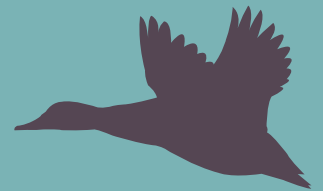


The Messy Process of School Counselor Leadership



Leadership may be messy,
but it is an essential
part of what the school
counselor does. Discover
your leadership style, and
learn to incrementally
increase your goals
and reach to build your
credibility.



BY COLETTE T. DOLLARHIDE, PH.D.

One day, the principal walks into your office and says, “You are so adored by everyone – students, parents and teachers – and you are so brilliant and talented that I have decided to let you make all school decisions. We will follow your lead without question.” Yes, that is the fantasy. You are named the Supreme Leader, without any fuss or effort. This fantasy resonates with several myths of leadership: great leaders are destined for greatness by innate talents, and leadership “just happens” because these wonderfully talented people rise to the occasion. That could happen to you, right?

The problem with this fantasy is that it (almost) never happens this way. The reality is that each school counselor has a choice to make – to hide from one’s professional responsibility to make the school a better place or to lead the fight for systemic changes that are best for kids. When we stand up for what we believe to be best for kids, for our programs and for the school, we step into the messy process of leadership. This messy process involves negotiation, persuasion, collaboration and compromise in which the system, the leader and the led are transformed. Leadership, as a professional mandate, is not an option when the future of our students is at stake. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote, “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

In the book “Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership,” the authors provide a holistic definition of leadership: Leadership is “a subtle process of mutual influence fusing thought, feeling and action to produce

cooperative effort in the service of purposes and values of both the leader and the led.” In this definition, we can see that leadership is (1) natural and organic, (2) reciprocal, (3) holistic, (4) noncoerced, (5) includes both goals and values and (6) views followers as a vital part of the process. School counselors’ programmatic and systemic efforts fit perfectly into this definition.

What makes leadership “messy” is that there is no clear-cut process, no guaranteed recipe for success, says Chris Janson, Ph.D., in a *Professional School Counseling* journal article. Leadership comes with some risks that must be acknowledged; if you are working to make large changes in school climate, for example, your efforts to facilitate change will be visible to a number of people. But no one can learn without trying, and failures improve our chances for future success if we are willing to be reflective.

Although there is no recipe for leadership, there are things we can learn from successful leaders. Successful leadership depends on four things:

1. Assessment of your own strengths and challenges
2. Assessment of your experience in terms of your leadership goals
3. Knowledge about followers
4. Knowledge about leadership

First, you need to honestly assess your strengths and challenges. There are a variety of ways to evaluate your leadership style, but the essence of this self-evaluation is to understand how you

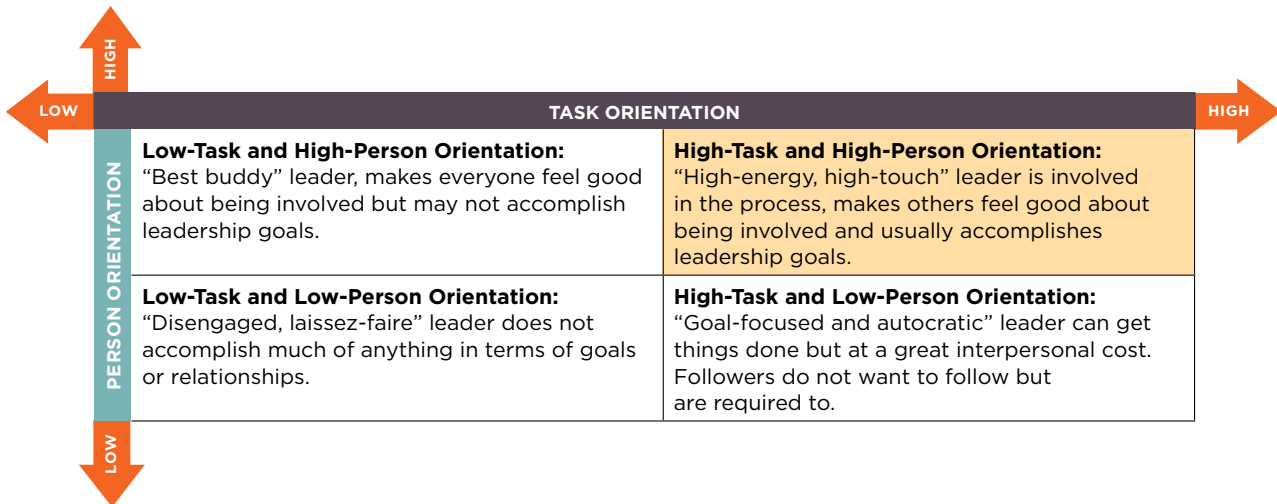
Leadership may be messy, but it is an essential part of what the professional school counselor does. You can improve your leadership efforts and outcomes by improving your style of leadership, by incrementally increasing your goals in reach and scope as you gain experience and credibility, by matching your needs with the needs of your followers and by understanding various leadership models.

