

Building-Level Leadership

It doesn't matter if you supervise other school counselors or not. You still have the ability – and imperative – to be a school counselor leader.

BY ANITA YOUNG, PH.D.

What does it mean to be a school counselor leader? Do you think of leadership in the context of supervision and evaluation only?

Or do you think of a leader as one with the ability to organize, someone who can initiate innovative solutions to issues, communicate effectively, multi-task or relate to individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

Perhaps you believe being a school counselor leader is simply the ability to chart a vision for student success. All of the aforementioned, and more, are characteristic of school counselor leaders. Whether intentional or not, school counselors engage in leadership practices. Leading in schools requires understanding kids; school counselors understand kids and can relate to their needs.

Yet, challenges remain. Disproportionate student-to-school-counselor ratios, low student attendance rates, pervasive achievement gaps, high suspension rates, inequitable enrollment practices, disenfranchised parents and limited partnerships create a daunting task to implement sustainable comprehensive school counseling programs. Moreover, stakeholder perceptions about school counselors' role in education reform and the acceptance that leadership reaches beyond the principal are continual barriers

and ongoing discussion points.

Some school counselors may still question their professional identity, leadership preparation, ability to lead or effectiveness of their current leadership practices. However, others are forging through the challenges and responding to the call.

Across the nation, school counselors are participating in professional development trainings to further develop their knowledge and skills about ways to implement cutting-edge comprehensive school counseling programs and become key leaders and partners in preparing students to be college- and career-ready for the global economy.

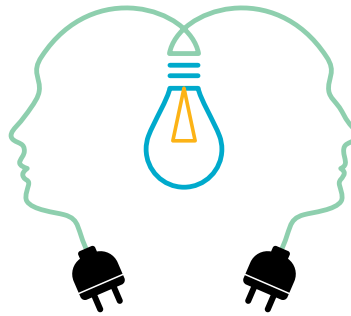
Leadership is the transformative tool, the absolute skill and the essential practice to catapult school counselors' capacity to respond to educational initiatives and prepare all students to be college- and career-ready. Leadership is a capacity all school counselors can learn. So, what more is needed? How do we move beyond current roles to daily school counselor leader practices that foster consistent and ongoing school counselor leadership practices leading to improved outcomes for all students? What does it mean to be a school counselor leader who initiates individual and collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for

all students? How can school counselor leaders ensure accountable and equitable leadership practices that are intentional and not random acts of improvement?

Leadership Beliefs

Cliché or not, beliefs do drive our actions. Examining beliefs about student expectations is the first step to guide leadership ideals and practices. A school counselor leader should be able to articulate the rationale for the school counseling vision, its alignment with the instructional vision and how it translates to robust student outcomes. Reflect on your personal beliefs for a moment. Are your personal beliefs about leadership congruent or incongruent with the school and district goals to prepare students to be college- and career-ready? What leadership characteristics do you believe are essential for school counselor leaders? How do leadership characteristics shape leadership practices that produce equitable outcomes for students? Not only should school counselors chart the course for the school counseling program’s vision but they should also establish an individual professional vision based on their personal beliefs about serving all students. What barriers are preventing you from authentic school counselor leadership practices?

School counselor leaders at all levels should understand eliminating opportunity barriers and increasing access to



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courses of rigor are critical tasks that must be undertaken to close achievement gaps. Reading current school counseling research, aggregating and disaggregating data and applying evidence-based practices are a must to shape policies to prepare students for optimal outcomes. School counselor leaders should be able to determine what type of data they

should collect and analyze to increase college and career readiness and with whom to share the data. School counselor leaders should use data-driven decisions to inform their actions.

Committed school counselor leaders identify and call attention to policies and practices that disadvantage particular groups of students and use outcome data to advocate for change. They are also aware of the influence power and oppression can have on educational outcomes. School counselor leaders must ensure access, equity and attainment are realities for all students. How do current practices in your building limit or promote student access to courses of rigor? Are your current practices inclusive for all ethnic, racial, LGBTQ and other subgroups?

Leadership in Practice

Belief in students, use of data, seeking partnership, advocating for all students and seeking equitable outcomes ground effective school counselor leadership principles. The presence of identifiable leadership characteristics is also an important component for effective school counselor leadership practices necessary for sustainable school counseling programs. Trustworthy, confident, intelligent and organized are often considered traditional leadership characteristics and are also identifiable school counselor leadership characteristics. Consider, specifically, the leadership

Leadership Activity

What are your leadership strengths? What practices validate your leadership skills? Use the school counselor leadership assessment activity adapted from “School Counselor Leadership: An Essential Practice” to assess your current practices. How can you move your “no” or “in progress” to “yes”?

School Counselor Leadership Survey	Yes	No	In Progress
Accomplish goals with certainty			
Find resources to secure what is needed to improve services for all students			
Advocate for marginalized students			
Share innovative ideas			
Actively work with stakeholders to implement comprehensive school counseling programs			
Remain positive when faced with barriers impeding student success			
Can persuade others to gain buy-in			
Accomplish goals that have systemic impact			
Ask for help to advocate on behalf of students and parents			
Have confidence in ability to lead			

characteristics, skills and practices unique to school counselors. The following recommendations, based on findings from a national school counselor leadership survey, are provided to increase school counselor leadership capacity. The five characteristics are not exhaustive, and the highlighted practices may be used independently or collectively depending on the situation and context. They are: resourceful problem-solving, systemic collaboration, interpersonal influence, social justice advocacy and professional efficacy.

