A Primer on Organizational Ethics and Leadership for Professional School Counselors

Beto Davison Avilés, PhD
Associate Professor of Education and Coordinator
Professional School Counseling Program
Bradley University
1501 W Bradley Ave, Peoria, IL 61625, USA.

Jobie L. Skaggs
Associate Professor of Education and Coordinator
Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program
Bradley University
1501 W Bradley Ave, Peoria, IL 61625, USA.

Abstract

The transforming school counselor initiative directs counselors to move beyond their roles as helpers to individuals to organizational or school improvement catalysts. A parallel moral shift from individual ethics to individual-organizational-systemic ethics must accompany this transformation. This article provides the reader with a blueprint for understanding the ethics of organizations and how those standards inform leadership for professional school counselors.

Seldom a day goes by that a professional school counselor does not face a decision or circumstance requiring ethical decision-making or behavior. Counselors encounter ethical issues with individuals: students, teachers, administrators, colleagues, the list goes on. Individual ethics, that is, standards of behaviors and decision-making models dealing with individuals, are, for the most part what professional school counselors typically encounter in their training. It would not be surprising to find that many school counselors see the application of ethics as individual-based.

However, professional school counselors must also deal with ethical issues at the systemic or organizational level. Policies and procedures at the district or building level can help or harm. School climate or the organizational health of the building community transcends the behaviors of individuals and is reflective of a myriad of events: organizational culture, communication, leadership styles of administrators and teachers, the physical plant, the surrounding community, including socio-economics, safety, and governmental influence.

For professional school counselors, ethics are morally-based, agreed-upon standards of behavior and practice (Stone & Dahir, 2006; Remley & Herlihy, 2005). The shift from individual to organizational ethics requires counselors to understand and apply these standards of behavior and practice on a larger, multi-systemic level. This article will provide the reader with a blueprint for understanding the ethics of organizations and how those standards inform leadership for professional school counselors.

The Transformed Counselor and Ethical Transformation

Perhaps the largest evolutionary shift in professional school counseling has been the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 2007). As a result of this initiative, school counselors have seen their role become an amalgam of individual specialist and developmental expert, leader, collaborator, and systemic intervener. Erford, House, and Martin (2007) point out that inequitable educational practices and failing schools call for school counselors to be advocates and school-change agents. Counselors must move beyond their roles as helpers to school improvement catalysts.

Likewise, Johnson (2007) highlights the recent spate of organizational failings, ranging from Arthur Anderson's fraudulent accounting to the Air Force Academy's sexual assault/harassment problems, as harbingers of change. Johnson takes a strong stance on these problems, issuing a mandate for ethical changes at the organizational level:

> "To transform something means to alter its very nature or essence for the better . . . Transformation places ethics at the center of the workplace, significantly altering attitudes, thinking, communication, behavior, culture, and systems." (p. xv).

Borrowing from Covey (2004), in the context of systemic and collaborative interventions, the transformed school counselor can be thought of as doing things right (managing). The accompanying ethical transformation that includes organizations and schools may be thought of as doing the right thing (leading). In managing and leading a school counseling program, it is imperative that the transformation of professional school counselors be accompanied by a parallel transformation of ethics from individual-based to individual-system-organization based.

School reform has historically been fueled by inequitable education and access to high quality teachers, schools, and curricula (Erford, 2007). The demand for reform has increased as higher numbers of students from poverty and greater racial/ethnic diversity in schools have challenged educators and counselors to develop new ways to teach and help children. Missing from the equation is the (almost heretical) question: are consistently higher-performing schools also more ethical organizations, where students, teachers, administrators, and other staff behave in ethical and moral ways? Are high performing schools that way because they have ethical leaders who understand and use power and empowerment wisely? Recent research using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) found that variables associated with ethical organizations, trust, shared expectations, and positive interactions among students, teachers, and administrators, are predictors of successful student outcomes (Stewart, 2008).

The conceptual underpinnings of these questions are addressed in Johnson's (2007) model on personal ethical development and ethically transformed organizations. He offers an innovative array of ideas and interventions for school counselors to use in helping eliminate inequitable educational practices at the organizational level. It will serve as a backdrop for the current discussion on professional school counselors' leadership and responsibility in creating an ethical workplace.

Ethical types of Organizations

The notion of institutionalizing ethics, that is, making ethics a common part of an organization's identity, has been around for over a decade (Sims, 1991). Indeed, Purcell and Weber (as cited in Sims, 1991) indicated strongly that organizations cannot be partially ethical, rather, they must "graft a new branch on the corporate decision-making tree – a branch that reads "right/wrong" (p. 493). In a similar fashion, Johnson (2007) suggests that organizations (schools in this case) may be either ethically decoupled or ethically transformed. Simply put, schools may either pay lip service to ethics or they may be positively transformed by them.

