

HOW EDUCATIONAL LEADERS CAN USE COUNSELING PRINCIPLES AND SKILLS

As Alicia Newport,* a college instructor, left the treasurer's office, she felt as if nothing had been accomplished. In fact, she was now farther than ever from obtaining her request. Later, she confided to her best friend: "I admit that there are two sides to the issue and I didn't really expect to win, but at least I'd like to have engaged in some dialogue. I felt as if he was not listening to me. While I talked, he was thumbing through the policy book to find the statement to read to me. And my case is totally different. . .but he just didn't understand."

Faculty members as well as students tend to feel relaxed when talking to the school counselor to share a concern. But if the appointment is with the principal or president, their anxiety levels may increase significantly. School and college administrators pose a certain level of threat to individuals going to see them. Would counseling skills help administrators with these encounters? I believe so, and the literature also points in that direction.

When I accepted a position as academic dean, I was excited about the job's challenges and possibilities but sorry to leave behind my teaching and practice in psychology and counseling. However, I soon realized that my skills were quite useful in the new job. And when, years later, I was appointed university president, I found counseling skills to be even more useful!

Educational leaders spend much of their day interacting with people—in committee meetings, small groups, and one-on-one interviews. These encounters are often appointments made by employees or students to discuss problems, issues, worries, and personal requests. Counseling principles and skills were specifically designed for encounters where someone is seeking help, support, or understanding from another person—just what happens to educational leaders. This article reviews a number of counseling principles and skills that may be helpful.

*Not her real name.

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By Julian Melgosa

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How Does Counseling Work?

The basic assumption of counseling is that talking is good for the soul. When a person is listened to carefully by a caring counselor who asks the right questions and suggests valid alternatives, he or she leaves the room in a good emotional state and better prepared to face the difficulties of life. A counseling relationship among believers adds the crucial components of prayer, Bible references, the role of God and the Holy Spirit, and the function of a supporting church community.

Counseling follows a series of steps¹ beginning with (a) *a first encounter* between counselor and client (normally the initial session) to set up procedures, communicate expectations, and start building mutual trust. Soon after follows stage (b) *exploration*, when problems or issues are examined in detail. After sufficient analysis, (c) *insight* is achieved. This involves an understanding of the root, nature, and extent of the issue. Subsequently, the (d) *strategy* stage is reached—appropriate therapeutic techniques (or treatment) drawing on the worldview, background, and experience of the counselor. Finally, after the problem is resolved, point (e) *termination*, arrives—

when the counselee is able to proceed successfully without professional help.

Clara Hill and Karen O'Brien² have proposed an increasingly popular three-step model—Exploration-Insight-Action. Barbara Okun³ uses an even simpler two-step model consisting of (a) building the relationship through rapport and trust, and (b) planning-implementing-evaluating strategies.

Such sequences are often used by school administrators to explore existing problems with a member of their staff (or a student) in an attempt to discover suitable solutions. Then they take steps to implement a solution.

Unfortunately, those steps do not say much about the “how to.” The specific principles/skills used in the counseling process are the key to improving relationships. I would like to propose the following skills as most useful to educational leaders.

Rapport and Empathy

Rapport exists when people feel comfortable sharing ideas and feelings. When educational leaders interact with teachers, students, or fellow administrators, they need to develop

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good rapport in order to obtain a complete picture of the issue, especially if it involves a personal crisis. Rapport occurs when a person coming to talk to the administrator feels respected, accepted, and trusted. Much of the responsibility for achieving rapport lies with the leader. He or she needs to convey a message of trust and not judge too quickly. Carl Rogers⁴ calls this *unconditional positive regard*, a necessary ingredient for problem-solving.

Perhaps the main adversary of rapport is a judgmental attitude. People who feel judged will not speak freely, and those who judge will see judgment coming back at them. Jesus said: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”⁵

Empathy means trying to understand the other person’s emotions and feelings from his or her perspective. The teacher or student meeting with the administrator needs to feel understood. In order for this to happen, the leader needs to “walk in the other’s shoes” and “see the world through the

other person’s eyes.”

The high value of empathy has been underlined by many leading experts.⁶ It is perhaps the foremost factor in successful counseling. Empathy soothes tension, builds trust, improves mutual understanding, and promotes psychological healing. In addition, empathy must be *conveyed*. As David Martin⁷ indicates, it is not effective if it is not clearly communicated by appropriate verbal and non-verbal messages.

On one occasion, I had an unhappy teacher come to my office complaining about not getting an educational allowance that others received. He was noticeably irritated, and his voice began to rise. He kept saying that his professional accomplishments were at least equal to, if not higher than, those of others. As he talked, I realized that the problem was not really the money, but self-worth and personal value. I made no attempt to respond to his message

but rather tried to confirm his sentiments as I understood them.

