

## HOLISTIC PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELING LEADERSHIP THEORY

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Theories of school leadership illustrate great diversity in their attempts to account for the various factors related to the prediction of effective leadership. Previous attempts to describe leadership success have traditionally focused on single areas of inquiry. Therefore, for the theory of leadership to match contemporary theories of counseling integration and holistic practices, a model of leadership that integrates these features creates an optimal foundation for further inquiry. We present a holistic model of counseling leadership, which integrates contextual features, personality traits, and situational influences into the realm of leadership theory. The model theoretically has the capacity to identify the various levels and functions of counseling leaders as well as provide a conceptual framework to understand the influence of these factors.

**Keywords:** school counseling, leadership, holistic leadership, ASCA

Counseling supervision models have been developed in the early 20th century; however, according to Leddick and Bernard (1980), these models lack empirical research. There have been limited articles that provide research support for counseling supervision models. For example, there has been a limited amount of research endeavors that may be applied to the aforementioned counseling supervision construct. Specifically, there are few counseling-related supervision articles in the specialty of school counseling that have shown positive results with counselor self-efficacy. These articles have utilized single-case, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Farmer et al., 2017; Tümlü & Ceyhan, 2021).

Perspectives related to effective leadership characteristics illustrate theoretical as well as empirical attempts to account for the development and maintenance of such factors (e.g., self-efficacy, confidence, etc.; Sperry, 2002). These vantage points represent attempts to conceptualize the traits of effective leaders and the maturation of these abilities. Several schools of leadership theory attempt to account for leadership as encompassing inherent personality traits, situational factors, or contextual themes (e.g., Sperry, 2002). These endeavors have all been shaped and guided to shine the proverbial light onto the question of “What makes a good leader?”

Within the field of school counseling, this question represents an area of contextual divergence. Although traditional leadership theory has been heavily informed by organizational, social, and applied psychological theories (e.g., Avolio, 2007; Sternberg, 2007; Vroom & Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007), it still possesses a humanistic element that is inherently a cornerstone of counseling. Leadership as it applies to counseling represents the profession’s identification of leaders as well as the roles, functions, and responsibilities of these identified individuals. Leaders in the school counseling profession function at varying levels of professional organizations,

practice and supervision, advocacy and legislation, and research and education (Zaccaro, 2007). These individuals possess certain skills and attributes that either contribute to their success or failure in their roles (Sperry, 2002; Zaccaro, 2007).

As the field of counseling grows and transforms in response to the changing needs of client and societal needs, so too do the theories relating to counseling leadership development. In the counseling nature as it relates to the integrative movement (Norcross et al., 2002) and holistic practices, it appears prudent to conceptualize school leadership development within these theoretical lenses.

Leadership in school counseling is also synonymous with evoking and sustaining change. In this, counselors serve as change agents continuously monitoring and responding to the needs of the school and students in a formative manner as the program leader (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Counselors initiate this change through a comprehensive guidance program, responsive services, individual and group counseling modalities, and systems support (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Stone and Dahir (2016) noted that school counselors are charged with the task of continuous improvement for student outcomes, identifying barriers at the environmental and systems levels. Specifically, school counselors are tasked with creating an equitable environment where all students can succeed by amplifying social justice, transparency, and accountability to deliver lasting change to improve the socioemotional, academic, and career outcomes for students (Stone & Dahir, 2016).

Furthermore, leadership models have been widely published and relate to the multiple disciplines in mental health, marriage and family, and school counseling environments. These models present linear-based conceptualizations of leadership and place heavy emphasis on dispositional attributes (Sperry, 2002). Thus, a professional school counseling leadership model inclusive of a social justice approach is necessary and would reflect more appropriately the changing needs of the counseling profession. This need is highlighted as professional school counselors often experience a wide range of student and school-based needs that require flexibility in both approach and leadership styles, allowing them to adapt and change based on the situational circumstances they are navigating. Additionally, a flexible leadership model helps maintain a school environment that celebrates and promotes collaboration among the key stakeholders responsible for responding to student needs. Lastly, a model hinged on flexibility will allow for more accurate data-driven decision making as the professional school counselor will have insight into the unique needs of their campus (Sperry, 2002).

