work and develop a cross-boundary synergy.** We sensed a network structure might work best because:
 - a. We found many Social Work Managers, as they moved through their professional life, tended more and more to move beyond "traditional" social work, whether by moving up the organization beyond direct service or by moving beyond traditional human service nonprofits and public agencies. Instead of viewing Social Work Managers as balkanized and scattered across many fields of practice, we preferred to view the situation as a natural evolution of social work, and our professional opportunity was to structure linkage across an as-yet unconnected network of associations. This professional home could best work as a network, which, at its zenith could honeycomb across interconnections of public, private and voluntary sectors of professional life. As such, it could be a potent force for its members and for society. The distributed nature of the Internet, blended with such tools as the web, email and other rapid and easy communication devices, have only underscored this opportunity.
 - b. If we succeeded in attracting the most senior of Social Work Executives (mindful that we wanted to attract the full range of Social Work Managers, not just those at the top), then we would be dealing with an Executive who was extremely busy and preoccupied with day-to-day stressors. We were competing for that person's time and attention, of which the person perceived she or he had little to spare. We had to offer something that person got from no other source. We thought that something was the core values of why the person decided to enter social work in the first place, understood by colleagues who shared similar stressors. A network structure might best meet our challenge of creating cohesion among such Executives.

In sum, all six imperatives might propel the fledgling Network to "break new ground," to move beyond creating yet another typical professional association, indeed, to be more than what NASW had chosen to be, having bypassed the management mantle, and to

become a Network that could rapidly respond to setting national priorities as well as community priorities.

The Profession's Struggle To Own Management

So for those six reasons, I worked with so many fine professionals in founding the Network. But the story is not done yet, because the founding history of The Network is, in reality, a subset of a longer and larger struggle of Social Work Managers, which pre-dates the Network, to get the profession of social work to embrace management as an inherent part of social work, not apart from it.

I am but a bit player in the pantheon of other social work managers who have fought that struggle. The broader history of that struggle is one that needs re-telling, and stalwarts such as Paul Keys, Leonard Hirsch, Chauncey Alexander, Mark Battle, Margaret Gibelman, Sy Slavin, Rino Patti, Leon Ginsberg, Felice Perlmutter, and many others can do the telling better than I. It is critical that one understands that The Network stands on that heritage that preceded its founding.

A Personal Journey to The Network

The “Why Bob Maslyn” question illustrates the six imperatives that led to the founding of the Network. So, permit me to recount my personal story.

In 1976, I decided to seek a graduate degree in social work from Syracuse University. At the time, I worked for a tri-county, rural drug and alcohol program in Pennsylvania. I was the program’s second employee and had the seemingly rare opportunity to build a “continuum of care” program from prevention to treatment to aftercare, from the ground up. In the first year, before there was such tools as email messages, instant messaging or cell phones, I was the drug and alcohol hotline, all the time, everywhere I was: in the office, in my car (car phone), and wherever I walked (pager). I had a terrific experience, immersed in direct service, clinical practice, residential care, and prevention but also policy as we dealt with the local, state and federal governments.

I came to notice that at the boardroom table, where policy (read: political) decisions were made, there was rarely anyone at the table who had worked on the frontlines, yet I felt a board needed such an informed board membership who would voice frontline issues in a policy context. I wanted to become that voice.

I also yearned to buttress my frontline experience with social work theory: how human services were supposed to work and why, and how the systems all fit together (or not) and why, and how to best manage and organize.

So my path took me to the MSW program at the Syracuse University School of Social Work, where I quickly decided to focus on social policy and community organization, coached by the great community organizer on the faculty, Neal Bellos. But I had a hunger for more than what the School of Social Work offered, and so I and three of my

social work student colleagues decided to enroll in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at the same time, and pursue an MSW and a Masters in Public Administration in parallel, even though there was no formal dual or joint degree between the two schools. The MSW required 60 credit hours and the MPA required 40 credit hours.

But I wasn't done yet raiding what I felt was an academic candy store. I also enlisted in the School of Social Work's Certificate in Health Studies and also enlisted in the University's All-University Gerontology Center, for a Certificate in Aging. I found all the parts – social work curriculum, public administration courses, the health studies and the multi-disciplinary aging program – synergistic beyond what any one part could seem to imagine.

At graduation, in spring 1978, I earned an MSW, an MPA, and the two certificates, plus a lesson in how to manage the academic bureaucracy to grant all of those credentials when it had no formal program for sanctioning the collection as a whole.

Spring 1978 also marked the mid-term of President Jimmy Carter and he had fulfilled a campaign promise made in 1976 that he would create the Presidential Management Intern (PMI) Program, to cultivate the future federal managers. The Maxwell School nominated me for the Program, after a rigorous internal competition, and, after another rigorous competition run by the government, I became one of 5 Syracuse finalists to join the charter class of 250 Presidential Management Interns in July 1978.

The PMI Program opened the door to a position in the Office of the Secretary of the-then Department of Health, Education and Welfare, seemingly the ideal position to use the superb blend of social work and public administration in my background.

At Syracuse, I found that I traveled from one world to another, from social work to public administration, and neither world seemed much aware of the other:

Social Work gave me community organization but Public Administration gave me organizational development;

Public Administration focused heavily on national and state government, barely noting local government, while Social Work celebrated nonprofits and voluntary associations, barely noting government at all;

Public Administration highlighted budgeting yet ignored the biggest chunk of the federal budget: welfare programs, while Social Work focused on grants, rarely engaging in local government budgeting;

And the dichotomy seemed to extend to their professional associations as well, namely, NASW and ASPA, even though both shared a strong public service ethic.

In moving to Washington, D.C. to join the federal government, I became active in both NASW and ASPA. I became so active that I held two chapter presidencies at the same time: President of ASPA's Northern Virginia Chapter and President of NASW's Metro

Washington DC Chapter, and later I served at the national level in both national associations.

For different reasons, neither professional association was prepared, in my view, to fully embrace what I sensed was the best of both professions: Social Work Management. Chaucey Alexander as NASW Executive Director and later Mark Battle fought the good fights to re-structure NASW to elevate management but did not succeed.

I concluded that one had to venture outside the formal structure of existing professional associations to create a new national professional organization to address the interests of Social Work Managers, and perhaps I had the right mix of background and experience to articulate its creation, or perhaps not.

Nonetheless, I began contacting soul mates such as Paul Keys, and he contacted others, and the word passed from one to another to another, until I brought the first meeting to order in a Chicago hotel in 1985, to "break new ground."