In a calm voice, I said: “You are angry, you are mad” “Exactly right!” he replied. I said: “Do you perhaps feel neglected and rejected . . . as if nobody recognizes your achievements?” He agreed, and our dialogue improved considerably from that point on. Through my feedback, he realized that, albeit imperfectly, I was beginning to grasp his feelings. The matter could have been quickly “settled,” for he lacked sufficient ranking for the allowance. However, showing him the policy would not have assuaged his anger or reinforced his sense of personal worth. He was trapped in a strait-jacket of negative feelings, unable to engage in simple reasoning. At a later time, we had the chance to sit down together and work on his application for ranking.

Attending/Listening

Attending refers to one’s willingness to listen. As in the case of empathy, attending must not only be felt but also conveyed. In practice, attending requires active engagement with col-

Table 1

NONVERBAL MESSAGES AND THEIR POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION

Overt Behavior	Possible Meaning
Furrow on brow. Mouth tight.	Anger. Doubt. Concern.
Excessive blinking of eyes.	Nervousness. Embarrassment.
Teary eyes.	Sadness. Tenderness. Happiness.
Staring at objects.	Preoccupation. Wishes to convey lack of interest.
Eyelids halfway closed. Mouth halfway open.	Fatigue.
Lip biting.	Nervousness. Anxiety.
Blushing.	Embarrassment. Anxiety.
Movement of arms and hands to convey message.	Excitement. Conviction.
Crossed legs and arms.	Resistance.
Tapping. Sighing.	Trying to convey boredom or disagreement.
Leaning forward. Facing squarely.	Openness to communication and exchange.
Silence.	Need for time to organize thoughts. Inner conflict.

Although the above interpretations have been broadly confirmed in Euro-American cultures, there are many other non-verbal behaviors in other cultures. Educational leaders should observe and study the non-verbal variations of behavior in their environment.

leagues or subordinates. A person coming to see the administrator will get the right message if he or she observes eye contact, lifting of eyebrows, head movements, nods, smiles, a body posture showing interest, and appropriate sounds of acknowledgment: “mm-hmm,” “yeah,” a sigh, or a laugh. Attending makes the other person feel worthy and more willing to proceed and share deeper levels of experience. On the contrary, when signs of attending are absent (e.g., looking at one’s watch, yawning, lack of eye contact), the person feels rejected, unworthy, and thus unwilling to share any feelings.

Listening is defined by Egan⁸ as the act of capturing and understanding the message, either verbally or non-verbally, clearly or vaguely. Listening is a central skill for anyone wishing to communicate with other human beings and is especially useful to the educational leader, who must spend large amounts of time listening to others.

Listening is not easy. Administrative positions demand fixed schedules, so it’s tempting to worry about the next hour’s meeting instead of listening. It’s difficult to listen when one is tired or concerned about some imminent event (e.g., a committee meeting or class coming after the interview). In such cases, it may be best to explain the circumstances and postpone the appointment. Often, however, this is not possible.

To eliminate distractions, imagery is particularly useful. The listener makes a mental moving picture of the information being conveyed, elaborates on it, adds some color and perhaps a bit of humor. In that way, it is possible to concentrate more fully and better retain the events in memory. If the information is highly abstract, the listener can focus his or her attention on the other person, trying to identify the feelings behind the message (i.e., What is the connotation of the words she is using?), looking for generalizations (i.e., “People are so demanding...” “I always for-

get...”), and distortions (i.e., “I am not liked by any of my colleagues...”). This mental activity will help keep the mind focused.

Non-Verbal Messages

Ever since Theodore Reik⁹ published his book *Listening With the Third Ear* more than 50 years ago, many counselors have used the expression “listen with your third ear” to indicate that one can gain the full message only after paying attention to non-verbal indicators. See Table 1 for examples.

Non-verbal behavior and its meaning may vary considerably from culture to culture, so administrators need to observe and study the environment where they work in order to interpret messages accurately. I became aware of this through one of my students from Tanzania. He asked questions and participated in class, but when I answered him or commented on his remarks, he

would not look me in the eye. He looked down at his notebook or toward a side wall. I was so annoyed at his behavior that I could hardly focus on what I was saying. I concluded that he was rude and had a bad attitude.

A few days later, I was talking to an East African friend. He told me that certain tribes in Tanzania consider it to be disrespectful to look openly into the face of an elder when he speaks to them—doing so would mean defiance. Soon, I realized that my Tanzanian student was actually trying to show his respect by not looking at me directly. Knowing this made me feel relaxed and able to interpret his behavior in a positive manner.

Open Questions

By asking open questions, administrators can gain an understanding that goes beyond the bare facts. Unfortunately, educational leaders tend to be

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quite specific in their questioning. They are interested in exploring the facts, in getting yes/no answers, and in asking “Why” questions. While this can be appropriate for fact-finding, it is quite limiting when exploring personal and relational issues.