Understanding the complexities of school counseling programming in an ever-changing world, the need for leadership within the field is greatly heightened especially considering the duality of identity as both a counselor and educator (Ieva et al., 2022). School counselors play a unique role in promoting social justice in their leadership efforts within their schools and broader communities. The ethical standards for school counselors highlight the importance of students having the right to school counseling professionals who are social justice advocates (ASCA, 2019). One of the primary ways that school counselors can promote social justice is by addressing issues of cultural competence and diversity (Dahir & Stone, 2016). Ultimately, school counselors must be aware of and sensitive to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students in order to provide comprehensive and culturally appropriate services (Boyland et al., 2019; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Additionally, they must be able to provide counseling services that are culturally appropriate and responsive to those diverse needs both at the individual and community levels. Through the engagement of community, counselors can lead through action by incorporating the lived experiences and cultures of their school through partnering with families

through events and workshops to build relationships, establish connections, and create opportunities for dialogue that ultimately correlate to improved student outcomes (Jeynes, 2022).

More broadly, the understanding of social justice and leadership intersection highlights a microlevel underscoring. The urgency regarding social justice leadership as advocacy for policies and practices that support equity and inclusion, leading the charge for counseling programming and services to promote inclusivity. Leadership advocacy involves several stakeholders such as school-based administration, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders to develop policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion for all students (Boyland et al., 2019; Ieva et al., 2022). Moreover, school counselors have the unique opportunity to provide leadership on key issues or familial experiences within schools such as bullying, discrimination, academic and personal development, and resource sharing. Finally, school counseling leadership models must be inclusive of and reflect school counselor behaviors that exemplify a social justice approach such as increased self-awareness of biases and privilege (Chang & Barrio Minton, 2021).

Furthermore, professional school counselors working alongside students, families, school staff, and other key stakeholders have the unique opportunity to identify and address discrimination, bias, and inequality. Additionally, leadership through a social justice lens requires school counselors to be active allies in challenging systemic oppression to promote cultural humility, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Leading from a social justice lens recognizes the imperative nature of inclusion and helps ensure programming addresses the systemic inequalities and injustices that can potentially impact a students' academic, career, personal, and social development ranging from inability to access high quality food to disparities in academic achievements.

Additionally, a social justice approach focuses on creating a more equitable and inclusive school environment to help ensure equal and equitable access to opportunities and resources. This effort alone helps to reiterate the purpose and mission of professional school counseling programs, promoting academic achievement and career readiness for all students through barrier elimination such as reduced access to resources, discrimination, or social/familial challenges. Ultimately, an effective school counselor as leader has a moral purpose, a mindset for action, and a purpose larger than oneself (Dahir & Stone, 2016).

### **Literature Review**

The ASCA (2023) asserted the following:

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, career and social/emotional development so they achieve success in school and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society. ASCA provides professional development, publications and other resources, research and advocacy to school counselors around the globe. (para. 1)

While the role and expectations of school counselors is outlined in the ASCA model, professional school counselors have faced obstacles in performing the expectations presented within the model. Additionally, the role of the school counselor has historically been minimized against competing school needs. Studies estimate that school counselors only spend roughly 60% of their time on counseling with the rest of their time appropriated towards administrative or non-school counseling tasks such as scheduling, testing coordination, and other assigned duties (e.g., ASCA,

2022; Rylander, 2002). While the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Acts created an added stress to teachers and administrators to ensure and substantiate success thresholds for students, these acts paved a way for professional school counselors to showcase their leadership skills, training, and expertise while assisting colleagues and students (ASCA, 2019). ASCA (2019) provided a framework for comprehensive school counseling programs that are designed to promote the academic, career, personal, and social development of all students. School counselors should provide a range of services, including individual and group counseling, classroom guidance lessons, and consultations with key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and additional school staff. The emphasis of the model is hinged on school counselors supporting students' academic achievement, personal growth, and career readiness.

Specifically, the ASCA (2019) comprehensive guidance program asserts that school counselors should develop a program based in data, are systematically driven and implemented, and delivered through an age-appropriate curriculum in order to improve student outcomes such as attendance, discipline, and achievement. More specifically, school counselors should spend a maximum of 20% of their time on program planning and school support while 80% of a school counselor's time should be spent in direct student services (ASCA, 2019). The standards help outline high-quality services to students and are bracketed into three ways to evaluate program effectiveness, professional development, program management, and accountability. Ultimately, the model promotes data-driven decision making, creating opportunity for the counselor to use data and assess the effectiveness of their programs thereby allowing them to make programmatic adjustments as necessary to ensure they are meeting the needs of their students and overall campus and, thus, exemplify campus leadership.

