2007

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Vol. 41, No. 1, 2007
STORYTELLING AND LEADERSHIP IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This article addresses a gap in scholarship on leadership styles in the Deaf community. There is an invisible style of leadership differing from the mainstream culture that has not been previously addressed in the literature at any depth. This article was intended to begin a discussion addressing this gap. My analysis of literature in the leadership fields, Deaf Studies and Performance Studies indicates a unique style of leadership by Deaf people within a Deaf community that is collaborative in nature yet values the individual. Further studies into Deaf leadership are warranted and may help to uncover this “collective individualist” approach as the community begin to share their story with mainstream culture.

Introduction

This paper investigates how theater can be used to uncover and characterize Deaf leadership. Leadership in the Deaf culture seems to take on a form that is frequently not apparent to the mainstream hearing culture. It is my hope that this study will allow a Deaf cultural leadership style to be accessible to others so that it can understood more fully. Most of the literature I was able to find regarding Deaf leadership was written by hearing researchers. I was able to find only a handful of studies seriously considering a separate form of leadership — a deaf cultural leadership. I expect this paucity to be caused by a bias – however unintentional – toward the majority vision of leadership as hierarchical and comprising the vision, charisma and talents of a single person with the ability to lead many. Unsurprisingly, with that perspective in mind, deaf leaders of this specific type are in fact, far and few between. Deaf cultural leaders tend to be known and acknowledged primarily within their own community and tend to emerge in a more collaborate approach.

The limited definition of leadership which seems to ignore methods of leadership that require the combined energy of a group reflects the forms of leadership that are easily found in the societies and cultures of the originators of leadership studies. The esteemed ethnographer, Franz Boas (1940), is quoted in connection with this double-edged sword of intimacy and otherness as saying:
In all our thoughts, we think in terms of our own social environment. However, the activities of the human mind exhibit an infinite variety of forms among the peoples of the world. In order to understand these clearly, the student must endeavor to divest himself entirely of opinions and emotions based upon the peculiar environment into which he is born. He must adapt his mind, so far as feasible, to that of the people whom he is studying. The more successful he is in freeing himself from the bias based on the group of ideas that constitute the civilization in which he lives; the more successful he will be in interpreting the beliefs and actions of man. He must follow lines of thought that are new to him. He must participate in new emotions, and understand how, under unwonted conditions, both lead to actions. Beliefs, customs, and the response of the individual to the event of daily life, give us ample opportunity to observe the manifestations of the mind of man under varying conditions. (p. 8)

Mindful of Boas’ advice, a goal of this article is to trace the language choices, social significance, and presentation, of a theatrical story with a message significant to the participants as it appears within the context of Deaf leadership. Although I had trouble finding studies specifically addressing Deaf cultural leadership, I did find a different research method tradition that upheld many of the beliefs and concerns I used when my clinical subjectivity insisted on the experiential evidence of Deaf cultural leadership. As a member of the Deaf community I have seen the community rise together and affect change, accomplish objectives and create new perspectives. I believe that these successes result from an intentional and structured form of group leadership. I have used my abilities and resources in the theater industry to provide a space where the hearing and deaf communities can meet on common ground. Suppose, for example, were I asked by an interested acquaintance: What is the subject of your work?

I should respond by saying that my focus is the anthropological significance of Deaf leadership in balance with hearing cultural norms while in the holding environment of a theatrical rehearsal process. My research question targets a very specific pool of participants. My participants are the creative people who inhabit the edges or “margins” of their cultures (Deaf or hearing) because of their relationship to the arts. These theater people, whose tolerance and innovation bring them into contact with each other, create a third pool of people who inhabit a cultural bridge area allowing for both cultures to experience successful cultural change and shared power in leadership. It is in this pool of participants that a previously unrecognized form of Deaf leadership can be evidenced.

Through my years of living and working in the Deaf community I have noticed a style of leadership that seems to be unique to the Deaf. Yet it is a style rarely shown in “mixed” company, that is, Deaf and hearing people working together. This unique Deaf cultural leadership style has most often evidenced itself to me during the rehearsal process for theater. Unlike the usual work or academic environment in which this “mixed” group often functions and which abides by hearing cultural norms, like Spoken English and hierarchical structures, the environment of a rehearsal employing both Deaf and hearing actors is often consciously weighted in favor of Deaf cultural norms. What I mean by that is rehearsals are run using signed communication and collaborative structures.

In order to assist you, gentle reader, to see what I have seen, let me begin by situating you in the historical perspectives on deafness and leadership. These glimpses of how the mainstream world sees deaf people may begin to explain why we haven’t seen the behaviors that I will later explain as “leadership traits” in the proper context. I have chosen examples from varying historical periods that specifically mention deaf people. These deaf individuals evidence actions that affect a historical course of action which alters outcomes for both hearing and deaf communities. Yet many of these individuals are still represented as “less than” rather than as leaders.

