

A Solution-Focused Leadership Model: Examining
Perceptions of Effective Counselor Leadership

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Abstract

As school leaders, counselors are in a unique position to form collaborative partnerships with principals and faculty while utilizing techniques that improve morale, school climate, and student development. In this qualitative study, school counselors, teachers, and principals were asked to reflect on counseling leadership styles perceived as effective.

Themes emerged suggesting the following leadership paradigms: collaboration between school counselors, principals, and teachers; the implementation of solution- focused techniques; and a need for school counseling program improvements.

Recommendations and procedures for implementing a new leadership model, solution- focused leadership, are included as based on this qualitative data.

A Solution-Focused Leadership Model: Examining Perceptions of Effective Counselor Leadership

School counselors are called to improve the academic domain for all students as well as advocate for systemic change through effective leadership. *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association, 2003) states that “school counselors build effective teams by encouraging genuine collaboration among all school staff to work toward the common goals of equity, access and academic success for every student” (p. 25). Further, *The ASCA National Model* (American School Counselor Association, 2005) and current literature stress the importance of creating partnerships with school principals if students are to experience success (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Walker, 2006). As school leaders, school counselors are in excellent positions to promote this positive collaborative environment using solution-focused methods. A discussion of these solution-focused techniques follows such that an understanding of the premise can be linked with qualitative themes and the accompanying model later in this article.

Background of Solution-Focused Strategies and Leadership

Solution-focused techniques are based on de Shazer’s (1988) theoretical counseling model. The theory is based on exploring and amplifying strengths and successes rather than focusing on problems. Individuals then choose to change behaviors based on previous successes (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Several solution-focused techniques can be applied to school based leadership (Metcalf, 1995). Techniques such as complimenting are used to build upon existing strengths and to change a problem focus to one consisting of solutions (Dejong & Berg, 2002) while

finding exceptions is a strategy used to enable individuals to see change as a possibility based on past success (de Shazer, 1988; Dejong & Berg, 2002). In individual counseling, a person might gain courage to try new behaviors after being told they seem persistent and strong (complimenting). Next, the individual is asked to describe times when things have gone well (finding exceptions). In the systemic context, these techniques can be applied to faculty, staff, and administrators, thus changing the entire system (Metcalf, 1995). The result may be a new school vision that is more open to changes in the school counseling program while also positively altering school climate and academic programs.

Rationale for Collaborative Efforts

While school counselors can implement solution-focused leadership unilaterally, (Metcalf, 1995), collaborative partnerships between counselors and principals can be even more effective. Collaboration has been defined as direct interaction between at least two equal partners who work voluntarily toward a common goal (Friend & Cook, 1996). The *ASCA National Model* (2003) states that school counselors work as leaders, advocates, and collaborators to “influence system-wide changes and implement school reforms” (p.24). This is particularly important since organizations must either constantly change to meet accountability standards or face stagnation (Lewis, Lewis, Packard, & Souflee, 2001; Scholtes, 1998). Collaborating with principals means more power to make these needed changes and foster a better sense of trust and community between stakeholders (Devoss & Andrews, 2006).

School counselors and principals who agree on school and consequently, counseling program priorities empower staff to attain desired outcomes for students

(American School Counselor Association, 2005). Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, and Kleiner (1994) state that the school consists of three interconnected subsystems: the school, classroom, and community/home. Change occurring within one subsystem can positively influence happenings within the entire system. As a result, this study sought to understand perceptions of leadership styles that promoted positive morale, school climate, and student academic, emotional/social and career development.

Rationale for Study

Although several leadership models have been described in the literature, little has been written describing perceptions of school faculty with regard to effective counseling leadership practices. A review of literature over the last 20 years via ERIC and EBSCO databases revealed only nine articles that discussed school counselors, principals and leadership (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Bemak, 2002; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Kaplan, 1995; Kentucky State Dept. of Education, 2004; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Rose & Cheney, 2005; Solomon, 1988; Walker, 2006). Few of these articles addressed specific techniques or models designed to create better school climate and therefore, student development. Little has been written to address specific leadership interventions desired and perceived as effective by teachers, school counselors, and principals. This qualitative research project allowed these educators to voice what strategies have been helpful, challenging, and/or supportive with regard to school leadership. The purpose of this research was to learn about desired leadership techniques as perceived by school counselors, principals, and teachers and use the data to create a leadership model within that system.

