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The Counselor Feedback Training Model: Teaching Counseling Students Feedback Skills

Jacqueline M. Swank and Shannon N. McCarthy

Giving and receiving feedback is an important counseling skill; therefore, it is crucial to focus on this skill within counselor training. This article presents the Counselor Feedback Training Model, a developmental approach designed to assist counselor educators in teaching counseling students how to give and receive feedback.

Keywords: counselor development, feedback, training

Feedback (n.d.) is “the transmission of evaluative or corrective information about an action, event, or process to the original or controlling source.” Specifically, positive feedback focuses on strengths, which may reinforce behavior. Corrective feedback addresses behaviors that have undesirable consequences, and although it may be perceived at times as threatening, this feedback may promote change (Toth & Erwin, 1998). In the counseling profession, it is important to develop and maintain skill in giving and receiving positive and corrective feedback to and from colleagues, supervisors, clients, and other stakeholders. Giving feedback involves being respectful and professional in recognizing the strengths and areas for improvement in others and being able to communicate this effectively in a written and an oral format. Receiving feedback focuses on an individual’s ability to accept feedback without becoming defensive or considering it a personal attack, as well as being able to reflect on it and integrate it to enhance one’s development. Hence, feedback helps students reach their full potential during their training through the development of self-awareness regarding strengths and areas for improvement, and it also helps identify interventions to improve performance (McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.).

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It takes practice to develop skill in giving and receiving feedback. Counseling students may enter a training program with limited, if any, experience in how to give and receive feedback. Students who enter a program immediately after completing their undergraduate degree may lack experience in giving and receiving feedback in a professional manner. In addition, students who have a work history may have some experience with giving and receiving feedback; however, their feedback experience may focus on work performance only, which differs from the expectation of giving and receiving feedback about an individual's personal and professional development.

Throughout their training, counseling students may have the opportunity to practice giving and receiving feedback multiple times (e.g., processing role plays and other experiential activities, processing peer and instructor/supervisor critique of assignments). To develop effective feedback skills, students may benefit from instruction about feedback and how to use it within a professional environment. Counseling students may experience greater comfort and confidence in giving and receiving feedback that is positive; however, focusing only on positive feedback is unrealistic and does not facilitate self-awareness, growth, and development (Toth & Erwin, 1998). Therefore, it is crucial for counselor educators to teach students how to give and receive both positive and corrective feedback.

Teaching students how to give and receive feedback provides them with the knowledge for skill development throughout their training program, instead of waiting until the clinical experience portion of training. Learning feedback skills helps students become reflective practitioners, which supports the development of professional autonomy (McKimm, 2009; McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.). Consequently, counselor preparation programs that train students in giving and receiving feedback facilitate their development beyond the training environment to extend into their work with future supervisors, colleagues, and clients. Therefore, a need exists to train counseling students early in their program on how to give and receive feedback. This article focuses on (a) examining the accreditation and ethical standards supporting feedback training, (b) exploring the counseling literature related to feedback, (c) presenting a model for training counseling students in giving and receiving feedback, and (d) discussing the implications of feedback training for counselor education and supervision.

NECESSITY OF FEEDBACK TRAINING

Feedback in counselor training is emphasized within the accreditation and ethical standards for the counseling profession. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) addresses giving and receiving feedback within counselor training. CACREP requires counselor educators to continuously evaluate students throughout their training program (Section I, Standard P). Additionally, students receive formal feedback

from their faculty and site supervisor during their clinical experiences (Section III, Standards F.5. and G.6.). Through this evaluation process, students receive feedback regarding their strengths and areas for improvement. CACREP also requires students to produce recordings of their counseling sessions or receive live supervision during their practicum and internship experiences (Section III, Standards F.4. and G.5.), as well as participate in individual and group supervision (Section III, Standards F.2., F.3., G.2., and G.3.). Individual and group supervision provide opportunities in giving and receiving feedback. Finally, CACREP requires counseling programs to provide opportunities for students to give faculty feedback regarding curricular and clinical experiences (Section I, Standard BB). Thus, the CACREP Standards necessitate training counseling students in giving and receiving feedback.

