

Benchmark: Personal Leadership & Advocacy Philosophy

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Leadership and advocacy in the counseling field is expansive, not limited by classic leading roles such as manager, professor, or CEO of a company. Instead, leadership and advocacy opportunities occur at every level including direct care provider, clinical director, and company founder. These opportunities also occur within the counselor education system, through mentorship roles, advising positions, and student leadership. The core of good leadership is founded in a solid professional identity and regular engagement in and development of training.

I strive to approach leadership through servanthood, to lead by example in a way that is focused on the needs and growth of others, fostering a sense of transformative leadership, building community through trust and encouragement. I have struggled in positions requiring transactional leadership styles, because I have felt there was a focus on numbers over people. A blend of transactional and transformative leadership is preferred within this profession, as we must hold supervisees to the required standards while also encouraging them to pursue their interests while building on their strengths (Chang & Minton, 2022).

Identity

Professional identity often connects with leadership and advocacy opportunities, as they are both related to interests and passions. Leaders within the counseling profession have promoted areas of advocacy over the past few decades, and there are almost endless opportunities for future advocacy projects. A master's level professor should approach this differently than in a post-master's program due to the differences in student's development level and potential for establishing a professional identity. Within the master's programs, professors can begin discussion of professional advocacy through discussing ways to identify programs that

have already been established. At the doctoral level, professors can assist students in finding program gaps and working to develop steps for closing them.

Identity often serves as the foundation for pursuing advocacy projects, which has been clear in my own advocacy pursuits. As I have navigated the professional landscape of counseling within my region, I have realized a potential hurdle for religious counselors. Towards the beginning of my career, I was surprised to be asked ‘how’ I work with individuals in the queer community who are not actively pursuing biblical lifestyles. As someone who graduated from a the same religious program as this individual, I was shocked by the narrow multicultural lens displayed by this individual.

Training

Leadership can be expressed as both a personality trait and as a developed skill. Individuals naturally gifted in leading may pursue more opportunities to strengthen these skills, but does not mean that individuals who are not natural leaders should not do the same. There are many resources on becoming a leader and workshops exist to develop these traits. In addition, leaders should remain well-informed of changing landscapes in the counseling profession and surround themselves with other leaders who are doing the same. I do not feel that strong, healthy leaders exist in a vacuum, as there is no accountability or regular opportunities for self-reflection. Attendance at professional conferences is essential to encourage networking and remain up to date regarding new techniques or projects.

Engaging in training opportunities facilitates communication about community needs and opportunities for advocacy work, including the development of trainings through these opportunities. A classmate made a specific point about the unending nature of advocacy work, which has resonated with me throughout this course. Chang and Minton (2022) make reference

to advocacy consciousness and the past few decades of advocacy work that has led to the development of the American Counseling Association (ACA) and its divisions such as the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). The ever-changing culture of each region, state, country, and the world mean that advocacy work and opportunity for research in the profession is never complete. Just like our calling as Christians, the work will not be done until Christ returns to this earth.

Future Directions

As I continue to pursue leadership opportunities, my goal is to remain humble and aware of the needs of the individuals who are under my leadership, to be attuned to their strengths so I can encourage them to pursue these areas as they advance. My own approach to leadership has developed through my own experiences with both healthy and unhealthy leaders, as well as my pursuit of growth through training. As I reflect on my desire to teach future counselors, I think about the professors who inspired me to pursue teaching in addition to my career as a counselor – the teachers who brought the course material alive and inspired me to dive deeper into what I was learning. I hope to lead as these professors led and encouraged me in my natural strengths of connection and support of others.

One of my first goals is to identify advocacy opportunities within my new practice, as each of us are interested in underserved populations in our community. One of my colleagues and I have started connecting with local schools in our community to establish relationships for future psychoeducation and therapy opportunities. I have already connected with a guidance counselor at a school in walking distance of my practice. In addition, I will be continuing research on group resources for high school juniors and seniors who are anxious about post-graduate life with the plan to establish a group in the fall of 2024.

Additionally, I would like to investigate additional opportunities for reaching bachelor's level students and communicating with them about the profession and future educational opportunities. I have had multiple conversations with psychology students who are unsure about counseling as a profession or feel as though their undergraduate program did not prepare them for the counseling field. I would like to do some research within our own university to see what advising opportunities are provided and look to develop a Q&A for students looking to pursue post-graduate education. I am participating on a panel for master's levels students who are interested in doctoral programs, and I plan to evaluate ways this can be applied to other educational levels.

My role as a supervisor places me in a perfect position to discuss leadership and advocacy as a part of my supervision plan. I am currently working with a resident in counseling and a bachelor's level intern, at two very distinct development levels. For my bachelor's intern, I have been working with her to identify her counseling focus, and plan to incorporate a discussion of advocacy work as she moves further in the field. I have also invited her to attend LU research week with me to introduce the concept of professional research in counseling and the importance of ongoing advocacy work. For the resident, I have been discussing her leadership role within her agency, and how she can continue to trust her instincts and lead new employees or entry-level staff.

Ultimately my goal as a leader is to create an atmosphere that encourages others to pursue their interests and facilitates an environment of growth and learning. I want to lead by example in my advocacy work as I pursue my interests and help religious counselors feel more confident when working with unique multicultural groups. Previous supervisees have reported I am encouraging and have been a safe place to learn techniques while identifying areas of

professional development. I hope to continue using my professional standing, personality, and career setting to encourage future counselors to engage in leadership and advocacy work.

References

Chang, C., & Minton, C. (2022). *Professional counseling excellence through leadership and advocacy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.