approach tasks/goals and other people. On the simple “Task vs. People” orientation grid (below), you can locate yourself and your leadership style, then think about ways to improve. You can see that the high-energy, high-touch leader usually has the most successful leadership

efforts. How can you refine your style to be more successful?

Second, you can examine your experience to evaluate how the scope and reach of your leadership goals match your experience. “Scope” refers to the size of the changes you hope to make. How big of a change are you seeking? “Reach” refers to the settings you hope to change. How far outside of your immediate program is the change you are seeking? For example, a small change in your own program (starting a parent newsletter from the school counseling office) is small in scope (because it is a small change) and in reach (only your own program). Conversely, petitioning the school district to increase funding for school counselors to meet the ASCA ratio of 250:1 is large both in scope (because funding issues spark large-scale discussion and debate) and reach (for the entire district). Experience relates to this in terms of leadership, as your credibility as a leader may be influenced by your experience in relation to the scope and reach of the change you seek, say Erin Mason, Ph.D., and George McMahon in a *Professional School Counseling* journal article. Each level of experience has advantages and disadvantages for leadership.

The advantages for leadership for new school counselors might include new conceptualization of the work of a school counselor and others’ expectations that change is coming. The leadership challenges for new school



RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGE PYRAMID



counselors include the perceptions that until they prove themselves, they have little legitimacy as a leader.

For mid-career school counselors, the advantages for leadership include being seen as an established expert who is known in the school, but the challenge includes being embedded in the status quo, making leadership for change seem incongruent.

For highly experienced school counselors, the advantage for leadership is that their credibility as a leader is high due to their respected position as an expert, but their challenge may be in overcoming history with colleagues.

The point is that leadership efforts are more likely to be successful when school counselors are aware of these advantages and challenges and adapt their leadership efforts. It is not fair to state that new school counselors cannot be successful with goals that are large in scope and reach, as this is not true. It might be fair to say that new school counselors will face increased challenges if their leadership goals exceed their credibility. By looking at the scope and reach for the change you seek and then thinking about your experience, you can target your leadership efforts in ways that will increase your credibility as a leader. Starting with small-scope and small-reach leadership goals, experiencing success in them, then increasing the scope and reach of your leadership goals can build your confidence and credibility as a leader.

Consider Followers

Third, you will want to think about the needs of your followers as you design

your leadership interventions. Consider what followers need and what you need to implement the change; then work to match what they need with what you need. For example, you want to start a peer mediation program to help with conflicts in the school, thereby improving school climate. You hope teachers will support the program, volunteering their time and referring students. What do the teachers (followers) need? Involvement, appreciation, input to the program? Then consider what you need from the followers. Their assistance, support or resources? Finally, match what you need with what they need by asking them about the conflicts they

see in class, what they think will work, how they might want to be involved, etc. Notice the order of these questions. You are increasing their awareness of the problem, asking for their input, then asking them how they might want to be involved. Consider offering incentives for the teachers. What can you do for those teachers who help? Can you ask the principal to release the teachers once a week from some duty the teachers do not enjoy? If that is not possible, even a note of appreciation or a treat in their mailbox can be important. Be creative.