The *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association, 2005) emphasizes feedback within counselor training. Specifically, ACA acknowledges the importance of providing continuous feedback throughout the counselor training program (Standard F.9.a.) and helping students understand feedback and seek assistance when needing remediation (Standard F.9.b.). Additionally, ACA outlines the need for ongoing assessment throughout the supervisory relationship (Standard F.5.a.) and the importance of helping supervisees understand feedback and seek remedial assistance (Standard F.5.b.). Thus, the *ACA Code of Ethics* acknowledges the importance of feedback in the development of effective, ethical counselors.

Counseling researchers have discussed assessing openness to feedback as an area of counseling competency. Bradey and Post (1991) discussed assessing applicants' openness to the opinions and values of others during the admission process. Additionally, Duba, Paez, and Kindsvatter (2010) explored the criteria counseling programs ($N = 30$) used to evaluate students and found that programs identified feedback as a crucial area for assessing students' interpersonal relationships in individual and small-group contexts and their openness to self-evaluation. Within interpersonal relationships in an individual context, programs reported assessing students' ability to receive and accept feedback from faculty and supervisors. In assessing interpersonal relationships within a group context, programs evaluated students' ability to accept and provide feedback to group members, commitment to learn and openness to accept feedback and criticism, and use of feedback. In assessing openness to self-evaluation, counselor educators evaluated students' ability to be receptive, nondefensive, and welcoming of feedback, as well as their ability to reflect on, use, and follow feedback. Hence, counseling researchers have identified areas of feedback to include in assessing the competency of counseling students.

Researchers have also discussed including a feedback category within assessments to measure counseling competency within gatekeeping policies and procedures. Frame and Stevens-Smith (1995) discussed a policy developed by the counseling department at the University of Colorado at Denver that

encompassed nine personal characteristics, including three that focused on feedback—open, willing to use and accept feedback, and aware of impact on others—as professional nonacademic behaviors essential to counselor development. The categories within the policy statement were used to develop the Personal Characteristic Evaluation Form (PCEF). McAdams, Foster, and Ward (2007) discussed the use of the PCEF as a model for the development of the Professional Performance Review Policy, which encompasses 10 professional performance criteria. Three of McAdams et al.’s criteria address feedback in their evaluative description: willingness to accept and use feedback, openness to new ideas, and awareness of own impact on others. McAdams et al. noted that counseling students typically expect faculty to give them feedback regarding all aspects of their development as counselors, and reluctance to address concerns about a student’s performance communicates that faculty are unclear about their evaluation methods or their willingness to uphold their gatekeeping responsibility for the profession. Swank, Lambie, and Witta (2012) discussed openness to feedback as a profession disposition and behavior category to include in assessing counseling competencies within the Counseling Competencies Scale.

FEEDBACK WITHIN COUNSELOR TRAINING

Research has found that counseling students struggle with giving feedback to each other, especially when the feedback is corrective and focused on personal qualities. Coleman, Kivlighan, and Roehlke (2009) conducted two studies to examine feedback provided during group supervision of students ($N_s = 20$ and 24) within a group counseling course. They found that students provided feedback on the leader’s technical aspects of facilitating group more frequently than feedback on the effectiveness of the leader’s personal characteristics. Additionally, positive feedback was rated as more acceptable than corrective feedback. Coleman et al. concluded that counseling students might be more open to accepting corrective feedback when it is integrated with positive feedback. Coleman et al. emphasized the importance of modeling how to give and receive corrective feedback to assist with normalizing the process for students.

