

## **Self Care for Leaders...**

*And we are all leaders...to someone*

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One of the greatest challenges of leadership is maintaining a healthy balance between family, friends, work, the organization we serve in...and self. With so many people and tasks to attend to it is easy to fall out of balance and subsequently take “self” off of the list in an attempt to keep it all manageable. But where did we get the idea that neglecting self was the answer to bringing this all back into balance?

When I entered the field I observed, with great interest, those who were in leadership positions. I wanted to know what it would take to contribute to the profession and they seemed to be the most direct avenue to this information. What I observed were passionate, dedicated people who appeared to be under constant stress and strain. I heard leaders talk about how many different committees and projects they were involved in, and express feelings of being completely overwhelmed. I saw them rush from one event to another while maintaining full-time jobs and managing households. I unconsciously started to develop the mindset that the busier one was, the more important he/she must be, and that in order to contribute to the profession I must do the same.

What I now understand is that at the time (mid 1990's) this was part of the original leadership paradigm that was necessary to propel the field forward. As time has gone on and the association has grown we now have more formal structures in place on a national level to manage some of the business that volunteers used to manage. Yet many of our leaders (especially those on a state level) continue to operate under significant stress and imbalance. The level of passion and dedication that is the foundation of our profession, and that was exhibited by early leaders who had direct ties to the Deaf Community, is something that we all benefit from to this day. And at the same time, given the size of the association in terms of both numbers and issues before us, attempting to match what our predecessors did is causing potential leaders to shy away from stepping forward and current leaders to step down while they still have much to contribute.

Intra-field dynamics are compounded by societal values and definitions of success. A high percentage of practitioners and leaders are female. And women have traditionally been caretakers drawn to careers of service. Western society has also historically defined professional success as being able to manage high-stress careers often to the detriment of everything else in our lives. Taking care of others is noble. Busy equals important, busy equals successful. Put it all together and it's a recipe for self-neglect.

So we run around at unimaginable speeds to manage the needs of those around us; spouses, children, family, our bosses and peers, members, friends...and then wonder how we ended up on the bottom rung of the ladder. We have fooled ourselves into believing that self-sacrifice for the benefit of everyone else is the road to happiness and fulfillment. We have placed little value on “being.”

There is one more, far less obvious, reason why we run ourselves ragged. When we allow ourselves to just “be”, we are left alone with our own thoughts. As interpreters we are constantly facilitating the thoughts of others...it can be uncomfortable to get accustomed to listening to our own! When we do so

we find that our own thoughts contain guidance, and it is exactly this guidance that we fear. What if our guidance involves initiating change or stepping forward in life in a way that is unfamiliar? Hmmmm, what if???

What we may find when we stop the madness is that the madness is a way of seeking validation, or avoiding current circumstances that no longer serve us. When we attend to ourselves first we receive validation from within and are able to see the truth of what we have created. This, then, opens us up to being able to serve from a place of pure intent. Ironically, it is in the silence of our own thoughts rather than the doing-ness for others that we begin to find the true key to happiness and fulfillment.

Time in quiet reflection is just one of the many ways that we can start to re-balance our lives. Here are a few other practical suggestions for taking care of the leader in you:

***Put yourself on your calendar:*** When creating your weekly schedule blocks out periods of time for you. When meetings or other events associated with volunteer obligations surface consider the time you have blocked out for you like you would work or vacation time – completely unavailable.

***Make a list of things that you enjoyed doing as a child, and do one every week:*** Did you enjoy reading? Playing an instrument? Taking walks, playing games? Resurrecting child-like energy can quickly rejuvenate our souls!

***Take a look at how you are spending your time and energy:*** Do the activities in your life lift you up or drag you down? Do they feed you or deplete you? Work to eliminate those activities that keep you busy in the world but deplete your energy, and replace them with something that quiets your mind, soothes your soul, and lifts you up.

***Make sure that the leadership position you serve in is a good fit:*** This includes first examining your motives for service. Are you looking for validation from those around you? If so, find ways to increase your sense of self-worth then take a close look at the position you hold; is it truly a good fit? If not, look for something that truly inspires you so you are acting from pure desire to contribute rather than obligation.

Attention to self is what keeps us healthy and contributing; and encouraging others to attend to self is a powerful way to keep your organization vibrant and membership alive!