Methods

Participants

Participants included four school counselors, two school principals, and six teachers working in two middle schools in the panhandle of Texas. The four school counselors consisted of two Anglo females, one Anglo male, and one Hispanic female ranging in age from 27 to 52. The school principals were Anglo males ranging in age from 35 to 51 and the teachers consisted of five Anglo females and one Hispanic male ranging in age from 24 to 35. Each participant had between one and four years of experience in their current position with the average years of experience being three.

The participants worked in small school districts containing less than 5000 students. Participating school counselors worked in the same school with one other counseling professional and principals served as the only person of that role. Numerous teachers served alongside the participants from each building. The middle school enrollments were 551 and 650 students with 20 and 55 % receiving free or reduced lunch. Participating teachers taught average class sizes of 30 while school counseling caseloads were between 276 and 325 students.

Procedures

Participants from two middle schools were selected to participate in the study during the spring of 2007. After consenting to participate, each subject was asked to write responses to the following structured questions:

- 1) Tell me about school counselors, school principals and leadership in your school.
- 2) What memories come to mind when you think of leadership?
- 3) What does effective leadership look like to you?

Two weeks after the initial responses were collected, participants were given a letter asking them to review personal responses and to state any information they might have overlooked. Finally, participants were asked to respond to each prompt through journaling over the next four weeks. Responses were sent via email to the researchers (two Anglo female professors employed in an education department within a university setting). Individual responses were collected (as opposed to group interviews) to ensure that participants were allowed freedom to state unbiased perceptions without undue influence or anxiety (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

First, a transcript consisting of 44 typed pages containing verbatim text from each participant was compiled. Two researchers read the transcript independently to gain an overall understanding of the data (Cohen, Zahn, & Steeves, 2000). This transcript was then reviewed and analyzed numerous times (as per the constant comparison method; Charmaz, 1983) and both researchers unanimously identified several initial themes related to the following question: What experiences (as related to school counseling leadership) have personal meaning to faculty employed in a middle school? Only data related to school counseling leadership was included in this study.

Once data related to school counseling leadership was agreed upon by both researchers, thematic analysis was used to unanimously uncover sub-themes (Patton, 2002). Word processing allowed researchers to sort each theme and sub-theme into folders containing relevant participant quotations. Specifically, the researchers used Microsoft Word to highlight (using various color coding), sort and paste verbatim text into separate folders created as themes and sub-themes emerged. This method allowed

researchers to maintain the original transcript yet also sort specific quotations into themes as applicable. Each folder and the original transcript were then viewed individually by each researcher. Next, the researchers convened to confirm themes and content of language. Once both researchers believed no new information was being observed, unanimous agreement of themes and sub-themes resulted.

An analysis of the data revealed three sub-themes: collaboration between school counselors and/or principals and teachers (endorsed by all participants), leadership based on a positive focus (endorsed by five teachers, all counselors, and all principals), and the need to improve school counseling programs (endorsed by all participants). As suggested by Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) and Walker (2006), all participants believed that counselors and principals possess collaborative power to create positive changes within the system and support a better academic climate for students. All participants valued school counselors who worked collaboratively with administrators and/or teachers to advocate for students, yet voiced a need to improve counseling programs through effective leadership. A teacher remarked, "I remember when she (school counselor) helped a homeless student get some new clothes. This kid's behavior was so much better afterwards. I wish she had the time and resources to help more of them. When they behave better, I can actually teach." All participants also believed in a connection between positive school counseling leadership, faculty morale, and student success.

Positive leadership. Eleven of the participants believed that a positive mindset and encouraging interactions between school counselors and other faculty created better morale and a healthier school environment. These participants believed that an

atmosphere of competence was created when school administrators and counselors focused on teacher and student success, as suggested by Metcalf (1995). It was further stated that through isomorphism this non-punitive climate benefited students. A teacher stated, "I remember a school counselor who used to walk in the building and point out everything teachers did well. I would have done anything this counselor asked. I respected her so much. The building climate was great when she was here. It didn't take long before the principal, and, well, all of us were doing it. I think I was more patient with students that year." A school counselor wrote, "Counselors are effective leaders when they remind others that by supporting each other, we support the students. I refuse to become a negative influence and in fact, I feel better when I advocate for those who need help." An administrator remarked, "She (school counselor) truly cares about everyone in the building. It bleeds off onto the children." This supports Buckingham and Coffman's (1999) assertion that effective leaders build upon assets rather than trying to correct flaws. Dubrin (2001) emphasized this point by asserting that effective leaders inspire others by recognizing talents, building enthusiasm, offering emotional support and encouragement; as well as by advocating and becoming a role model for causes and values that promote the common good.

