School Psychology Awareness: Using Your Own Strengths to Support Your Colleagues


Anyone working in education in America knows it can be a stressful and demanding job. Discipline problems, high-stakes testing, difficult parents, budget cuts, and personal stressors can cause even the most seasoned veterans to doubt themselves, succumb to stress, and lose their effectiveness at times. It is easy to see how we can support the students we serve, but what about our colleagues? For School Psychology Awareness Week, take a step back and reflect upon your own strengths. Identify and recognize the skills that make you stand out. Then use them to support your colleagues.

BE SURE TO KNOW YOUR OWN STRENGTHS
Catalogue your signature strengths. Review the six signature strengths defined in the positive psychology literature and list specific qualities or capacities that you have related to each one. Think about specific circumstances under which those strengths have helped you and others to overcome an obstacle or achieve a goal. Consider doing this with your colleagues to help each other discover, share, and celebrate your strengths.

Find your professional passion. While we are responsible for all aspects of our jobs and strive to demonstrate excellence in all domains of the NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (NASP Practice Model), it is important to take time to discover the part of your job that you love the most and make sure to devote time to it.

Update or create a professional vita. If you haven’t done so in years, raise your self-awareness by updating your vita and highlighting your professional strengths. Seeing all the things that you do laid out in black and white can certainly help bolster your sense of professional efficacy.

Assess your professional development needs. Competency is a core strength. While the NASP Practice Model in its entirety is likely overwhelming, and in many cases impossible for an individual school psychologist to practice at one time, it does list all aspects of our training and competency. NASP’s online self-assessment survey (http://www.nasponline.org/standards/survey/self-assessment-intro.aspx) is a great way to reflect on areas of practice at which you excel and in which you might want further training. If there are domains in the model that interest you, but you are not currently practicing, set up a meeting with your supervisor or administrator to see how you might incorporate them into your daily practice.

Take the team approach. Most school psychologists work in teams of some kind. Think of overarching challenges in terms of the team strengths and capacities. One person cannot do everything, but doing our best in collaboration with others doing their best can move even the largest obstacles. Use this approach in terms of the NASP Practice Model. Think about the team of school psychologists practicing the model district-wide, not necessarily the tasks of a single individual.

Spread the wealth. Every school psychologist, from the most seasoned to the early career, has something to share with others. Take time this week to mentor a colleague or meet with a graduate student or intern.
Consider volunteering to conduct a professional development session for the staff of your school or your school psychologist colleagues on a topic of interest, strength, or passion.

**Lean on others.** Take time to check in with colleagues to help evaluate what is reasonable to accomplish on a daily to-do list, how to pace yourself, or how to approach a difficult student or family situation.

**Remind others that they can lean on you.** Some school psychologists have an open door policy and are often the go-to person for colleagues to vent professional and, at times, personal frustrations. While conducting therapy with staff is certainly outside of the scope of our practice, being available to staff to aid in problem solving is an essential part of our role. Let colleagues know that you are there for them when help is needed. Let them know that you are a resource for referrals and for content knowledge. Building these connections and relationships will help facilitate your ability to work collaboratively with them in the future.

**UNDERSTAND YOUR COLLEAGUES**
A number of different disciplines and professions converge to support the education of children. All play an important role in maintaining a positive, safe, and welcoming school. Whether greeting students in the morning, serving them at lunch, or providing direct instruction, our colleagues are building relationships with students and could potentially assist with the delivery of intervention. Yet, all can be impacted by the challenges of working within education, to varying levels. When thinking about the teams you serve, think of these individuals:

- Other school psychologists
- School social workers
- School counselors
- Teachers—regular education, special education
- Paraprofessionals
- Administration—principals, assistant principals
- Secretaries
- Custodians
- Cafeteria staff
- Bus drivers

**LOOK FOR COMMON ISSUES**
The need for support or assistance can come in many forms and at many levels. These issues may present themselves as common everyday stressors and issues and fall within the realm of your day-to-day practice. Then there are the more challenging situations. Though not out of the realm of day-to-day practice, they may require a little more attention. Finally, there are the situations that are significant and serious which may be outside the realm of typical practice and require outside support.

- Case/peer consultation regarding evaluations, FBA/BIPs
- Confusion about various developmental, mental health, and academic accommodations, interventions, and strategies
- A project that needed to be done yesterday
- Stress
- Discussing specific concerns about the child of a colleague
- Challenging students, parents, advocates, colleagues, or administrators
- Implementation of local policies and regulations related to special education and prevention services
- Understanding the implications of an outside evaluation
- The effects of a specific mental health diagnosis
- Family stresses—financial, medical, issues with their own children or personal medical issues
- Personal mental health issues—anxiety, depression
- Grief and loss
Divorce  
Peer conflicts  
Budget fears

This is not an exhaustive list, but it shows some issues commonly experienced by staff and even school psychologists.

**HOW DO YOU SUPPORT YOUR COLLEAGUES?**

There are many simple and effective ways to support staff. One of the most important is building relationships with staff within your school. Being visible and accessible should be considered your most important level of support. Thinking in terms of a tiered model, what are some methods of supporting colleagues?

**Tier 1**
- An open door policy
- Visibility within your schools—asking to be introduced at a staff meeting, being seen in the hallway greeting students and staff in the morning, being seen in the break room
- Brown-bag workshops on various topics, for staff to attend during their lunches
- Experienced psychologist’s active outreach to early career and intern psychologists
- Outreach to new staff/teachers
- Colleague recognition—take advantage of opportunities to recognize small to big accomplishments
- Any educational activities that help you be recognized as the mental health authority

**Tier 2**
- Outreach to staff struggling with challenging students, parents, colleagues
- Workshops on how to cope with and manage challenging students, parents, or meetings
- Covering meetings for a colleague
- Assisting a peer with an overburdened case load
- Caregiver trainings
- Allowing others to vent

**Tier 3**
- Providing outside mental health resources such as EAP or other outside groups
- Limited/brief counseling (within your scope of practice)

What if you are the only school psychologist in your district? School psychologists in these situations are able to support their colleagues as discussed above; however, they may not have the peer support that larger school systems have. One of the ways to connect with colleagues is through the NASP Communities. You can post questions and receive answers from peers across the country. You can sign up for various communities based on area of interest as well. Another great resource is your state school psychology organization. Through these groups, you will be able connect and build relationships with local psychologists in order to seek as well as provide support.

Anyone in education needs support from time to time. During School Psychology Awareness Week, reach out and help your colleagues. Knowing and sharing your strengths will not only help someone in need, but also will bolster your confidence and empower you to do more.


©2012, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway #402, Bethesda, MD 20814