Johnson (2007) explains that decoupled organizations may look ethical on the outside, but upon closer inspection fail to demonstrate behaviors and policies that reflect a true ethical nature. Ethically decoupled organizations behave differently than stated values imply, see ethics as a means to an end (to have a "better image" p. xv), and fail to notice moral dilemmas.

A decoupled school would likely control behavior through rules and penalties, have lower trust levels, and have teams or cliques that behave unethically. Counselors, teachers, and administrators who are veterans of public and private education likely have worked in such schools and euphemistically considered the experiences "character-building". It is time for this kind of character-training to end and be replaced by transformed professionals and organizations whose central focus is education with an ethical foundation. Ethically transformed schools are explicit and clear about ethical practice. They are true to their higher moral nature and essentially walk their talk. Johnson (2007) suggests these organizations behave consistently with their collective values, see ethics as an end in and of itself, and have keen radar for moral issues. Dollarhide (2003) points out that as human resource leaders, counselors inspire and empower others, mirroring Johnson's ethically coupled organization that shows a self-less high concern for others, a high concern for stakeholders, and a social and global conscience. This is opposed to the decoupled notion of high concern only for the organization.

Phillips and Freeman (2003) argue that organizations must have their own codes of ethics that guide their everyday activities. Derived from business ethics, Phillips and Freeman's thesis is that organizations have responsibilities to stakeholders, entities beyond shareholders . Applying Phillips and Freeman's ideas to schools suggests that while students and their families might be considered primary "shareholders", additional legitimate stakeholders would include teachers, administrators, support staff, community groups, businesses, and perhaps political entities such as city councils and school boards.

The role of the school counselor in fostering organizational ethics would be to act as a transformational change agent. In addition to the skill sets implied in the ASCA National Model, teaching, counseling, planning, consulting, managing, and administering, professional school counselors must develop leadership and followership skills and skills for improving group ethical performance (ASCA, 2008; Johnson, 2007). School counselors are positioned to be ethical architects and carpenters, helping to build ethical workplaces which are designed to foster organizational citizenship and social responsiveness.

Useful Ethical Approaches for School Counseling

Johnson (2007) provides several perspectives for ethical practice. We focus on three that we believe to be most useful for school counselors. The first, Justice as Fairness, is derived from Rawls' (see Johnson, 2007, p9.) philosophy for resolving conflicts, especially those dealing with distribution of resources and basic liberties. Asserting that people have inviolate rights, no matter the consequences, Rawls proposed the "principle of equal liberty" (p. 10). This principle states that everyone has certain rights and that equal application of those rights to every person is necessary. Johnson defines Rawls' second principle as the "equal opportunity principle" (p.10). In other words, everyone gets an equal break at jobs or offices, and the education & training to qualify for them. The implication for counselors is that, in fostering justice-as-fairness schools, the educational, experiential, access, and opportunity gaps between high and low income students would shrink. All teachers would have equal access to training and resources.

Communitarianism is a recent philosophical idea, developed in the United States in 1990 (Johnson, 2007). It focuses on community responsibilities, highlighting such concepts as shared responsibility for social projects and community values based on universal standards. Communitarians believe that democracy depends less on government and more upon shared values, habits and practices. More to the point, communitarianism states people should care for the wellbeing of others and that organizations are entrusted to forward moral values and build character. For school counselors this means working towards a school that has a moral voice in caring for all children and their families. Johnson notes that communitarianism has its faults, notable among them the idea that, although fathers are urged to be equal parenting partners, women should leave the workforce to care for families. Not all philosophies will have all the answers, yet, the latter criticism notwithstanding, communitarianism raises some powerful and useful ideas for counselors and educators who can choose the best it has to offer: contribution, collaboration, commitment, and conscience.

Third, altruism, or concern for others, serves as an effective organizational principle for school counselors. Altruism means helping others even if we do not benefit from it. Still a biological question, most social scientists agree that altruism exists and that it is ubiquitous (Johnson 2007). The applications to school counseling should be apparent, concern for others is the foundation for improved coordination and cooperation. Relationship is the essence of counseling and altruism serves as an antidote to social pathogens affecting relationships and is the essential element to a healthy diet of improved relationships.