The perception that focusing on strengths helped create a positive environment gave credence to de Shazer's (1988) solution-focused theory. As one school administrator said, "My counselor is very good at letting everyone know they are doing a good job and keeping up morale." A counselor stated, "I make sure I point out what is already working when we are making school decisions. There is no need to reinvent the wheel when something is already working." One participating teacher remarked, "I like

to see what is working on other campuses” (before implementing changes). This supports de Shazer’s (1988) contention that focusing on exceptions to problems can point out effective strategies.

Collaboration between counselors, principals, and teachers. Effective teamwork was viewed as a crucial element in school and student success. Most participants (92%) stated that effective leadership was initially based on collaboration between principals and school counselors. A teacher stated, “My principal listens to the school counselor. I don’t know what we’d do without her voice of reason and influence.” Another teacher remarked, “He (administrator) meets with our school counselor almost every day. It helps because he may not have time to hear it (important issues) from anyone else.” An administrator wrote, “I wouldn’t make it without the school counselor. He keeps me focused on what is really important. We work closely together.”

Most participants (92%) also valued teacher input as part of the leadership process. One teacher stated, “The school counselor reminds the principal that we are doing the best we can...I like it when they discuss things together and then involve us in decision making.” A school counselor stated, “I like it when we all work together. I think it is best for the students when we all put our heads together.” This supports Dubrin’s (2001) statement that leaders are those who can mobilize people to work together systemically in harmony.

Improving Guidance Programs. Every participant remarked on the need to improve school counseling programs. One principal stated, “I wish the counselor had more time to work with students.” Another said, “The counselor is very busy. I’d like her to spend more time creating counseling programs.” A teacher stated, “Our school

wouldn't be the same without the school counselor. She is often the voice many students don't have. I just wish she could put together more programs to work with students." Counselors made remarks indicating frustration based on time and role constraints. A counseling participant remarked, "I wish my principal understood that I am not just an overpaid secretary." Another counselor stated, "I want to make my (school counseling) program better but there are just too many other things being dumped on me." A teacher said, "Our counselor works really hard. I'd love it if they could talk to the kids in my class more often."

These comments made it clear the participants felt a need to change the school counseling program to one serving the needs of students. The counseling participants longed for strategies that would help them transform counseling roles without causing friction among faculty and the administration. As stated by one school counselor, "I wish they would just let us do our job...counseling the kids. But if I ask to work with kids, they all act like I just have a bad attitude and don't want to help."

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that school counselors do serve an important leadership function. Teachers felt supported through positive counselor leadership and believed a better climate was created for students and faculty as a result. Principals valued the input of school counselors and placed importance on their leadership abilities. School counselors who focused on the positive and inspired teamwork were described as having the ability to motivate others. It was clear that counselors, principals, and teachers valued a positive solution-focus rather than one based on

correcting flaws. At the same time, counselors desired leadership strategies conducive to building school counseling program changes.

It is important to acknowledge that due to the small sample and qualitative nature of this study, several limitations are evident. First, the views of the participants can not be generalized beyond the sample itself. Although the intent of this research was to develop leadership strategies for the specific participants of the study, it does serve as a catalyst for those looking for effective leadership strategies. Future research is needed to determine the efficacy of solution focused leadership in various locations within diverse schools.

The researchers were both Anglo females employed as professors within a university setting. The researchers' current and previous work experience (one as a school counselor and the other as a school administrator) must be considered since qualitative research inherently uses the researcher as instrument (Patton, 2002).

Despite the aforementioned limitations of this study, participant views lead to the conclusion that a leadership model based on solution-focused techniques and teamwork can improve school climate, teacher and faculty morale, and student outcomes. In an age where accountability is expected for all school stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, and school counselors), the following leadership model (as based on the aforementioned study) creates a means to improve school counseling and academic programs and involve school counselors as change agents. As a result, the researchers recommend the following solution-focused leadership model.

Recommendations

Several steps are suggested as based on the findings of this qualitative study. The first entails the establishment of a true partnership between the school counselor and principal. In order to develop this partnership, the school counselor must approach the principal with a desire and commitment to collaborate. Counselors model de Shazer's (1988) complimenting techniques while initially working with the principal and continue the technique throughout the model. For example, the school counselor sincerely points out the principal's leadership qualities and the inherent systemic results. The counselor might say, "I admire how you advocate for teachers on this campus. The teachers have stated they find you approachable."

