**Lesson 23: Communications and Counseling Skills**

**Introduction**

This lesson consists of:

1. Communications Theory

2. The Leader as a Counselor

3. Student Role-Plays

**Assignment**

1. **Read Course Guide**

2. When you solve a case study or act as a leader in your organization:

I. ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using Communication and Counseling Theory by ***classifying*** the worker’s performance issue into one of the below listed categories.

A. Misunderstanding of leader’s message

B. Personal issue that interferes with job performance

C. Career Development issue

D. Performance Appraisal issue

III. ***Explain*** how the follower’s issue is interfering with individual, group, and organizational outcomes.

IV. ***Select*** an appropriate theoretical leader strategy(ies) to address Areas of Interest.

V. ***Apply*** the theoretical leader strategy(ies) to the situation in the form of a specific leader plan that addresses all Areas of Interest.

VI. ***Assess,*** evaluate, and revise your leader plan.

3. **Practical Exercises.**

Several scenarios will be provided in class depicting a potential workplace situation. For each situation, take either the role of the leader-counselor, employee, or evaluator-observer. You will have a few minutes to digest the information provided. Plan how you will conduct your portion of the role-play during this time. If you are the employee, please make the role-play realistic for the leader-counselor so that he or she can not only practice the safe counseling skills, but also develop and process a counseling session. Evaluator-observers should study the feedback sheet and prepare to collect information about the session. After the role-play, the evaluator-observer will lead a discussion where the evaluator-observer, employee, and leader-counselors will all have an opportunity to provide and receive feedback about the counseling process.

**Communication and Counseling Skills**

Effective communication is critical for leaders to successfully engage with followers, peers, and bosses. This lesson delves into the complexities of communication, how differences between individuals affect the process, and strategies to overcome common barriers. By understanding the factors that influence communication, leaders can improve their ability to transfer information clearly, provide feedback, and handle counseling sessions with confidence.

**The Communication Process and its Challenges**

Communication involves a sender (source), message, and receiver. Miscommunication often occurs when the message is not clearly understood, leading to frustration and confusion. The key components in the communication process include:

* **Sender (Source)**: The individual initiating the message.
* **Message**: The information or idea to be conveyed.
* **Receiver**: The person or group to whom the message is directed.
* **Encoding**: The sender’s process of putting thoughts into symbols (e.g., words, tone, gestures).
* **Decoding**: The receiver’s interpretation of the symbols.
* **Feedback**: The receiver’s response to the sender’s message, completing the communication loop.

Even when a leader articulates a message clearly, various factors—such as differences in interpretation or background—can distort its meaning. Understanding how these factors influence communication helps reduce misunderstandings.

**Cybernetic Model of Communication**

The cybernetic model highlights how communication flows through a feedback loop between sender and receiver. Communication begins with an intended message. The sender encodes this message using symbols like words, gestures, or tone and transmits it through a selected medium (e.g., face-to-face conversation, email). Upon receiving the message, the receiver decodes it based on their perceptions, experiences, and context, which may lead to a different interpretation than the sender intended.

Once the receiver processes the message, they provide feedback. The feedback loop helps the sender understand whether the intended message was accurately received and offers a chance to clarify or correct misunderstandings. If miscommunication occurs, the sender may need to adjust their message, thereby completing the feedback cycle.

However, this process is complicated by **communication noise**—the disruptions or distortions that affect the message’s clarity. Noise may come from differences in background, experiences, or unintended nonverbal cues.



**Factors that Distort Meaning in Communication**

One of the most important aspects of effective communication is recognizing that no two individuals perceive reality in the same way. Differences in self-identity, roles, values, moods, and motives between the sender and receiver can distort the intended message, leading to confusion.

