Leadership: Perspectives From Deaf Leaders and Interpreter Leaders

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Perspectives on Leadership

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Interpreting Consolidated

Abstract

This article examines leadership from the perspectives of 50 deaf leaders and interpreter leaders from Canada and the United States. This qualitative research study contributes to knowledge about what leaders value and what are important leadership practices to each group of leaders. Data were collected through individual interviews using semistructured open-ended questions. Twenty most frequent themes were identified in the interview data. The values of respect and communication were strongly related among and within the two groups. When participants were asked about the differences and similarities between deaf leaders and interpreter leaders, five themes were identified: importance of relationships, importance for all to understand, valuing all input, the knowledge of how systems work, and the speed of decision making. Implications for interpreter education and for practitioners as it applies to leadership are discussed. Recommendations for further research are offered.

Key Words: American Sign Language, Deaf, leadership, interpreters, leaders, ASL-English, sign language interpreter, sign language

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Leadership: Perspectives From Deaf Leaders and Interpreter Leaders

1. Introduction

Leadership is deliberate and conscious. It includes civility, fairness, self-control, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence. In interpreting, leadership is a fundamental practice, including: (a) leading oneself, (b) leading individuals, (b) leading groups, and (4) leading organizations, communities, and societies. Interpreters at the most basic level must lead themselves. Often they need to lead others, such as clients who have no experience working with interpreters. Whether one is a student in an interpreter education program or already working as a practitioner, leadership is of great importance to one's career as an interpreter.

Expectations for interpreters continue to rise as more interpreters work with deaf professionals such as politicians, doctors, lawyers, authors, and engineers. Interpreters often work in teams or as escort or designated interpreters with these professionals. Leadership and the behaviors associated with leadership are crucial for creating a successful context in which to work with deaf professionals. Interpreters also take on leadership roles within the profession as supervisors of other interpreters and as mentors to interpreters, and they are involved in professional associations on the executive board and on committees.

In the deaf community, the need for leadership education was identified as early as the 1960s. For example, the federally funded National Leadership Program was established in 1961 at California State University, Northridge, to educate individuals who worked with the deaf community and to provide training for potential leaders within the deaf community. The need for leadership education for interpreters was not as clearly identified, although awareness of its importance might have been reflected in the consistent acknowledgement, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s (Ball, 2013), of the need for higher degrees in interpreter education.

Formal education for interpreters began in the United States in 1948 (Ball, 2013) but the topic of leadership has yet to evolve as a key curricular component in interpreter education. Within the curriculum of interpreter education programs, there is little direct attention given to the topic of leadership or the behaviors associated with effective leaders. Leadership is tangentially covered within ASL-English interpreter education curriculum, if at all. One exception, however, is the Certificate in Leadership and Supervision offered through the Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training at the University of Northern Colorado. This program for nationally certified sign language interpreters consists of four courses (12 credit hours): Leadership in Interpreting, Conducting Diagnostic Assessments, Supervision of Interpreting Systems, and Ethics in Leadership (http://www.unco.edu/doit/prospective/lscp.html).

Effective leadership is highly correlated to behaviors that include civility (e.g., Sergiovanni, 2005), fairness (e.g., van Knippenberg & de Cremer, 2008), and social and emotional intelligence (e.g., Mandell & Pherwani 2003). Considerable research has been done on leaders ranging from student leaders (e.g., Kezar & Moriarty, 2000) to corporate leaders. In contrast, there is a small amount of research related to deaf leaders and to ASL-English interpreter leaders. The research that has been done related to these two communities generally falls into

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one of three categories: (a) identification of leadership traits or characteristics, (b) identification of what leaders do, that is, the practices of successful leaders, and (c) identification of what leaders value. The literature review that follows highlights research conducted with leaders who are deaf and with leaders who are not deaf.

1.1. Literature Review

Ashton (2012) examined leadership within deaf and hearing cultures by comparing small sample groups of deaf leaders, hearing leaders with no deaf family members, and hearing leaders with deaf family members. Two instruments were used to compare the groups in this study, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior. No dominant personality types or interpersonal styles were found in the groups. Singleton (1995), who also used the MBTI in an earlier study of deaf female educational administrators, found the same results. Using the Leadership Effectiveness Adaptability Descriptor (LEAD), Singleton found the women leaders had a high relationship style; however, there was no correlation between results of the two instruments (MBTI and LEAD).