Stories of Deaf Leadership

Historical Perspective from the Mainstream

For the past 4,000 years, deafness has manifested itself in every society with written records. However, it has only been within the last 200 years that the evidence of and concern with deafness has become even slightly more than anecdotal. Most of what we know about leadership in the deaf community comes from historical texts that occasionally mention pivotal moments which were triggered by deaf influence. One of the first references to deafness in relation to leadership in recorded history was by Herodotus (Scouten, 1984) who portrays this emergence of a deaf leader as so unbelievable as to be a
miracle. In the midst of a pivotal battle between Greece and Persia, Croesus' deaf-mute son screams over the sounds of battle, “Man, do not kill Croesus!” this cry alerted Croesus that his enemy from Persia was about to kill him. Instead of dying that day, Croesus overcame his adversary (Herodotus, book I, pp. 47-48). Despite this the attitudes of ancient society toward deafness and the deaf are revealed in the rest of the story. The child saved his father’s life and yet nowhere in Herodotus’ entire story does the name of the deaf son appear. Additionally when Croesus is recorded as speaking to his hearing son, Atys, he says “For you are the one and only son that I possess; the other whose hearing is destroyed, I regard as if he were not.” (Ibid., p. 22). The deaf son was in, what would be called today, a non-person status, which makes his contribution even more striking. He disregarded how he was perceived by others in his desire to protect his father.

The Greeks had a long established practice of placing handicapped infants on a hillside to die, and yet this practice did not always apply to deaf children probably because deafness is not an easily discernable disability. Therefore deaf children may have survived long enough to show their value in physical strength or manual dexterity (Scouten, 1984, p. 4). However, these skills must not have been enough to engender respect, a key commodity in Greek society.

Pericles believed a man clearly above corruption was enabled, by the respect others had for him and for his own wise policy, to hold the multitude in voluntary restraint. He lead them, not they him; and since he did not win his power on compromising terms he could say not only what pleased others, but what displeased them, relying on their respect (Wills, 1994).

Since deaf people had no respect and were considered non-persons there would have been no opportunity for a positional deaf leader to emerge. Although it was understood that a leader needed to know his own limitations both as a leader and physically, “You will certainly not be able to take the lead in all things yourself, for to one man a god has given deeds of war, and to another the dance, to another lyre and song, and in another wide-sounding Zeus puts a good mind” (Homer, The Iliad). Still, the limitation of silence was too large a limitation to overcome. As Aristotle opined, “those born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason” (Gannon, 1981).

Aristotle and Plato focused on systems of government more than individual qualities and yet both provided history with very strong opinions that leaders needed to be superior beings both physically and ethically. Take for example Aristotle’s thoughts on rulers and the law:

They should rule who are able to rule best and a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange...Political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of mere companionship (Aristotle, Politics).

Neither of these philosophers was supportive of a democratic form of government. Therefore, they tended more toward exclusivity rather than embracing the entire wealth of diversity and strength in a community. For example, whether or not Plato is being sarcastic in his much-quoted view on democracy below, these views were not conducive to the encouragement of a deaf leader, “Democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder and dispenses a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike” (Plato, The Republic, 558-C).

When leadership theorists look at the next era in historical texts, they defer to Bennis, who describes the Big Bang Theory (Bennis and Nanus, 1997). This theory conjectures that great people do not make great leaders, but great events make people great leaders. According to this Big Bang Theory of leadership, fate plays a far more important role in leadership development than bloodline or education. Thus, although this theory opens possibilities for deaf leadership to emerge in ways that earlier beliefs in physical superiority or positional opportunities for leadership could not, virtually no examples of it can be found in the research literature from these eras either. It is certain that there were deaf individuals who lived and had an effect on the communities within which they lived. However, it is not until the Hebraic formulation of a written moral code that the recognition of deaf individuals can be seen. A societal shift occurred opening the majority culture to accepting deaf people as human. The moral code provides protection and concern for individuals who could not orally defend themselves. “Thou shalt not curse the deaf…” (Leviticus, 19:14). The deaf are accepted as a part of the community but are still unable to be property-owners and have only the same rights and privileges as children. Again, their societal position places them outside of conventional leadership possibilities.
From these historical anecdotes it is clear that Deaf people in antiquity were largely disregarded by society in terms of their genuine potential and usefulness (Scouten, 1984). Their predicament was perhaps most clearly outlined in the poetic work of Titus Lucretius Carus (96, 55 B.C.).

“To instruct the deaf, no art could ever reach
No care improve, and no wisdom teach.”

The next mention of deafness in historical texts appears in Rome when Emperor Justinian created a code (A.D. 528) which identified deaf people as requiring special attention and protection due to the perception that “the Deaf and Dumb from birth without exception and without regard to degree of intelligence, [are] condemned to a perpetual legal infancy” (Peet, 1857, p. 32). Sadly, that Roman law, specifically the Justinian Code, served as the foundation for the legal structure of the whole western world. To great extent this serves to explain why the focus of research concerning the deaf community has been on “fixing” them. In fact, this systemic marginalization of this community has been in evidence from the earliest written memory. In Machiavelli’s own words, “A man who has no position in society cannot even get a dog to bark at him” (The Discourses, Book I, chap 3, pp. 7-8).