1. **Self-identity**: A sender’s assumptions about how the receiver views themselves can impact how the message is received. For instance, a leader might assume a follower will be excited about a new challenge, but the follower may perceive it as a threat due to a low need for achievement.
2. **Role perceptions**: Differences in understanding one's responsibilities can create confusion. A follower might believe that a task requested by the leader falls outside their role, leading to frustration or resentment.
3. **Values**: Variations in personal values can lead to different interpretations of the same message. A seasoned employee may value loyalty to the organization differently than a newcomer, affecting how they respond to a leader’s request.
4. **Mood**: A stressed sender might convey urgency, while a relaxed receiver may interpret the message as routine, creating a mismatch in priorities.
5. **Motives**: Differences in motivation between the sender and receiver can also skew the intended meaning of a message. A leader may be responding to organizational pressures, while followers may lack the same level of urgency.

To improve communication, leaders should ask themselves key questions, such as:

* Do I share the same values and motives as my followers?
* How might differences in roles or values affect how my message is received?
* Am I using terminology that aligns with the receiver’s understanding?



**Nonverbal Communication and its Role**

Albert Mehrabian’s research shows that **only 7%** of the communication impact is verbal, while **38%** is vocal (tone, pitch) and **55%** is nonverbal (facial expressions, gestures). Leaders must be aware of the nonverbal components that accompany their words, as these can often carry more weight than the verbal message.

Examples of nonverbal cues include:

* **Proximity**: We stand closer to people we like and trust, and further from those we do not.
* **Posture**: Relaxed, open postures signal comfort, while rigid or tense postures suggest discomfort or high status.
* **Facial expressions**: Eye contact and positive facial expressions indicate engagement and trust.
* **Vocal tone**: Volume, inflection, and pauses all contribute to the message’s meaning.
* **Dress**: Appearance can convey professionalism and status.

A leader’s nonverbal cues should reinforce their verbal message. Incongruence between what is said and how it is said can undermine a leader’s credibility. For example, saying, “This is important” in a monotone voice may convey apathy rather than urgency. Being conscious of how body language, tone, and expression influence communication will help a leader ensure that their message is understood as intended.

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|  | **Nonverbal Indicators** | | |
|  | **Liking** | **Status** | **Responsiveness** |
| **Proximity Cues** | * Closer proximity | * More distance by low status person |  |
| * Increased touching | * Greater territorial access by higher status person |  |
| **Posture Cues** | * Lean forward | * Hands on hips for higher status person | * Spontaneous gestures |
| * Open arms and body | * Relaxation by higher status person | * Shifting posture |
| * Direct body orientation |  |  |
| * Relaxation | * Strutting, expansiveness by higher status person * Standing by higher status person | * Proximal movement |
| **Facial Cues** | * More eye contact | * Less eye contact by higher status person | * Expressive face |
| * Positive facial expression |  |  |
| **Vocal Cues** | * Positive vocal | * Low voice volume by lower status person | * Vocal variety |
| **Dress Cues** |  | * Ornamentation with status symbols by higher status person |  |

**The Leader-Counselor Role**

Effective leadership requires an ability to counsel followers to help them grow and overcome challenges that may be hindering their performance. The goal of counseling is not to solve problems for followers but to help them find solutions on their own. Building trust between the leader and the follower is critical to successful counseling. Followers are more likely to open up and engage in problem-solving if they trust the leader and feel that the leader has their best interests at heart.

Key characteristics of an effective leader-counselor include:

1. **Self-awareness**: Leaders must understand their own biases, needs, and values to avoid projecting these onto others.
2. **Congruence**: Leaders must align their words with actions, ensuring that they “practice what they preach.”
3. **Respect for others**: Leaders should allow followers to take responsibility for their actions and solutions.
4. **Honesty**: Trust is built when leaders are straightforward, open about limitations, and constructive in their feedback.
5. **Confidentiality**: Trust also depends on the leader’s ability to maintain confidentiality. Followers need to know that personal issues shared during counseling will not be disclosed to others unless absolutely necessary. This ensures that the counseling environment is safe and nonjudgmental.

**Barriers to Effective Counseling**

Several barriers can impede a leader’s ability to counsel effectively:

* **Authority dynamics**: Followers may be hesitant to open up about personal weaknesses due to fear that it will affect their future prospects.
* **Advice-giving**: Leaders often default to giving advice, which can undermine a follower’s self-reliance. Instead, leaders should listen actively and guide followers toward their own solutions.
* **Cultural or generational differences**: These can create misunderstandings. Empathy, active listening, and avoiding judgment can help bridge these gaps.