Counseling students may view expressing a different opinion as saying something negative about someone. Students’ reluctance in giving and receiving feedback that is corrective may stem from religious, cultural, or family values (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). For example, a person learns, “If you don’t have something nice to say, then don’t say anything.” This negative perception of corrective feedback may result in giving vague feedback that lacks clarity and fosters confusion (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). In examining counseling students’ ($N = 8$) perceptions about feedback, Hulse-Killacky and Page (1994) reported nine themes: ambivalence, protection, preparation, skill building, childhood memories, method, leader, evaluative, and context. Additionally, in developing and administering the Corrective Feedback Instrument, Hulse-Killacky

and Page found that students reported some emotional barriers to corrective feedback, which included fear, anxiety, and being uncomfortable about possibly losing relationships and being evaluated and rejected by others. However, they reported that the leader can be helpful in encouraging corrective feedback by educating students about the purpose of feedback, facilitating a safe environment, and modeling how to give and receive feedback. Thus, the identification of these themes and barriers emphasizes the importance of understanding and challenging students' perceptions about giving and receiving feedback to assist them in learning about and using feedback.

FEEDBACK TRAINING MODEL

The Counselor Feedback Training Model (CFTM) was conceptualized following our experience coteaching a counseling skills course to first-semester students. We identified a critical need for a training model to teach new students how to give and receive feedback with regard to their personal and professional development, including the development of basic counseling skills. We noted that the majority of students enrolled in the course were admitted to the graduate program immediately following the completion of their bachelor's degree and that their experience, if any, in giving and receiving feedback in a professional environment was probably limited. Additionally, we observed students' anxiety, defensiveness, and frustration related to receiving feedback from us. The students reported feeling anxious and uncomfortable about giving and receiving feedback to each other and generally relied on positive feedback, without using any corrective feedback, when discussing counseling performance. When students were instructed to give corrective feedback, their responses were vague or were worded to minimize the feedback. Therefore, after reviewing the literature, we identified a need to create a training model to match students where they were and to teach them how to give and receive positive and corrective feedback.

Researchers have discussed the challenges and barriers that may contribute to counseling students' level of difficulty with giving and receiving feedback (Coleman et al., 2009; Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). Embracing a developmental approach may assist with teaching students feedback skills. This approach aligns with Stoltenberg's (1981) Integrated Developmental Model for supervision, which emphasizes the implementation of strategies focused on a person's characteristics exhibited at various developmental levels. Within a developmental approach, counselor educators meet students where they are developmentally to facilitate the acquisition of feedback skills. Additionally, the counselor educator promotes an environment that both supports and challenges students. Balancing support with challenge is crucial because providing only support does not motivate development, and challenge alone fosters a negative, punitive learning environment (King, 1999). Therefore, the counselor educator

strives to match students where they are developmentally to help them learn how to give and receive feedback with peers, educators, and supervisors.

The CFTM is grounded within Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model (McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.). Kolb conceptualized learning as a process, not an outcome. Therefore, Kolb proposed that students learn through the engagement in experiences and the development and modification of ideas. Counseling students reported the effectiveness of experiential learning, specifically the integration of role plays, in their development as counselors (Shurts et al., 2006). Additionally, researchers found that (a) experiential learning through the integration of role plays facilitates the retention of information when compared with lectures (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997) and (b) experiential activities promote self-awareness (Achenbach & Arthur, 2002).

The model is also grounded in behavior theory, emphasizing the reinforcement of positive behavior/feedback and balancing this with corrective behavior/feedback. Corrective feedback may reduce unproductive behaviors; however, it may also instill fear and anxiety and decrease motivation and openness to change (King, 1999). Thus, we created the CFTM within the framework of developmental and experiential learning theories.

We designed the CFTM to occur within the basic counseling skills course. The rationale for integrating the CFTM within this course is twofold. First, this course is required during students' first semester in the program; therefore, the integration of feedback training within this course allows students to begin developing feedback skills that they can continually refine as they grow throughout the program. Second, the feedback training aligns with and reinforces the development of basic counseling skills that are taught within this course. The ability to give and receive feedback requires building rapport through trust, respecting others, being nonjudgmental and genuine, and maintaining congruence between verbal and nonverbal communication (McKimm, 2009). In using active listening in giving and receiving feedback, students learn to develop insight. Hence, students embrace the process of listening and asking instead of giving solutions (King, 1999).

