

**Vision: A Conceptual Framework for School Counselors**

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### **Abstract**

Vision is essential to the implementation of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. Drawing from research in organizational leadership, this article provides a conceptual framework for how school counselors can incorporate vision as a strategy for implementing school counseling programs within the context of practice. Specific attention is given to how school counselors craft, communicate, and market their school counseling vision to gain support from teachers and administrators to implement comprehensive school counseling programs fashioned after the ASCA National Model.

*Keywords: vision, leadership, ASCA national model*

### **Vision: A Conceptual Framework for School Counselors**

Today's school counselors struggle to implement school counseling programs fashioned after the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (Studer, Diambra, Breckner & Heidel, 2011). Part of the struggle may be due to the complexity that exists in linking school counseling program outcomes to academic achievement (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Sink, 2005), along with the quasi-administrative tasks (e.g. scheduling, lunch supervision) that principals have historically assigned to school counselors (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, & Cobb, 2011). Regardless of the reasons, Bemak and Chung (2005) have criticized school counselors for maintaining the status quo, and urge counselors to be more proactive in creating school counseling programs that are responsive to the needs of students who live within a diverse society.

To shift the nature of their work away from reactive services and quasi-administrative duties (e.g. lunch and bus supervision, scheduling, test coordination) school counselors must utilize leadership strategies that promote the implementation of school counseling programs. Leadership in school counseling is a national expectation (ASCA, 2012; Dollarhide & Sagninak, 2012) and facilitates the implementation of the ASCA National Model (Mason, 2010; Shillingford & Lambie, 2010). When examining specific leadership strategies that facilitate program implementation, Shillingford and Lambie (2010) identified vision as being an essential leadership practice.

Vision as defined by Bennis and Nanus is "a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists" (p. 82). Furthermore, Northouse (2012) identifies the characteristics of vision as: generating an image of a future, changing status quo,

containing values and beliefs that people find worth pursuing, giving direction to an organization and challenging the individuals within it to change. Vision provides a mental image of a possible future and directs those within an organization to rise above the status quo and live with purpose (Northouse, 2012). Additionally, vision signals change in organizational practice to address a worthwhile need or service. For school counselors who are looking to rise above the status quo and implement the ASCA National Model, vision is a perfect leadership practice.

Vision is a leadership strategy vital to creating organizational change (Bennis, 2003; Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Senge, 1990, 2006) particularly when that vision is shared among its membership (Bennis, 2003; Bennis & Nanus, 2007). Organizational members who share a vision are emotionally invested in, and committed to its implementation (Covey, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 1990, 2006). Vision is identified within the foundation component of the ASCA National Model and is intended to guide the direction of the school counseling program by defining how the counseling program will operate in the future. Knowing where you want to go, and acting with purpose are essential strategies that facilitate the implementation of school counseling programs (Scarborough & Luke, 2008), and are indicative of vision.

As mentioned above, vision is essential to implementing a school counselor program (ASCA, 2012; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Scarborough & Luke, 2008; Shillingford & Lambie, 2010) yet little attention is given to how school counselors utilize vision to implement their counseling programs. Drawing from organizational leadership literature (Bennis & Nanus 2007; Covey, 2004; Kouzes &

Posner, 2007; Senge 1990, 2006), this article addresses vision as an innovative leadership strategy to facilitate the implementation of school counseling programs. The goal of utilizing vision as a leadership strategy is to facilitate the implementation of school counseling programs patterned after the ASCA National Model. The purpose of this article is to introduce school counselors to vision and demonstrate how vision can be applied to school counselor practice. The use of vision as a leadership strategy is clarified in a vision conceptual framework, drawn from the works of Bennis and Nanus (2007) and Kouzes and Posner (2007), and particularized to the role of the school counselor. To illustrate how vision can be applied to practice, a case example is provided. Lastly, implications for how vision might impact the practice of school counselors are discussed.

### **Vision as a Leadership Skill**

In a large-scale qualitative study, Bennis and Nanus (2007) examined the practices of successful organizational leaders and found that four core leadership strategies were common to all 90 professionals interviewed. The four core leadership strategies included: (a) attention to vision, (b) meaning through communication, (c) trust through positioning, and (d) the deployment of self through positive self-regard (Bennis & Nanus, 2007, p. 25). According to Bennis and Nanus successful leaders take the time to communicate their vision to others in clear and relatable ways. To gain buy-in, these leaders connected their vision to the passion and beliefs held by others within the organization, while inspiring trust by acting in ways consistent with their vision and reporting on their results (Bennis & Nanus, 2007). Participants in the Bennis' and

