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LEADERSHIP:
Keeping It Alive, Well and Active!

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LEADERSHIP: Keeping it Alive, Well and Active!

Linda K. Stauffer, M.Ed., CSC

Have you ever looked around your RID affiliate chapter or your region and said, “I wonder whatever happened to so-and-so? He or she was such a good leader!” If you have not wondered where these folks are, at your next meeting, ask all the former presidents to stand and see how many are there. My guess...very few! Where did they all go? My guess...they are burned out!

Stress and burnout are common problems for people who step forward in our field to lead. Often, we are so grateful that “someone else” is “willing to do it” that we fail to notice the toll it takes on the very people we do not want to lose. So what causes stress and burnout in leaders, and, more importantly, how can it be prevented?

Stress can be defined as a *nonspecific physical reaction to change*. In and of itself, stress does not sound so scary! However, stress occurs when we perceive ourselves as having excessive demands without the appropriate resources. Now that sounds very familiar and is scary! I am certain our RID affiliate chapter leaders understand that! Stress and burnout can come from a number of sources such as inadequate training, lack of support from previous leaders (who are themselves burned out!), lack of support from the membership, dealing with difficult people, unrealistic expectations about leadership, unexpected crisis(es), lack of personal leadership plans/goals and change, change, change!

Unfortunately, stress and burnout in our leaders can result in physical and mental ailments including ulcers, depression and loss of enthusiasm and vision for the organization (Oplinger, unknown). Burnout is not only a personal experience. It also leads to catastrophic results for the organization such as ineffective leadership, a silent and passive majority, impaired relationships, isolation from the larger organization, and organizational stagnation. Others learn the lesson that becoming a leader is no fun, hard work, and not worth it; therefore they see nothing positive from stepping forward. All these effects result in an organization without vision, vitality or energy. Pretty dismal.

The best way to handle burnout is to prevent it! The **whole organization** is responsible for organizational health and prevention of leadership burnout. How can the organization prevent people from burning out? Here are some suggestions:

TRAIN BEHIND. Make sure the organization is committed to planning ahead and training behind. Patricia A. Siegel (unknown), in her article, *Developing human potential through leadership training* defines leaders as those "who step forward voluntarily to take on major responsibilities and become trustees of their profession or industry" (p. 118). Nothing empowers a person more than receiving support when stepping forward and again when providing support to the leaders who follow. Consider these two scenarios:

Imagine... an RID affiliate chapter where a nominations committee (usually a committee of one) makes numerous calls and is still unable to find at least one person willing to run for every board position (forget about running for committee positions!). Imagine that the thought of elections keeps people home and away from meetings (somebody might nominate me!). Imagine that people are nominated from the floor for board positions and are pressured by their peers to accept (but might be genuinely enthusiastic about running at a different time). Imagine the membership's relief when someone agrees to run so they don't have to think about leadership for another two years. Now....

Imagine... an RID affiliate chapter where leadership, board elections and committee positions are easy to fill because everyone is involved, where leadership transition is planned and known by all! Imagine knowing those who want to serve their professional organization now and in the future, and imagine if each of these persons had a personal plan for leadership growth! Imagine the benefits to the organization if leadership transition included providing skills building and mentorship to those who will serve next, and training behind by those now serving!

Leaders are not born—they are made. For this reason the mantra of organizational leadership should be "plan ahead; train behind." Leadership decisions and choices should not be made via coercion, arm twisting or with wringing of hands and tears, but rather as part of a positive process that provides individuals with specific information, training opportunities and excellent models long before an individual accepts the nomination to run for office. Leadership training should be a continual part of every leader's responsibility.

HONOR COMMITMENT TO RID. Make sure that everyone, including board members and the general membership, values the commitment to RID and to the affiliate chapter made by those who have stepped forward to serve. Regardless of issues, regardless of the problems, these individuals are giving their time to serve their profession, and that makes them admirable people.

PROVIDE JOB DESCRIPTIONS. Provide a job description for each board position and for each committee. If one does not presently exist, encourage development of either bylaws changes or a policy and procedure manual that includes job descriptions. The board or members may each have expectations about what is to be done that are not shared by all. With clear descriptions, it is easier to be more objective about what is required to serve in specific positions within the organization.