Counselor educators may also integrate the CFTM within courses at various points in the curriculum. Additionally, counselor educators may reteach portions of the training throughout the program to continually emphasize feedback in the counselor development process. Regardless of where feedback is taught within the program, it is crucial that the feedback is congruent with the student learning outcomes (McKimm, 2009; McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.). The objectives of the CFTM focus on assisting students to (a) create awareness of the importance of feedback as a counseling skill; (b) explore their perceptions about feedback; (c) develop skill in giving effective, positive, and corrective feedback to peers; (d) be open to receiving feedback from others (e.g., peers, instructors, supervisors); and (e) apply feedback to promote their development as counseling professionals.

Training Components

The CFTM balances didactic teaching with experiential activities. It is crucial to provide various approaches and experiences to facilitate the learning process. Additionally, integrating a skill-based intervention with experiential methods may help facilitate a nonthreatening learning environment that is conducive to skill development in giving and receiving feedback (Toth & Erwin, 1998). Thus, the CFTM integrates various teaching strategies and activities to facilitate the learning process.

The CFTM involves a two-part training format (see Appendix). The two training sessions are separated by a 2-week period, which is designed to allow time for reflection on the material and practice beyond the training environment. The first part of the training has four components: introductory activity, beliefs and values, didactic instruction, and practice. The second part has three components: discussion, didactic review, and practice.

Part I

Introductory activity. The purpose of the introductory activity (icebreaker) is to provide a fun, interactive introduction to giving and receiving feedback. The activity involves participants sitting back-to-back with a partner. One participant is given a picture of a simple configuration of shapes, and the partner is given a blank piece of paper and a pencil with the task of recreating the picture from the partner’s verbal description. After the drawing is completed, the partners compare their pictures. Then, the drawers provide feedback to their partners about what verbal descriptions were helpful and not helpful, and their partners have an opportunity to respond to the feedback. Alternatively, half of the participants are given a structure made out of blocks or other materials and their partners are given the materials to build the structure from the verbal descriptions. Following the activity, the trainers facilitate a discussion about the experience and the process of giving and receiving feedback used during the exercise. Thus, the trainers facilitate an activity grounded in experiential learning that is designed to engage participants, while also considering the development of the students (new to the counselor training program), with the aim to reduce anxiety in the students.

Beliefs and values. The Corrective Feedback Instrument–Revised (CFI-R; Hulse-Killacky, Orr, & Paradise, 2006) was designed to facilitate discussions about the emotional barriers that people experience related to giving and receiving feedback (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2006). The CFI-R contains 30 items with a 6-point Likert response scale. The instrument is administered to all participants, and then the trainers facilitate a discussion (a) to explore students’ perceptions about feedback and their experiences with giving and receiving feedback and (b) to encourage students to be open to learning about and using the feedback process. Therefore, the trainers are able to obtain additional information that allows them to match the students where they are developmentally to facilitate

the learning process. To enhance the discussion, the participants first engage in small-group discussions, which are then followed by a large-group discussion.

Didactic instruction: What, why, how. The next component of the CFTM involves didactic instruction. Educating students about how to give and receive feedback may help encourage them to use feedback (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). During the didactic component, the facilitators describe what feedback entails while also addressing myths about feedback. This includes an emphasis on using feedback to promote professional and personal growth and development, instead of viewing it as a personal attack on the individual. This component also includes steps for giving and receiving feedback. Furthermore, the facilitators discuss the importance of feedback within the counselor training experience and counseling profession, thereby providing a rationale for why this information is pertinent to counseling trainees. The facilitators use some components of the training presented by McKimm and Swanwick (n.d.) to teach students about the components of the feedback process.

Practice. The final component of Part I is practice and involves three activities. The first activity focuses on written feedback. Most counseling students have indicated that written feedback was helpful (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). Additionally, from a developmental perspective, using written feedback allows students to study and reflect on what is written, which may assist them in later developing skill in orally giving and receiving feedback. Furthermore, written feedback is integrated throughout a counseling program regarding performance on class assignments and clinical experiences. Therefore, a need exists for helping counseling students develop skill in giving and receiving feedback in a written format. To facilitate the development of this skill, the facilitators show a brief video clip of a counseling session, and students are asked to write feedback statements (positive and corrective) that they would provide to the counselor. The statements are then discussed in small groups and in the large group, emphasizing the components of useful feedback statements.

