School Counselors as Program Leaders: Applying Leadership
Contexts to School Counseling

As a profession, school counseling is experiencing a paradigm shift from ancillary service provider to full partner in the education process (Johnson, 2000). As school counselors struggle with divergent demands (Burnham & Jackson, 2000) and divergent definitions of their professional roles (Herr, 2002), a consistent message is that school counselors must become leaders of their programs, advocates for counseling and for students, and representatives of the profession (Dahir, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

As leaders of school counseling programs, school counselors have a role in addressing the problems of today’s schools. Various authors have identified the need for school counselors to lead in program design and advocacy (Baker, 2000; Hatch & Bowers, 2002; Herr, 2001), to become involved in school reform (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Bemak, 2000), and to accept certain organizational roles in the school (Clark & Stone, 2000a, 2000b). In looking to improve the educational experience for students, school counselors need to lead in multicultural awareness efforts, pupil assistance committees, mentoring programs, student leadership development, connection with external constituencies, and political activism (Clark & Stone). School counselors also need to be leaders in championing healthy choices, respect for students and families, social justice, healthy environments for schools, and most of all, the development of students and families (Cole & Ryan, 1997; Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992; Smaby & Daugherty, 1995).

The need for school counselors to become leaders has also become evident as the profession examines problems of school counseling programs such as the erosion of counselor time devoted to students and the intrusion of administrative tasks into the counseling agenda (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Gibson, 1990; Hutchinson & Bottorff, 1986; O’Dell & Rak, 1996; Partin, 1993; Wiggins & Moody, 1987). Specifically, O’Dell and Rak found that a lack of leadership (defined as poorly conceptualized, poorly communicated, and poorly administered programs) resulted in school counseling programs being labeled ineffective by teachers and administrators. These problems in school counseling programs have led the Education Trust (2001) to charge that large numbers of practicing school counselors are functioning as highly paid clerical staff and quasi administrators, and to promote the transformation of school counseling.

This transformation starts with effective leadership by the school counselor (House & Hayes, 2002). According to Hughey (2001), “Effective leadership is important for professional school counselors and necessary for active involvement in school reform efforts” (p. ii). Effective leadership is evident when there is strong counselor commitment to organize the program around student competencies and when the counselor’s time is devoted to the design, implementation, and accounting for a comprehensive school counseling program (House & Hayes; O’Dell & Rak, 1996).

There have been efforts to give school counselors direction in the development of leadership over school counseling programs. Gysbers and Henderson (2000) discussed the process of designing and leading a guidance program, and VanZandt and Hayslip (2001) presented a process of leadership that outlined task-approach skills (attitudes toward rules, problem-solving styles, deadline awareness, work assignments, and interpersonal relations).

If school counselors are to be leaders of school counseling programs and transformation efforts, understanding the contexts in which leadership occurs (Bolman & Deal, 1997), the activities involved in each context, and the skills required for those activities can be a way of conceptualizing and applying effective leadership of school counseling programs. The purposes of this article are to discuss leadership contexts as they apply to school counseling, to outline the activities and skills of each leadership context specific to school counseling, and to provide an example of this holistic view of leadership as used by a school counselor.
THE CONTEXTS OF LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL COUNSELING

Leadership has been addressed in a variety of disciplines: adult development (Gardner, 1995), management theory (Mink, Owen, & Mink, 1993), educational administration (Bean & Clemes, 1978), and political science (Phillips, 1992). In the field of organizational development, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) defined leadership as “the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation” (p. 91). To examine what constitutes effective leadership, Bolman and Deal (1997) have explored various leadership situations which they termed contexts. These authors proposed that leadership takes place in four contexts, that effective leaders are able to understand problems or challenges in terms of these contexts, and that they engage in activities and employ skills appropriate to each context. The four contexts are non-sequential, permitting a leader to focus on each leadership context independently or in combination with the other three contexts as needed. As leaders become comfortable and confident in contextually relevant leadership, they naturally integrate their skills in these four contexts into a holistic leadership “style.” The leadership contexts presented by Bolman and Deal are as follows (see Table):

1. Structural leadership, or leadership in the building of viable organizations.
2. Human resource leadership, or leadership via empowerment and inspiration of followers.
3. Political leadership, or leadership in the use of interpersonal and organizational power.
4. Symbolic leadership, or leadership via the interpretation and re-interpretation of the meaning of change.

