

THE Secrets OF EXCEPTIONAL COUNSELORS

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ASSOCIATION

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THE
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This book is dedicated to Jon Carlson
My coauthor, colleague, friend, and brother
1945–2017





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Preface: Tricks of the Trade

Every profession has certain secrets of the guild. Passed on from one generation to the next throughout the ages, these are the lessons taught from wide experience. They are sometimes shortcuts that save time, or else ways to operate more efficiently and effectively while minimizing resources and reducing effort. Sometimes they include ways that maximize profits or even shortchange clients or customers through deceptive practices. Sales staff in car dealerships, for instance, are known to rely on particular methods to manipulate customers into purchasing options they don't really need, telling men that automatic door locks are for convenience while telling women that they are for safety. Waitresses in certain restaurants are required to dress seductively in tight-fitting, low-cut dresses. They are taught to lean forward when taking an order from a man to maximize the display, whereas they are inclined to kneel by the table to deemphasize this feature with other women. Mountain climbers have their little tricks as well, passed along from guides, to make their lives in treacherous environments a little more comfortable, such as using duct tape to prevent blisters or hanging their wet socks with dental floss. Magicians have their secret methods of redirection, sleight of hand, and illusions, all intended to capitalize on disguised or hidden actions beyond public view.

We counselors have our professional secrets as well to improve our functioning, most of which I hope are designed to better serve our clients. But some exceptions also rely on duplicity in order to increase our power and influence. We pretend to know more than we do, stall for time when we are stumped, and occasionally enhance our standing by appearing like magicians. However, we are also highly skilled in communication and relational engagement and thus able to read audiences accurately to know when things are working and when they are not.

One counselor I know was quite proud of the ways he had discovered to appear far more masterful than he actually felt most of the time. He

loved to operate from a position of unquestioned authority and dominance, much like the Wizard of Oz. His clients were quite impressed, even astounded at times, by his seemingly mystical powers to read minds, predict the future, and even mysteriously always know exactly when the session was over even though he never wore a watch and had no direct access to a clock. In fact, the only timepiece in the room was a single small device that was actually situated next to him out of his direct view. It was a frequent topic of conversation that his clients brought up: How did he always know when time was up? He would just shrug.

This counselor, for reasons that went beyond client welfare, enjoyed using certain secrets and tricks to fool his clients into believing that he had powers that went way beyond those of mortal beings. It turns out that he had meticulously arranged his office in such a way that he could appear to be looking directly at his client while seeing the image of the clock next to him reflected in the glass of a picture hanging on the wall. He was so devious in this regard that it wasn't even a direct reflection, which might be too easy for the client to figure out; instead, the reflection of the clock bounced off the glass of one framed picture to actually become visible in another one on a side wall. So he could appear to be thoughtfully considering some idea while staring at a side wall and then suddenly announce that time was up. The client would then look around the room and wonder how the heck this counselor always knew the exact time, as if he had a clock inside his head. Of course nowadays smartwatches can aid counselors with hidden signals to accomplish the same goal of enhancing illusions of power.

I mention this example as the sort of secret within our profession that I do *not* wish to investigate—one that involves deception or manipulation, even if supposedly designed to improve effectiveness. Instead, I am interested in those ideas, behaviors, strategies, methods, interventions, and even little tricks learned over time that exceptional counselors have invented, inherited, developed, borrowed, stolen, or discovered that increase both professional effectiveness and personal satisfaction. I have attempted to collect and catalogue the greatest wisdom of some of the best clinicians, especially those among us who have worked long and hard to find ways to increase their effectiveness and efficiency through innovation, creativity, and dogged determination to better serve their clients.

I have been especially curious about some of the things that experienced counselors have learned, or devised for themselves and their work, that have previously gone unmentioned—or at least rarely acknowledged in a meaningful way. There has been some limited research in this area by investigators such as Barry Duncan and Scott Miller describing the way that exemplary clinicians or “supershrinks” have developed certain signature habits, such as continually asking their clients how they’re doing and making adjustments accordingly, as well as simply devoting themselves wholeheartedly to achieving excellence in their work.