Beyond Competence: Understanding Self as an Ethical Entity

Typically, school counseling texts have one chapter devoted to professional ethics. Most, if not all, also provide a copy of the ACA and ASCA Codes of Ethics. There are six moral principles upon which most codes of ethics are based (Remly & Herlihy, 2007). Autonomy means to respect the rights of others to be self-determining and to make their own decisions. Nonmaleficence and its counterpart beneficence mean to do no harm and to do good, respectively. Justice and Fidelity refer to fairness and trustworthiness, respectively. The sixth principle is veracity, the duty to be honest and truthful. The journey to becoming an ethical practitioner begins with understanding these principles at the inter- and intra-personal levels and culminates with applying them at the organizational/systemic level.

Textbooks use to teach school counselors to apply moral principles and ethical codes typically focus on individuals (Erford, 2007; Remley & Herlihy, 2007; Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2006). Taking this to the next level, the transformed counselor must recognize the need for organizational change and lead with the concept that when someone joins an organization, he or she has a responsibility to improve that group (Johnson, 2007). If one accepts that most ethics material for school counselors has been written on a duty-to-the-individual level, many professional school counselors may find an organizational application a novel aspect of their ethic of beneficence. More to the point, understanding and applying organizational beneficence appears to missing from many professional school counselors' training. However, the idea that school counselors ought to do good on an organizational or systemic level is inherent in the transformed school counselor movement's call for counselors to take a role in school improvement and school reform.

Brown and Trusty (2005) discuss the school counselor's role in organizational change and leadership using a Covey-like (2004) approach that highlights management, coordination, advocacy and power. They comment on leader values and skills in public relations, negotiations and supervision in the context of professional school counseling. While these competencies are essential for the transformed school counselor, an explicit connection to ethics is absent in Brown and Trusty's discussion of counselor-leaders.

In order to foster organizational ethical behavior, professional school counselors must develop their own ethical competence. This involves applying the aforementioned six moral principles in specific ways. Covey (2004) suggests the emergence of the principled or ethical self involves finding one's own voice through the realization of inborn human potential. This potential is best discovered in three ways or "birth-gifts" (p. 40). First is wisely using the freedom and power to choose. Specifically, people can choose to respond to challenge positively or to initiate positive change in others, no matter how difficult they may be.

Second, Covey (2004) supposes that there are universal laws or principles that operate on human relationships: fairness, kindness, honesty. In short, behavioral manifestations of the six moral principles. Taken together, the first and second gifts allow for moral authority, the exercise of self-less efforts on behalf of others. Third, human potential is realized through the use of multiple intelligences: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Of these four intelligences, the last two, emotional and spiritual, are fundamental to school counselors engaging their work ethically, with sensitivity, respect, and social appropriateness. Spiritual intelligence especially, binds together the previous three gifts into an amalgam of ethically or morally centered leadership.

The act of finding one's voice precedes the basis of ethical leadership, helping others find their voices. It is in this activity that Covey's (2004) process for ethical leadership development provides for the emergence of ethically coupled organizations. Similarly, Johnson (2007) calls for recognizing personal values, understanding personal weaknesses, and developing character based on worthy merits. Calling upon virtues ethics, Johnson provides a list of moral qualities such as benevolence, trustworthiness, and honesty. Interestingly, in this current age of partisan politics and personal polemics, Johnson also suggests that the qualities of cool-headedness, civility and decency are relevant to transforming ethical organizations.

Similar to Bolman and Deal's (2004) concept of leading with soul, Johnson's personal ethical development culminates in seven milestones:

1. Embracing new values and possibilities – understanding how people make meaning of their values.
2. Toward a passionate reason – understanding the synergy of emotion and reason.
3. Toward the development of an open value system – understanding the belief structures of others.
4. Toward spiritual development that is shared with others – joining with others on a spiritual (not necessarily faith-based) level.
5. Toward a new vocabulary and grammar of spirituality – willingness to use words like faith, soul, and spirit.
6. Toward an appreciation of the spirit in larger and large wholes – organizations have spirit that connects them with society and the global community.
7. Toward centering in the present – balancing internal and external realities in the present, being mindful of the thoughts and feelings of self and others.
   (pp. 48-50).

Thus, it is through the processes of finding one's voice and consistent application of virtues-based developmental tasks that school counselors can develop ethically. Once ethical self-awareness has developed, school counselors may set upon the lesser-known task of leadership, helping organizations (schools) transform into ethical entities.

Beyond Advocacy: School Counselors as Leaders

Professional school counselors are called to leadership in various ways: as team builders, conflict mediators, developmental experts, and educational transformers. Note we did not say "reformers". The term educational reform assumes that one form must be translated into another. Transformative efforts are needed to overcome the educational challenges of the 21st century. Transformative leadership calls for change agency and collaboration.