In 1997, Balk studied deaf and hearing educational leaders at schools for the deaf using Kouzes and Posner's Leadership Practices Inventory, and found no differences between deaf superintendents and hearing superintendents. The deaf superintendents rated highly in three of the five leadership practices: challenging the process (solution seeking), inspiring a shared vision (collegiality), and modeling the way (example setting). The deaf superintendents rated moderately in the other two leadership practices: enabling others to act (self-determination) and encouraging the heart (caring).

Baynton (2005) compared deaf leaders at Gallaudet University, a university for deaf students in Washington D.C., with hearing leaders at a college in Texas. The student leaders in both groups preferred situational leadership approaches because of their multiple roles, and they identified their most important leadership traits as effective communication skills and professional integrity. Slife (2007) also compared groups of deaf students and hearing students at postsecondary institutions using the social change model of leadership development. The study showed a few differences between the groups in the areas of congruence, commitment, and controversy with civility. Kamm-Larew and Lamkin (2008) surveyed program leaders in the deaf community and found that deaf leaders most often highlighted the importance of empowerment, role modeling, self-advocacy, and decision-making skills.

T. B. Smith (1996) studied the deaf community using an ethnographic approach and described two types of leaders: grassroots and professionals. Grassroots leaders were commonly monolingual American Sign Language (ASL) users with a large network of deaf people. Professional leaders were often bilingual and bicultural, allowing them to move between deaf and hearing communities while supporting deaf cultural values and beliefs. J. L. Smith (2005) used a case study of a deaf community to examine the characteristics of deaf leaders from deaf families. These deaf leaders were fluent in ASL and followed the transformational leadership model in working with the deaf community. Similar to the deaf leaders in Balk's (1997) study, the deaf leaders in J. L. Smith's study were caring people who wanted to meet the needs of the deaf community in which they were leaders.

Ashton (2012), in a study of leaders in an organization of deaf ASL teachers, identified the complexities of the cross-cultural interaction of personal traits and work styles. Seiberlich (2006) examined the challenges of leadership within professional organizations of ASL-English interpreters, finding that even when association leaders acknowledged the need for leadership training, formal ongoing training opportunities were rarely available to new association leaders.

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2. Method

The research related to deaf leaders and hearing leaders cited above used a wide variety of methodological approaches such as ethnographies, case studies, and standard measurements of personal type and interpersonal styles. For this study, I used a qualitative approach to examine what leadership characteristics deaf leaders and interpreter leaders value and what they view as important leadership practices. I collected detailed and rich data from participants using semistructured open-ended interview questions. The overarching research question for this study was "What are deaf leaders' and hearing interpreter leaders' perspectives on leadership?"

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in 2006 and expanded in 2012. In 2006, eight Canadian individuals were interviewed (four deaf leaders and four interpreter leaders). In 2012, 42 more individuals were interviewed in Canada and the United States.

A total of 50 deaf leaders and interpreter leaders participated in this study, 24 from Canada and 26 from the United States. Thirty-one (31) were female and 19 were male. Among the 24 deaf leaders there were eight women and 16 men; among the 26 interpreter leaders there were 23 women and 3 men.

Each participant included in this research had a minimum of 5 years of formal leadership experience. The range of formal leadership experience ranged from 5 years to 45 years (mean = 18 years). Leadership experiences ranged from heads of programs for deaf people and/or interpreters to executive board positions in regional, national and/or international interpreter organizations or deaf organizations. The number of communities in which they were involved ranged from one community to seven communities (mean = two communities). If participants were involved in a regional organization and an international organization, this was counted as involvement in two communities. If they were involved in two different regional communities, a national community, and two international communities, this was counted as five.

The hearing interpreter leaders were also nationally certified in Canada, the United States, or both. Deaf leaders who were also interpreters were included in the deaf leader group, not the interpreter leader group. The participants were not paid or otherwise compensated for their time.

2.2. Interviews

The participants in the study were informed that they would be involved in an interview on leadership and to allow up to 60 minutes for the interview. They were not told the questions in advance. At the beginning of the interview, participants were told that all of their responses were confidential and that only recurring themes across participants would be reported; specific identifying information about the participants or their responses would not be reported.

