

Leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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presenting your work to others

Possessing effective presentation skills is an essential ingredient for leadership. Although few receive formal public speaking training in their academic careers, social workers are well educated about the importance of words to motivate clients, advocate for communities and create social change (Mankita, 2009).

Throughout their careers, social workers have opportunities to present their expertise at professional symposia and conferences. Being comfortable and proficient in presenting your work to others enhances your career—and builds your leadership skills portfolio. It also advances the social work profession as a whole. Some basic pointers for effective presentations include:

- » **FIND PRESENTATION OPPORTUNITIES**
Look for opportunities—both internal and external—to hone your presentation skills. In partnership with your mentor, plan and implement an in-service training on a relevant topic for staff within your organization. Professional meetings and symposia, such as NASW state chapter conferences, are excellent opportunities to improve your presentation skills and showcase your area of expertise (NASW, 2008).

- » **CONNECT WITH A MENTOR**
Find an experienced colleague within your organization who can serve as your presentation mentor—someone with public speaking experience who is willing to provide honest and constructive advice on your presentations and your delivery. Use your mentor to vet opportunities and to rehearse your presentations.

- » **SUBMIT CONFERENCE PRESENTATION ABSTRACTS**
In most cases, you need to “apply” i.e., submit an abstract, in order to present at a professional conference. Each conference will have its own abstract submission guidelines, which should be followed carefully. Generally, an abstract is no more than 350 words, written in



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paragraph form. If you are presenting a research paper, your abstract provides a summary of your key concepts, including theoretical concepts, major hypotheses, and conclusions reached (NASW Press, 2011). A comprehensive but concise abstract is important because this description of your presentation is often what is printed in the conference program. Attendees frequently decide whether to attend your presentation based on the quality of your abstract.

» **PREPARE**

Allow sufficient time and attention to create a quality presentation. You should only present on topics that interest you and that you know well. Begin by writing out your speech, and then edit your written text into a presentation that uses simple words and shorter sentences. When possible, use humor, personal stories and conversational language—these tactics will be easier for you to remember and will keep your audience engaged. If you are presenting a research paper, select only the highlights of your research to include in your presentation. Consider your presentation “an advertisement” for your paper (Wineberg, 2004).

» **START AND END STRONG**

As you develop your presentation, keep in mind that the beginning and ending matter the most. Start your presentation with an interesting quote, a provocative piece of data or a compelling news headline—something powerful that will get the audience’s attention immediately (Toastmasters, 2011). Then find a way to bring your talk to an inspiring conclusion—refrain from saying, “more research is needed” (Wineberg, 2004). Try not to end your presentation with questions and answers. If you build a Q and A component into your presentation, follow it with a summary of your key points, a memorable quote or a call to action.

» **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

Practice your presentation repeatedly, preferably in front of your mentor. Rehearse out loud with your PowerPoint slides and any other equipment or props you plan on using. Revise your

presentation as necessary. Work to control the use of filler words (“umm”, “uh”); pause and take a breath instead (Toastmasters, 2011). Practice with a timer and have a plan for shortening your presentation, should something unexpected occur. Toastmasters (2011) suggests that visualization is also helpful in the rehearsal process. Visualize yourself giving your presentation, with your voice loud, clear and confident. Visualize the audience clapping. This will boost your confidence. Finally, speak with passion in your voice. The more passionate you are about your topic, the more likely the audience will embrace your message.

» **PRESENT WITH CONFIDENCE**

For both novice and veteran speakers, feelings of nervousness prior to presenting are natural. The following are proven tips on how to overcome your fear and give a strong delivery (Toastmasters, 2011; Wineberg, 2004):

- » **Know the room.** Arrive early, walk around the speaking area and practice using the microphone and any visual aids.
- » **Know your audience.** Greet some of the audience members as they arrive. It’s easier to speak to a group of acquaintances than to strangers.
- » **Relax.** Begin by addressing the audience. It buys you time and calms your nerves. Pause, smile and count to three before saying anything. (“One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand. Pause. Begin.) Transform nervous energy into enthusiasm.
- » **Look at your audience.** Find a single person in the audience and make eye contact with him or her. Stay with that person long enough to deliver a full sentence or complete thought. If you take responsibility for the audience’s understanding of your message, you will soon forget your sweaty palms and knocking knees.
- » **Speak directly into the microphone.**
- » **Focus** your attention away from your own anxieties and concentrate on your message and your audience.
- » **Don’t apologize** for any nervousness

or problem—the audience will likely never notice it.

- › **Realize that people want you to succeed.** Audiences want you to be interesting, stimulating, informative and entertaining. They're rooting for you.

Few people are born natural orators. Feeling comfortable making presentations is an acquired skill, and leaders in all fields, including social work, must master this skill through experience. Also, experience will build your confidence, which is the key to powerful presentations.

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RESOURCES

Toastmasters International: Toastmasters is an international network of community-based public speaking clubs, in which participants hone their speaking and leadership skills, in a safe and friendly environment. www.toastmasters.org/

Advanced Public Speaking Institute: APSI provides articles and other resources for public speaking improvement. www.public-speaking.org/index.htm

Using PowerPoint

Appropriate use of PowerPoint is critical for public presentations. While some argue that PowerPoint is flawed—e.g, its use of bulleted lists encourages complex ideas to be distilled into overly simplistic thinking (Tufte, 2003)—it remains the standard visual aid for presentations. The following are tips for effective PowerPoint use, compiled from presentation experts (APHA, 2011; Toastmasters, 2011; Wineberg, 2004):

- Make the text large—no slides with print less than 32-point type
- Don't read your slides to the audience. The only exception is a direct quote
- Choose colors that make the text easy to read – use boldface type
- Use phrases or bullet points, not full sentences
- Avoid charts and diagrams that are hard to see
- Each slide should present one subject or idea; busy slides are confusing to your audience
- Be mindful that your audience may include people with seeing, hearing, and cognitive disabilities, so all visuals (words, charts and diagrams) need to be described verbally. Descriptions of visuals not only help people with disabilities, they are also appreciated by people seated at a distance from the speaker