

# **Role and Responsibility of a Deaf Person as a Leader**

By Alan Hurwitz  
The Deaf American  
Vol. 35, No. 6 - 1983

In this paper I want to share my perceptions of the “Role and Responsibility of a Deaf Person as a Leader.” When I speak of what it means to be responsible as a leader of deaf people, I am talking about the development of attitudes and being responsible for how you influence them to think or feel about other people. People have different kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes. They come from all kinds of ethnic, racial, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Their family and socio-economic status vary from individual to individual. They have different educational experiences: some attended residential schools, some went to day schools for the deaf or attended public schools with hearing children.

Many have had a combination of schooling experiences. Some deaf people learn oral communication only, others have the opportunity to learn and use total communication. Some people have had some work experiences and others never worked before. Some may have had other experiences, such as volunteer work in the community and others never shared these experiences. People develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes based on their previous experiences; they learn about other people’s experiences which may or may not influence them to develop their own perceptions. Deaf people who become good leaders are often in a position to influence or shape other people’s thinking. A leader who listens and tries to understand other people’s concerns and needs is apt to guide them properly.

Now that we have talked briefly about the characteristics of deaf people and how a leader needs to be aware of their individual differences, I’d like to discuss some ideas about this topic, but I believe there is a common thread through all leadership concepts; that is, we must understand people and respect them for what they are. In the following pages I have listed the concepts I consider as involved in leadership. I will elaborate each theme and discuss it further as I go through the list:

## *1. An opportunity to interact with other people and learn about them*

This opportunity has enabled me to meet with a lot of people from all over the United States and throughout the world. When I was little, my parents often took me to a deaf club in Iowa. I enjoyed meeting with people and talking to them about their jobs, hobbies, and other interests. I learned that each person has different strengths. Some were adept at woodworking and others were skilled in a variety of other crafts. Some loved to go fishing and hunting; they would talk endlessly about their achievements and tribulations. Some were actively involved in organizing club activities and would try to persuade other people to be involved in these activities. We’d watch captioned films and then talk about them afterwards. I grew up with a notion that each person is

super in his/her own way. I found that most people would be willing to work together and support each other. Sometimes they would argue or disagree other for a period of time, but then eventually, they get back and work together in projects. It was a learning experience for me.

As I was growing up my parents would take me to bowling tournaments, statewide picnics and conventions. I learned that there were still a lot of people with differing levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes. People were always talking with each other about everything. I became intrigued with people who would talk about politics and organizations. I enjoyed watching people running meetings, organizing activities and leading people. I learned that people have different styles of leadership. Some were aggressive and manipulative, some were assertive and democratic, and some were lackadaisical and allowed things to and happen by chance. Each leadership style has its own merits and weaknesses, but it was interesting to observe how people responded to different leadership styles.

## *2. An opportunity to help other people*

There is always a purpose for an organization; many are organized to help other people to get what they need. A good leader recognizes that people need help to accomplish their objectives. Some people feel good when they know they are helping others; others may choose working with individuals to help them with their specific needs. A leader may organize a charitable activity to help needy children or clean up a town. Or one may choose to work with a social service agency to help it to be better prepared to meet the needs of deaf people. People often learn more about themselves and feel good when they help others.

## *3. An opportunity to share our work with others*

One of the most exciting aspects of leadership is learning from other people's experiences and sharing experiences with others. Gary Olsen, Assistant Executive Director for the State Affairs of the National Association of the Deaf, has often shared his perception about this concept in his leadership training programs. He frequently uses an acronym game, forming words from first letters if a major word "SHARE." He challenges his audience to guess an appropriate word for each of the first letters of this word (SHARE). Let's perform this activity together:

S stands for **sacrifice** which means that we must sacrifice our time to become involved in a leadership activity and contribute to an important cause. It may be time consuming and take us away from other things we enjoy doing.

H stands for **helpfulness** which means that we need to be helpful to others or help an organization to accomplish its objectives. We should not sit back and expect others to do it; if everyone did this, nothing would be accomplished.

A stands for **acceptance** which means that we need to accept an assignment and complete it. It's possible that if we do not accept it, there may be no one else willing to accept the responsibility.

R stands for **responsibility** which means that each of us is responsible for our actions and behavior. We must be responsible for whatever we do; if we accept an assignment, then we must be responsible for seeing that it is carried out to its completion. If we have trouble with performing an assignment, then we are responsible for seeking some help of guidance on how to do it rather than leaving it unfinished.

E stands for **examples** which means that a good leader must always set good examples for other people to follow. If a leader sets a bad example, it may lead to problems for the leader, the organization and its members. People learn better when a leader provides examples of what he/she wants to accomplish.

