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Teaching Basic Counseling Skills to Aspiring School Leaders: Active Listening Skills as Critical Components of Team Building and Collaboration

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Changing Standards for School Leadership Programs

The preparation of school leaders in educational leadership programs provides multiple challenges in terms of a set course of study with discrete skills for the leader. Programs in educational leadership have been criticized for curricular disarray (Levine, 2005). Deficiencies cited by an American Enterprise Institute study of 31 educational leadership programs found that a small percentage of instruction in those programs focused on issues such as data analysis, public relations, marketing, and parent and school board relations (Hess & Kelly, 2005). A Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) study of educational leadership programs found that the majority of universities “fall short of implementing the conditions necessary to create high quality programs centered on preparing principals who can lead improvement in student achievement” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005, p. 8). A move away from curricula organized along those lines began in the 1980s with a new emphasis on skills required of an instructional leader (Hallinger, 2003; Jason, 2001). Most representative of this focus was the alignment of educational leadership curricula with standards set by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). These standards have since been folded into the Educational Leadership Constituent Consortium (ELCC) Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership (SAPEL) of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). These standards emphasize knowledge, skills, and performance-based indicators associated with the development and implementation of an organization-wide vision, data collection and analysis, and communication/collaboration with the various groups that make up a school community (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). The standards are recognized by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the accrediting body for colleges of education and have been incorporated into the Georgia Educational Leadership Performance Standards adopted by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) as the guiding standards for the certification of educational leaders.

The new educational leadership curriculum as envisioned by the ELCC, the NPBEA, NCATE, and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission is based on the ability of a leader to work with colleagues, students, parents, and
stakeholders from businesses and the community at large (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). The school leader must work with these various constituent groups in the development and implementation of an organizational vision, collecting and analyzing data, and working in collaboration with those groups to develop plans that can implement the school vision in a way that is consistent with directions indicated by data.

The New Work of the School Leader

Marino (2007) states that effective leadership in today's new paradigm stems from "shared vision, mission, core values, and goals" (p.10) that guide organizations toward improvement. Such shared vision results from consensus and buy-in that are the products of processes that ensure input from stakeholders. These processes should emphasize such concepts as mutuality and empowerment with groups working together synergistically toward their goals (Revolutionary Concepts of Leadership, 2006). Zappulla (2003) cites collaborative leadership as a new millennium leadership skill because of "educational reform, accountability and strategic planning – not only from the principal but the whole school community” (p. 29). The necessity for improved collaboration and communication stem, in part, from the fact that leadership has been distributed to faculty and staff members who become leaders in the eyes of their peers (Spillane, 2006). Leveraging this dynamic through the development of leadership teams is critical to continued school improvement. Key to effective teamwork is the development of a relationship that “has a common purpose, understanding, commitment, structure, and operational procedures” (Zappulla 2003, p. 30).

Among changes in the educational landscape are emphases on school effectiveness and improvement along with the development of partnerships with diverse groups of stakeholders. This new paradigm goes beyond internal communication and collaboration within the microcosm of the school (students, staff, and teachers) and even the macrocosm of the immediate stakeholder group (parents, community members), and extends to partnerships with other schools, businesses and the community at large (Evans, Castle, Cooper, Glatter, & Woods, 2005).

An entirely new skill set is required of principals so that they can lead in an environment where synergistic cooperation is critical to continued improvement. The number and diversity of stakeholders involved in the school decision-making process requires collaborative skills that principals, in many cases, do not have and that are not being taught in programs that train school leaders (Slater, 2005). While collaboration has been established in a wide array of articles and reports as a critical leadership skill, defining a set of leader skills leading to collaborative learning environments has remained elusive. Thus, adding “the component of collaboration to an administrator’s professional skills is a daunting task” (Slater, 2005, p. 321).