However, it is not only because of societal perceptions and values that deaf leadership is overlooked. The other part of the problem of identifying Deaf leadership in history is in recognizing that individual leadership in the Deaf community is not highly valued. The physical experience of being deaf in a hearing society can be isolating. Therefore, from a Deaf perspective, to value individualism is to value isolation. The obvious correlation to this is that, for the Deaf being a part of a community offers the best opportunity to advance ideas and effect progress. When a Deaf person is in an environment that supports a communication difference that does not rely on sound there are no limits. Naturally, it is when the community acts collectively that the outlines of culturally defined Deaf leadership can really be seen. Allow me to now change the lenses and revisit historical references from the perspective of Deaf scholarship.

Historical Perspective from the Deaf Community

The significance of Deaf leadership starts to become evident when reading Deaf history in the light of Howard Gardner’s ideas (1995) of Ordinary, Innovative and Visionary leadership. Howard Gardner’s focus on leaders is centered on their ability to storytell. Gardner has said, “the compelling ability to draw others into your perspective is a common trait of many modern recognized leaders.” These stories when applied to an organizations problems result in solutions that Gardner identifies as ordinary (logical, practical solutions), Innovative (or creative use of strengths already identified), or Visionary (ability to find solutions from disaster). Deaf cultural history is rich with ordinary stories that lead to innovative change, with a vision that breaks through invisible barriers and unites the Deaf community with mainstream society. One of the first notable moments in Deaf cultural history when the community (rather than an individual) evidenced Innovative Leadership acting en masse and affecting a breakthrough moment that affected the community at large as well as the deaf community itself, is during the French Revolution (Scouten, 1984).

Many teachers of the Deaf throughout history have used a teaching method that had the potential of crushing Sign Language by making the gestures used by deaf students punishable. However, the Abbé de l’Epee, director and principal of the National Institute for the Deaf of France, learned sign language from his pupils and then used it to teach. Although his methods were highly criticized by the Abbé Sicard, his successor, Sicard also encouraged and continued to develop educational use of Sign Language. As you can well imagine, these teachers were beloved by their deaf students. Then, in August of 1792 in the name of the Republic of France, Abbé Sicard was seized at his Institute for the Deaf and placed in confinement. This created an event that fits Bennis & Nanus’ (1997) Big Bang theory.

In response to this event, deaf students walked publicly in daytime as a community to the National Assembly to plead for their teacher. To imagine what this must have looked like think of street theater protests of our own generation and how impressive and visual the message becomes—even without hearing a word. When I have seen the story of the Abbé told in American Sign Language (ASL), the members of the Tribunal are characterized as startled by the wild gesturing of Deaf teacher Jean Massieu, who placed a petition on the desk of the Tribunal. Historical texts quote this petition as stating, “...This man is good and just. We ask you his liberty. Restore him to his children, we are his children. Return him to us.” (Bender, 1981, p. 78).

This petition was heard and approved; however, some days later the Abbé was still led to execution through a bureaucratic oversight. “There are dumb hearts making wail, with signs, with wild gestures; he their miraculous healer...”
turned to a less acceptable but more effective method to achieve their goals, won. But when that success was not going to result in the desired result, they went through the accepted channels of government to protest and argue and values, in just the way Abbe Sicard's loving deaf students did. They took who hid him.

In the telling of this historical anecdote, it is important to note that although two deaf individuals are mentioned by name, it is the power of the group as a whole that succeeds in saving their mentor. This scenario is redolent of the Innovative Leadership concept put forth by Gardner (1995). Richard Couto, a published academic force in the field of leadership studies, has described Gardner's Innovative Leadership as bringing "a new twist to a familiar but ignored story". The values they champion may be familiar, but asserting them in public life requires change (Couto, 2002, pp.12-13). Innovative Leadership calls for significant change-action in order to increase and improve the forms of investments we make in the social good of a community.

This story also reveals the deaf community's adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1997). Heifetz is a leadership theorist who researched leaders who are able to see a problem as if "from a balcony". That objectivity allows the leader to use the elements of a dysfunctional situation, reuse these elements to adapt the situation which guides an organization to a successful result. The deaf students in the story attempted to use the accepted societal structure of appealing to the Tribunal to save their teacher, but when the decision is not carried out, the Abbé is still saved by the community. In that way, the community demonstrated how to reduce the gap between values (trusting the system) and practice (sometimes the system works against you). Heifetz (1997) says adaptive leadership is distinguished by values based on communal bonds that guide a group's work. Some values are moral and democratic, and others are not. Heifetz's work suggests that groups may adopt and express a variety of values, in just the way Abbé Sicard's loving deaf students did. They took the situation and the barriers preventing them from achieving their goal and adapted their strategies to ensure the desired outcome. The Deaf community went through the accepted channels of government to protest and argue and won. But when that success was not going to result in the desired result, they turned to a less acceptable but more effective method to achieve their goals, in short they adapted.

