

Counseling for the Training of Leaders and Leadership Development: A Commentary



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Alfonso Barreto

Counseling is the instrument that empowers training and forges the development of leaders in their essential drive to inspire and guide others. As much a discipline and praxis as a professional practice, counseling increases consciousness and optimizes the management and synergy of human energy. This article addresses methods for sustaining leadership development via the leader as manager, educator and motivator.

Keywords: leadership, human energy, counseling, sustained development, discipline and praxis, synergy

Discipline and Praxis in Counseling

Human enhancement is the pure essence of counseling both as a discipline and a profession. As a discipline, counseling is based on education, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology and other human sciences. As a proactive professional practice, counseling works with the processes inherent to the development of personal potential with a view of strengthening and making its integral evolution more effective (Barreto, 2009; Vera, 2003).

Counselors are multidisciplinary professionals who offer their support in the development of individuals and groups regarding a constellation of subjects relative to their circumstances and commonalities (e.g., anxiety, depression, mental-emotional disorders, addictions, family issues, sexual abuse and domestic violence, absenteeism, vocational choice and career development, social maladjustment, grief, transitions in stages of life) that usually cause stress in the development of the personality (Navare, 2008; Vera, 2003; Vera & Jiménez, 2005).

Vera (2006) reported that a fundamental goal of counseling services is the assistance to the individual in the task of becoming a person with optimal emotional and intellectual function, and with autonomy sufficient to take care of personal and community affairs in a suitable and effective form.

For Vera (2006), counseling is essentially a service for the enhancement of the individual based on a set of basic assumptions, including the following:

- The development of the individual is cumulative and dynamic, and changes over time, although it is considered that the early influences in life echo the experiences of the subsequent years.
- The psychological representation of life events influences behavior more than the events themselves.
- Personal development is generated when one maintains a consistent identity (internal limits and external clarity about self) and when responsibility is assumed to choose one's own personal growth.
- One has the freedom to choose the future from a wide range of possibilities.

Alfonso Barreto is a Development Analyst in Talents and Specialists (PDVSA – Management AIT). Correspondence can be addressed to Alfonso Barreto, Av. 33A, Calle 100, Terrazas de Sabaneta, Maracaibo-Venezuela, Sur América, alfarreto@yahoo.es.

- Social behaviors are learned and can change with the learning process.
- Personal development is a product in which interest is manifested in the cooperation with others in order to a common goal.

In consideration of these points, counseling is derived from a set of sub-disciplines and practices that allow one to address the different facets of life from various angles (e.g., social environment, stage of life, experiences) and is focused on an uplifting vision and a holistic understanding of the self (Barreto, 2009; Vera, 2004), as noted by the following:

- Career counseling pertains to knowledge and methodologies that address the needs and challenges of individuals in the work/organizational environment. Career counseling specializes in work education, organizational and group dynamics, organizational philosophy, sociology and anthropology. Similarly, vocational counseling is the branch of counseling that addresses the needs and challenges in the processes of vocational choice, career planning, and development during the life cycle.
- Academic counseling focuses on the academic environment and challenges in the personal-social development of students, teachers and the academic community.
- Family counseling addresses the needs and challenges of the contemporary family, taking into account the sociocultural environment and the interests and expectations of family members.
- Community mental health counseling engages in the design of programs and projects, addressing the diversities of the community environment for the sake of addressing and facilitating the progress of the communities in a harmonic and sustainable manner.
- Gerontological counseling centers its activities on the needs and challenges of life in late adulthood, retirement and old age.
- Addiction counseling is focused on support for individuals and groups regarding drugs and addictive substances, with the purpose of serving as an educator in the process of personal development.

Counseling works based on different scientific-humanistic frameworks without imposing models and patterns of understanding or assistance that restrict freedom, but cooperating and supporting the development of the potentialities of the person in order to stimulate autonomy and functionality throughout the life cycle, and in the sociocultural environment to which individuals belong (Barreto, 2009; Vera, 2004).