When we **share** our work with others, we are talking about **sacrificing** our precious time for an important cause, **helping** others and the organization to accomplish its objective, **accepting** assignments and being responsible for our jobs and setting good examples for other people.

#### *4. An opportunity to develop organizational skills*

Leadership enables us to learn more about how to organize meetings, committee assignments and other organizational activities. This is important because people do not like to waste time of meet for the sake of meeting. A good leader plans ahead and prepares well for meetings. A good lead plans ahead and prepares well for meetings. A good leader must develop a concise agenda so that members will know exactly what to expect in the meeting and be prepared to contribute their ideas and discuss them. A good leader must understand parliamentary procedures well and use them to run meetings. A good leader needs to know how to make those in the meeting feel good about themselves and enable them to participate actively in meetings. A good leader needs to know how to handle conflict situations and resolve problems without creating a scene in meetings. A good leader needs to know how to make assignments to his members and make them want to be involved. A good leader needs to know how to help other people to organize their assignments and activities. A good leader needs to know how to organize his/her reports to the membership.

#### *5. An opportunity to learn how to raise funds*

Fund raising is one of the most difficult and challenging tasks of most organizations. We need money to accomplish our objectives. The more money we can get, the more we can do for the organization. Very few people know how to raise funds effectively. There are a number of individuals who have the knack of soliciting financial contributions. Some enjoy doing it and volunteer to do it. Some do not enjoy this activity, but do it anyway – others, like myself, do not enjoy asking people for money

and prefer to leave this to other. Often when I am given raffle tickets to sell for an organization I end up buying all of them myself.

A good leader needs to understand what it takes to produce effective fund raising projects. We must have a purpose for raising funds; people will ask you why you are doing this and what you intend to do with the money. We must have a clear statement about the purpose of fundraising and help others to understand that it is for a worthy cause. People need to understand how you intend to use the money. One example is the TV Accessibility Fund of the NAD. The goal of this project is to raise money to bring together people from the TV industry (TV producers, TV broadcasters, TV captioners and TV sponsors) to talk about how they can increase TV access for deaf people. We explained that if we have a legal right to TV access, we may have to take a legal action and demand that TV programs be captioned; this activity will cost a lot of money as it will involve services of an attorney. Or we may decide to use the funds to lobby for a new federal legislation that will require that all TV programs be captioned for hearing-impaired people. The state association representatives at the 1982 NAD convention in St. Louis mandated that we raise \$10,000.00. But the NAD Executive Board felt that it would not be enough to support the objectives, so the board raised the goal to \$50,000.00. We are confident that many deaf people view it as an important cause and are willing to contribute money to the fund. We are asking all 50 state associations to help to raise the money.

#### *6. An opportunity to help others to become leaders*

Another gratifying aspect of leadership is seeing more people become involved in organizations and becoming leaders in their own right. A good leader will view this as an important objective in the development of an organization. A good leader must be willing to give other people a chance to learn to become good leaders themselves. A good leader needs to be willing to delegate responsibility to other people and allow them to develop their leadership skills. It does not suffice to give someone an assignment and not be willing to give him/her the responsibility to carry out the assignment. A good leader needs to be willing to give other people the chance to learn about their roles and assignments and be responsible for their own actions. A good leader needs to be willing to work with an individual who may be new to an assignment and take the time to cultivate the person's skills to the point when he or she is able to do it alone.

Another important aspect of this concept is that a good leader will never, never make a person look bad in front of others. A good leader would handle this as discreetly as possible and discuss his/her concerns with the person in privacy, offering constructive criticism to the individual.

#### *7. An opportunity to motivate people to become involved*

Another challenging area of leadership ... a good leader must understand effective motivation. People need to feel good about themselves in order to be motivated to become involved in organizational activities.

Leadership does not always happen at the top. Without followers, a leader is useless. There are many opportunities for people to become leaders. A follower can become a leader of a committee or a specific assignment. When a good leader gives an assignment to a member, he/she delegates responsibility to the individual and makes sure that he/she will receive guidance and assistance to do the job effectively; he/she becomes a leader of this effort and leads other people. It is a learning process that motivates people to become involved.

One way of motivating people is to reward them for their work. They need to feel that they are being recognized for their contribution. This is one area in which many leaders fail. We need, however, to be careful that we are not saying “thank you” or “good job” too often or without meaning. People are motivated if they feel that they are given the responsibility to do their job and know that they will get some guidance and support from their leaders. People like to feel that they are important and that they are needed. People want to be respected for their ideas and contributions.