In a 2005 study regarding principal behaviors contributing to collaboration, participants identified communication skills that include listening and openness as being critical to the fostering of a collaborative environment:

Participants identified specific communicative behaviors that principals demonstrate which can support collaboration in the school. Although all participants in the study agreed that effective principals must have highly developed communication skills, they felt that listening and openness are particularly important in providing support; however, when our emotions are raging inside, it may be difficult to listen
Leadership experts writing for the corporate sector often cite collaborative skills as critical to effectiveness of businesses in terms of profitability and return on investment. Romig (2001) identified seven principles of leadership associated with outstanding corporate business performance. These principles reflect spheres of leader behavior associated with the development of a collaborative environment where teams do the work of creative innovation, product development, and service delivery. These spheres include: Personal Leadership, Interpersonal Leadership, Team Leadership, and Organizational Leadership. Leadership behaviors critical to high performance in the corporate sector depend upon communication skills, specifically two-way communication skills (Romig, 2001). Goleman (1998) and Salopek (1998) state that the competencies associated with emotional intelligence are more important in effective job performance than are cognitive ability and expertise. The higher one rises in an organization, the more important are the emotional competencies possessed by an individual, making emotional competencies crucial to the success of a leader. The work of Boyatzis, Goleman, and Rhee (1999), articulated a framework for the clustering of emotional competencies. Two of the four dimensions in this model, social awareness and relationship management, deal with leader behaviors that reflect ability in collaborative skills.

Wasonga and Murphy (2007) explain the leader role as one where the leader not only guides the group but is also guided by the group, a dynamic they define as co-creating. Essential to this dynamic is the leader behavior of active listening:

In order to interact effectively, influence people and learn the ideas of the people in the organization, it is necessary to understand them. Thus, listening is essential for gathering information and ideas needed to lead. To listen well takes practice, energy and hard work. (p. 23)Active Listening

Listening is one of the most elementary activities in which one can participate, but the act itself is often taken for granted (Dennis, 2004). Encouraging students to take an active role instead of a passive role in their listening is the essence of active listening. Active listening is the process of not only capturing the content of another’s message but also the tone, voice, and body language of the person (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2006). Wasonga and Murphy (2007) list active listening as an essential disposition for leaders.

Although many students think of active listening as one particular skill, it is important to reframe the mindset. Active listening is really a skill set instead of a particular skill. These skills represent a higher level of complexity than simply receiving information from a speaker. In order to reframe this mindset, it is essential to break down the listening process skill-by-skill. The particular skills used in active listening can be categorized in two ways: what the listener brings to the session and what the listener does during the encounter.

To use active listening effectively it is important to help students think about what they bring to a conversation. It is our goal to stress the skill of being congruent or genuine in interactions. The willingness to see the speaker’s experience from his or her worldview as if it were the worldview of the listener is the skill of empathy. Wanting the best for the speaker without conditions is the skill of unconditional positive regard. Congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard are skills that build trust within relationships (Welfel & Patterson, 2005). These skills may also be tied to a
person’s philosophy of life as a serving professional.

Active listening skills that must be taught are attending and paraphrasing. Attending is the process of tuning into the content and actions of the speaker. Using body posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and acknowledging the physical positioning between speaker and listener are ways of encouraging the speaker to continue to communicate (Welfel & Patterson, 2005). Attending also involves paying close attention to the speaker’s nonverbal communication. Educational Leadership students must learn how to apply this skill to a group setting as well (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2006). The skill of paraphrasing is the process of repeating back to the speaker the information that the listener heard. Johnson (2002) speaks of paraphrasing as having different levels. The first level is reflecting content, the actual words the speaker used. The second level is depth. Matching the depth of language and intensity of the speaker shows more interest and encourages more communication. The third level is meaning. Meaning is when the listener takes clues from the nonverbal communication, context, and other information available to read between the lines of what speaker is saying. Attending and paraphrasing work together with empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard to encourage the speaker to continue communicating.

Allowing students to become aware of their motives for listening is another part of teaching active listening. Johnson (2002) speaks of five motives of which one should be aware. The most common motive used is evaluation. This motive refers to the act on the part of the listener in making a judgment on the speaker’s actions. Interpretation involves the listener trying to give feedback to the speaker regarding meaning and usually leads to the giving of advice.