**Counseling Skills for Leaders**

1. **Active Listening**: Leaders must listen beyond the words to understand the follower’s true meaning. This involves paying attention, paraphrasing, and restating the follower’s message to ensure understanding.
2. **Questioning**: Open-ended questions encourage followers to reflect on their experiences and thoughts. This fosters a more collaborative discussion. Closed questions should be avoided as they limit conversation.
3. **Understanding and Accepting Feelings**: Followers’ emotions must be acknowledged before moving into problem-solving. Leaders should seek to understand how the follower feels about the issue at hand.
4. **Problem Solving**: Leaders should guide followers through a structured problem-solving process. This involves:
   * Helping the follower identify the problem.
   * Exploring alternatives and gathering information.
   * Setting clear goals and developing a plan.
   * Monitoring progress and offering support.

**Confidentiality in Counseling**

Maintaining **confidentiality** is paramount to building trust between a leader and a follower during counseling. Confidentiality reassures followers that their personal concerns will not be shared with others unless absolutely necessary. This is particularly important when dealing with sensitive issues like mental health, personal crises, or performance problems. For police officers, who may experience high levels of stress and trauma, confidentiality allows them to feel safe in disclosing personal or work-related issues without fear of repercussions.

However, there are circumstances where confidentiality **cannot be maintained**, including:

* **Threat to Self or Others**: If a police officer expresses intent to harm themselves or others, the leader has a legal and ethical responsibility to breach confidentiality and seek immediate professional help to ensure the safety of the officer and others (Levine, 2015).
* **Illegal Activity**: If a follower discloses involvement in illegal activities, the leader may be obligated to report this information to the appropriate authorities, especially within the law enforcement profession.
* **Organizational Duty**: In some cases, leaders may be required to report serious concerns to higher authorities within the organization if the issue affects operational safety or the wellbeing of others in the department.

It is essential for leaders to communicate these limitations to followers upfront so they understand when and why confidentiality might be broken. This transparency is a key aspect of **trust-building**. If a follower knows the boundaries of confidentiality, they are more likely to engage in honest discussions, knowing that the leader will only break confidentiality in critical situations.

**Performance-Centered Counseling**

Performance-centered counseling focuses on improving the follower’s job performance through constructive feedback. Leaders should conduct regular performance appraisals that are developmental in nature rather than purely evaluative. This approach reduces defensiveness and encourages growth.

1. **Planning Work and Setting Standards**: Leaders and followers should jointly set high but realistic goals, with clear performance standards.
2. **Observing Work**: Leaders should provide ongoing feedback, focusing on specific behaviors rather than personal traits.
3. **Appraising Results**: The appraisal should be developmental, helping the follower identify areas for improvement and setting goals for future growth.

**Using a Referral Source: When and Why**

Leaders, particularly in high-stress environments like policing, must recognize when their counseling role reaches its limits. Police officers face unique challenges, often encountering traumatic situations that can have long-term emotional and psychological effects. Leaders need to understand when it’s time to refer an officer to professional support and why it’s critical to do so.

**When to Use a Referral Source:**

* **Personal Crisis Situations**: Issues such as substance abuse, marital problems, or severe mental health concerns (e.g., PTSD) require professional intervention.
* **Repeated Performance Deficiencies**: If counseling and support from the leader fail to improve an officer’s performance, and the issue stems from deeper emotional or psychological challenges, a referral to a mental health professional may be necessary.
* **Burnout or Compassion Fatigue**: Police officers often experience burnout, which can impair their ability to engage in the job or interact with colleagues and the community effectively. Recognizing these signs early can prevent long-term damage to both the officer and the department.
* **Signs of Trauma**: If an officer has been exposed to a traumatic event and exhibits signs of emotional distress, referral to a therapist or counselor trained in trauma may be essential to ensure their well-being.

**Why to Use a Referral Source:**

* **Specialized Expertise**: Leaders often lack the specialized training needed to address deep-seated personal or psychological issues. Referring officers to professionals ensures they receive the right care.