The second activity within the practice component focuses on modeling the process of giving and receiving feedback. Modeling effective use of giving and receiving feedback may encourage students to be more open and willing to engage in the feedback process (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). In this activity, the participants observe a role-played session between the facilitators that involves a noncounseling scenario in which one person is giving formal feedback to another. An example scenario would be a teacher giving feedback to a student about a writing assignment. A noncounseling scenario is used to assist students with developmentally understanding the basic components of the feedback process and becoming comfortable with the process before integrating feedback focused on counseling skills. The participants then discuss their reaction to the feedback given in the scenario and identify how they might change the verbal feedback.

The final activity within the practice component involves students engaging in role-played feedback sessions with a partner. This activity is at the end of the

first part of the training to allow the trainers to promote a safe environment through the facilitation of the other activities, which is crucial in encouraging students to engage in the feedback process (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). The students process the experience and then receive a homework assignment to practice giving and receiving feedback at least three times before the next training session. Students are also asked to reflect on the first training session and their experience completing the homework.

Part II

Discussion. Part II of the training session is conducted approximately 2 weeks after implementation of Part I. This session introduces additional counseling concepts and techniques and provides time for practice. It begins with a group discussion. Participants are invited to share their experiences in giving and receiving feedback since the last training session, including feedback given to peers during class and feedback given to others beyond the classroom environment. Students have the opportunity to reflect on their current comfort level and thoughts and feelings about giving and receiving feedback. Thus, the trainers identify what the students have learned and experienced in Part I and how this has been integrated between sessions to determine the starting point for Part II.

Didactic review. Following the discussion, the trainers review the key concepts of giving and receiving feedback discussed during the first training session to reinforce them. One facilitator then role plays a brief counseling session with a student volunteer, with the facilitator playing the role of the counselor. Following the role play, the other facilitator models the process of giving feedback to the “counselor” and the “counselor” has the opportunity to respond to the feedback, thus modeling how to receive feedback. The facilitators then process the activity, asking the students to discuss the process of giving and receiving feedback that was demonstrated and their thoughts and feelings about the experience.

Practice. The final component of the CFTM provides an opportunity for students to practice giving and receiving feedback. Students are grouped into triads, and each group member plays one of the three roles (counselor, client, or observer). Students role play brief counseling-related scenarios (5–7 minutes), practicing the counseling skills learned within the course. After the role plays, the students in the roles of client and observer provide verbal feedback to the student who role played the counselor regarding his or her use of counseling skills. The “client” and the “observer” are required to provide at least one positive and one corrective feedback statement that are different from each other. Then, the “counselor” has the opportunity to respond to the feedback (what was said and how it was perceived). The students rotate roles and conduct additional role plays until each student has the opportunity to experience each role.

After all role plays are completed, the trainers facilitate a discussion with the students. The students are asked to reflect on and share their thoughts and feelings about the role-play experiences, their comfort level with giving and receiving feedback in the moment, and their strengths and areas for improvement

in giving and receiving feedback. Hence, the students have the opportunity to process their practice experience with the facilitators and with one another.

Following the completion of the training, the students are given an evaluation form to provide feedback to the facilitators about the CFTM. Additionally, the facilitators meet with the course instructor a few weeks following the training to discuss the CFTM and the students' progress with giving and receiving feedback since the training. Thus, the trainers obtain feedback from the students and the course instructor to use for improving the CFTM.

DISCUSSION

Feedback skills are useful within the counseling profession when working with colleagues, supervisors, and clients. Additionally, these skills are crucial in facilitating personal and professional development (McKimm, 2009; McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.; Toth & Erwin, 1998). Developing skill in giving and receiving feedback begins within the counselor training process, which is emphasized within the CACREP (2009) Standards and the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to establish a method for training counseling students in giving and receiving feedback, such as using the CFTM.

