

Seven Habits of Highly Effective School Psychologists

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Have You Ever...

- *tried to convince students they have a problem when they don't think they do?*
- *worked much harder than the student to change a school problem?*
- *felt like giving up altogether on counseling, consultation, or intervention because you simply don't have the time to do it right?*

These are the kind of challenges that led to the seven practical habits in this article. If you answered “yes” to any of the questions, then I hope you will find these ideas as useful in your work as they have been in mine.

The Seven Habits

Habit #1 Remember that change is the name of the game.

Most referrals to school psychologists represent a request for change. This is true regardless of the type of service being requested. Even assessment referrals are initiated because someone, usually a parent or teacher, wants to see a change in the student's academic or social behavior.

Whether evaluating a student's academic ability or consulting with a teacher regarding a classroom behavior problem, change is the ultimate goal. For this reason I suggest the following question as a guide for professional practice: *Will this action promote the desired change?*

“Action” is broadly defined here to include assessment procedures, evaluation reports, placement and programming decisions, interventions, meetings, and so forth. Our professional usefulness depends largely on our willingness to apply this question to daily decisions and activities. As such, this habit is the foundation for all the others.

Habit #2 Be a good ambassador.

When foreign ambassadors arrive in a new country, they don't start telling people what to do. They look, listen, and learn. They ask questions like: What do you value most?; What does an average day like for you?; How should I go about learning as much as I can about you and your country?; If you were me, what advice would you offer to the people of your country?

Good ambassadors are eager and humble learners who approach the country's inhabitants as essential teachers of key cultural beliefs and practices. The ambassador's ultimate effectiveness rests largely on an ability to match advice and recommendations to the unique challenges, interests, and capabilities of the country's population. Likewise, effective interventions for school problems are tailored to the distinctive aspects of the problem and the people involved in it. Approaching students, teachers, and parents with humility and curiosity helps to build collaborative relationships. Collaboration enhances change by fostering people's ownership of intervention strategies. Like good ambassadors, effective practitioners fit their approach to the people instead of trying to fit the people to their approach.

Habit #3 Use words wisely.

Counseling and consultation are language-based activities. Words can either help or hinder. The effectiveness of intervention improves when we listen carefully to the words of others and choose our own words wisely. The words people use to discuss school problems provide important clues about their views of the problem and its potential solution. Consider the difference between the following two descriptions of the same problem involving a fifth-grade student referred for disruptive classroom behavior.

Teacher: He's very manipulative and likes to have the upper hand. When he's

not in control, he'll do something to direct attention to himself so he can have an audience. Meanwhile, I lose control of class. That's my big concern. I feel like I'm losing control of the class, and he's gaining all the control.

Student: She's always on my case [referring to the teacher]. I can't do anything right. Everything I do in her class is wrong. I breathe and she says, "Now Stephanie, stop breathing."

[Notice the difference between the practitioner's response to each.]

Practitioner (to the teacher): I'm wondering what you could do differently to regain some control in the classroom.

Practitioner (to the student): I'm wondering what you could do differently to get the teacher off your case.

In both cases, the practitioner respects and reflects the person's language by incorporating it into a follow-up comment ("gaining control" for the teacher, getting the teacher "off your case" for the student). This takes practice, but it is well worth the effort. I have been amazed at how useful this strategy is in engaging the most reluctant or so-called "resistant" students. The term "resistance" is addressed next.

Habit #4 Resist the term "resistance."

Mary was a high school student referred for defiant school behavior. Here is what Mary said as she entered my office for the first time before I even had time to say hello: "This school sucks. The teachers are stupid and the principal is an idiot. And now I have to come here to see you. I know you're gonna try to make me mind the teachers, but I'm not doing it, and you can't make

me. Nobody can make me. This whole counseling thing sucks just like the school. I'm not crazy. I don't care what you say."

Mary fits most definitions of resistant. The big question is: Does viewing Mary as resistant help me to work with her in a way that enhances change? In my experience, viewing people as resistant hinders the change process. Consider the following two common responses to so-called resistant students like Mary: (a) the *Rational Persuasion Approach* of trying to talk her out of her opinion by providing facts that challenge her view of herself and others; and (b) the *Fatalistic Future Approach* of informing her how miserable her future life will be if she doesn't heed Santana's advice and "change her evil ways" pronto. As well-intentioned as they are, these resistance-countering responses usually backfire and make matters worse.

Students who demonstrate serious and ongoing school problems often feel misunderstood, a change-detering impression that is reinforced when practitioners view them as resistant (including statements or implications that the student is "not trying"). It is more efficient to cooperate with the student's position instead of trying to change it. Returning to Mary, I cooperated with her position by asking what she needed to do to get out of coming to counseling. Mary was intrigued by this unexpected question. She became much more cooperative as we talked about specific behaviors that would advance her goal of not coming to counseling. Change is enhanced by replacing the resistance label with creative efforts to cooperate with students, parents, and teachers.

Habit #5 Focus on what works.

The field of psychology has been described as being obsessed with people's shortcomings and limitations. Renowned educational psychologist Seymour Sarason characterized psychological

assessment as “the search for pathology.” Seeing students and other people as deficient or as competent is a matter of choice versus truth. Habit #5 invites practitioners to “search for competency” by including assessment and interviewing strategies aimed at identifying people’s strengths and resources. Psychotherapy outcome research indicates that building on people’s strengths and resources is one of the most powerful and efficient means of changing problems (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Bohart & Tallman, in press; Murphy, 1999).

One practical way of implementing this habit is to search for exceptions to the problem. Exceptions refer to times in which a school problem is absent or less intense. Asking a disruptive student about the *one class* in which they *don’t* get into trouble, instead of focusing only on problematic classes, provides helpful clues about what works for the student in regard to class format, teacher-student interaction, and so forth. This information can be used to design interventions that encourage the student and others to do more of what is already working (Murphy, 1994).

As simple as this concept sounds, it is not easy to do in the face of traditional assessment systems and policies that require deficit-based diagnoses in order for people to receive services (e.g., DSM-IV, special education). Strategies for integrating strengths and resources into assessment, consultation, and intervention are provided elsewhere (Epstein & Sharma, 1997; Murphy, 2008). [Warning: Immediate application of Habit #5 may cause sudden attacks of hope and optimism.]

Habit #6 Focus on the future.

Despite sounding like a retirement slogan, this habit offers many practical advantages to school practitioners. Assessment, consultation, and intervention are most effective when they are

future-focused and solution-oriented versus past-focused and problem-oriented. The past is useful only insofar as it enhances future solutions. Information regarding previous interventions and their relative success is helpful in planning future actions. However, prolonged archeological digs into the problematic past do not always provide a clear direction for change and may actually heighten people's despair. Focusing on the future cultivates hope and improves outcomes.

Questions and comments that anticipate change and build hope are useful in helping students and others focus on future goals, actions, and possibilities. Here are some examples:

- How will you know when things start getting better?
- What will your daughter be doing differently when her self-esteem begins to improve a little?
- How will classroom life change for you as a teacher when these ideas start working?

Additional questions can be found in Murphy (2008).

Habit #7 Remind yourself (often) that change is the name of the game. This is the mantra of effective school psychologists and others for whom resolving problems is a daily requirement. Since referrals are requests for change, this reminder keeps us tightly focused on what is most important to the people we work with. Like any good mantra, it should be repeated often throughout the day.

Editor's Comments

Dr. Murphy was invited to submit this article as a supplement to his workshop on October 30, 2009 at the KASP conference in Overland Park, KS. For more information about putting these ideas into practice on the job, refer to Dr. Murphy's website (www.drjohnmurphy.com), two

recent books (*Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* (2008) (American Counseling Association, 800-422-2648; www.counseling.org) and (with Barry Duncan) *Brief Intervention for School Problems* (2007) Guilford Press, 800-765-7006, www.guilford.com), and videotape (“Solution-Focused Child Therapy with John J. Murphy,” Psychotherapy Resources, www.psychotherapy.net). For more information and workshop scheduling, refer to Dr. Murphy’s website or contact him at 501-450-5450 or jmurphy@uca.edu.

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