### **Internal Barriers to School Counselor Leadership**

Studies as recent as 2019 have revealed that school counselors face internal barriers such as self-of-the-therapist issues that impact leadership and implementation of comprehensive programming. Examples of these barriers include lack of confidence (Hilts et al., 2019) and internal barriers such as their beliefs regarding what constitutes a comprehensive program and its effectiveness (Fye et al., 2018). These barriers hinder the school counselor's ability to lead through systematic programming to improve student outcomes.

Throughout the role of school counseling, school counselors often experience internal resistance. While this resistance may be attributed to stress from competing priorities, compliance, or legal directives, school counselors often face (a) reluctance to change from school personnel, (b) managing and prioritizing multiple duties within the school, (c) managing time and stress, and (d) "killer statements" lamenting that new programs have already been tried unsuccessfully in the past (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012, pp. 48–49). This resistance impacts program effectiveness, equitable programming, and student outcomes and potentially highlights increased resistance to change among school staff and leadership thus aiding in the difficulty to implement new programs or initiatives.

### **External Barriers to School Counseling Leadership**

In addition to internal barriers that school counselors face such as professional identities and confidence, external barriers can exacerbate the difficulty specifically in meeting the needs of those in which they serve and the models in which they must adhere such time and efforts (Hilts

et al., 2019). There is often role ambiguity brought on by administrators who do not know what a school counselor does and assigns other duties not related to school counseling (Hilts et al., 2019). Furthermore, when administrators misunderstand the role of the professional school counselor and assign extra duties such as lunch duty, before and after school duty, or substitute teaching, the school counselor is removed from the ideal 80% of time being focused on direct student services potentially lending itself to feelings of inadequacy and ineffectiveness (ASCA, 2019). According to Fye et al. (2018), “regular engagement in inappropriate duties may create barriers to the full implementation of the ASCA national model and, therefore, reduce the ability of school counselors to effectively meet students’ career, academic, and social/emotional needs” (p. 3). This shift in priority and requested duties impacts the professional school counselor’s ability to lead and manage their school-based programming effectively as the competing demands and reprioritization of leadership responsibilities shifts based on duties otherwise assigned.

Unfortunately, the professional school counselor is often met with resistance due to the lack of administrators’ understanding of the professional school counselor’s training and depth of study in counseling and school counseling program implementation. Without this awareness, administrators unknowingly miss out on opportunities for students to gain through supporting the school counselor’s efforts and program adherence. This is often shadowed by the immediate needs in which administrators need fulfilled rather than investing in the long-term approach and preparation of a school counseling program implementation and the benefit for the school’s functioning (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Moreover, a lack of school leadership training on the roles and responsibilities of professional school counselors may negatively impact the requested versus required duties asked of the counselor. This lack of administrative training on the ASCA national model and the scope of the role of the school counselor limit programmatic implementation of school-based programming ((Boyland et al., 2019; Fye et al., 2018).

Additional external barriers for the leadership development of a professional school counselor include the potential of a genuine lack of training. With growing needs and increased enrollment in school counselor master’s programs, universities may not be doing enough to adequately prepare school counselors for leadership. Ideally, faculty in school counseling programs have served as school counselors and can provide not only research-based school counseling training but also practical and attainable strategies for fulfilling the role with efficacy and professionalism while also demonstrating the personal characteristics needed to gain the trust and confidence of the professional school counselor. The careful division of training the professional counselor in ethics, skills, theories, and practicum experience must also be partnered with school counseling program development, guidance, and leadership development training (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Furthermore, exploration regarding role clarity is important as alignment within the governing bodies of school counselors impacts the internalization and expectations of the field. A shared understanding of the role and responsibilities of school counselors by not only the counselor but also other stakeholders such as school leaders, administration, parents, and students helps programmatic success in meeting the needs of the students and border campus community (Boyland et al., 2019).