Some versions of the Abbé Sicard story emphasized the preciousness of sign language over the Deaf community's action; another well known story from Deaf history shows how, not just the language but connection to the community can save lives. Eighteen year old Joshua Davis was squirrel hunting near Atlanta, Georgia. It was a great day for hunting and Joshua was very skilled, intent on a particularly bold squirrel. Joshua forgot time and place in his focus until suddenly he found himself surrounded by Union soldiers, shouting something at him. The soldiers believed that Joshua was a Confederate spy and was only playing deaf. Joshua frantically gestured to his ears but the soldiers did not believe him and they began to find a rope and a tree to hang the boy from. It was an officer with a deaf brother (a member of the community) that came to Joshua's aid. He signed, "Are you deaf?" the boy answered, "Yes". The officer asked a typical question asked within the community upon first meeting "Where were you educated?" The boy was able to tell him that he was from a school known to be for deaf people. The officer let him go. Deaf Heritage (Gannon, 1981) points out that sign language can save your life, but I find Padden and Humphries (1988) analysis of the story more to the point; "Relying on gestures can get you hanged. Speech is likewise useless. Instead it is the special knowledge gained from other people in the Deaf community that can save one's life." (Padden and Humphries, 1998, p. 33).

Another story, told in historical texts that focus on Deaf culture, gives a good example of adaptive leadership that influenced mainstream culture. The story begins on a baseball field in Oshkosh in 1886. A young Deaf man named William F. Hoy, nicknamed "Dummy," took the field. His ability as a baseball player attracted the press and he enjoyed showing off to them. One story tells of him catching fly balls while balancing on a buggy shaft (Moore and Panara, 1996). His deafness might have isolated him within a team of hearing players. But Hoy decided to adapt his situation and create an environment within which he (and his created community of baseball players) became more than a team, they became a community. He taught his teammates signs and together they devised a gestural code to avoid collisions and to communicate in secret. By moving beyond a conventional team grouping through the sharing of a common language, goals, experiences and trust this community supported Hoy in creating a change in our national pastime that can still be evidenced today. During a game in 1887, "Dummy" asked the umpire to express balls and strikes with exaggerated arm movements. This developed into the colorful signals we all now know as "strike 1, 2, 3" "out" "safe". These signs are accepted as official gestural communication used by umpires in baseball games today (Moore and Panara, 1996, p. 84). William Hoy granted his hearing teammates the "keys to the kingdom" and initiated them.
into what George Veditz, a former president of the National Association of the Deaf, would call, “the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people” (Padden and Humphries, 1998, p. 35). William Hoy’s ability to take the structure of a team and by adding collaboration through a common communication style used the shared environment of baseball to allowed for equal access and a place in the baseball community where he could belong. He used his strengths and charisma as a team player to create a community that promoted a lasting change this also fits Heifetz’s description of Adaptive Leadership (1983). This use of common environment to create a bridge for Deaf leadership to evidence itself in the mainstream hearing community is also possible through the shared understanding of theater. Effecting lasting change as a group is a common theme in Deaf culture.

A more widely recognized moment in the emergence of Deaf leadership as a community appeared on front page and prime time news sources from March 6-13, 1988. Two qualified Deaf candidates for president of Gallaudet College were by-passed in favor of a hearing administrator who did not yet know sign language. Gallaudet was a Liberal Arts College, founded in the 1800’s by President Abraham Lincoln, as a secondary educational opportunity for the deaf. In 1988 students, faculty, and staff went on strike to protest the Board of Trustees’ decision and closed the Gallaudet University campus. This event has been coined the “Deaf President Now” movement. The Deaf President Now (DPN) leaders did not appoint themselves; instead they were chosen by the Gallaudet student body. All were student government leaders and all were from Deaf families. The confidence that the deaf community placed in these four young leaders encouraged them to push past barriers that had long been taken for granted. Jerry Covell, Tim Rarus, Greg Hlibok and Bridgetta Bourne-Firlled a successful nonviolent strike, which had immediate positive results for the Deaf community, and for the majority hearing community as a whole. The first accomplishment was the appointment of the first Deaf Gallaudet University president and, soon afterwards the election of Board of Trustees consisting of a majority of Deaf members. Across the nation, schools for the deaf began actively seeking and hiring qualified Deaf candidates as superintendents, administrators, faculty, and staff. The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 27, 1990 and it is generally accepted that DPN helped to provide the impetus (Moore, 1996, p. 425).

To bring about this kind of dramatic breakthrough, leadership must be embedded in the community (Senge, 2002). Personal mastery and shared vision create a spirit of inquiry which leads to team support. As Senge suggested,
analyzing organizational development which has traditionally been structured as a hierarchy so naturally they set out to analyze leaders who appear within the context of a hierarchy.