It also is important to mention that the counselors are able to cooperate with the development of the human ideal thanks to the development of certain basic therapeutic conditions and some fundamental capacities to obtain the convergence and harmonization of human energy. In Venezuela, and according to relevant literature, such capacities and conditions are denominated professional competencies for counseling including empathy, active communication, paraphrasing, verbal follow-up, comprehensive synthesis, feedback, reflection of contents, feelings and meanings, and confrontation. In this sense—and in agreement with Chang, Barrio Minton, Dixon, Myers, and Sweeney (2012)—counseling professionals have an advantage in identifying population indicators, selecting support methods, and improving the daily mode of life. In the same vein, leaders trained in counseling skills are in a better condition to understand, interact and respond to diverse situations of personal dynamics in the goals for which a leadership relationship has been established.

In effect, the attitudes, skills, and abilities with which the counseling professional is educated conform to a practical theory that can help train and develop responsible professionals and others who wish to facilitate the well-being of humankind: diplomats, police officers, professors, doctors, social workers, journalists, firefighters, and evidently, all types of leaders.

In this way, as demonstrated by the work that was developed by the Counselor Student's Association at Regis University (Colorado, U.S.) and stipulated by Osterlund and Mack (2011), diverse students who have been able to participate in the programs of this association have harnessed their own style of leadership from the knowledge they have gained about themselves, and were able to better organize work teams, handle conflicts, recognize their weaknesses, and take advantage of their strengths. At the same time that these students improved their leadership skills, they also were able to forge closer relations with each other to mutually support their academic and professional development, even after the completion of their university studies.

In parallel, when the leader accepts a set of principles and exerts a praxis based on some attitudes that are key to all counseling interventions, the leadership would be much less autocracy and more counseling. If leaders exert the praxis of leadership similar to how certain processes of consultation occur, in which the consultant and consultee share responsibility during the support process in order to promote interpersonal relations, human development, socialization and mental health (Hansen, Himes, and Meier 1990), then the exercise of leadership would become sufficiently sensible and effective in order to reach its maximum potential. This potential harnesses the individual in its processes of improvement, development and search for well-being. In any case, leaders and counselors share a focus and professional interest in their daily activities including the effective management of human energy.

Leadership: An Interaction of Human Energy

The human phenomenon of "leadership" is one of the most studied, discussed and controversial, thus its complexity, prospects for understanding, and variability of definitions. Barreto (2010) stipulates the following:

In academic circles, leadership is usually associated with status, certain skills, and power that some person has to influence others, innovate, and achieve objectives. Research is carried out constantly in order to clear up confusion and to diminish the lack of knowledge facing the needs and expectations generated around the topic. Also, a great number of books and writings are dedicated to offering prescriptions and formulas for people to exert effective leadership in their areas of expertise and social spaces.

In political, economic and community contexts, leadership is observed as a type of authority—one tied to power and related to the qualities of somebody that excels within a group, which addresses the leader as a set of subordinates, a mass, or lower-ranked followers. In the military field, it is that voice and presence of the leader that keeps alive the "fire" and the "mystical" in the troops when they are deployed to undertake the battles that will guarantee freedom, independence and sovereignty.

In the organizational area, it is presumed that the leadership is in management positions, and that the leader is the highest authority or president of the company. It is for this reason that the leader should shape and grow a set of general and technical skills in others who have management responsibilities, so they can assemble various work teams and reach objectives in an effective and efficient manner.

Additionally, for Barreto (2009), it is evident that leadership is a phenomenon of great attention as much for professionals as nonprofessionals, the young and not so young, experts and the not-so-expert. A social discipline even exists that exclusively approaches leadership as a phenomenon of change and transformation, referred to as *leaderology* (Barreto, 2009). The term *leadership* comes from the indo-European word *leit*, meaning "to advance or to go forward." Nowadays the concept of leadership is usually connected with terms like process, skill, influence, ability, quality and power. (Barreto, 2009).