It is also worth noting that counselor positionality, bias, and background impacts school leadership. Research suggests that various factors such as a school counselor’s socioeconomic status, color, previous leadership experience, self-efficacy, and multicultural competence are associated with leadership practices (Hilts, Liu, Li, et al., 2022). In this, leadership is not fixed or predetermined. School counselors can strengthen their leadership by generating more experience

within their school such as initiating inaugural programming, collaborating with leadership, and attending professional development (Hilts, Liu, Li, et al., 2022).

### **The Leadership Challenge Model**

Professional school counselor advocacy in leadership efforts is not a new concept or need. One such model, the leadership challenge model, inspired five main efforts in developing the school counselor as a leader: (a) challenging the process, (b) inspiring a shared vision, (c) enabling others to act, (d) modeling the way, and (e) encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Kouzes and Posner (1995) developed the Leadership Practices Inventory that has been used by numerous researchers over varied professions including education and counseling.

While the leadership challenge model as applied to school counselors provides a step in the right direction promoting advocacy and awareness for the role of the professional school counselor, this calls for school counselors to have a willingness and the courage to step out of the need for compliance and be more visible and outspoken regarding the conflict between the perception and expectation of the role and to shift the view of school counselor from support staff to school counselor as leader within the schools. This model is not for the faint of heart because the school counselor leadership challenge model is just what it says it is: a challenge to the system and the manner in which school counselors are trained, utilized, and seen. While this change model inspires change and awareness to the true intent of the role of school counselor leadership, this model may not promote cohesiveness and a spirit of collaboration of efforts as the delivery of such a model must be handled with care and consideration of the receptiveness of such advocacy.

School counselors in training should receive knowledge and opportunities to develop leadership strategies and practices as they begin their career so that they are prepared for any systematic obstacles they may face. Effective leadership practices have been shown in research to be instrumental in promoting program success in the school counseling profession; therefore, counselor educators have a responsibility to equip their students with the tools that they need to be leading agents of change. The leadership challenge model (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) is one approach that may be useful in bridging the gap between students' theory and practice of leadership. By endowing them with the leadership perspectives and skills they need, school counseling students may be in a more advantageous position to disambiguate their roles, anticipate and counter resistance, overcome personal fears and doubt, and hopefully become effective change agents (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 17).

### **Holistic School Counseling Leadership**

Leadership inquiry through these theoretical modalities provides the opportunity for individuals to view the vast arena of leadership as a holistic and fluid construct. In this sense, leadership is not viewed as static or fixed traits that individuals either possess or lack but rather as an interactive constellating force that contributes to optimal leadership. This interactive framework views leadership as not being attributed to one characteristic, situation, or context but rather as the result of the various interactions of factors. The interrelation among these variables may be conceptualized as operating within a fluid continuum. The ends of such a continuum are largely influenced by the context in which the leader emerges; however, the placement within the continuum is greatly influenced by the personality and situation surrounding and influencing the

leader. Therefore, it is possible to create infinite leadership outcome possibilities as well as selections of effective action (Norcross et al., 2002)

Contextual continuum polarities may be hypothesized as resembling a three-dimensional model that consists of four points of reference. These points of reference relate to the degree to which the context influences and informs the emerging leader. Within the vertical portion of the model there are leadership contextual features pertaining to advocacy and legislation and organizational involvement. These leadership contexts represent the various settings in which counseling leaders are employed or represent the counseling profession. The horizontal portion of the model illustrates contextual factors such as research and education as well as practice and supervision. The clustering of these contextual features illustrates a best fit hypothesis in which there is overlap between the contextually related factors. Furthermore, these contextual points create the opportunity for leadership characteristics and situational influences to interact and places the leader into the three-dimensional model.

The characteristic element within the model relates to the abilities, skills, and knowledge that a counseling leader possesses. The documentation of leadership traits (e.g., emotional intelligence, empathy, communication skills, wisdom, authenticity, etc.) have received empirical support as contributing to effective leadership (George et al., 2007; Sperry, 2002; Zaccaro, 2007); however, there has been considerable variance related to these traits' abilities to consistently predict successful leadership. Therefore, the interaction of these traits with contextual features allows for the conceptualization of the placement of a counseling leader within the model. In addition, the degree to which these individuals possess skills such as rapport-building, active listening, and reframing also contribute to their placement in the model. In other words, certain contextual factors either interact well or not well with specific characteristics. The identification of these contextual areas and preferred leadership abilities should assist in the placement of the individual and subsequently the prediction of their effectiveness.