Next, the school counselor discusses times or instances in other locations or within current literature when current problems are not occurring. The counselor might say, "I read an article about another campus with this problem. Faculty on that campus implemented..." (describe program). The principal is asked to share goals and exceptions as well. This models de Shazer's (1988) emphasis on using exceptions to problems as solutions. The result is a unique team (such as that described by study participants) who possess a collaborative vision focused on student centered goals and objectives. The school counselor becomes a team player contributing equally to the building's mission.

Once it is clear that the counselor shares the principal's vision of student and school excellence, the school counselor suggests strategies that create a safe environment for academic and school counseling program change. In other words, the school counselor shares in the school's goals and interventions, and becomes

accountable for systemic changes that influence student development. In an age of accountability and high stakes testing via the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), it is crucial that school counselors become team players responsible for overall student outcomes. Suggestions counselors might share with principals include such strategies as: school wide solution-focused rapport building, school counseling program and instructional modifications, faculty involvement in school counseling and instructional programs, and community networking. Each aforementioned component will be described as follows.

Solution-focused rapport building involves routinely complimenting teachers and staff such that better relationships and teamwork become possible. For example, the school counselor and principal agree to compliment (de Shazer, 1988; Dejong & Berg, 2002) two teachers and one staff member each day. These compliments consist of pointing out strengths and qualities that enhance the academic achievement of students. For example, the principal approaches a teacher who is an excellent mentor for other teachers and says, "I really admire the way you drop everything and help your peers when needed. The lesson plans of others have improved thanks to your assistance." The school counselor (to another teacher) says, "I appreciate your perseverance in working with that particular student. I noticed your patience and see the difference it is making." Notes and letters might also be used to reinforce strengths and create this healthy school environment (Oliver, Nelson, Cade, & Cueva, 2007). The result is the positive solution focus described by study participants and an environment where change becomes less frustrating.

As stated previously, participants valued the inclusion of teacher input. As a result, this program uses the aforementioned reinforcement of employee strengths to create an environment where teachers not only feel comfortable contributing to positive academic and school counseling program changes but are more motivated as well (Metcalf, 1995).

Consequently, the next step is to include teachers in bi-monthly strategic meetings where systemic strengths are discussed as well as exceptions to instructional problems. In other words, teachers first discuss things that are going well within the school then share strategies that are working in other classrooms or campuses. Discussions ensue regarding which strategies to implement within the school and include ways to improve the school counseling program, academic curriculum, and other issues. Counselors share exceptions to problems (i.e. programs recognized as following the *ASCA National Model*, 2005) and encourage teachers to share ideas. Finally, community members are asked to attend annual meetings to elicit input and even participate in student programs. The result is the team approach valued by participants in the study. In addition, guidance program changes become a systemic focus. This leaves counselors feeling less isolated and more supported as comprehensive school counseling programs are implemented. In addition, it offers shared accountability for student outcomes in academic, personal/social, and career domains.

Once solution-focused leadership has been implemented, the school counselor and principal agree to meet weekly to evaluate progress on each aforementioned step. As new problems emerge, exceptions are again discussed and brought before other

stakeholders. Solutions are constantly used to improve the school environment, academic learning, and the school counseling program. As such, themes identified in the study (positive focus, teamwork, and guidance program improvement) become a tangible concrete and usable leadership model. The result is a new mindset where accountability for student success is shared among all stakeholders. A school's focus changes from that of blaming schools for student failures to one where solutions are found.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that although school counselors are important school leaders who create better school environments through positive, solution-focused techniques and teamwork, a need exists to improve school counseling programs. Participants indirectly described solution-focused leadership techniques including complimenting and exception finding as well as collaboration and teamwork as positive leadership qualities. Finally, participants mentioned a need to use leadership skills to improve school counseling programs. As a result, the researchers suggest implementing the solution-focused leadership model; a unique method of creating a positive school climate more conducive to academic and program change while instilling counselor accountability.

The solution-focused leadership model is especially important for school counselors who are attempting to singlehandedly transform counseling programs. This program can be used to help such school counselors create allies while trying to fully implement comprehensive guidance and counseling programs. Additionally, the school culture becomes one consisting of success for all, positive morale, better decision

making, improved academic programs, and as mentioned above, better counseling services for students. In short, the solution-focused counseling model, as created based on the aforementioned qualitative study, can instill a better learning climate for students, teachers, and faculty while offering a unique method of initiating school counseling program change.

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