A study conducted by Barkham and Shapiro¹⁰ and another by Hill, et al.¹¹ show that when open questions are used, people tend to tell their story more fully and talk more about their feelings. These questions provide direction and help the person focus on the most relevant aspects of his or her account. To elicit answers with substance,

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it is much better to ask questions such as: “What do you mean by that?” “What else happened?” “How do you feel about it?” or “Tell me more about that,” rather than inquiries such as: “How many were there?” “Who told you?” or “Why didn’t you go?”

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure means being willing to share relevant information about oneself and to be vulnerable. To do this, the educational leader can present a brief, personal account of a similar nature to the one being shared by the other person—“I can understand how you feel because many years ago, I also lost my father . . .”

Self-disclosure has several benefits: Hearing about a similar experience

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from the leader helps the person understand her or his own experience better. It also helps the listener feel less threatened, knowing that someone else has gone through a similar experience and survived. Finally, it helps balance the power, showing that the educational administrator is a real person. This enhances rapport and will usually have a positive effect on the relationship and on the resolution of the issue.

This principle finds a parallel in our relationship with Jesus. When tempted or in pain, we can feel reassured because He has experienced the same things—“for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin.”¹² Because He lived among us, Jesus is able to feel as we feel and experience our joys and pain. Thus, the administrator who discloses a personal experience can communicate caring and servant leadership.

A common mistake is the tendency to use self-disclosure to make a point, rather than to empathize. Greenberg et al.¹³ called this “promiscuous self-disclosure.” I remember when a business manager dismissed my concerns with this type of self-disclosure. It was my first job, and I was struggling financially, so I went to him to make a request that I thought was reasonable. He denied my request, and I accepted his decision. But then he proceeded to tell me how at the beginning of his career, he also struggled financially. At his family table, he would have liked an extra slice of cheese, but refrained from taking a second helping, as he could not afford it. This, in my opinion, was a misuse of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure should be used to help a person bear pain produced circumstantially or

by an external individual, but not pain produced by the decision of the educational leader himself. Instead of using self-disclosure appropriately, the administrator, using himself as an example, attempted to lecture me and to brag about his own virtues!

Confrontation

A confrontation or challenge occurs when an administrator identifies a discrepancy, contradiction, irrational attitude, or fundamental disagreement that needs to be challenged.

Challenges are ways to point out the discrepancy or disagreement, not ways to blame or judge. Let us look at a biblical example. Jesus had a series of disheartening events recorded in Luke, chapters 9 and 10. Not only had recent events been extremely unpleasant, but He faced imminent death. He did not need a buffet dinner but conversation, affection, and companionship . . . so He went to His friends’ house in Bethany. Mary hit the target, while Martha gave herself up to the monumental task of entertainment, which normally would be praiseworthy, but here was off target. Jesus did not blame Martha. He did not even tell her that her efforts were not helpful. He simply pointed out a better way: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”¹⁴

Confrontation statements must be made gently, respectfully, and thoughtfully, implying acceptance rather than criticism. Above all, such statements should be made only after the relationship is well established, when the administrator has consistently shown support and empathy. Scott Meier and Susan Davis¹⁵ include this principle among their Elements of Counseling—“You may confront as much as you have supported.”

I learned this principle when working as director of an international language program at an Adventist academy/junior college. Every year, a new batch of students enrolled in a year-long foreign-language program, most

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of them Seventh-day Adventists. A number of female students wore jewelry. This was not an issue in their home environment, but it was unacceptable at our school. So I had the responsibility of “laying down the law.” The large majority did not welcome my enforcement of this rule and, although many complied, they would put the jewelry back on as soon as they left school property. I was unhappy with this outcome, and so with the next group of students, I decided to wait a week before I invited them not to use jewelry. This made the principal restless, but I pleaded for a little extra time.

For a few days, I attempted to build a caring relationship with the students, showing interest in their families, their adaptation to a new culture, new language, etc. I also tried to help them with their practical needs. During this time, I became basically jewelry-blind. After a few days, I talked to them individually about the rule and the reasons behind it. The results, though not perfect, were much better than the initial

experience. This convinced me that, regardless of my position, I did not have the right to invite anyone to change their lifestyle until I had made them my friends.

Educational leaders can benefit from using counseling principles and skills. Following the basic counseling steps smooths out the relationship between leaders and subordinates. It pays great dividends to build up rapport, to learn how to listen and to read non-verbal messages, to pose open questions, and to make adequate use of self-disclosure and confrontation.

For the administrator, and especially for the Christian administrator, decisions are very important but not as important as people. A sound, logical, and “effective” decision may be disastrous if it destroys relationships. Likewise, a mediocre decision, backed by satisfied individuals, can be potentially remarkable. Wise administrators will seek to implement actions in the context of happy and congenial relationships. ✍

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