PROVIDE LEADERSHIP MENTORING. Approach former leaders to mentor the incoming leaders. One-on-one mentorship should be provided to anyone who is interested in possibly running for an affiliate chapter office. Do this privately and

confidentially until the person being mentored has decided to publicly announce his or her candidacy. This gives that individual time to see what the position is really about, and to learn more about the requirements in private. All too often, when someone mentions that he or she "might" be interested, all others jump ship leaving that individual feeling pressured and without choice. Possible candidates should have a way to check out the position, "try it on" privately and still decide "no" without public comment.

CONSIDER A PAST PRESIDENT OR PRESIDENT ELECT POSITION. Consider adding a past president position and/or a president elect position on the board. President elect positions allow for a term of office whereby the next president can learn while serving with the current president. This assures the membership that there is a "next" leader and supports this next leader with time and experience before he or she assumes the new role. A past president position allows incoming boards to continue to benefit from the wisdom and experience of outgoing leaders. Each position takes away the fear of "dangling out there by myself" for those who are considering stepping into leadership positions.

PROVIDE LEADERSHIP TRAINING. Provide regular leadership training. It does not have to be fancy. It should provide a way for outgoing board or committee members to share their work and views with incoming board or committee members. Develop resource people within your chapter who can lead new groups to explore leadership styles. Training should also help the group address questions such as: What is the purpose of a board? What are individual and collective strengths? What is the board's decision-making style? You may want to check first with former presidents who have a wealth of experience and information. Also check the Internet for material in print on leadership and non-profit boards.

PROVIDE FOLLOWER-SHIP TRAINING. According to Thomas (2003), "Leaders can only *exist* and accomplish extraordinary goals because they have *supportive* followers! Both need each other to achieve the group's vision and established mission." Let the membership know what is expected of them. Often people feel that their responsibilities begin and end with their yearly membership dues check. Not so! What expectations does the affiliate chapter have for new members? Some may be to attend membership meetings, vote in elections and on motions, participate in workshops, serve on a committee, help with refreshments, submit items for the newsletters, etc. Other expectations, which may not be readily known but are equally important, include providing accurate information and feedback to the members and leaders, supporting leaders' efforts to affect positive change, challenging flawed plans or strategies, and providing individual expertise to the group.

OFFER LEADERSHIP SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS. When planning workshops for CMP or ACET credits, consider workshops that address specific needs of members who are considering future leadership positions. Find out through brainstorming sessions or group surveys what skills people need before they feel ready to serve. Some areas to consider are: **Basic Leadership Orientation** (responsibilities of boards and

committees, association management principles, leadership styles and characteristics), **Leadership Skill Development** (conflict management, mediation models, time management, presentation skills, public speaking techniques, writing skills, interpersonal skills development, motivating volunteers, conducting meetings, parliamentary procedure, marketing strategies, strategic planning, goal setting and visioning, group dynamics, decision-making models, leadership plan development, fundraising, budgeting, record keeping and minutes), **Newsletter Development** (layout, editing, use of technology), **Associational Information** (associational structure, associational policies and procedures, job descriptions, national office structure and staff, bylaws, products and publications, etc.).

UNDERSTAND CHAPTER FLOW. Try to diffuse peoples' belief that if "something cannot be done now, then the chapter might fold." Experience teaches that chapters ebb and flow much like the moon. It seems to be a natural pattern and one not to be too concerned about. Also, leadership is a learned skill; people must allow new leaders to learn and make mistakes. The old adage is true: *Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from poor judgment.* If people feel something can be done better, encourage these persons to run. One of the main reasons people run for an office or any position is that they want to make a change. Try to capitalize on it.

RUN AS A SLATE OF OFFICERS. Consider having candidates run as a slate of officers rather than individuals running for a single position. In this way, "Susie" knows she can work well with "Bob" and that she will run if "Bob" runs. This can make it easier for individuals to consider serving on boards or committees.

STAGGER BOARD AND COMMITTEE POSITION TERMS. Stagger board positions to ensure that there are always experienced board and committee members serving. Those who join as new members will learn the history, protocol, and the collective wisdom from those who are continuing to serve. Likewise, the new people will become seasoned board and committee members who will provide the same training to future members.

KNOW AND USE RESOURCES. Let the membership and potential leaders know that there are many people and places to turn to for assistance. Remember that RID has fax-on-demand. Use the web page. Contact the National Office staff or request assistance from the region representative. Get a personal mentor. Do not hesitate to ask for help or advice. We all need it!