Collaborative leadership is a mindset, suggest Stone and Dahir (2006). Personal-social consciousness, by now a familiar leadership theme, plays an important in Stone and Dahir's model of collaborative school counselor leadership. In their model, school counselor leaders move beyond administrative and management duties to influence and collaborate with the socio-political ecological system (see Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) of student, family, school, and community.

Ethical use of power plays an important role in school counselor leadership and organizational transformation (Dahir & Stone, 2006; Johnson, 2007). Power is derived from authority, either formal or moral. Formal authority comes from position, wealth, or talent, whereas moral authority is the result of service to others, authority achieved through sacrifice (Covey, 2004). Using power wisely to effect ethical organizational change requires the school counselor-leaders to rely on team or association leadership, relationships, passion, empowerment, and the ability to connect with persons of influence. Stone and Dahir call these types of power position/jurisdictional, referent/relational, caring, transformational/connection, reward, and technical/expert power, respectively.

Although all power is important, perhaps the most useful types for counselors seeking to inform positive organizational values and behavior are relationship, caring, and transformational power. As counselor and teacher educators, we are constantly teaching our students about the power of positive relationships. The school counselor's ability to be supportive, listen actively, and positively influence intrapersonal dynamics is dependent upon and a result of building strong positive relationships with others. Caring power becomes evident when, through relationship, the school counselor is able to show passion in caring for others, revealing a basic stance of intentional and purposeful support and advocacy. Stone and Dahir (2007) point out that caring power is motivational, helping stakeholders inside and outside the school to understand, support, and participate in the school vision and mission.

Transformational power extends caring and relational power by way of improving the collective capacity of people in the organization or school to forward their mission and vision. Organizational members do this through team work, programmatic and policy changes, and mentoring and empowering one another. The professional school counselor is uniquely positioned to integrate these three types of leadership into an amalgam of interdependent educators, staff members, students, families, and community members.

Application: Leadership and Transforming Schools into Ethical Workplaces

Walk into nearly any public school in the United States and ask teachers about their code of ethics and more often than not you will get a puzzled look. Professional staff may not know that they have code of ethics code of ethics, however such codes do exist. Typically they are written by unions (National Education Association, 2008), professional trade associations (Association of American Educators, 2007) and state departments of education (New York State Education Department, 2007). While these codes are similar, there appears to be no common moral base or code of ethics for teachers. Thus, perhaps the first task for school counselors and educators in creating ethical workplaces and organizations is to agree on a set of guiding standards for self-regulation. After establishing a unified ethical rubric, organizational change can begin.

This last section deals with the seemingly gargantuan task of ethical transformation on the organizational level. However, it is fruitful to look at how the business world attempts such changes and Johnson (2007) provides a template useful for school counselors educators, and administrators. Extending Dahir and Stone's (2007) leadership model, we will examine the novel (for school counselors) combination of leadership and followership ethics and building an ethical workplace.

As noted earlier, leadership has its challenges. Johnson (2007) points out six tests of influence: the challenges of power, privilege, responsibility, information management, consistency, and loyalty. School counselors who have formal or moral influence must be cautious to use it wisely. Power's twin sibling, privilege, presents an additional challenge for school counselors. Our social justice roots give us some insights about privilege, but counselors who have positional privilege such as a private office, flexible schedules or mobility in the building, and access to perks such as travel for training, need to be aware of how these add-ons may distance them from teachers or staff who do not receive such benefits.

When there is more than one school counselor in the building, or when the school counselor leads a team, the challenge of responsibility indicates that counselor-leaders work to ensure that department or team behavior is not just ethical, but also empowering. School counselors who become pupil personnel supervisors (supervisor of guidance, for example) recognize their responsibility to those they serve (lead) and those who receive counseling services.

School counselors have significant training in information management, and for good reason. Often school counselors are the informational hub of what goes on in the building. Professional confidentiality and personal propriety are essential to effective school counseling practice. Appropriate data gathering, information sharing, and communication boundaries can be the mortar for building an ethical organization. Consistency and loyalty are the bookends of organizational trust. Knowing a school counselor-leader is reliable and puts the interests of the school ahead of personal interests leads others to invest in the mission and vision of the school. This other-investment is sustained through what Johnson (2007) calls followership.

Followership is probably an unusual concept for school counselor-leaders. The transformed school counselor movement highlights leadership, but the challenges of followers, including school counselor-followers, is less obvious. Johnson (2007) points five areas for consideration: obligation, obedience, cynicism, dissent, and bad news. Of these, we will focus on obligation and cynicism. Obedience and dissent frequently are interwoven in contractual negotiations, whereas the business concept of being the bearer of bad news is inconsistent with the traditional school counselor duties as an information manager.