Therefore the present lack of recognition of successful Deaf leaders in the leadership literature is not really a surprise because, more often than not, deafness is portrayed in education, rehabilitation, and society in general as a deficiency, a dysfunction, and a deviance. Historically, the focus of observations about the deaf begins with the question: how can we help them become like us? Consequently, there has been a paucity of research in the leadership literature on successful individuals who are deaf. We have yet to ask: how can the difference of a deaf perspective inform the rest of us? To begin our investigation let us begin to look at Deaf leaders within the context of their own communities.

Deaf Leaders within the Deaf community

Seventy eight percent of all deaf people are born into hearing families (Lane, 1992). If deaf people had been viewed as different but equal, it is possible that deaf culture might never have been recognized. But the difference of deafness led us to create a separate educational system that was different and unequal but that helped to form a community. Most cultures put a great deal of faith in the power of education to balance differences of class, race and culture but are often unaware of a by-product, which is the creation of a community which might otherwise never have come into being. In addition to this, the perception that the special educational needs of a deaf child were all-encompassing led to the creation of residential schools, which were originally called “asylums” (Branson and Miller, 2002, p. 132). And although we now view these institutions as repressive, causing children to be separated from their families and segregated from the larger community, initially they were seen as progressive. Ironically, the deaf community saw, and still sees, the advent of this form of education as a blessing. The Deaf community was nurtured by having deaf children brought together. Although the environment was often Dickensian and horror stories remain of children knowing each other by number, not by name (National Theater for the Deaf My Third Eye), hands tied to chairs to discourage use of Sign Language, and abuse of children raised in dormitories by their adult supervisors (Branson and Miller, 2002, p.141), the environment also provided for the creation of a community.

In my own observations of the Deaf community the power of storytelling is unable to be estimated. One of the most impressive compliments you can give is to identify someone as being a wonderful storyteller. In theater, the structure of presentation follows the storytelling pattern of a plot line. Performances wishing to create catharsis in their audiences more often than not seek to create that shift in perspective through the use of presenting a story. Mainstream culture also uses theater in this way. Churches use the parables of Jesus, fairy tales convey lessons in morals or allegory and nearly all of these familiar childhood stories have appeared in some form on stage.

Storytelling is an especially useful tool when motivating children. This attraction takes an even deeper hold in the Deaf community since the cultural structure of the community stems from residential school bonding. Deaf culture is the only culture documented as being passed from child to child rather than handed down from generation to generation (Lane, 1992). Instead of crushing deaf individuals, experiences shared from residential school life served to define the value of being part of a unique community. With the establishment of this unintentional community, American Sign Language (ASL) became more standardized, leading to easier communication (Padden and Humphries, 1996). Deaf children learned to rely on each other more than those [even family members] that were now seen as being “outsiders” and cultural norms emerged (Lane, 1984). With a community behind them, individual leaders among the children wielded influence with the adults, but implemented change by involving everyone (Wrigley, 1996). In this environment there would be no positional power held except by those would were considered outside of the community base. The students at the residential school developed a form or organizing themselves using the strength of each individual to help the community rise as a whole. The stories I related from Deaf culture about saving a beloved teacher, finding common ground during war and effecting change on a college campus show how that method can be employed to great success when wielded in an adult framework.

A visual image of deaf leadership would show a circle of people who step in as they have something to contribute and step back out when they are done, sharing the leading role while focusing on accomplishing the goal (Van Cleve and Crouch, 1989). The structure of deaf leadership can be compared to the energy models of the I Ching (Fu, 2004) where the individual elements create a sphere of energy spun by the movement created in an environment that holds both cooperative and oppositional elements.
Now, let us consider Deaf cultural studies, in which the number of studies done on deafness rose, after the advent of residential schooling became the norm for deaf children at the turn of the twentieth century (Gannon, 1981). Most of this work focused on questions of educational "best practices," leaving research on cultural issues, most particularly leadership, untouched. I was able to uncover two dissertations, three empirical studies and three professional journal articles that mention deaf leaders in residential school settings. However, these writings tend to focus on individual Deaf leaders who are in a hierarchical setting. They tend to compare the Deaf leader in these situations unfavorably to hearing leaders in the same circumstance. I have found no academic leadership literature discussing a Deaf style of leadership that creates change through a group dynamic rather than by the impetus of an individual leader. I have however, found evidence that others have noticed a Deaf leadership tendency to "delegate" and to show special strengths in team building. In an effort to be concise I will cite one of these studies below as a foundation for my own observations in this article.

Chronologically, Sutcliffe (1986) is credited with the first documentation of a look at cultural habits of deaf leaders and hearing leaders in his dissertation comparing hearing and deaf supervisors. In his dissertation, Sutcliffe outlines a quantitative comparative study of leadership behavior among deaf and hearing supervisors of residential deaf institutes. A survey comparison investigated whether or not communication styles affected leadership effectiveness. Follow-up interviews attempted to illuminate the difference between deaf supervisors' habits and hearing supervisors. It was mentioned in the results that deaf managers are more likely to delegate and share responsibility while individual hearing supervisors are more likely to bear full responsibility alone.