When each leadership context is applied to school counseling, it is possible to identify the activities that correspond to each context (adapted from Bolman & Deal, 1997). In the context of structural leadership, school counselors would lead by activities involving the building of an effective comprehensive school counseling program, including technical mastery of counseling and education, strategies for growth of the comprehensive school counseling program, and implementation of an effective program. The skills needed for these activities—namely counseling, consulting, teaching, advocacy, and research—are taught in most graduate programs for school counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Paisley, 2001; VanZandt & Hayeslip, 2001).

In the context of human resource leadership, school counselors would lead via the activities of believing in people and communicating that belief, being visible and accessible, and empowering others (Bolman & Deal, 1997). These activities require skills in communication, empowerment, trust building, and listening. Both structural leadership activities and human resource leadership activities are within the traditional skill sets of most school counselors.

Political leadership, however, may be a more non-traditional role for many counselors and may cause counselors to experience anxiety and dissonance. In this leadership context, school counselors would lead through activities involving the assessment of the distribution of power within the building and district, the building of linkages with important stakeholders such as parents and school board members, and the use of persuasion and negotiation (Bolman & Deal, 1997). School counselors can expand their leadership through awareness of and access to formal and informal structures of power in the school and the district, negotiating with important stakeholders and advocating on behalf of the school and the comprehensive school counseling program. These activities require skills in negotiation, persuasion, collaboration, and advocacy, which may be taught directly or indirectly in graduate programs, or may be developed as counselors become more aware of the power dynamics of the school environment.

Finally, the context of symbolic leadership requires activities involving using symbols and metaphors to capture attention, framing experience in meaningful ways for followers, and discovering and communicating a vision (Bolman & Deal, 1997). School counselors who lead in this context have a relationship with their community (students, parents, school professionals) and are effective models in efforts to meet the needs of students, inspiring others to follow their example. Furthermore, school counselors help students, families, and others understand their experiences as symbolic of growth and development. In this leadership context, school counselors lead by articulating a vision of healthy, resilient students and by maintaining faith in that vision (Littrell & Peterson, 2001). The skills required by these activities—designing symbols, expressing meaning, inspiring others, and modeling for others—may be obtained through graduate education or may evolve as counselors develop a professional identity (Johnson, 2000).

AN EXAMPLE OF THE APPLICATION OF LEADERSHIP CONTEXTS

Recently, I consulted with a graduate who had been hired to fill a relatively new middle school counselor position in a small rural district. The program she
### Leadership Contexts and Activities Applied to School Counseling

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<th>Leadership Context</th>
<th>Leadership Activities Applied to School Counseling</th>
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| **Structural leadership:** Leadership in the building of viable organizations | 1. Build the foundation of an effective school counseling program.  
2. Attain technical mastery of counseling and education.  
3. Design strategies for growth of the school counseling program.  
4. Implement an effective school counseling program. |
| **Human resource leadership:** Leadership via empowerment and inspiration of followers | 1. Believe in people.  
2. Communicate that belief.  
3. Be visible and accessible.  
4. Empower others. |
| **Political leadership:** Leadership in the use of interpersonal and organizational power | 1. Understand the distribution of power within the building and district.  
2. Build linkages with important stakeholders (e.g., parents, administrators, teachers, board members).  
3. Use persuasion and negotiation. |
| **Symbolic leadership:** Leadership via the interpretation and re-interpretation of the meaning of change | 1. Use symbols and metaphors to gain attention of followers.  
2. Frame experience in meaningful ways for followers.  
3. Discover and communicate a vision.  
4. Maintain a relationship with the community you represent (e.g., students, parents, school colleagues).  
5. Model health on all levels to inspire others.  
6. Lead by example. |

Political leadership, however, may be a more nontraditional role for many counselors and may cause counselors to experience anxiety and dissonance.

Inherited emphasized duties in scheduling, testing, and discipline and, as such, did not consist of the activities of a comprehensive school counseling program. Her goal was to redefine the program to align with the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). In this example, all four leadership contexts facilitated the redefinition of this school counseling program.

We used the leadership contexts to strategize how she would establish leadership over the program. She decided that reducing inappropriate functions would take secondary priority to the design and leadership of a viable comprehensive school counseling program; “displacement” or “streamlining” these activities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) would be attempted once the new program was accepted in the school.