Supporting is another listener motive that is used to reassure, calm, or side with the speaker. Probing is a motive used to gain more information or encourage the speaker to expound. The least-used motive is understanding. This motive is when the listener creates a response to check-in with the speaker to make sure he or she understands the message that is intended by the speaker. While all of these motives are beneficial in communicating, our teaching in the Counseling, Educational Leadership and Professional Studies Department (CELPS) at Columbus State University (CSU) stresses the motives of support and understanding. It is our belief that these motives are more consistent with the current shift in leadership from a heroic stance to more of a collaborative or transformational stance (Wasonga & Murphy, 2007).

Teaching Active Listening to Aspiring Leaders

The model of leadership taught in CELPS at CSU is the Transformational Leadership Model (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Avolio & Bass, 2004). Dimensions of the Transformational Leadership Model include Idealized Influence (attributed) where the leader fosters trust and respect through interactions with others; Idealized Influence (behavior) where the leader emphasizes shared sense of mission; Inspirational Motivation where the leader works to motivate others and foster a shared vision; Intellectual Stimulation where the leader stimulates creativity and innovation; and Individual Consideration where the leader acts as coach and mentor. As in the model of leadership developed by Romig (2001), the Transformational Leadership Model requires two-way interaction between the leader and others. In both the Master of Education and Educational Specialist in Educational Leadership degree programs, active listening is taught in several courses: Collaboration

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for School/Student Improvement, a graduate seminar required for graduate students in teacher education, school counseling, and educational leadership programs; Collaboration for Improved Student Achievement offered to aspiring leaders at the master’s degree level; and Team Building and Communication offered at the specialist degree level. The approach to teaching active listening stresses the support and understanding motives for the listener.

In training aspiring leaders in active listening, it is important to convey the reason for such training and the objectives of the training. Often, aspiring leaders who have been trained as content specialists and pedagogy experts have had success in the classroom. As successful classroom teachers, these aspiring leaders have honed management skills and proven themselves as successful managers (Hackett & Baltimore, 2007).

While many of those management skills translate well into new leadership roles in the schools, the need to lead in a transformational style requires new skills that lead to the identification and articulation of a vision, the fostering of acceptance of group goals, and the establishment of intellectual stimulation (Leithwood, 1993). Leaders dealing with communities associated with the schools must be able to get a picture of the topography that exists relative to community dynamics (Hackett & Baltimore, 2007). Once rationale and objectives have been conveyed to students, the actual training in the skill set takes place. The training is accomplished through three modules: the initial instruction/practice phase; the intensive practice phase; and the application phase including practice through a team scenario.

Module 1: Initial Instruction and Practice

In the initial instruction phase, the basic active listening skills are introduced through lecture. The skills include full attention of the listener demonstrated through the practice of posture, eye contact and body language behaviors discussed by Welfel and Patterson (2005) and verbal and non-verbal cues and feedback of the type presented by Johnson (2002). During the lecture, the skills are modeled by instructors using role play. It is critical to convey to students that the speaker must perceive that he or she is being heard. Several listener practices that promote and inhibit this perception are reviewed prior to the initial practice of the skills.

In order to practice the skills, students work in pairs to practice with a partner. They are asked to recall the “worst teaching experience” of their careers and share that experience with their partners while the partners practice the active listening skills. This scenario proves popular because the stories are easy to recall, are detailed, and make for animated communication and discussion. During this practice session, instructors circulate and coach listeners. At the end of the practice sessions, speakers critique their listeners using the practices shared during lecture as standards by which to measure and coach. This feedback underscores another important aspect of collaboration. Following the pair practice and critique, both listeners and speakers share their practice-related experiences with the class. Additionally, students are assigned to practice the skills in a variety of settings including home and work and reflect on that practice in a journal.

Module 2: Intensive Practice

The second instructional module begins with a review of active listening skills in class discussion followed by the sharing of homework practice activities with new pair partners. In pairing and group work, it is important to change partners and groups
regularly so that the practice is performed with new and unfamiliar associates. During the sharing sessions, the active listening skills are practiced while instructors circulate and coach participants in appropriate listening behaviors.

Once the skills have been reviewed through discussion and sharing in pairs, students are assigned roles to play in three school-based scenarios. In one scenario, the listener is a teacher who has assigned a grade of “zero” to a cheating student while the speaker is a parent petitioning for a second chance for the student (Table 1).