There are several other dissertations and case studies that I have found with similar results. None point directly toward an intentional collaborative choice in leadership, but I submit they were written previous to leadership studies expansion and appreciation for a style of leading in this manner.

**Storytelling a Foundation for Deaf Influential Leadership**

One of the most obvious theories in the leadership literature that can help provide a context for a view of a collaborative Deaf leadership style which employs the power of storytelling is Howard Gardner’s (1995) theories on the importance of the use of storytelling. As an educator, Gardner developed a theory of multiple intelligences to explain why many of our most esteemed artists do not reveal themselves through standardized testing methods. This work led him to consider why so many of the modern leaders we look to today could not have been predicted. He questioned how leaders like Margaret Thatcher, Martin Luther King and Gandhi were able to rise to positions of power in communities that for a variety of reasons would not have placed them in those positions historically. In his book “Leading Minds” (Gardner, 1995) he illustrated a theory outlining the influence wielded by the ability to pull people together with a compelling story. This storytelling technique is crucial in developing influential leadership. It is also critical in maintaining and continuously re-building the culture. Many minority cultures maintain their identity through their artistic expression (Kenny, 2002). Often, colonized cultures will acknowledge that when a way of life has been taken, the road back to their cultural identity is through the arts (Higgin, 1980). Basic clinical subjectivity will reveal that many people can give examples of how oppression can be relieved through expressive arts. In your own experience, I’m sure you also know examples of war survivors who found their way back to civilized life through painting, poetry or music. More commonly shared examples are of Holocaust prisoners singing (Anne Frank: And Then They Came For Us) even as they were led to the gas chambers. Also often related are examples throughout music history which can provide us with documented evidence of work songs, slave songs and songs of protest.

For deaf people fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), skills in storytelling, poetry and visual art are practiced in everyday language, which brings the storytelling skill to great refinement (Lane, 1984, p. 5). Being a skilled storyteller becomes an influential leadership trait in the Deaf community as storytelling is embedded in the American Sign Language (ASL) linguistic base (Larson, 1984, p. 87). Although it is not possible for every person who signs to be a skilled storyteller, it is a skill that is as valued in the Deaf community as musical skill in the hearing community. A small example of ASL grammatical structure might help those unfamiliar with sign language to find a way toward understanding this phenomenon. In English, a typical speaker will take a narrative prose perspective when relating everyday events. That same objectivity doesn’t work well in ASL. One small difference with large consequence is that there is no proper linguistic use of “he said/she said” in grammatically correct American Sign Language. Instead the proper prose form for this would be a technique called “role shifting” in which the speaker takes on the physical characteristics of the people portrayed in the story and mimes them talking to each other directly. For example a mother and child
having a conversation would be signed by slightly turning to one side and looking down (mother said) then responding by turning slightly to the left and looking up (child said). Physical attitude, sign choices, idiosyncratic movement and gesture are all incorporated. In English, accent, pitch and inflection might be employed to create an imitation of the person being depicted but in ASL their entire body language and facial movement is copied in a way similar to an actor portraying a character. You might ask how this detailed physicality could be a common skill? From necessity deaf people must become highly visual and so the ability to copy detailed movement and gesture is a natural outcome.

Deaf cultural studies show that in the early days of the American film industry when silent movies filled theaters, Deaf advisors were common to assist in physical acting and in the editing of stories told with pictures (Gannon, 1984). Therefore, a useful metaphor for hearing people unfamiliar with communicating in American Sign Language would be a series of movie shorts. Obviously, the language is far more complex and detailed, but this metaphor allows a glimpse for the outsider of what only years of study could reveal in deeper detail. When discussing everyday events in ASL, a deaf person would habitually convey the information with detailed physical representation and in a visual story form. Imagine then, if you wanted to use this highly refined physical communicative storytelling skill with a story that pulls people together or inspires, how much influential force can be yielded.

Storytelling Provides a Cultural Bridge

Storytelling provides a bridge that allows deaf culture to cross over and influence mainstream hearing culture. Both cultures have a long tradition of physical storytelling. In the Deaf culture it is supported by the grammatical structure in the language and in hearing culture it is through theater. Bloom and Jaffe (1964) discuss leadership in the context of theater, but only focus on Shakespeare. In their work the idea of the story and the power of the storyteller are suggested. Long before Shakespeare, theater historians point out that the roots of theater are in the storytelling and rituals of so-called primitive peoples and in the richly stylized traditions of the East (Molinari, 1972). The rituals and ceremonies, which are familiar as a way to recognize leadership – coronations, inductions onto office, and other public forms of acknowledging positional leadership -, are all structures borrowed from these theatrical roots (Brockett, 1968). Using theater as a structure for the storytelling aspect of leadership is a natural evolution. The fact that storytelling is a linguistic foundation of American Sign Language (Padden, 1998, p. 35) almost insures that theatrical and storytelling elements will be crucial in identifying a deaf leadership style since these are both cultural strengths. The mainstream culture uses theater as a refined storytelling technique as well. Since their understanding of theater, its process, and its expressiveness overlap, theater can become a shared space within which to appreciate both cultures' abilities.