FOLLOW PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE. Use parliamentary procedure as intended. Most people use parliamentary procedure to prevent business from moving in a direction they do not want, or conversely to control business in a direction they do want. However, parliamentary procedure "...if properly understood and duly followed, is a tool that allows a group to come together and make reasonable decisions as a group" (Collins, 1997, p. 18). Each person is responsible to understand parliamentary procedure and use it

for the good of the entire group. Note: some groups use a consensus process rather than parliamentary procedure.

DELEGATE AUTHORITY. Make sure that the work is distributed fairly. Three of the most powerful words that have ever been shared with new leaders are, “Delegate, delegate, delegate!” Why are these words so powerful? Because it is a reminder to all that leaders are elected to oversee the work of the organization, not to do all the work of the organization. He or she is NOT simultaneously the lady on the flying trapeze, the lion tamer, the clown, and the elephant rider or the flame thrower. Rather, a leader is more like the circus master who makes sure that all the acts are progressing satisfactorily in all the rings.

One of the abiding principles underlying RID at the national and affiliate levels is that RID is *membership* driven, not *leadership* driven. This organization is made up of professionals who volunteer their time for the betterment of a profession which seeks to enhance the lives of deaf people by making their access to all parts of society more equitable through the availability of skilled, qualified interpreters. How does this happen? By working through the organization that provides the structure or "bones" for what we do. Members provide the heart, muscles, ligaments and connective tissue that create the vision, bind people together, and provide the power to get things done. Without the "innards" a chapter is only a skeleton doomed to lie in the dust.

An organization that does not move forward will die. An organization can only move forward through the dedication and commitment of its members volunteering to serve on committees, on the board, or to take on tasks large to small. There is enough work for everyone, and everyone is needed. Folks who let others "do the work for them" instead of lending a helping hand are diminishing the amount of progress possible for the whole organization. They are depriving the organization of their unique input, and depriving themselves of the opportunity to and satisfaction of making a difference. In other words, when a member sits back uninvolved, there is someone important missing. Some things can't get done and those few members who get the work accomplished find the journey not as much fun.

Everyone must understand that electing leaders does not relieve the membership of its responsibility or call to take action. Everyone has a part, everyone is needed and everyone is important.

KEEP SEASONED MEMBERS ACTIVE. Remember that leadership is neither a death sentence nor a life sentence; rather, it is an opportunity to make a difference in a particular way for a limited time. Remember, too, that people respond best to personal invitation.

Keeping seasoned members active in the organization is not significantly different from attracting new members. The key is to keep the members aware of the reasons they

joined the organization, and to help members see that their involvement is unique and makes a positive difference.

The organizational leaders' responsibility is to:

- * Assist the organization in defining its vision and goals
- * Foster the vision and goals of the organization and keep them before the members
- * Through board, committee and individual work, see that the will of the membership, as expressed through motions, is carried out
- * Plan for leadership transition

The pros of working with seasoned members are that they:

- * Have been members for a long time, bringing history, experience and wisdom to the organization
- * Do not need to be convinced to join
- * Are usually very committed to their organization
- * Have experience on all levels (state, regional, national)
- * Become your leadership pool

The cons of working with seasoned members are that they:

- * May be burned out
- * May be tired and need to rest
- * May feel the "nothing's new under the sun" syndrome
- * May have lost the vision and the fire

Some ideas on how to attract (and attract back) chapter members as adapted from Lawson, L., Donant, F., and Lawson, J. (1982) include:

- * Provide periodic and regular chapter visioning and goal setting sessions and activities. What do the members want to see happen?
- * Provide personal invitations to get involved. People respond most to one-on-one invitations.
- * Provide low threat situations for people to get involved. Keep the meeting positive, moving, and use printed agendas so people know what to expect.
- * Give members with limited experience something simple to do at first; ask seasoned members to share their wisdom and experience.
- * Look for non-verbal signals and body language; what are people responding to both positively and negatively?
- * Be informal and personable; use people's first names; be generous with positive suggestions and compliments.

- * Involve members in setting organizational goals; create individual and collective investment in the activities of the organization.
- * Divide work into many manageable parts before asking for volunteers; make sure work responsibilities are equitable and that most of the work is not being done by only a few.
- * Help members find things to do that match their interests and talents.
- * Involve members in the business of the organization - respect everyone's opinion and right to be courteously heard.
- * Encourage cooperation and teamwork.