Nanus' study were able to forge a new path within their organizations because they deeply believed in their vision and were confident in their ability to move it forward.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that in addition to the above visioning practices suggested by Bennis and Nanus (2007), successful leaders must also challenge historical ways of practice that conflict with their vision, and build trust among organizational members to stimulate a change in practice. To move a vision forward, a leader must also be willing to put words to actions and learn from the resistance that is often a natural part of change (Reeves, 2009). Listening to feedback, even critical feedback, can be helpful to realizing a vision because it allows a school counselor to modify strategies intended to support a counseling program so that it better resemble its counseling vision. Additionally, Dollarhide, Gibson, and Saginak (2008) found that school counselors who used resistance as a learning opportunity were able to realize their counseling goals.

In linking vision as a leadership practice that facilitates school counseling programs, Shillingford and Lambie (2010) discovered that school counselors were more likely to implement a school counseling program when they had a shared counseling vision and took risks to challenge current practices that were not consistent with their vision. Shillingford and Lambie further stated that "if school counselors do not have a clear vision of their school counseling program, or if they are challenged to inspire others to share their vision, the implementation of the comprehensive school counseling program may be impeded" (p. 214).

Scarborough and Luke (2008) also found vision to be part of program implementation. In their study, Scarborough and Luke examined the effective leadership

practices of school counselors who were implementing school counseling programs. Two counselor characteristics that relate to Bennis' and Nanus' (2007) views on vision were apparent in the findings: 1) the counselor's belief that implementing a school counseling program was the best way to meet the needs of students; and 2) the commitment the participants had to implement a comprehensive school counseling program (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Findings from the Scarborough and Luke study suggest that school counselors who were committed to implementing the ASCA National Model were more willing to do what it takes to ensure their students had access to counseling services.

Furthermore, Scarborough and Luke (2008) found that counselors who were implementing school counseling programs valued collaboration as a method for promoting their counseling vision. These counselors were systemic in their approach to program implementation to gain support for their counseling goals (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Collaborative practices that promote the counseling vision can further the implementation of school counseling programs by making concrete connections between the counseling vision, the needs of students, the desires of faculty, and the academic goals of the school. In doing so, school counselors pursue opportunities to engage faculty in conversations intended to promote their counseling vision as a means to address the academic, personal/social and career development of students associated with academic achievement.

When generating a vision school counselors must reflect upon their beliefs associated with the role school counselors play in supporting the academic vision of schools in ways that currently do not exist. To gain organizational buy-in, a counseling

vision must be relatable to faculty (see Northouse, 2012). To be relatable, teachers and administrators need to see how the counseling vision supports their own aspirations and goals for their students. Vision statements that are relatable to those who work within an organization have the potential to generate the buy-in that is necessary to propel the vision into a possible reality (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Covey, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Bennis and Nanus (2007) argue that successful leaders create a vision that grounds their work while captivating the attention of others (p. 26).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The third edition of the *ASCA National Model* (2012) identifies vision as a strategy that defines the purpose of the counseling program by identifying what the program will look like in the future. The conceptual framework proposed in this article expands upon how the ASCA National Model uses vision by integrating the exemplary leadership practices identified by Bennis and Nanus (2007) and Kouzes and Posner (2007) to highlight the importance of communicating and marketing a counseling vision that is relatable and credible to teachers and administrators. The core leadership practices offered by Bennis and Nanus (2007) and Kouzes and Posner (2007) are integrated into the conceptual framework provided in this article and have been contextualized to fit the role of the school counselor. The three-step process is:

1. Identify a vision.
2. Communicate the vision.
3. Market a vision.

**Identify a vision.** To identify a vision that will establish the direction of a counseling program, school counselors need to examine their core beliefs related to student learning and the impact school counseling programs have on the broader



educational goals of schools (ASCA, 2012, p. 22). To get at core beliefs, Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggest that individuals think about the legacy that they would like to leave behind. Reflecting upon your legacy gets at the impact you would like to have in the lives of your students. The third edition of the ASCA National Model provides additional questions that school counselors can use to uncover their core beliefs. With a greater sense of clarity and connection to core beliefs, school counselors create a vision statement they feel passionate about and are inspired to pursue. Through these core beliefs, school counselors begin to create an image of how their counseling programs will operate in the future.

To gain input from faculty, school counselors can initiate conversations to understand how teachers and administrators currently view the counseling program and explore their thoughts as to how the counseling program can operate in the future to address academic needs. Through these conversations, teachers and administrators assist in the development of a realistic counseling vision and begin to see how their beliefs and values align with counseling goals. Engaging faculty in conversations related to counseling vision could strengthen their commitment to the implementation of that vision.