A total of 50 people were interviewed. The interviews in 2006 were all conducted with Canadian individuals. The interviews in 2012 included additional Canadian participants and added participants from the United States. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis.

The researcher conducted all of the interviews in person at a location selected by the participant, on the telephone, or through video technology. The researcher, an interpreter educator and interpreter for over 30 years, is fluent in ASL and in English. She interviewed all of the participants using the language of their choice. After the researcher described the project and the interviewing procedures, each participant was asked four identical questions in the exact same sequence to heighten the level of reliability across the interview results. The structured narrative interviews with four open-ended interview questions were:

1. What characteristics do you value in a leader?
2. What do others value in you as a leader?
3. Describe one of your best leadership experiences.
4. What difference and/or similarities do you see among deaf leaders and hearing interpreter leaders?

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The researcher asked additional questions when clarification was needed or to probe deeper into the participants' responses. The researcher took thorough notes during each of the interviews to immediately document the participant's responses to each question. These notes were then used to analyze the data. The researcher decided not to video record the interviews in favor of having a more comfortable, relaxed setting to gather the most authentic responses possible. Each interview lasted between 30 and 75 minutes.

2.3. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using a three-step approach. First, answers were coded according to the number of recurring themes that emerged across all 50 responses for each question. That is, the responses to the first question were coded separately from the responses to the second question, the third question, and the fourth question. Second, the common themes for each question were categorized and quantified within and across the deaf leaders and within and across the interpreter leaders. Third, if a similar response occurred at least five times, it was considered a theme.

The researcher reviewed the coded themes, extracting 71 recurring themes specific to leadership. The resulting themes with the highest frequency were reviewed. The results reported in this article address the responses to Questions 1, 2 and 4. Responses related to Question 3 were not included, but will be reported separately in a different article. The results are provided in the following section, followed by discussion and implications.

3. Results

After analyzing the data from the 50 interviews, 20 themes were identified and are presented below in Tables 1 through 5. Themes and the frequency of the themes related to the first two questions begin with the four most frequent responses from deaf leaders, followed by the four most frequent responses from interpreter leaders for each question. The frequency of responses to the third question showed the overlap of four themes for both groups of leaders.

Question: What characteristics do you value in a leader?

Table 1: Leader characteristics valued by deaf leaders

Common Themes	Number of deaf leaders reporting	Percentage of deaf leaders reporting
Respectful	24	100%
Honest	20	83%
Supportive	17	71%
Bilingual, bicultural	14	58%

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Table 2: Leader characteristics valued by hearing interpreter leaders

Common Themes	Number of interpreter leaders reporting	Percentage of interpreter leaders reporting
Respectful	21	81%
Communication	17	65%
Open-minded	13	50%
Innovative	12	46%

Question: What do others value in you as a leader?

Table 3: Leader characteristics in the deaf leaders interviewed valued by others

Common Themes	Number of deaf leaders reporting	Percentage of deaf leaders reporting
Involved in the community	22	92%
Good listener	16	67%
Responsible	15	63%
Fair	12	50%

Table 4: Leader characteristics valued in interpreter leaders interviewed valued by others

Common Themes	Number of interpreter leaders reporting	Percentage of interpreter leaders reporting
Integrity	24	92%
Effective communicator	21	81%
Reflective thinker	14	54%
Admits mistakes	9	35%

Question: What differences and/or similarities do you see between deaf leaders and interpreter leaders?

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Table 5: Leaders perceptions on differences and similarities between deaf and hearing leaders

Common Themes	Number of deaf leaders reporting and percentage	Number of interpreter leaders reporting and percentage
Relationship is important (similarity)	18 = 75%	15 = 58%
Make sure everyone understands (difference)	21 = 88%	7 = 30%
All input is valued (difference)	18 = 75%	4 = 15%
Speed of decision making (difference)	14 = 58%	11 = 42%
Knowledge of how systems work (difference)	10 = 42%	16 = 62%

4. Discussion

In responding to the question "What characteristics do you value in a leader?" deaf leaders in the study most frequently mentioned that they valued respect (24 participants), honesty (20 participants), supportiveness (17 participants), and being bilingual/bicultural (14 participants). Of particular note was that all 24 of the deaf leaders mentioned respect as a valued leadership characteristic. Interpreter leaders in the study most frequently mentioned that they valued respect (21 participants), being communicative (17 participants), being open minded (13 participants) and being innovative (12 participants).