Finally, you are more likely to be successful in leadership when you are informed about leadership. This allows you to decide how to engage in leadership efforts. Leadership is no longer conceptualized as the Lone Ranger myth – that a leader is some miraculous presence that fixes everything. A more holistic vision of leadership is that of an orchestra conductor. The conductor helps the musicians do what they do best, and the result of this synergy is music. This systemic focus on leadership comes from emerging leadership paradigms that expand leadership practice into three types: traditional leadership, participatory/distributed leadership and collaborative leadership.

Traditional leadership is not to be confused with the Lone Ranger myth, but the leader does accept the bulk of the responsibility for the change sought. When the scope and reach of the leadership effort are small, concentrated in your school counseling program or in your school, this is most likely the leadership model you will

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use. For example, you want to structure your classroom presentations so you know you have provided a comprehensive school counseling program to each student and each grade level in your school. You secure support from your advisory council and your principal, work out a good schedule with the teachers in your school and make the change. You publish this new schedule and collect outcome data knowing you are offering comprehensive programming for your students. You do this because you are the school counselor and this is your program, your area of expertise.

When the scope and reach of the leadership effort involves more people in the building and you need others to assist in the attainment of your leadership goals, you might move into participatory or distributed leadership. This leadership paradigm has gained attention in both the corporate and educational worlds, as a leader in this model

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recruits the support of other leaders in the leadership effort, engaging all of a community's assets and creating an energetic culture of openness and participation.

For example, you have a large population of new immigrant families in your school, and your elementary school attendance data show these

students are struggling with health issues and poor nutrition from their home countries. In addition, these parents worry about their children's behavior in this new country. Responding to these needs, you want to create a parent library and offer programs for parents targeting pediatric health care, nutrition and parenting strategies. For this leadership effort, you will ask the leader in school health (the school nurse), the leader of academic resources (the librarian), some leaders of teachers (grade-level lead teachers) and the fiscal/administrative leader of the school (the principal), to work with you to plan the parent library and to carry out the parent workshops. For this leadership effort, you would probably want to have established your credibility as a leader of your program, because the reach and scope of this leadership effort are more extensive.

Finally, let's imagine you have a

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opportunity

and opportunity is knocking

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project you believe will result in systemic changes for your students, and this project is large in both reach and scope. It involves coordinating the efforts of school counselors in multiple buildings in your district and beyond. For example, you want to create seamless transition programs between the elementary school, middle school, high school and local community college so students at each level have access to transition programs to help them adjust. This leadership effort is among colleagues, and you don't have any formal power or official role with them. You have the power of persuasion, and you have data highlighting how students struggle when they transition to a new educational level. Here, your experience and credibility will be important. You may find collaborative leadership is useful, because you will be recruiting collaborators in the design and implementation of the transition program. Each school counselor

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at each level will individually decide if he or she wants to be involved, how to be involved and what this involvement will entail. For this effort, collaborative leadership allows you to bring together colleagues in the spirit of systemic change, and together you will find ways to answer the challenges of all your students. Be prepared for the outcome of collaborative leadership to look very different from what you might initially imagine, as colleagues' great ideas and collective synergy may

take the resulting program into new, creative directions.

Leadership may be messy, but it is an essential part of what the professional school counselor does. You can improve your leadership efforts and outcomes by improving your style of leadership, by incrementally increasing your goals in reach and scope as you gain experience and credibility, by matching your needs with the needs of your followers and by understanding various leadership models. Improving these things will make leadership less messy and more productive and rewarding. The most important thing is that you never give in and you never give up. Your students deserve no less. 

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