Resourceful problem-solving: School counselors are faced with daily dilemmas that frequently are beyond the scope and practice of their preparation and training. Parents enter school counseling offices with specific concerns and rely on the school counselor to know what is best. Students' verbal and non-verbal communications tell you there is a void that needs to be filled or a situation to be resolved. More often

than not, school counselors are able to address the concern, respond to the situation and gather immediate answers. School counselor leaders are resourceful and know where and how to find sustainable solutions. Resourceful problem-solving practices refer to a school counselor leader's willingness and ability to exceed expectations to secure resources, initiate services and programs and eliminate situational circumstances to improve student achievement. They resolve issues through a goal-oriented lens and critically evaluate them. They secure resources to initiate programs and remove barriers for all students, especially marginalized individuals. Collecting and analyzing data become key catalysts to minimize reactive tendencies, identify goals and determine necessary interventions.

Example: A school counselor might establish business partnerships to sponsor college field trips for first-generation middle school students in a school

with limited financial resources, low parental participation and widening achievement gaps.

Systemic collaboration: Change rarely occurs in isolation; effecting change requires active engagement with stakeholders. Systemic collaboration is about forming alliances and partnerships to accomplish the desired outcomes. Systemic collaboration requires creativity and innovation to systemically align services with the instructional vision and mission. Systemic collaborators begin with the end in mind and have a clear vision for how to accomplish goals. They are creative, critical thinkers willing to share their innovativeness with colleagues. In some ways, resourceful problem-solving and systemic collaboration can be reciprocal.

Example: A school counselor leader might take the initiative to develop a district school counseling collaborative team composed of school counseling representatives from each school in

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the district with the goal of developing school counseling practices that more closely align with district goals and initiatives. Similarly, a school counselor leader might develop a curriculum guide from achievement, attendance or behavior outcome data.

Interpersonal influence: School counselors interact with students, parents, teachers and administrators on a daily basis. Charisma and social capital are worthy leadership characteristics necessary to motivate followers and gain buy-in. School counselors who practice interpersonal influence understand administrative politics and are capable of navigating through school and district systems to gain the necessary buy-in.

Example: A school counselor leader will broker opportunities to present outcome data to school board members to advocate for additional school counseling positions or will use interpersonal skills to persuade advisory council members to support a particular school counseling initiative.

Social justice advocacy: School counselor leaders are culturally responsive change agents who know how to integrate instructional and school counseling best practices. Social justice advocacy practices require a willingness to take risks for students without crossing ethical boundaries. It means thinking outside the box to challenge the status quo and respond to inequities. It means advocating for system policies that effectively serve the educational needs of targeted student groups and marginalized populations. The systemic impact of interpersonal influence promotes teaching others to self-advocate. Social justice advocate leaders know how to model excellence.

Example: A school counselor leader will question inequitable enrollment patterns by sharing disaggregated data with stakeholders and provide recommendations based on the findings. A school counselor leader will “own” the implementation of school counseling services.

Professional efficacy: School counselor leaders should be confident in their ability to communicate the vision of the school counseling program and collaborate to accomplish identified goals. Professional efficacy is exemplified in

the confidence that school counselors need to effect change. School counselor leaders practicing this characteristic remain calm when faced with adversity and believe they have the ability to improve student outcomes. They view themselves as leaders and change agents.

Example: Practicing professional self-efficacy means volunteering to mentor new school counselors or designing a model to train future school counselor leaders. It means applying for a school counseling supervisory position.

You Are a Leader

School counselors at all levels are in the best position to leverage their leadership capacity. If you are a school counselor and one or all of the aforementioned leadership characteristics resonate in your daily practices, consider yourself a horizontal leader. Horizontal school counselor leaders serve as change agents in their current settings. They lead collaborative partnerships and efforts with


stakeholders. They lead change efforts within their current role to improve outcomes for all students by initiating services or programs. Vertical leaders incorporate all aspects of horizontal leadership and expand to include a responsibility to develop leadership through professional development training for the school counseling professionals they supervise.

When school counselors accept the responsibility to lead, they are able to fully engage in transformative tenets and identify system barriers impeding academic success. School counselor leaders:

- use multiple strategies and resources to solve problems
- build partnerships and engage all stakeholders
- navigate through the politics of systems
- advocate for equitable services for all students with a courageous stance
- excel in the use of appropriate

accountability strategies to challenge the status quo

- persuade colleagues and build consensus
- identify and accomplish goals with confidence
- exceed expectations when accomplishing tasks
- accept the responsibility to lead
- acquire a leadership mindset

Your challenges may be many; however, leadership will help you overcome the obstacles. Build your leadership capacity to increase your ability to analyze data, advocate for all students, collaborate to form partnerships and effect systemic change. Decide to lead. 

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