

By Frank R. Turk, Ed. D.
Dean of Pre-College Student Life,
Gallaudet University

Invitational Leadership is the Answer



As a traveling lecturer, I see many young deaf people who, as a result of low self-esteem and apathetic leadership, are in charge of their parents today. I also observe many deaf teenagers who, as a result of positive self-esteem and vibrant leadership in power with, not over, their parents, have a strong measure of control over their own lives.

There are two primary choices in our lives—to accept conditions as they exist or to accept the responsibility for changing them.

Individuals within the first group believe in luck, fate, jinx, wrong time and “You can’t fight the administrators, so what’s the use?” They give in to doubt and fear and suffer unnecessary consequences as a result. They see themselves as victims of the system. They say that you either have it or you do not. Success, to them, is a lottery or a roll of dice—a gamble.

Individuals in the second group believe in work, challenges, adversaries, opportunities and “We reap what we sow.” They deliberate what occurs and respond appropriately to inevitable changes. They learn from their mistakes, rather than replay them. They spend time “doing” in the present, rather than fearing mistakes or criticism. Success, to them, is the never ending experience of developing, developing and developing all that is in them to be.

Which choice is yours—the first group or the second group? Mine, as much as that of our parent organization, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), is the latter group—always has been and always will be. To us the purpose of life is work, and the purpose of work is personal growth. When we work, we get to know who we are, what we can do and what we may be able to be—in realizing our potential to the fullest. We do not grow without challenges, and the amount of challenge we can tolerate is a function of the support that is always available through group

membership.

To quote one of our successful deaf leaders, Dr. Wesley Lauritsen: “Good work is never lost.” We can never go wrong when we work hard. The same goes for challenges and risks. We stand to gain every time we challenge ourselves to perform the tasks larger than the strength we feel, as in the “No pain equals no gain” concept of total development. That, we all can say, is more sensible—destroying our talent, energies and creative qualities. It is more difficult to learn how to be good to ourselves than to learn how to be good to others because of the risks involved—the risk of rejection, the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted or the risk of failure. But we live in a less than totally certain world and, as such, risks will always be present. Would we really want it otherwise? The greatest hazards in life are to risk nothing, send nothing, accept nothing, be nothing.

Those in the first or “apathetic” group are self-inflicted victims of their own fears, victims of habit and group conformity. They become prisoners of restrictions of their own making. They have a strong need, which they do not understand, to conform to the standards of their peers. They fool themselves into thinking they are “different.” To them, being different means being cleaner, neater and better groomed than the group. It is better to look slightly better, than slightly worse than others. Be different, if it means to put more time and effort in all you do. Be different, if it means to take the risks for self-improvement. The greatest security is to plan and act and take the risk that will make you independent.

Now for an important question: “What can we do to create situations that, on a continuing basis, encourage the realization of human potential among both groups—the “apathetic” and the “doing”? My contention is that teachers, bus

To Invite or Not to Invite

When I was a young girl, over 30 years ago, I attended a square dance. While there, I spied a handsome young man standing alone. After watching him for a while, I summoned my courage, walked over to him and said, "Excuse me, sir, do you dance? He replied, "No, I don't know how." And I said, "I'll teach you!" We've been dancing together ever since...during over 30 years of marriage.

—Notes from a Conversation

drivers, aides, cafeteria staff, secretaries, librarians, nurses, counselors, custodians, administrators and everything involved in the educative process can—and should—invite students to perform to their capacity at all times. The most appropriate answer to this question, then, is "Invitational Leadership."

What is "Invitational Leadership"? It is the style of leadership that *invites* you to become actively involved in the growth and development of others and the school itself while you, yourself, too, grow and develop in the process. Just as everyone and everything in hospitals encourage healing, everyone and everything in school should *invite* the realization of human potential. This involves the *people* (teachers, bus drivers, administrators, others) the *places* (classrooms, offices, hallways, restrooms, playing fields, gymnasiums, libraries) the *policies* (rules, codes, procedures) and the *programs* (academic or nonacademic). Everybody and everything can and should *invite* physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. We call this entire process "Invitational Leadership"

The principles of *invitational leadership* are as follows: one—people are able, valuable and responsible and should be treated accordingly; two—leadership is a cooperative activity; three—people possess a wealth of untapped potential in all areas of human development; and four—this potential can best be realized by *places, policies and programs* that are especially designed to *invite* upward mobility and by *people* who care and who have a sense of responsibility for others.

Leaders who do not *invite* may be safe from rejection misunderstanding or involvement, but that is not how leaders should be. We learn that we are able, valuable and responsible when someone takes the risk of *inviting* us to feel that way. We take risks when we *invite*. There are greater risks than in not taking. Take

the case of friendship which requires *invitations*. Our closest friends were once total strangers. Without *invitations*, sent and received, they would have remained faces in the crowd.

We are responsible for causing our own effects in life. It is to our advantage to *invite* the toughest, most challenging assignments. It is to our advantage, too, that our gratification comes after we have made the effort to do the job. Our true rewards in life depend on the quality and amount of contribution we make on our own *invitation*—to ourselves and to others.

In the long or short run, we reap what we sow. All in all, *invitational leadership is the answer!*



Frank Turk (middle) discussing a leadership topic with two others.