It is important to note that most of these attributions of leadership emerge from the perspective of the leader. However, in making a new judgment on what can be considered to be leadership, it is necessary to understand that it also involves people who are non-leaders—that is, those who are led. A leader is not leader if he does not have the led; this means that *leaders* and *the led* are interdependent (Barreto, 2009). The term *led* is preferred, instead of *followers* or *subordinates*, since *led* serves the intent to increase participation, autonomy, achievement, equality, responsibility and fairness, whereas the other terms imply fascination, oppression, disability, domination, submission and inferiority.

In this sense, and according to Barreto (2009), Freire (2005), Heider (2004) and Ingenieros (2002), the led are at the other end of leadership; they complement the leader, and articulate and execute transformation and re-engineering. While the leader can serve as a guide and helmsman, the led have the force of the propeller. The led are the reason for the leader. Therefore, leadership is an interaction between the leader and the led, conditioned by the skills, qualities, processes, abilities, characteristics and interests of both parties; where reciprocal influences exist, leaders seek to open and develop the processes of growth and improvement for themselves based on a clear vision and concrete objectives.

As noted by Barreto (2009), each person is a source of energy; adding together all the energies present in a group (family, society, organizations, and work teams) will produce a whole set of emotions, abilities, talents, skills, potentialities, wishes, psyches, bodies, souls and spirits that must be inexorably well-managed to ensure maximum well-being.

Consequently, one should consider leadership as an interaction of human energy that wishes to be developed and prosper. Human energy is the intelligent and rational force that promotes the transformations and re-engineering. Not only is it a physical energy, it is also a mental, emotional and spiritual energy. Before this redefinition of leadership as an interaction of human energy with the intention to prosper and to perfect, and thanks to the principles assumed in counseling, the leader must be construed as a *Manager (M)*, *Educator (E)* and *Motivator (M)* able to manage knowledge, clarify objectives, establish effective communications, evaluate various scenarios and risks, make decisions, and manage changes (Barreto, 2009).

The MEM Leader: Manager, Educator and Motivator

First, it is imperative to clarify that the leader is neither the head nor the patron, nor is the leader necessarily one that is being followed by a group or somebody who holds a managerial or executive position. Leadership is arguably more than that. A leader is a stimulator, guide and protector of human energy (Barreto, 2009).

Ontologically, the leader is a person with an unquestionable ecological sense of the human being, and perhaps for that reason the leader is somebody who revives and renews the concepts of “hope” and “prosperity” that are necessary for the human being to transform with enthusiasm and willingness. For that reason, each leader must be somebody with a set of characteristics, skills, abilities, qualities and talents that allow the leader to initiate and pursue the complex network of processes that comprise the interaction of human energy.

For Barreto (2009, 2010), a leader does not have to be a dichotomous person, nor is a leader simple product of a juxtaposition of characteristics, skills or behaviors. The leader is a triune: a holistic combination of a manager, an educator and a motivator.

A manager has the distinction of converging action toward an objective where energies are put in active tension to obtain an expected end. A manager-leader is responsible for the achievement of goals and objectives

that have a pattern of criteria and a clear philosophy of management and human development (Barreto, 2009; Sennewald, 1985).

An educator is an artist who can enable others to function in social life (Ingenieros, 2002), enhances intelligence, increases the power of the thought, and promotes the intrinsic skills of others to confront the challenges of life.

The true educator-leader assumes a pedagogical and liberating psychology, instead of allowing the dislocated epidemiological processes in which the only thing that happens is the adaptation of the person to the surroundings. On the contrary, the leader stimulates the germination of the critical-reflective competencies that allow both the led and the leader not only adapt to the reality of the surroundings but also to reinterpret it, to re-engineer it, and to transform it (Barreto, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Freire, 2005).

The motivator mobilizes, encourages, dissuades and makes human energy flow. The leader as a motivator keeps the positive tension active in the group. This motivator-leader creates an energetic climate so that the led enrich it with their activity and enthusiastic participation. The leader is a positive energizer in the group, who does not assail the group, expend its energy, or impose his motivation per se; rather, a leader resonates in the led and allows their intrinsic motivational energies to increase and articulate themselves (Barreto, 2009; Goleman, 2006; Heider, 2004).