The highest number of responses from the deaf leaders and interpreter leaders were related to respect and communication. Respect was mentioned the most frequently as a valued leadership characteristic b both groups of leaders—100% of the deaf leaders and 81% of the interpreter leaders. The next highest number of responses within the two groups of leaders was communication, with more than half of the deaf leaders (58%) stating that bilingualism and biculturalism were highly valued and with 65% of the interpreter leaders stating that communication was highly valued. The next two most frequent responses from deaf leaders and hearing leaders had no direct relationship. Deaf leaders valued honesty (83%) and supportiveness (71%), while the interpreter leaders reported open-mindedness (50%) and being innovative (46%).

In answering the question "What do others value in you as a leader?" deaf leaders reported being involved in the community (92%), being a good listener (67%), being responsible, (63%), and being fair (50%). Interpreter leaders reported having integrity (92%), being an effective communicator (81%), being a reflective thinker (54%), and the ability to admit mistakes (35%). There was no common value reported by the two groups. However, there was less variability in the range 92% to 50% in the four most frequent reports from the deaf leaders, than the interpreter leaders whose range was 92% to 35%, indicating there was slightly more commonality among the deaf leaders interviewed than among the interpreter leaders interviewed. The highest frequency in both groups with the deaf leaders reporting being involved in the community and the interpreter leaders reporting having integrity had the same high level of frequency of responses at 92%. There was, however, a high degree of commonality in the importance given to the highest frequency value in their respective groups. The interpreter leaders (81%) valued

an effective communicator, which was similar to their responses when 65% answered the previous question, "What do you value in a leader?" Although 65% of the deaf leaders valued communication in other leaders, they did not mention it again in relation to what others value in them.

In Table 5 a comparison of response frequency to the question "What differences and/or similarities do you see among deaf leaders and interpreter leaders?" shows what each group identified as differences or similarities. When these similarities and differences were reported, there was 100% agreement within and across the two groups of leaders as to whether the response was a similarity or a difference; they all categorized their responses the same.

Five themes were identified across both groups of leaders. Both groups noted four out of the five themes as differences, with only one theme noted by both groups as a similarity between deaf leaders and interpreter leaders. "Making sure everyone understands" was mentioned by 21 (88%) of the deaf leaders and by only 7 (30%) of the interpreter leaders, indicating the importance of this difference from the deaf leaders' perspective. A representative statement from one of the deaf leaders was "A real leader is concerned with clarity of communication and has patience with people who may not understand the information immediately. This value is not reflected among many interpreter leaders." Similarly, 18 (75%) deaf leaders reported that "all input was valued," whereas only four (15%) of the interpreter leaders mentioned this as a difference between deaf leaders and interpreter leaders, again indicating that the deaf leaders did not see this value demonstrated among interpreter leaders. The interpreter leaders, with some exceptions, did not note this as a important difference between the two groups, indicating a possible lack of awareness.

The two groups were most closely related on two themes: "relationship is important"—18 (75%) deaf leaders and 15 (58%) interpreter leaders reported this value—and "the speed of decision making is different"—14 (58%) deaf leaders and 11 (42%) interpreter leaders expressed this sentiment. Kamm-Larew and Lamkin (2008) also found that decision-making skills were important to deaf leaders.

For only one of the five themes did a higher number of interpreter leaders report a theme than did the deaf leaders: "knowledge of how systems work." Sixteen (62%) interpreter leaders and only 10 (42%) of the deaf leaders reported this theme. This may indicate either that knowledge of how systems work was not perceived as important to deaf leaders as it was to interpreter leaders, or perhaps deaf leaders were unaware of this difference. A representative statement from one of the interpreter leaders was "Hearing leaders have more access to resources and assistance than deaf leaders." This comment was likely made because deaf leaders have generally not had the same level of access to communication as interpreter leaders.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

As is often cited in the literature (e.g., Creswell, 2007), one of the drawbacks of conducting qualitative research using interviews is coding the data. To compound the situation, the interview questions in this study were open-ended. Although all of the questions allowed for a tremendous amount of depth and substance to the responses, with the high number of 50 participants, and using semistructured questions, albeit open-ended, the coding was much easier than when using a smaller sample size (e.g., Gall, Gall, & Borg 2003). With a large sample size of 50, the common themes were much easier to identify and aggregate.