Counselor-followers are familiar with the challenge of obligation, it is evidence of the moral concept of fidelity. Beyond the organizational expectations of arriving on time, carrying out tasks effectively and efficiently, school counselors routinely work late, attend before- or after-school functions, and make home visits. Although these activities are voluntarily done with the greater good of the school in mind, school counselors must take care in not over-extending themselves. Cynicism is a more difficult problem. Teachers often think of themselves as patient professionals, dealing with the next curricular magic bullet or think-outside-the-box, under-funded government reform. It is difficult not to become cynical when one has to do more, differently, with fewer resources. School counselors must try to avoid such cynicism themselves and as leader work towards maintaining an optimistic and supportive stance towards fellow professionals.

If you want to create an ethical workplace don't think outside the box, crush it. School counselors must bring together transformational, servant, and relational styles of leadership (Johnson 2007; Covey 2004). Transformational leaders motivate individuals by putting the needs of others first, mentoring, and seeing to it that work is given real meaning through knowledge, enthusiasms, and modeling. School counselors as transformational leaders appreciate mistakes as learning opportunities and use their training in reframing to creatively solve problems or discover new ideas. Adept at accepting supervision, school counselors can easily adapt to Johnson's transformational leader's skill set of at being open to new ideas and creating intellectual stimulation.

Servant and relational leaders possess skill common to the training of professional counselors. Servant leaders use the familiar counseling skills of listening, empathy, conceptualization and a commitment to the growth of people (Johnson, 2007; Corey, 2009). Relational leaders rely on collaboration, consensus, understanding diversity, and seeking common understanding and agreement. Taken together, these three leadership styles weave together a useful and effective tapestry of joining, serving directing, influencing and helping others to create an ethical workplace. Applying leadership to organizational ethical change involves both formal and informal essentials. On a formal level, how the organization is structured in terms of accountability and decision-making is critical.

In particular, empowering teachers, staff and students by fairly allocating decision-making rights about important issues can bring about improved ethical behavior (Johnson, 2007). When people have a sense of true ownership, ownership proven through equal and democratic participation in determining their school's current and future achievement and status, they are more likely to create for themselves an ethical workplace. A formal mission statement supports such actions (Covey, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, agreeing upon a code of ethics is another formal measure that can be taken. Implementing intentional and active review and reward systems that encourage right behavior also formalizes ethical development. For example, catching people doing good publicly highlights ethical behavior. Reinforcing good teaching as well as higher test scores focuses on process as well as outcome, thereby rewarding expertise and competence.

Informal aspects of leadership application to improve organizational ethics are drawn direct from the school counselor toolkit. Language is a key element in transforming organizations. School counselors recognize that changing the way people talk about themselves and their environment can change they way they think about and act on it. Encouraging an ethical vocabulary using words like mission, vision, values, and integrity supports organizational change (Johnson 2007).

Norms are another informal aspect or organizational culture that can affect employee health and workplace performance and stress (Hammer, et al. 2004). Norms are behavioral standards that can affect organizational ethics. As team members working on the school improvement plan or school mission, school counselor-leaders can influence the development of healthy norms that are aligned with positive organizational ethics. Also, rituals, or meaningful planned events, can also be an informal tool for ethical transformation. Recall that servant and transformational leaders motivate by helping people find meaning in their work and are committed to helping them grow. Ritual events that improve organizational ethics include recognizing excellent performance, taking time for renewal, and setting aside time to resolve the normal conflicts associated with human interactions.

Lastly, Johnson (2007) points out the necessity of ethical drivers, interventions that are necessary to organizational change. One driver is ethical diagnosis, a review of ethical strengths and weaknesses. Organizational climate, "what it's like to work here", is revealed through ethical diagnosis. Engaged leaders are also ethical drivers. They are role models attentive, proactive as well as reactive, and fair in allocating resources.

In describing the last two drivers, targeted socialization and ethics training, Johnson (2007) points out the necessity of intentionality and explicit structure in ethically transforming an organization. Socialization of people in an organization should not be left to chance, but instead be an intentional effort to nurture, mentor, and grow ethical, competent employees. An important part of socialization is ethics training. It should be a norm that everyone in a school needs to understand the essential elements of positive and moral interpersonal behavior.

If this all sounds like a pretty tall order, it is. Nothing about this is easy, but the stakes are too high to tread softly around the importance of an ethical workplace. Our children deserve it and our future depends on it.

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