Comparison of Minority leadership and Deaf Leadership

African-American Leadership

Other minority cultures also find shared space within the mainstream culture as a useful platform or stage for influential leadership. I was able to discover many more examples of leadership studies done on the African-American community than I was able to find on the Deaf community. One of the most comprehensive resources is Walters' bibliography, African-American Leadership: An annotated guide (2004). In this collection, African-American Leadership studies focus on the practice of black leadership and the power of “preaching” as an influential leadership trait. These studies begin with an analysis of the roles of black leadership and an historical analysis of strategies of “strategic shift.” That would be an intentional strategy to effect societal change. The authors then provide illustrative case studies of the styles of black leadership. They examine the continued utilization of mass mobilization in the forms of boycotts, direct action, and mass demonstrations and marches. The issue of collective black leadership requires the framework of unity, which is an elusive but necessary form of community organization. Very much like the Deaf cultural form – influential leaders with differing skills form a group and require community support.

The focus on collaborative leadership in the Black community is paired with the strength in the culture of storytelling and preaching through church organizations. Because the community notably bonds through the churches, theatrical elements are more ritualistic, yet they are still there. This ability to inspire through storytelling and presentational skills, imply a relational approach which is similar to Deaf leadership. Black culture found its center within the organizational structures of churches and so their storytelling approaches follow methods appropriate to that environment. Deaf culture found its center is residential schools and so their storytelling methods evolved in a way appropriate to their environment. The Black preaching-like style of
organizers can be compared to the role of the storyteller as an influential tool found in the Deaf community.

Historically, the emphasis in American leadership studies has been on the individual,” Walters explains, in his online profile for the web page “Leadership Studies.” Walters points out that, like Deaf leadership styles, leadership in the African American community, has been group-oriented. The focus has been on the interaction between leaders and the people.

Although influence is one of the most discussed traits of effective leaders in the traditional leadership literature an influential approach to leadership wasn’t recognized until fairly recently. White’s street-gang studies (1940) dealt with how the street gangs wielded power and status to achieve influence. Reuter (1941) felt that leadership was, “the result of an ability to persuade members without use of power.” In 1942, Copland dealt with the use of influence through persuasion rather than, “drivership.” Rost (1991) mentions that many of the observers of leadership styles in the 1930’s and 1940’s were focused on a group approach and looked deeply at influential ways of wielding power.

Women’s Leadership

This change in leadership studies to allow an analysis of influence rather than physical superiority or position power first appeared in a shift in research perspective on leaders within the women’s movement. Considerable literature can be found researching women’s leadership. Again, parallels can be found between relational and influential forms of deaf leadership and women’s leadership. It is notable that much of the research that reveals female leadership styles employs qualitative methods. In the ground-breaking book Women’s Ways of Knowing (Helgeson, 1990), the qualitative approach to exploring female politics was used and in-depth interviews with 155 women showed strategies that women have for overcoming the feelings of being silenced in their families and in schools. It encouraged people to think in new ways about what constitutes knowledge and therefore about the aims of education. It became a framework for future research on women, knowledge and identity. It also provided a new lens through which to view and understand Emergent Leadership (Wheatley, 1999). Margaret Wheatley viewed leadership as a comparison to the natural or organic ways nature has when stronger environmental elements emerge dominating more passive forms. Her identification of this more organic or emergent form of leadership was the model used in many female studies on leadership. Often the metaphors used for female leadership styles are found in the natural world one of the most quoted metaphors comes from The Web of Leadership (Helgeson). This uses the idea that women use networking similar to a spider in the middle of a web to keep informed about the entire community. Deaf leadership also keeps an open network for communicating across the entire community. The metaphor for this was gossip (Meath-Lang, 1998). These newer forms of viewing the community as its own leader allowed researchers to open their definitions of leadership past the traditional understanding. Rather than the hierarchical leadership structure, community-based leading was analyzed and accepted as a useful leadership model.

Additional studies on leadership from a feminist perspective also used qualitative methods, such as collections of diaries, as in The female advantage: women’s ways of leadership. Others used analyses of articles on women in political leadership, for example, A portrait of marginality: The political behavior of the American woman. By using examples of recognizable female leaders who did not follow traditional patterns in their work, this book helped to broaden the definition of “leader” and began to open the door to alternative definitions. This in turn began the process that we are still following today. Many minority cultures do recognize their own leaders, but these leaders take shape in ways that majority culture has difficulty comprehending. By letting alternative styles of leadership emerge in a more qualitative open-ended investigation, minority cultural leaders can be shown to be evident in larger numbers than were first appreciated.