The CFTM provides a developmental, experiential framework for counselor educators and supervisors to use when training students and counseling professionals in how to use feedback. As with any model, however, limitations exist. Designating sufficient time to teach the CFTM is one potential concern. However, counselor educators and supervisors may flexibly use the model to integrate training throughout course work and during workshops extended beyond the designated class time. In using the CFTM, counselor educators and supervisors need to be attuned to the trainees' comfort level with participating in the activities. In some circumstances, the trainers may need to provide additional time or exercises to help the participants become comfortable in engaging with each other.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Counseling students give and receive feedback throughout their training experience; therefore, using the CFTM early in the training process can be advantageous for programs. Specifically, the training may assist students with being developmentally ready to give and receive feedback within experiential components of the curriculum (e.g., a 10-hour group counseling experience, group supervision within practicum and internship). Early implementation of training may help students develop comfort and confidence in using feedback. Thus, students are prepared to engage in the feedback process and continue developing their skills in giving and receiving feedback throughout their training.

The CFTM may also help students develop comfort and skills in balancing positive with corrective feedback and balancing professional performance (technical skills) with personal growth. This addresses concerns regarding feedback identified within the literature (Coleman et al., 2009; Toth & Erwin, 1998). Coleman et al. (2009) examined peer feedback given and received by students within a group counseling course and found that students predominantly gave positive peer feedback that focused on the technical aspects of group leadership, instead of providing corrective feedback to their peers and focusing feedback on personal characteristics of the group leader. Toth and Erwin (1998) stated that corrective feedback, despite being perceived as threatening, promotes behavioral changes, whereas focusing only on positive feedback is unrealistic and does not facilitate self-awareness and personal growth. Having self-awareness of strengths and areas for growth and implementing interventions to improve performance help students reach their full potential (McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.). Hence, the trainers help counseling students recognize the importance of balancing the types and content of giving and receiving feedback and practicing this skill to assist them in their personal and professional development as counselors.

Integrating the CFTM within counselor training structures the process and promotes consistency for teaching feedback skills. Through participation in the CFTM, trainees develop an understanding of feedback, practice using it, and learn about the significance of feedback within the counseling profession. Learning about and practicing how to give and receive feedback is crucial because researchers identify it as an area of competency to assess within counselor training (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; McAdams et al., 2007; Swank et al., 2012). Additionally, assessing feedback skills helps counselor educators and supervisors assess students' effectiveness with interpersonal relationships (Duba et al., 2010). Thus, through the CFTM, counselor educators and supervisors communicate to students their expectations regarding the development of competency in giving and receiving feedback, which provides standards for continual assessment in this area throughout the training program.

With the implementation of the CFTM, researchers have the opportunity to examine the effectiveness of teaching students the process of giving and receiving feedback. Researchers may further investigate the types of feedback used and the context of the feedback to expand on the work of Coleman et al. (2009). Additionally, future research may explore students' development and their level of comfort and confidence in giving and receiving feedback following the completion of the CFTM. Thus, research regarding the CFTM may provide an understanding about how to teach students to effectively use feedback to promote their development as counselors.

In summary, feedback is a crucial skill that facilitates growth (McKimm, 2009; McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.; Toth & Erwin, 1998), which promotes the development of reflective practitioners who exhibit professional autonomy (McKimm, 2009; McKimm & Swanwick, n.d.). Thus, the integration of the CFTM to teach

counseling students to give and receive feedback facilitates learning within the training program. Furthermore, their learning is extended beyond the training environment to facilitate continued development and growth throughout their professional career.

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APPENDIX
Counselor Feedback Training Model

Part I

- I. Introductory activity (icebreaker)
- II. Beliefs and values (Corrective Feedback Instrument–Revised)
- III. Didactic instruction: What, why, how
- IV. Practice: Written, watch role play, participate in role play

Part II

- I. Discussion: Experience, reflection
- II. Didactic review: How
- III. Practice: Watch role play, participate in role play