A counseling vision statement articulates what a school counseling program will look like in the future. According to ASCA (2012), a vision statement should be concise (1-3 sentences), inspiring, realistic and align with the academic vision of the district. Additionally, the school counseling vision statement should be written in future tense to depict what the school counseling program will look like within five to fifteen years. A sample vision statement is found within the case example section of this article.

**Communicate the vision.** According to Bennis and Nanus (2007), a vision grows legs when it is communicated to others in clear and relevant ways. Moreover, Northouse (2012) argues that vision should be adapted to fit its audience. To adapt a counseling vision to fit an educational setting, school counselors need to be able to communicate the connections their vision has to the achievement of academic goals. To clearly articulate the connections the counseling vision has to the academic vision of schools, school counselors must be knowledgeable about how counseling interventions, focused on the personal/social, career, and academic development of students support the educational goals of the school. Brown and Trusty (2005) assert that school counselors must use strategic interventions that logically connect to the needs of students, counseling objectives, and interventions selected (p. 1). Additionally, Brown and Trusty contend that school counselors must base their interventions on sound empirical evidence and theoretical practices. Utilizing strategic intervention strategies described by Brown and Trusty allow school counselors to logically connect counseling services to the academic mission of their schools in clear and concrete ways (Brown & Trusty, 2005). School counselors who have a deeper knowledge for how their counseling interventions connect to academic goals may be in a better position to challenge historical ways of practice that prohibit the implementation of the school counseling program. Being able to articulate how a counseling vision, and in turn counseling services, support educational goals position school counselors as collaborators who work with teachers and principals to foster the academic success and opportunities of all students.

**Market a vision.** Marketing a school counseling program has been identified as an effective strategy that counselors can use to gain faculty support (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Scarborough & Luke, 2008). To market a vision, leaders need to model actions consistent with the vision (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). To act consistent with a vision, school counselors may develop a detailed action plan to visually illustrate how their actions support the implementation of the vision. Once developed, the action plan needs to be communicated to principals and shared with faculty. ASCA (2012) supports the use of action plans and annual agreements to communicate (and gain support for) the services that counselors will provide to students throughout the academic year. Once a plan has been drafted, school counselors need to make sure to deliver their counseling services and share results to highlight the progress they are making towards the counseling vision. Northouse (2012) argues that modeling behaviors and attitudes that are consistent with a vision fosters credibility. Credibility is essential to the implementation of a vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Reporting on results is important to marketing a vision (Bennis & Nanus, 2007) and is a professional expectation for school counselors (ASCA, 2012; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Dimmit, Carey, & Hatch, 2007). Using evaluation practices to report results markets the program in two ways: (a) highlights the dedication and persistence a counselor has to execute her vision, and (b) allows a school counselor to learn from the results of his interventions to inform future decisions. Reporting on results is a collaborative process that allows school counselors to receive teacher feedback while building consensus around the services that they provide to students throughout the course of the year.

In addition to reporting on results and modeling consist practices that will integrate a vision into daily practice; Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend that leaders must acknowledge the contributions of others to the vision. Recognizing the contributions of others motivates people to engage in behaviors that are consistent with the vision and aid in its sustainability. Recognizing the contributions of others can be as simple as writing a personal thank you note (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

### **Case Example**

The case of Sandy demonstrates how school counselors could use the vision conceptual model offered in this article within the context of practice. The case of Sandy, a high school counselor at Lincoln High School, is an illustrative example and highlights how Sandy was able to use the vision conceptual framework to facilitate a school counseling program that is modeled after the ASCA National Model.

Sandy is the counseling department chair at Lincoln High School. Sandy believes that all students need to be exposed to a rigorous education to expand their post-secondary options, and is passionate about the influence school counselors can have in creating the conditions that facilitate the educational success of all students. To begin crafting a counseling vision, Sandy and the other counselors at her school reflect upon personal beliefs, identified current needs of students, familiarized themselves with the academic goals of the school and school vision. After weeks of deliberating, Sandy and her team of counselors have constructed a draft of the school counseling vision they perceive to be meaningful and supportive of Lincoln High School's educational focus. With a draft in hand, Sandy and her team of counselors sat down with teachers, administrators and parents to get a sense of what they perceived to be valuable aspects

of the counseling program and how it can grow to meet the current demands of educating students within a diverse and global society. To communicate her vision to faculty, Sandy initiated authentic conversations to uncover the beliefs faculty had related to student learning. Sandy attended to common beliefs shared by faculty and highlighted how her vision and counseling services speak to those beliefs. After several months, the school counselors at Lincoln High School worked together to edit their vision statement. After the vision statement was written, Sandy sent the statement to all teachers and administrators for comments and final approval for adoption. The final version of the counseling visions statement reads:

*Lincoln High School's School Counseling Program strives to become integral to the school's academic focus by creating conditions that promote student learning through a proactive and evidence-based comprehensive school counseling program centered on increasing the post-secondary opportunities of all students.*

After formal adoption of the vision, Sandy met with her counseling department and created an action plan for how the counselors would work towards realizing their counseling vision. Once developed, Sandy shared the action plan with her principal to gain her support. Upon receiving principal approval, Sandy presented her plan to the teachers and articulated how her services would support the work that teachers do for students within the framework of the counseling vision. Sandy knew that in order to gain support from teachers, she had to make her services relevant to their beliefs about education and highlight how her services will help them achieve the goals identified by the school. Sandy attended to faculty resistance by listening to their concerns and offered evidence (e.g. empirical research findings and theoretically sound counseling

practices) to address issues raised. Sandy and the other school counselors were committed to implementing the services mentioned in their action plan and frequently met to update each other on the progress made and assistance needed. Sandy felt good about the plan they had to move their counseling program closer towards the one she and the other counselors would like to see in the future. However, Sandy knew that to keep the vision from being more than just a statement, she had to articulate to faculty how school counselors were working towards that vision throughout the year.

To market her program, Sandy used monthly newsletters that articulated her counseling vision, program goals, identified counseling services and reported on the results of the large-group interventions counselors provided to all students. To guide the development of her counseling interventions, Sandy and her team of counselors used peer reviewed journal articles to inform intervention development. To better serve her students, Sandy utilized her school improvement team to gain critical feedback from team members to modify interventions as needed. Working collaboratively with faculty to make decisions that affected the delivery of the school counseling program gave teachers and the principal an opportunity to learn about the role of the school counselor and the unique contributions counselors bring to student learning. In addition, support for the program grew when faculty saw how the school counselors were working in a manner consistent with their vision. Sandy made sure to build productive and trusting relationships between her and her school faculty by celebrating short-term gains while also acknowledging the contributions of faculty to program success.

## Implications for Practice

Implications for how this conceptual framework will affect the practice of school counseling are addressed below:

- School counselors need to clarify their beliefs related to how school counselors support student learning to create a counseling vision that is relevant to their school context, while still being meaningful to the counselor. In other words, school counselors need to be passionate about what they do for students. It is through this passion that will motivate others to follow.
- Collaborate with teachers and administrators to establish a shared vision for the school counseling program. Connect the counseling vision to faculty beliefs and the current educational needs of the school.
- To communicate a vision, school counselors must engage in professional development to advance their knowledge of theory and evidence-based practices. Being familiar with empirical research and sound theoretical practices help school counselors to articulate the counseling vision in ways that are valued by teachers and principals.
- School counselors need to stay the course and should not get discouraged when they meet with resistance. Resistance is a natural part of change and much can be learned from it that will benefit the counseling program.
- Market the counseling program. School counselors need to inform others of the progress they are making towards their goals by using evidence to connect the results to their counseling vision. Marketing a program is more than just identifying services. Marketing a program also attends to results and outcomes.

- Attend to relationships. Cultivating trusting relationships with school faculty enables school counselors to get the support they need to forward their counseling visions.

### **Conclusion**

This article introduces vision as a leadership strategy and provides a conceptual framework for how school counselors can use vision as a leadership strategy to further their school counseling programs. A counseling vision gives a focus for the work a counselor does by articulating what the counseling program is projected to look like in the future (ASCA, 2012). The vision conceptual framework offered in this article highlights a three-step process: (a) identify a vision, (b) communicate a vision, and (c) market a vision that school counselors can use to implement their school counseling programs by making their counseling purpose transparent to teachers and administrators, while connecting their work to what educators value. In utilizing this conceptual framework, school counselors integrate their counseling program into the academic mission of the school by articulating a purpose for their counseling programs that makes transparent how the counseling goals address the needs of students while speaking to the desires and educational goals of teachers and administrators.

School counselors who market comprehensive school counseling programs engage faculty in regular conversations to advertise successes of their interventions and seek feedback to better the counseling services they provide. Through these conversations school counselors intentionally speak to how their counseling outcomes address the mission and academic goals of their schools, while attending to the needs of their students. In translating their work to teachers and principals, school counselors



gain the support they need to forge a new path, a path that better aligns with their beliefs about what it means to be a school counselor while actively contributing to the academic mission of their schools in ways that are understood and valued.

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