A good leader will probably need to make sacrifices in order to motivate other people to get involved, even if it means that others get the credit for what was really your own idea. It may be a hard thing for the leader to swallow, but often it is necessary if you want to make some progress. I have learned several valuable lessons in this area. If I come up with a good idea and try to persuade other people to accept my idea without giving them an opportunity to feel that they are part of this idea formulation, they will say that “this is your baby, so we are not really interested in your idea.” A good leader is smart enough to handle that matter differently. He/she must refrain from mentioning it as the only solution. However, the leader may guide the group into developing a listing of solutions and discussing the pros and cons of each solution. The group may select a solution that the leader had already thought of earlier, but the leader must not say that it was his/her idea. This is the quickest way to deflate anybody’s ego. A good leader may simply say he/she concurs that it is a positive solution and reward the group for its effort. It may be a painful experience for the leader, but when other people are motivated to work with you and feel that they are recognized for their ideas and hard work, they will make your work as leader easier and enjoyable. You’d then be able to accomplish more with their involvement and support.

#### *8. An opportunity for us to make mistakes and learn from these experiences*

There is an old saying, “if I were to earn \$1 for each mistake I made, I’d probably be a millionaire by now.” We must not be afraid to try new things and learn from our experiences. It is all right to make mistakes if we learn from these mistakes. Life is

full of trials and tribulations. We do our work through trial and error methods. There is no right or wrong answers in most of your work. It is a judgmental process. Judgment, common sense and willingness to try something new and learn from these experiences are important elements in the leadership development.

Making mistakes can be forgiven or overlooked if you are willing to demonstrate that you are learning from your mistakes and will do better the next time. But if you make the same mistake several times and do not learn anything from it, then I'd say "knock it off." We do not need to be ashamed of making mistakes. We should be honest and open about our mistakes; it takes a strong person to admit that he/she made a mistake and talk about what he/she learned from this experience and how he/she would do it differently the next time.

I remember about two years ago when I wanted to change the payroll deductions in my paychecks so that I could bring home a little more money for my family to use. Somehow I used a wrong formula and submitted it to the payroll department. My wife, Vicki, and I were pleased to add additional \$\$\$ I my take home pay. But what I did not know was that I was bringing home tax money which I owed the government. It was not until the following year during the income tax filing time that I realized that I had made a big mistake and owed the government a lot of money. After I realized what I had done, I was so disgusted with myself. I could have chosen to keep this from Vicki and blame the government for robbing us, but I decided that honesty was the best policy so I told Vicki everything. Naturally, she was upset, but she took it pretty well because I was honest with her about the mistake and told her what I learned from it. We had to dip into Vicki's hard-earned savings from her part-time job to pay back what we owed the government. She had just terminated her work to return to school, so it was learned my lesson the difficult way. What I learned from this experience is that if we are honest about our mistakes and do something about it right away to prevent it from happening again, we have gained.

I admit that I did make many mistakes in my leadership role. Each time I try to analyze and discuss what I learned from my mistakes with others. This usually resulted in my earning respect from others. They know I am a human being and can make mistakes. I promised my Executive Board that even though I may not stop making mistakes, I certainly will improve from these experiences. Did you ever wonder why we have erasers on our pencils?

## 9. *Conclusion*

In this paper I talked about some concepts of good leadership and how a deaf person may assume his/her role and responsibility as a leader. One does not have to be deaf to follow the rules; it just takes a good attitude to learn to become a good leader and help others to become leaders. We will always be different in our own ways; this makes it even more fun and challenging. I wouldn't want everybody to do as I say; I

only want them to capitalize on their strengths and potential. We must be willing to continue to improve ourselves and grow. My grandmother who lived to the age of 84 always had a small Webster dictionary in her purse. I once asked her why she did that. She remarked to me that she loved to learn new words and that no one is ever too old to learn new things in one's life.

It is my sincere hope that it is deaf people themselves who can make better things happen for deaf people. There is so much to do. As leaders we have a heavy responsibility to develop new leaders and involve them in leadership roles in different ways. It has been a long road for the NAD and deaf people, but we are getting there. With the new technology of tomorrow, we have responsibility to make sure that the future technologies will contain elements of alleviating communication and social problems of deafness and deaf people. Our dream is to have a complete and full accessibility in our lives. I am not proposing that we eliminate deafness and deaf people, but that we help make it possible to have rightful access in all phases of living.

*(This paper is taken from a presentation to the Lexington School for the Deaf during a recent Deaf Heritage Week. Dr. Hurwitz is the President of the NAD.)*