Minority Leadership Requires a Community Base

The Deaf community, wields influence through storytelling; however, if there are no listeners for the story, (that is: no deaf people) deaf leaders fade into the background and can be nearly impossible to observe and study. This phenomenon is documented in several studies on minority cultures as I have already touched on in my discussion of African-American, and women’s studies. A review of these documented alternative forms of leaders would reveal that all agree, collaborative or cooperative forms of leadership depend on having a community base. This provides an understanding of cultural norms that permits relationships to build. Cultural understanding is needed in the approach to research as well. Not surprisingly, minority leaders are more easily found when looking into qualitative studies that suggest that minority cultures are patterning their leadership style from a different set of values. Many minority cultures determine success by soul satisfaction, community
involvement, and inclusion; these outcomes are used as validating evidence in qualitative study methods more often than they are used in quantitative studies.

**Deaf Culture's Stories of Leadership**

Recent qualitative studies on the Deaf community are beginning to show a more positive image of Deaf leadership. Two recent studies look at successful Deaf people and measure positive aspects of deafness rather than assume negatives and tally them. Rogers, Muir and Ramonde (2004), for example, created a multiple-case exploratory study to describe interpersonal, behavioral, and environmental assets that may build bridges for Deaf adults between the Deaf and hearing worlds. In this study the traits of successful adults were looked at not in comparison to hearing cultural standards, but in terms of resiliency, which the authors define as being involved socially in leadership positions in the Deaf community (all three were identified as “good storytellers”) and an ability to work (40 hours a week) in one or more hearing settings. The study is extremely limited with only three participants. However, the study is able to identify 15 assets that may support resilience in Deaf adults, including authenticity and comfort with solitude. The authors use a positive psychology perspective of recognizing and building on human strengths. This study also acknowledges that it is the first of its kind and hopes to provide a beginning for discussions along these lines.

A second recent study gathered information from successful Deaf adults in an effort to counter the paucity of research on successful individuals who are Deaf. This study by Luckner and Stewart (2003) aims at offering a view of deafness different from the portrayal found in the literature of education and rehabilitation as well as in society in general. The authors have stated that they hope their study entitled “Self-Assessments and Other Perceptions of Successful Adults Who are Deaf: An Initial Investigation” will create a foundation for offering a more positive profile of successful Deaf adults.

**Deaf Leadership Revealed and Developed Through Arts-Based Practice**

One of the most important first steps in identifying stories of Deaf leadership is self-characterization. Rather than accepting the images and perceptions of deaf people that society promotes and much past research literature finds, many leaders in the Deaf community encourage and support the creation of their own cultural images. The need for the community to tell their own story has begun to emerge in mainstream entertainment settings. In the past, these images were kept within the community. There was suspicion of the mainstream culture and concern that self-created images would be co-opted and changed if shared with the mainstream culture (Gannon, 1981). Although those concerns are still in evidence in the deaf community, there is more acceptance of the idea that it is possible to share aspects of deaf culture that can be appreciated by the mainstream community without those images being altered (Bragg, 2001). By creating literary, theatrical, television, and movie characters that hold leadership positions while maintaining their identity as Deaf persons, these new community-located role models together with the already strong foundation of storytelling, that matches Gardner’s (1995) concepts of leadership, will begin to reveal a deaf leadership style that is distinct.

Another method for encouraging Deaf leaders to emerge requires the community to understand the social system well enough to predict how stressful the challenge of facing it will be (Heifetz, 1997). Theater can be used as a tool to develop this awareness. Similar to the way an individual will practice for an interview or a presentation, a deaf leader can enact a theatrical representation of a conflict, thereby creating a safe place to practice a necessary conflict, show it to others, get feedback and ideas and involve the community in their own development.

If, as Senge (2002) suggests, our organizations work the way they work because of how we think and interact then using cultural means, like literature or theater can influence an audience and provide a catharsis in thought while role modeling interactions between deaf culture and mainstream culture. This makes theater an obvious choice for leadership training as well as identification.

A theatrical experience naturally shares the same spiritual concepts that Bell (1997) discusses when explaining how to develop leadership with a spiritual component. For example, during a theatrical production the cast and crew become a community that nurtures one another. There is the development of a shared vision and service to the message of the play. The best theatrical experiences culminate in the growth of skills, of awareness, of appreciation for others and of humility by those involved in the process.

In conclusion, by using theater as a shared space where both Deaf and hearing cultures can access a similar form of expression, Deaf leadership might be more easily identified. The structure of theater allows for individuals...
to step in and step out of the spotlight as their skills are required. This mimics the natural Deaf leadership style I have witnessed. The theatrical ensemble functions as a collective and yet the actor’s personal drive for expression insists on an individual approach. Mainstream hearing culture understands this approach to “taking stage” and as we begin to study Deaf leadership styles more closely I trust, their style of collective individualism in leadership will find the spotlight.

References