We began by addressing the symbolic leadership context and the human resource leadership context. The opportunity to articulate and communicate a vision ignited her creativity and inspired passion for the school counseling program, qualities that energize emerging leaders by inspiring metaphors and symbols (Gardner, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). This counselor passionately believed in the power of the school community to foster healthy, resilient, and successful learners (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1997), and this image became symbolic goal that she shared with administrators, parents, and teachers as she talked about how together, they could make a difference in the lives of students. In these interactions, she was also refining her skills in the human resource leadership activities of believing in others, being visible, and empowering others.

After establishing the vision for the program, she began activities appropriate for the structural leadership context. These leadership activities include designing a viable organization, in this case, a comprehensive school counseling program for the middle school. Since the implementation phase was not possible yet, she focused on designing an ideal comprehensive middle school program, after extensive research in professional literature (e.g., Dollarhide & Saginak, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998; Muro & Kottman, 1995), and the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). She sought support for this new program by talking to teachers and parents about the benefits of a comprehensive school counseling program.
The final leadership context, political leadership, was yet to be addressed, but was essential for success. She asked the principal for administrative support for a systematic process for designing a comprehensive school counseling program (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). She proposed the establishment of an ongoing functional advisory board to assist in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the program. This advisory board would comprise the academic leaders of the school (both formal leaders and informal leaders), parents, students, and selected community leaders. The principal was willing to support this process.

Because the new counselor was not yet confident in her political leadership skills with this new advisory board, she relied on her skills in the other three contexts. To do this, she communicated her vision of the healthy, successful, and resilient student; shared her technical expertise in student development and school counseling; and empowered others to help in this creative process. When the advisory board was assembled, she educated them in the meaning of comprehensive school counseling, discussing her vision of the ideal school counseling program in terms of the professional literature and the National Standards. As a counselor educator, I was invited to participate in this discussion. In her preparation for this meeting, I urged her to allow her passion, vision, and creativity to motivate the advisory board members to share in a common purpose—that of creating a better school environment in which all students could achieve their personal best. It was a dramatic example of her skills in political leadership, human resource leadership, and symbolic leadership, as her vision inspired others (Littrell & Peterson, 2001).

The new counselor now began to weave all four leadership contexts together, integrating them naturally into her own leadership style. As the advisory board worked on the mission statement, consensus was built (human resource leadership), the vision of the program was improved because of group input (symbolic leadership), and the holistic development of students' academic, career, and personal/social development became the focus. Once the mission statement was complete, the program elements and priorities (structural leadership) were designed. At this point, the advisory board invited the principal and the district pupil services director (political leadership) to a meeting to discuss the newly designed program.

This application of leadership using all four contexts resulted in a significant redefinition of the program for this school counselor. The new program was aligned with the National Standards and included time allotments for counseling, educating, advocacy, consultation, leadership, and coordination of professional activities (Dollahide & Saginak, 2003). However, in spite of her best efforts, the program still included some administrative tasks that the counselor believed did not belong in the counseling program. She realized that she would need to respect the work of the advisory board and honor her commitment to implement the new program, evidence of her awareness of the political leadership context of her school. She resolved to establish her credibility in the district first by doing an exemplary job within the new program (Kouzes & Posner, 1995), and then to focus on the political leadership context within the district to move the program forward in the future.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Ongoing leadership of school counseling programs involves continual awareness of and activities in each of the four leadership contexts. Changes in the profession of school counseling, in human resources in the school and district, in the political power structure of the school and district, and in the meaning people find in the public and private events of their lives will mandate changes in the school counseling program. The commitment to be the leader of a school counseling program means the long-term commitment to the cycle of program design, implementation, evaluation, and redesign, using each of the leadership contexts to secure the continued support of followers and constituencies.

School counselors who heed the call to become leaders of their programs can use these contexts and corollary activities to structure their program leadership strategies. Structural leadership activities address building viable school counseling programs, human resource leadership activities highlight the need to inspire others, political leadership activities emphasize that school counselors need to access formal and informal power structures, and symbolic leadership activities prompt school counselors to envision a goal and communicate that to all stakeholders. With an awareness of the leadership contexts, plus courage, commitment, creativity, and faith, school counselors can transform their school counseling programs. I

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References