The MEM leader, as illustrated in Figure 1, drives a practice of participatory, enthusiastic, critical and sustainable leadership. The leader has the conditions to understand and to magnetize the led, and they in response are integrated, and complement and execute the transformations with conscience synergy (Barreto, 2009, 2010).

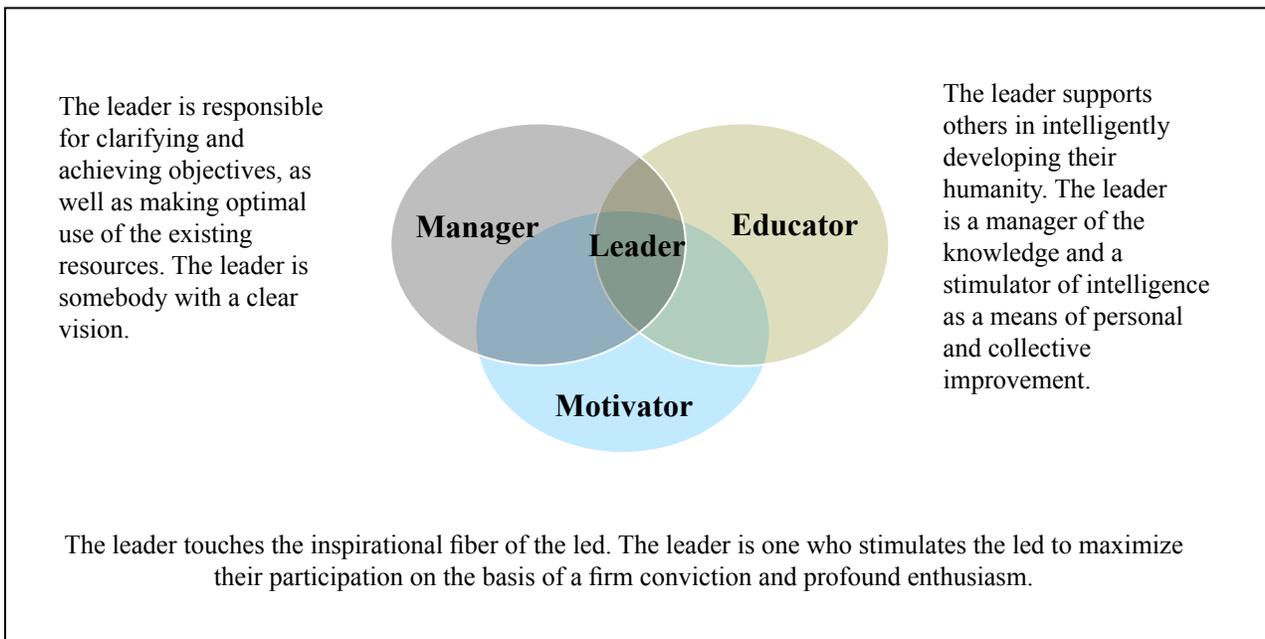


Figure 1. The MEM Leader. (Barreto, 2009, 2010)

Consciousness is associated with mental and emotional clarity, capacity to be empathic, ability to handle knowledge with intuitive clarity, and—over and above this—a superior understanding of the connection between all beings and elements (Chatterjee, 2007; Freire, 2005; Goleman, 2006; Heider, 2004). Synergy is the pace of sustained development; it is the cohesive integration of the parts of a system; it is the understanding and connection between the parts of a whole, making the final result of the system superior to the simple sum of the individual efforts that comprise it (Barreto, 2009, 2010). Synergy is the antithesis of entropy.

In thermodynamics, entropy is the property that marks the loss of interrelation between the parts of a system (existing disorder), which eventually leads to decay and obsolescence. A leader avoids entropy for the sake of maintaining harmonic, efficient and effective growth (Barreto 2009, 2010). While synergy is the union of energies, entropy is the dissipation of energy. Synergy makes efficient and effective use of energy; entropy wastes and exhausts energy.

