

Invited Article 2

Some Important Core Qualities of Counseling Professionals: A Personal Perspective

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The purpose of this article is to share with you my ideas about what I consider to be important core qualities of professionals working within the field of counseling. These ideas come from 55 years in the field working as a counselor, counselor educator, researcher, writer, consultant, and an active and involved professional association member. Throughout these years I have worked with novices in the field as well as with experienced professionals and all the individuals in between.

Before I describe the core qualities I see as important for professionals in our field to possess, I need to define what I mean by the phrase core qualities. I use the word core to mean essential. Quality is defined as the innate or acquired characteristics that determine the nature and behavior of individuals, in this case professionals working in the field of counseling. When I put the two words together I am describing what I believe to be essential qualities professionals in our field should possess.

In addition to describing core qualities I see as important for professionals in counseling, I also will share my thoughts about how these core qualities can be developed in individuals. I will focus on the role that counselor education programs play in this educational process.

It is important to understand that the list of core qualities that follows is not a complete list of all such qualities. Rather, the list represents a few of the core qualities I have found to be important in my own professional life and in the lives of the many professionals I have observed since I began my work in the field of counseling in 1958.

Core Qualities

Purpose

I begin the list with the quality purpose because, to me, it is a fundamental quality that underlies all other qualities. I have found that when you have purpose you can vision the outcomes you wish to achieve and develop specific ideas about how to achieve these outcomes. This enables you to conceptualize and formulate these ideas into tangible interventions and/or programs that will benefit the clientele with whom you work.

In addition, I have found that when you have purpose you are more likely to find meaning in what you do. And, when meaning is present in your work, intrinsic motivation to find ways to achieve follows. Thus, purpose provides you with direction, passion, and zeal as well as determination and resoluteness.

Risk Taking

It may seem strange to you that I list the quality risk taking immediately after the quality of purpose. I list it here because I believe that professionals in the field need to stretch beyond where they are in order to make progress in achieving their purposes. As Stan Maliszewski, former Director of School Counseling in the Omaha Public Schools stated, "You can't steal second with one foot on first."

I understand that to some individuals, risk taking has negative connotations. It implies failure. When these individuals feel this way risk aversion dominates their lives.

Because of the way some individuals view risk taking, it is important to distinguish risk taking done impulsively from risk taking done intentionally. Risk taking done intentionally means that careful thought is present. It means that the possible consequences of ones actions have been explored. Remember, while purpose gives individuals direction and focus, I believe intentional risk taking supplies the energy for action.

When risk taking is done intentionally, it means that time has been taken to vet the ideas that you have to the extent possible making them ready to be submitted for publication or presented at a workshop or at a convention of a professional association. Once submitted or presented, expect criticism. It can take the form of a rejection letter or negative comments from some individuals about the presentation.

When criticism occurs it is natural to be defensive. Allow yourself five minutes of defensive time and then it is time to move on. *You can visit pity city but you can't live there.* Remember that criticism provides opportunities for improvement. So instead of being defensive, see criticism as an opportunity to reflect, revise, and improve your ideas.

Perseverance

The word perseverance is defined as being steadfast, maintaining a course of action over time, sometimes in spite of difficulties. How does the quality of perseverance relate to you and your work? First, it means having the self-discipline to conceptualize your ideas, formulate them, and share them with others through the literature of the field and/or in presentations. Second, it means staying with your ideas over time even though you may receive criticism. Do not ignore criticism, however; use it to perfect your ideas. Then you stay with your ideas over time or as long as it takes to carry the ideas to

completion. And then you stay with the ideas even longer, continuing to perfect and enhance them.

The quality of perseverance is difficult to develop and maintain because of the possibility of rejection by some professional peers or the public at large. Then too there is often the lack of immediate change or results that can be pointed to. And yet, those who learn how to persevere carry on in spite of such difficulties. Their goal is to endeavor to persevere.

Patience

A major quality that I found to be important in individuals involved in the field of counseling is patience. What is patience? It is the ability to remain calm and self-possessed when confronted with delay or resistance. It is the realization that change takes time whether that change is in individuals or in organizations. In counseling it is a willingness to “trust the process” rather than trying to move more quickly than the client is willing and able to move.

Having the quality of patience means that you have learned how to suppress/handle feelings of restlessness or annoyance when change does not go as fast as you might wish. It means that you have learned that impatience begets anxiety, fear, and discouragement. Most importantly you have learned that patience gives rise to confidence.

Resilience

What is resilience? It is the ability to recover quickly from difficult situations. In my experience I have found this to be a critical quality for professionals in counseling to possess because we know that difficult situations and disappointments are part of professional life. When individuals have the quality of resilience they do not let difficult situations and disappointments drain them of their resolve to succeed.

Professionals who are resilient are able to reframe difficult situations and disappointments and learn from them. They are able to rise above adversity keeping their eyes on the goals they have. They may struggle but they are not deterred from reaching their goals.

The Role of Counselor Education Programs

While some aspects of these core qualities I described may be innate, I believe much is learned behavior. As a result, counselor education programs have substantial responsibilities to provide professionals in preparation with opportunities to learn and practice these core qualities. This means that these core qualities need to be introduced and discussed throughout the program’s course work and opportunities must be made available to professionals in preparation to begin to experience what these core qualities may mean to them personally and professionally.

What can counselor education programs do to help professionals in preparation learn and begin to practice these core qualities? Here are some ideas.

1. Identify the core qualities professionals should possess.
2. Infuse these core qualities into all of the course work of the program so that professionals in preparation become aware of them and learn how to begin to incorporate them into their behavior.
3. Focus particularly on the core quality of purpose since this is the quality that underlies all of the others. It means helping professionals in preparation learn what having purpose means and why it is an important quality to possess.
4. Be alert to students who may be experiencing the “I can’t do this” feeling when faced with a new learning experience by teaching them the power of the Adlerian concept of “Act as if.”
5. Teach professionals in preparation how to reframe when faced with adversity.

Summing Up

How do I describe individuals who have these core qualities? They have the ability to vision outcomes and identify ways to achieve them. They have purpose. To carry out their purposes they have developed the ability to be intentional risk takers willing to test their ideas in the professional market place and accept the consequences. They have learned that the implementation of their purposes is not an event, it is a process that evolves over time. As a result they have developed the qualities of perseverance and patience; perseverance to maintain a course of action over time and patience to realize that change does not always go as fast as one might wish. Finally they are resilient. They can rise above adversity and are not deterred from achieving their purposes.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm