Academic Advising for the 21st Century: Using Principles of Conflict Resolution to Promote Student Success and Build Relationships

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Academic advising is a proactive and intrusive process in which advisor and advisee build a collaborative relationship in order to promote college success. Conflict resolution is such an approach to aid advisors in maximizing the potential of advisees to be successful. Wallensteen (2012) defines conflict resolution as a "situation where the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's continued existence as parties" (p. 8). Let's take a moment and break down Wallensteen's definition and apply it to academic advising.

- First, advisors should understand that conflict is not negative but an avenue to build healthy relationships. Although advisors and advisees may have conflicting opinions, those opinions are necessary to fuel collaborative actions.
- Second, advising is an agreement that both advisors and advisees enter into. This agreement facilitates effective communication that, in the end, promotes student success.
- Third, advisors should understand that central incompatibilities exist as a means of transforming relationships in order to make them healthier and stronger. In addition, just as conflict should not be seen as negative, so shall the fact that differences exist between advisors and advisees.
- Fourth, advisors and advisees accept each other's existence because the end goal is program completion for the advisee. Furthermore, academic advising is an interdependent process that allows for positive conflict to occur in order to achieve common goals.

Building Rapport

Katz and Lawyer (1992) “proposition that rapport is a process of establishing a relationship of trust, harmony, affinity or accord with another” (p. 23). Their definition of rapport is an exact replica of what should occur in order to promote effective academic advising. Advisors should understand that “effective academic advising serves to build long-term, satisfactory relationships” (Kim & Feldman, 2011, p. 222). Academic advising is more than just an advisement session; academic advising is a relationship that builds from start to degree completion. Through building positive and healthy relationships, the advisor and advisee create an environment of trust and support. The building of trust and support can help to promote desired goals of the advisee. “Goals can be defined as desirable future conditions” (Jeong, 2010, 24). It can be a challenging process for advisees to reach their goals without support. Therefore, it is the job of advisors to offer support during challenging times in order to help advisees focus on their desired future condition.

The Practice of Empathy

Empathy is the ability of academic advisors to show compassion in times of great stress. “Empathy is the
process of mentally identifying with the character and experiences of another person” (Hybels & Weaver, 2009, p. 139). Academic advisors should show empathy not only from a concerned point of view but also from a listening point of view. “Listening to other people’s feelings is not just a way of giving emotional support, but it is a way of creating intimacy as well” (Hybels & Weaver, 2009, p. 139). What is interesting about the Hybels and Weaver statement is that intimacy is a part of relationship building. As the relationship grows and trust is built, advisors and advisees enter into an intimate relationship fostered by trust and support.

In conclusion, “the expression of empathy communicates that we have some understanding of the other person’s motives or needs” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011, p. 326). Often times, academic advising becomes life advising. In other words, advisees may need their advisor to express or show empathy for their situation. Academic advisors should show some type of empathy through practicing empathetic listening when advising their advisees.

**Listening Actively**

The job of academic advisors is to listen and probe for more information. An excellent method for listening to advisees is called active listening. Active listening is the most common form of listening that academic advisors do on a regular basis. Therefore, academic advisors who are effective listeners are most likely an active listener. “Active listening is an exact statement or paraphrase of what the respondent has said and often focuses on the emotional content of a message and is more of a response than a question” (Moore, 2003, p. 132). “The use of active listening skills may be an important first step to establishing effective two-way communication and successful collaboration” (McNaughton and Vostal, 2010, p. 252).

**Academic Advising and Collaboration**

Collaboration is more than just effective communication but it is also a means of enhancing the relationship between advisors and advisees. Collaboration involves working together and is exemplified by active listening. Katz and Lawyer (1992) conclude that “collaboration is maintained by interpersonal relationships” (p. 95) in which the advisor works to empower the advisee to reach their academic, professional and personal goals. Collaboration also requires that a partnership is formed between the academic advisor and the advisee. Through such skills as active and empathetic listening, the academic advisor creates a safe and nurturing environment for the advisee.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Academic advising is a relationship-building process. By using conflict resolution principles as a base for academic advising, academic advisors are in a good position to create healthy, long-lasting relationships with their advisees. It is hoped that academic advisors see conflict as a positive means for promoting effective communication, building intimate relationships, and creating a safe and supportive environment for their advisees to communicate freely and openly. Although conflict resolution is about resolving issues and concerns on many different levels, there are pieces of this theory that can be utilized and applied to the academic advising process. Unfortunately, academic advising does come with conflict but through the use of special skills, the academic advisor can successfully overcome any conflict situation in a healthy manner.

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References


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