GIVE THANKS...OFTEN. One certain truth for any organization is that many people will appreciate those individuals who step forward to serve an organization...however, few will ever say so. Therefore it is important to give each other much-deserved pats on the back! Take the time to thank, praise and appreciate the work that so many folks do FOR YOU! And do it often!

As an organization, one of the most important things we can do is to remember that all of our board, committee and general members are volunteers who chose to dedicate their time and energy to our profession through our organization. This always comes with a cost whether it is time away from work, family, friends, or precious rest. Everyone needs to remember that stepping forward to serve makes an individual deserving of our respect and admiration, for he/she has chosen to work for the future, to contribute to betterment of the profession, and to become an example for those new professionals entering the field.

Since monetary reward for professional service is neither sought nor available, volunteer experience needs to be fulfilling and rewarding. One way to do so is to develop a culture of "thanksgiving"! It sounds easy, but it is something that is frequently overlooked. Too often we wait until a person has died, moved away, or left office to let them know how much we appreciate all they have done!

Here are some ways that affiliate chapters can thank those who serve:

- * Chapter newsletters - thank folks for their efforts in print
- * Pass a motion dismissing the group with thanks when a task force or committee has finished its task and make it known through the minutes
- * Service awards for your affiliate chapter
- * Certificates of appreciation for those who contribute

- * Plaques that honor board members and committee chairs and members, presented during an important event such as a conference banquet
- * Public "thank you" during membership meetings
- * Letters of thanks to those who agree to serve, and again when service is completed
- * Member bio highlights in affiliate chapter newsletters and NAD state association newsletters
- * Chapter awards such as "Outstanding Interpreter of the Year"
- * Nomination of outstanding members for regional and national awards and scholarships
- * Nomination of outstanding newsletters and chapter web pages for national awards
- * Verbal acknowledgements or hospitality baskets for workshop presenters, interpreters and coordinators
- * Ribbons for name tags for committee members, volunteers, etc.
- * Program booklet "thank you" for all who make an event possible
- * Chapter "coupons" good for reduction in membership fees, workshops, etc. for volunteer service such as interpreting meetings, chairing a conference committee, etc.
- * Standing ovations and lots of applause
- * Hand written, personal notes to let individuals know how much their service, leadership, etc. has meant to you; they mean more than emails
- * Chapter scrapbooks!
- * Chapter "thank you gifts" such as chapter coffee mugs or tee shirts, given for service
- * Group collection for a gift certificate for a family meal at a local restaurant
- * Greeting card signed by the membership

Remember that the thanks should be given both publicly and privately. Public thanks should be eloquent, heartfelt, and done at a joyous occasion. Private thanks should be personal and sincere. No one can ever be thanked enough.

DEAL WITH BURNOUT. OK, what if you've tried to prevent burnout, but it happens anyway? Here are some suggestions for handling burnout:

- * Take a step back and evaluate the whole picture. Try to recapture the image of the forest instead of the individual trees. Ask an outsider to observe the situation or to listen to a description of the situation and give feedback.
- * Talk with your mentor! Everyone should have a mentor and everyone should become a mentor at some time in his or her career. Mentorship is leadership!
- * Determine a plan, individually or collectively, and evaluate your options.
- * Find something that inspires you! According to John Gardner (1977), former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) under President Johnson and author of several books on leadership, the keys to self-renewal are to "...be interested. Keep a sense of curiosity. Discover new things." (p. 14) Therefore, the opposite of burnout is inspiration. Find or recapture that thing which inspires you individually or organizationally!
- * Keep focused on what is important. Issues of personal control, personality differences or petty problems bog down organizations. Try to stay focused on why the organization was founded and the concerns and goals which bind the group together.
- * Maintain individual and organizational mental, physical and spiritual health. Keep humor alive! Remember to play together as well as work together and agree to "disagree" agreeably and respectfully! Maintain a balanced life unrelated to work or the organization.
- * Plan for change in leadership! Plan Ahead, Train Behind!

In summary, we are all responsible for nurturing and supporting our leaders who step forward on our behalf. They are electing to be part of the solution and deserve our admiration. At some time in our lives we are all leaders and we are all followers! We have a collective responsibility to contribute, to train, to support, and to step forward. We have a collective responsibility to prevent burnout! The organization, and everyone in it, will be better off for the effort!

Resources:

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