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| 1. Know the local resources that are available. If possible, visit these resources and establish contacts. Try to determine the strengths and limitations of each agency.  2. When a referral is necessary, be honest with the follower concerning your limitations as a counselor. State what you have observed that indicates that the individual needs further help. You might say, “Let’s take a look at other resources that may help you in this situation.”  3. If the follower indicates a readiness for referral, describe the resources that are available. Do not promise miracles, but do let the follower know what can reasonably be expected from a particular agency.  4. Discuss the possibility of referral with the referral agency before the problem becomes urgent. Do not release personal information to the referral source without written permission from the counselee.  5. Give counselees the opportunity to make their own appointments. It helps them take responsibility for the visit to the referral agency.  6. Maintain your counseling relationship with the individual until the referral is complete. |

* **Maintaining Officer Wellness**: Police work is emotionally taxing. Referral to a professional source helps officers maintain their mental and emotional wellness, allowing them to perform better on the job.
* **Preventing Long-Term Issues**: Unaddressed personal problems can escalate into larger issues affecting both personal life and job performance. Early intervention through referral can mitigate these risks.
* **Building Trust**: Officers may feel more comfortable speaking to a professional counselor about deeply personal issues, ensuring they receive unbiased, confidential support.

Leaders in policing should be aware of local mental health resources, peer support programs, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Establishing strong relationships with these referral sources can help facilitate a smoother referral process and ensure officers receive the help they need.

**The Leader’s Limits in Counseling**

Leaders are not always equipped to handle complex personal problems (e.g., marital issues, substance abuse) that may affect a follower’s work performance. In such cases, referral to professional resources is recommended. Effective referral involves understanding available resources, communicating their benefits, and maintaining a supportive relationship with the follower throughout the process.

**Key Takeaways**

* Effective communication requires attention to verbal and nonverbal cues and an awareness of how differences between individuals affect the interpretation of messages.
* Leaders must adopt a counseling approach that encourages followers to find their own solutions, rather than providing answers.
* Active listening, questioning, understanding feelings, and structured problem-solving are key counseling skills for leaders.
* Performance-centered counseling should focus on development and improvement, with regular feedback that emphasizes growth.
* Leaders should recognize when they need to refer followers, especially police officers, to professional resources for complex personal issues, including trauma, substance abuse, and emotional burnout.
* Confidentiality is crucial to building trust in counseling, but leaders must be transparent about situations where confidentiality cannot be maintained (e.g., harm to self or others).

By mastering these skills and strategies, leaders can improve communication and counseling effectiveness, leading to stronger relationships and better performance within their teams and organizations.

Practical Exercises

Several scenarios will be provided in class depicting a potential workplace situation. For each situation, take either the role of the leader-counselor, employee, or evaluator-observer. You will have a few minutes to digest the information provided. Plan how you will conduct your portion of the role-play during this time. If you are the employee, please make the role-play realistic for the leader-counselor so that he or she can not only practice the safe counseling skills but also develop and process a counseling session. Evaluator-observers should study the feedback sheet and prepare to collect information about the session. After the role-play, the Evaluator-Observer will lead a discussion where the evaluator-observer, employee, and leader-counselors will all have an opportunity to provide and receive feedback about the counseling process.

EVALUATOR-OBSERVER WORKSHEET

Observe the procedures used by the leader-counselor and be prepared to discuss the conduct of the counseling session using the questions listed below. As an opportunity to develop your own skills as a counselor, use the Safe Counseling strategies to facilitate your post-counseling feedback session.

How did the counselor create a comfortable atmosphere and reduce anxiety?

How did the counselor state the purpose of the session?

How did the counselor actively listen?

Occasional paraphrasing, mirroring, echoing?

Emotion labeling?

Minimal encouragers?

Reduce physical barriers?

Summarizing?

Hearing content vs. emotion?

How did the counselor question the employee?

Open or closed ended?

Concise?

Develop full understanding?

Use pauses/silence?

How did the problem-solving phase develop?

Did the employee identify solutions?

Did the counselor use available resources?

Were any referrals to other resources made?

Did the leader employ a follow-up (or split) session?

Was a subsequent session scheduled?

When? Where? Why?

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