Situational influences represent the last component of the leadership model. The identification and examination of these influences have been shown to effectively predict leadership abilities (Sperry, 2002; Vroom & Jago, 2007). However, similar to personality traits, there have been considerably inconsistencies in accounting for a large amount of leadership and situational variability. Situational influences may be hypothesized as the forces that shape the situation in which the leader operates (e.g., goals, expectations, standards of performance, etc.) (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Similar to leadership traits, situational influences impact the potential effectiveness of counseling leaders. In other words, certain leadership traits either will interact well or not within specific contexts and situations. Therefore, the interaction of personality traits and situational influences should be pragmatically viewed within contextual areas. The identification of the context and the situational forces are needed to place the leader into the model and subsequently predict effectiveness.

The conceptualization of holistic school leadership attempts to actively identify and explore the various components influencing effective modes of leadership (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Successful leadership is not determined within a linear fashion but rather as an interactional construct. The interaction between context, characteristics, and situational influences considers the infinite number of potential leadership outcomes. Intuitively when one perceives the various forms of leadership, it is prudent to consider leadership as a fluid construct. The fluidity of such a construct is not determined by one sole factor but rather is determined by the integration of systemic features.

The application of the holistic model of school counseling leadership provides the profession with the opportunity to expand upon previous theoretical and empirical endeavors. This model is not intended to replace the utility of previous models but rather serves to enhance previous conceptualizations of the optimal leader. In the same vein of counseling integration and holistic perspectives, the aforementioned model creates an additional foundation for exploring the related variances in predicting effective leaders. Defining successful leadership within the counseling profession illustrates the considerable variability associated with the diversity of the field. Prediction of effective leadership in certain areas may not translate well into other areas of counseling. Therefore, it is essential for the counseling profession to critically and analytically place leadership theory into a fluid model of systemic influences rather than view it within a one-dimensional framework. The holistic leadership model creates the opportunity to systematically account for the various functions of effective leadership and the needs to be met by diverse school environments.

### **Discussion**

The aforementioned model of school counseling leadership connects school counselors to the ASCA national model. While the ASCA model is the proverbial gold standard for school counselors developing a comprehensive program, the focus is on data-driven program development that seeks to support students by removing environmental and institutional barriers; it is not leadership development. Research suggests that students socially and academically benefit from schools that have a school counselor facilitating a comprehensive guidance program (Wilkerson et al., 2013). Much like school counselors utilize existing data to refine their interventions and advocate for students, we suggest that having access to well-defined leadership skills to evaluate and improve would allow for further personal growth and development for the school counselor, directly impacting student outcomes. We suggest that leadership development for school counselors is the missing piece of a comprehensive program.

### **Limitations**

Current limitations for understanding school counselors as leaders may stem from (a) the disconnect between national and idealistic models, (b) school counselors completing other tasks as assigned outside of scope, and (c) a lack of reporting the lived experiences of the school counselor. Although the field is becoming more adept and agile at measuring school counseling program effectiveness, leadership inventories are rarely utilized as often as program effectiveness tools. For example, Gibson et al. (2018) developed a transformational leadership inventory for counselors to examine current leadership practices and strengthen their programming, yet such inventories are rarely utilized. Aside from studies specifically examining school counselors, the field and world of research generally lack definitive information and a common vernacular about how to define, measure, and implement leadership for school counselors.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While there are numerous leadership theories, the moral imperative for growth and change rests solely on the school counselor. We maintain that there is a need to measure the effectiveness of school counselors as leaders beyond comprehensive programmatic evaluation inclusive of



interpersonal inventories and evidence of personal leadership skill development and implementation. Dahir and Stone (2016) suggested that leadership development is a longitudinal process as opposed to a final outcome, and as a result, school counselors need continuous development in the domains of “self-awareness, facilitative communication, team development, and staff development delivery” (p. 109). We echo this sentiment in widening the scope of what school counselor effectiveness and leadership encompasses and measuring these traits within future studies to demonstrate school counseling leadership and effectiveness. However, the majority of existing research draws conclusions about school counselors through correlated traits such as demographics or soft skills (Hilts, Liu, & Luke, 2022) when much more direct data such as inventories, self-reporting, or interviews with school counselors are needed.

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