Throughout the past few decades I have been privileged, along with my partner Jon Carlson, to interview some of the most prominent and

influential theoreticians and practitioners in our field. We were able to talk to them about some of their most unusual cases, creative breakthroughs, spiritual transcendence, greatest successes, advocacy efforts, disappointing failures, and disturbing deceptions; the clients who changed them the most; as well as their own developmental adjustments over time. During these conversations, these seminal thinkers, researchers, and clinicians revealed some of their secrets that had rarely been mentioned previously. Many disclosed, for example, that they no longer practiced the models associated with their names, having moved beyond single-theory allegiance to a far more pragmatic, integrative, flexible approach. Others mentioned the personal journeys that had led them to settle on a particular brand of helping that reflected their unique personalities, values, and preferences. There were even a few who shared their own doubts and uncertainties about the extent to which their contributions really mattered.

Although my previous focus was to target specific kinds of lessons that had been learned by eminent counselors and therapists—for instance, how they recovered from disappointments or which clients were most memorable or challenging—I am now interested in expanding this lens to encompass a far broader view of knowledge and wisdom that may have been long buried or ignored. For beginners and veterans alike, I am pleased to reveal some of the secrets and tricks of the trade that ordinarily receive little attention.

As we are all quite aware, there are so many different theories and hypotheses regarding what makes a truly excellent therapist. There are trait theories that look at personality features. There are particular training models that are purported to deliver optimal results. Advanced degrees, postgraduate workshops, supervision—are all alleged to play a role. But ultimately, beyond a requisite level of intelligence and emotional functioning, the best among us are quite simply those who have worked hardest to develop themselves. They are intensely motivated and committed to becoming the best practitioners of their craft—and they are willing to make all kinds of personal sacrifices and devote time and energy in order to make that a reality.

It's not just the so-called 10,000-hour rule, popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, that implies consistent, dedicated, reflective practice over time; it is also a matter of caring deeply about being the absolute best at what they do. Exceptional counselors have a secret that really isn't much of a secret at all: They just flat out work harder than the rest of us. I mean this not so much in terms of the number of hours they devote to their craft, how long they've been in practice, or what kind of degrees and credentials they've accumulated but rather in terms of their sheer grit and determination. They rarely feel discouraged and tend to dig in harder when they face challenges or disappointments.

I am talking about passion and excitement for the work, for the people they are helping, the kind that doesn't diminish over time. It has sometimes been noted that longtime veterans in our field can become complacent over time, slip into familiar routines, treat the calling as just a job. They

think they've seen it all before. They start just going through the motions, following a long-established pattern that gets the job done, all without much drama or even concerted effort.

What about those among us who are truly exceptional? Such professionals adopt an unwavering attitude of passion for what they do. They are constantly reinventing themselves. They test their limits. They push themselves to discover new ways of operating, perhaps rendering what they'd already been doing obsolete. Rather than resenting or resisting such continuous upgrades and growth, they welcome such opportunities as the primary means by which to remain fresh and completely engaged.



Acknowledgments

My lifelong friend, colleague, coauthor, and brother, Jon Carlson was my partner in the original conception of this book. We had a number of conversations about the nature of this project, and he was instrumental in identifying many of the professionals whose voices you will hear throughout these pages. Unfortunately, he never lived long enough to actually begin writing. As I write these words, I am still mourning the loss of one of my oldest friends. Jon and I had completed a dozen books together, and this one was to be our seminal work, collecting the most cherished secrets of friends and colleagues as well as sharing some of our own best practices that we have held close to our vests throughout our 45-year careers. Jon isn't around to see how this book eventually came together, but even during his last weeks, sitting by the window in his Wisconsin home in the woods, watching the birds, we shared back and forth what we hoped this book could become. Jon died just a few weeks later.

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About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler, PhD, is one of the most prominent authors in the fields of counseling, psychotherapy, health, and education, having written more than 90 books on a wide range of subjects. Some of his most highly regarded works include *On Being a Therapist*; *Introduction to Counseling: Voices From the Field*; *Learning Group Leadership*; *Creative Breakthroughs in Therapy*; *Bad Therapy*; *The Client Who Changed Me*; *Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life*; *The Therapist in the Real World*; *On Being a Master Therapist*; *Relationships in Counseling and the Counselor's Life*; and *Therapy Over 50*.

Jeffrey has been a counselor, supervisor, and educator for 45 years, working in preschool, middle school, mental health center, crisis center, hospital, nongovernmental organization, university, community college, private practice, and disaster relief settings. He served as a Fulbright scholar and senior lecturer in Peru and Iceland as well as worked as a visiting professor in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Nepal. Jeffrey is professor emeritus of counseling at California State University, Fullerton. He currently lives in Houston, where he works on projects related to refugee trauma and is clinical professor of psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine.