Another limitation of the study was that the interviews were not recorded and therefore the interviews were not available to review and transcribe verbatim. The results depended on the accuracy and the completeness of the researcher's capabilities of taking notes. This limitation was mitigated by the fact the interviewer had a great deal of experience prior to this study with conducting over 300 one-on-one interviews in English and in ASL and simultaneously taking notes for each of these interviews.

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5.   Implications for Interpreter Education

Knowledge of the deaf community is a basic foundation of interpreter education, but it is a challenge for interpreter educators to ensure that their students engage with the deaf community. Because there are fewer residential school programs and more deaf and hard of hearing children are mainstreamed, and because more interpreting programs are offered online, interpreting students cannot easily get to know the deaf community with whom they will work. Are interpreter education programs becoming more technical in their training rather than focused on relationship-building with the deaf community? The creation of video relay services (using a videophone to contact an interpreter 24/7 to make a phone call to a person who doesn't sign) in the United States has exacerbated a lack of engagement in the deaf community for some interpreters. As more and more interpreter programs go online, how does leadership education occur, even tangentially? The responses of the deaf leaders in this study reflect their views that students in interpreter education must learn to value respect, honesty, relationship, and communication. Given fewer opportunities for engagement in the deaf community, the need to teach students about deaf culture is even more important than it was in the past.

Leadership education for interpreters can start with educating students about the themes presented in this article articulated by deaf leaders and interpreter leaders. And not only should leadership education be an integral part of every interpreter education program; it is also needed in continuing professional education. Seiberlich (2006) found that ASL-English interpreters did not get the necessary support for leadership training when they joined their professional organizations as board members. Moreover, leadership education for interpreters must go beyond the general theories and practices of leadership. Ashton (2012) identified the complexities of the cross-cultural interaction of personal traits and work styles. It is one thing to be a leader in one culture using one language; it is an additional challenge to be a leader in a second language and culture; and it is yet a greater challenge to be a leader across languages and cultures. Knowing how to balance the leadership values within and across cultures is a skill that should be overtly taught and learned by interpreting students and by practitioners.

The deaf leaders in this study valued respect, honesty, support, and bilingualism/biculturalism. They appreciated leaders who were involved in the community, who were good listeners, and who were responsible and fair. Interpreter leaders valued leaders who showed respect and who had effective communication skills, and leaders who were open-minded and innovative. They appreciated leaders who had integrity, who were reflective thinkers, and who were able to admit their mistakes. If interpreters, interpreter educators and interpreter practitioners keep these in mind, it is likely to serve them well for their entire career.

6.   Suggestions for Further Research

Several pathways for future research can build on the results reported in this article:

1. Forty-five out of 50 participants mentioned respect as an important leadership value. Investigating the meaning behind *respect* to more deeply understand what each group meant would shed light on deaf leaders' and interpreter leaders' perspectives. Additional research interviews could be conducted asking questions about respect, such as, How is respect demonstrated? How is disrespect or a lack of respect demonstrated? What are the behaviors exhibited by individuals that demonstrate respect? Would the responses to these questions still have a strong relationship between deaf leaders and interpreter leaders? Would common themes occur among the participants from within each group? How would the responses from the two groups of leaders be similar and how would they be different?

2. Researchers may want to analyze responses by gender within and across each group of leaders, which would provide another lens through which to view the same data. Singleton's (1995) study found that deaf women leaders had a high relationship style. Was it because of the gender or because of deaf culture?

3. This research was conducted in Canada and the United States. Replicating the research in other countries with other language pairs would add to the significance of this research, and provide additional data that either support the findings in this study or discover other themes among other language pairs of leaders.

4. Researchers may be interested in interviewing less experienced groups of "not-yet" leaders (deaf and interpreters) and compare their responses with these data.

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