

Benchmark – Personal Theory of Leadership

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Introduction

Leadership is a component of counselor education, supervision, and professional practice. As doctoral learners prepare to serve as counselor educators, they must develop a personal theory of leadership that integrates research, ethical principles, and multicultural awareness. Leadership theories provide frameworks for understanding how leaders influence others, while leadership traits and ethics highlight the characteristics essential for effective and ethical leadership. The following compares three primary leadership theories, analyzes leadership traits and ethics, and presents a personal leadership theory aligned with a Christian worldview and the responsibilities of a counselor educator.

Comparison of Leadership Theories

Leadership theory has evolved through diverse perspectives that emphasize traits, relationships, and adaptability. Three primary theories, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and situational leadership, illustrate distinct but complementary understandings of how leaders can influence and inspire others.

Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, and the ability to inspire followers toward growth and change. Transformational leaders cultivate trust, encourage innovation, and empower individuals by aligning goals with shared values (Northouse, 2022). This theory is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where counselor educators are called to inspire students to develop professionally and ethically.

Servant leadership emphasizes prioritizing the needs of others and fostering communities of care. Leaders who embody this style demonstrate humility, empathy, and a genuine commitment to the growth and development of others. Servant leadership also resonates with

Christian values, as it reflects the model of service by Christ, though it can be applied universally as an ethical framework that promotes respect and empowerment (Greenleaf, 2002).

Situational leadership highlights the importance of adaptability. Hersey and Blanchard (1996) proposed that effective leaders assess the readiness and development level of their followers and adjust their leadership style accordingly. This approach balances directive and supportive behaviors to meet the unique needs of each situation. For counselor educators, situational leadership offers a flexible model for engaging with students, supervisors, and colleagues at varying levels of professional development. Together, these theories highlight the importance of vision, service, and adaptability. Each contributes essential insights into the development of a balanced and effective leadership style.

Leadership Traits, Ethics, and Multicultural Competence

Leadership effectiveness depends not only on theories but also on traits and ethical commitments. Research identifies key traits such as integrity, self-awareness, empathy, confidence, and resilience as central to effective leadership (Zaccaro, 2007). These traits enable leaders to navigate challenges, foster trust, and cultivate inclusive environments.

Leadership ethics provide a moral compass that ensures decisions promote fairness, justice, and care for others. The American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics outlines the responsibility of counselor educators to model ethical leadership by prioritizing the welfare of students and clients, engaging in advocacy, and fostering environments of respect. Ethical leadership requires consistency between values and actions, particularly when balancing authority with responsibility (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Multicultural competence is needed for effective ethical leadership. Leaders must demonstrate cultural humility, respect diverse perspectives, and address systemic inequities (Sue

& Sue, 2021). For counselor educators, multicultural competence extends to teaching, supervision, and research. By modeling cultural responsiveness, leaders prepare future counselors to serve diverse populations in an ethical and effective manner. Integrating multicultural awareness ensures that leadership is inclusive and socially just (Chan et al., 2018).

Traits of Being a Leader

Effective leaders embody a combination of personal and relational traits. Integrity establishes trust, empathy allows leaders to connect authentically with others, vision provides direction, and resilience sustains leaders through challenges. Humility, accountability, and adaptability further enhance leadership capacity. Together, these traits form a foundation for positively influencing others and guiding them toward growth (Yukl, 2013).

Baseline Knowledge and Skills for Leadership

Beyond traits, effective leaders must possess essential knowledge and skills. Strong communication is crucial for sharing a clear vision and fostering teamwork. Sound decision-making, based on ethics and evidence, guides leaders to responsible results. Conflict resolution skills enable leaders to address differences constructively, promoting reconciliation and growth. Cultural competence enhances inclusivity and fairness, while modeling positive behaviors for teams. Strategic thinking provides a framework for long-term plans and adaptability, helping organizations respond well to change. Mentorship abilities allow leaders to support others' professional growth and organizational development. These skills are fundamental to leadership in various professional contexts, including counselor education.

Current Knowledge and Skills

Self-reflection reveals several leadership skills already present. These include empathy, which allows for relational connection, and integrity, which guides ethical decision-making.

Communication and mentorship are also evident, particularly in guiding others toward professional and personal growth. Additionally, cultural awareness and a commitment to inclusivity reflect the integration of multicultural competence into leadership practice. These strengths provide a foundation for further development as a leader (Northouse, 2022).

Knowledge and Skills to Adopt

Growth as a leader requires intentional development in areas that are less fully developed. Skills such as strategic planning and organizational adaptability remain areas of focus. Enhancing confidence in decision-making, particularly in complex situations, is another area for growth. The ongoing development of advanced multicultural leadership skills, including advocacy for systemic change, represents an important goal. By cultivating these skills, leadership capacity can expand to meet the evolving professional demands (Chin, 2010).

Personal Leadership Philosophy

Drawing on the integration of leadership theories, traits, and skills, a personal theory of leadership emerges. This theory combines the vision and inspiration of transformational leadership, the humility and service of servant leadership, and the adaptability of situational leadership. Leadership is viewed as a relational and ethical responsibility, grounded in service to others, a commitment to justice, and a pursuit of growth.

This philosophy aligns with a Christian worldview, which emphasizes humility, service, and integrity. Servant leadership, in particular, resonates with the biblical model of leadership, which emphasizes service and humility. However, the philosophy also incorporates broader research-based insights, recognizing that effective leadership requires adaptability, cultural responsiveness, and ethical consistency. Ultimately, leadership is understood as a calling to guide, empower, and inspire others toward growth while modeling integrity and respect.

Conclusion

Leadership in counselor education requires an integration of theory, traits, ethics, and multicultural competence. Transformational, servant, and situational leadership theories provide complementary insights that inform a balanced leadership style. Essential traits such as integrity, empathy, and resilience, combined with baseline skills in communication, decision-making, and cultural competence, form the foundation of effective leadership. Self-reflection reveals both strengths and areas for growth, highlighting the importance of ongoing development. The resulting personal leadership theory emphasizes vision, service, and adaptability, grounded in a Christian worldview and aligned with the responsibilities of a counselor educator.

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