In a second scenario, the listener is the leader of a school team recommending options for teachers to implement for students with learning and behavior problems while the speaker is a teacher who wishes for the student to be removed from class. In a third scenario, the listener is a principal known for supporting teachers while the speaker is a parent with a complaint about a teacher. All scenarios are based on real events.

Members of pairs alternate between the role of listener and speaker as the scenarios are assigned. Participants prepare briefly and then work through the scenario as instructors circulate and coach participants in appropriate use of the skills. The speakers are encouraged to play their roles with enthusiasm while the listeners practice the active listening skills throughout the scenario. The verisimilitude of the scenarios quickly lead to animated discussions where listeners can practice the skills of active listening in emotional situations that are safe owing to the fact that the drama transpires in a training environment.

Practice of the active listening skills during this module proves to be more difficult than the practice during the first module. The conflict inherent in the scenarios often leads the listener and speaker to want to move quickly to a resolution of the conflict. Students are encouraged to practice the active listening skills rather than work toward quick resolution.

Module 3: Team Scenario

In the third module, students are assigned to a team scenario in a fictional Elementary school. In this school scenario, team members play the roles of teachers from various grade levels and the roles of counselor, assistant principal and principal who are reviewing test data from one grade level and developing recommendations regarding a school improvement plan. The focus of the team members on a specific task serves to distract students from the practice of active listening even though the scenario is presented as a follow-up listening activity. Often, the students revert to behaviors that are characteristic and comfortable for them as individuals. Students who are extroverted or who naturally seek leadership responsibility take the lead in setting the
team agenda and direction. They spend a great deal of time talking during the team meeting. Students who are more reserved make few attempts initially to share their thoughts although they may make attempts at non-verbal active listening behaviors. Finally, there are group members who participate only passively, either quietly listening or engaging in non-task related behaviors such as doodling, looking ahead in text or syllabus material, or working on other tasks.

Instructors who are circulating work with the teams to ensure that everyone participates, that everyone is heard, and that everyone perceives that their thoughts are heard. As in the intensive practice scenarios from Module 2, the initial inclination of the team members is to seek closure through the quick development of school improvement recommendations. They find that the practice of the active listening skills slows down the process. Moving toward the quick solution advanced by more extroverted team members can lead to groupthink or rush to judgment and can lead to bad decisions ratified by the group (Glaser, 2005).

Once the scenario is concluded, team members share their thoughts in class discussion regarding the application of active listening skills in the team setting. It is not unusual to have students comment on the tendency of groups to move toward groupthink, even after training in the active listening skills.

Future Directions

Training in active listening for aspiring leaders was initiated in CELPS at CSU three years ago. During the initial design phase, counseling faculty from the department provided support in designing the instructional modules, particularly in coaching the module designer in efficacious listening practices. Many classroom sessions have included faculty trained as school leaders and those trained as counselors working together as co-instructors. The collaboration of leaders and trained counselors in activity design and implementation has resulted in modules that provide powerful learning activities for students.

Program Expansion

Work remains to be done in the expansion of collaboration among faculty from counseling, educational leadership, and teacher education in the design and implementation of training for educators in collaborative skills. One focus for future design efforts should be additional modules designed to enable students skilled in the practice of active listening to learn skills associated with conflict resolution and techniques that move teams toward closure. One critique of the training modules as they now exist is that parties involved in issues where conflict must be resolved or consensus must be achieved should come to some resolution regarding the issues under discussion. There is, after all, only so much that skilled listening can accomplish. It is up to the leader to exhibit the sensitivity and skill to move such discussions toward fruitful resolution through adroit focus on win-win solutions. Modules focusing on such skills will enable aspiring leaders and other educators to move beyond active listening toward resolution.

Research

Research regarding the efficacy of the practice of active listening in promoting collaborative environments conducive to the new work of the educational leader is warranted, although the design of such research presents unique challenges. Among those challenges are the design of metrics and instruments measuring the effectiveness of the practice of active listening in fostering collaboration.

The training of aspiring leaders in the use of active listening skills to promote trust and collaboration has potential in terms
of being a critical component in the preparation of professionals for the new work of the school leader. Such training has implications, as well, for the training of all educators as the definition of leadership in the schools is expanded.

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