Counseling for the Training of Leaders and the Development of Leadership

At the present time, university programs in counseling are becoming more focused in developing the skills of leadership in the students (Wolf, 2011). This indicates that the competencies and abilities of leaders and counselors are becoming more similar. Therefore, leaders learn more about harnessing particular realities (e.g., culture, gender, political position, spirituality, social sphere), and counselors direct their skills toward the management of human energy.

The training of counselors is not a simple task inasmuch as the professional work of counselors is based on the human processes of the person. Hence, the aspiring counselor requires a deliberate and intense personal effort in the intellectual and emotional areas, and in the performance in the task of acquiring the competencies for the ideal practice of counseling (Vera, 2003). Similarly, for the training of leaders, a coordinated and deliberate effort is indispensable in order to provoke the awakening of one's talents and to be able to develop a versatile and heuristic leader: a MEM leader.

Patterson (1999, cited in Vera, 2003) notes, for example, that *empathic understanding*, *unconditional acceptance*, and *congruence* must be promoted and encouraged throughout the training program because such conditions are not techniques or strategies, but attitudes that must be harnessed in the person during training and not from the outside. Therefore, the training of leaders as managers, educators and motivators of human energy, can be based on the principles of constructive pedagogy of counseling that according to Vera (2003), allow counseling students to do the following:

- Become a professional of excellence (independent, flexible, reflective and critical).
- Assume a notion of life full of possibilities, not restricted to a single path or single way to be.
- Develop attitudes of understanding, deconstruction and transformation of the status quo.
- Recognize and to promote the integrated development of individual personalities framed in a sociocultural context.

Thus, it could be argued that counseling can provide knowledge that increases versatility in the training of a MEM leader (manager, educator and motivator) and in the development of leadership in communities, organizations, associations, and families, as well as circumstances in the life cycle of people including childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age and old age, providing the conditions for

- raising and promoting the construction of paradigms that allow for the establishment of spaces for reflective understanding and fraternal human encounter;
- facilitating the establishment of effective mechanisms and processes of communication and management of knowledge;
- increasing the critical, independent and sovereign sense of the led with the purpose of stimulating responsibility to make decisions, evaluate actions, and increase participation as builders of a collective vision;
- harnessing the skills of the leader and the led to reinterpret and surpass daily challenges; and
- promoting the development of individual virtues that serve to optimize and enrich collective skills in an integrated way.

Final Comments

Leadership is an interaction of human energy that it has as its main attribute the development of the processes of growth and improvement for those who conform to it: the leader and the led. Human energy is an intelligent and rational force that promotes and realizes transformations and re-engineering. The leader, consequently, is the focal point of the energies that characterize the group, and must be seen as the manager who clarifies objectives and articulates the resources; as the educator who empowers and intelligently nourishes human energy; as the motivator that maintains enthusiasm and vigor in the activities of growth and progress: the MEM leader (Barreto, 2009, 2010).

Counseling is a discipline and professional practice defined fundamentally by its uplifting nature of human energy, and by an understanding that people must harness their skills and form their attitudes. The counselor becomes a formidable ally for MEM leader both in its training as well as in its exercise, in providing a thorough understanding of the diverse facets of human life in its different angles with an enhanced vision and a holistic understanding of people, and in forging a set of key attitudes such as empathy and unconditional acceptance (Barreto, 2009; Vera, 2004).

It is worth reflecting on how many hidden talented leaders might exist in society, who by not considering the systems of counseling lose their methods to make humanity more human; it is worth reflecting on how many leaders in the world are—without knowing it—damaging a human being because they do not use the concepts of the basic principles of human relationships used by counselors, or also how many leaders are not able to manage intelligently, to educate humanely, or to motivate the led in a sustainable manner.

Counselors' unique training contributes to their being effective leaders in a wide variety of contexts (Paradise, Ceballos, and Hall, 2010). Counseling skills maximize the power of the leader to manage, to educate, and to motivate with synergy and consciousness, rendering human well-being more viable in the life cycle, consequently making the counselor-leader the *engineer of sustained human development*.

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