

# **Maintaining Professional and Personal Resilience as Demands Increase**

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Letter to Former Doctoral Students Following an American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA) Convention.

It was great to see so many of you at ASHA. Sorry that there was not more time. I appreciate the leadership that you are increasingly providing our profession and to your universities and organizations. It is encouraging for the AAC profession to see the new leadership that is emerging.

A number of my conversations with you at ASHA revolved around your concerns and satisfactions about your new leadership responsibilities and "opportunities." As you emerge as leaders within your own organizations and the profession, the grabbing (for your time and talent) will become more and more intense. There is a cloud of opportunity forming in the distance for each of you with talent, as you emerge into leadership.

In my opinion, it is appropriate that the expectations on you will continue to rise. Society has given you its "best" in the grand scheme of things-considerable financial support to complete its highest degree, jobs in its universities and research facilities, support to travel to conferences, opportunities to research, write, edit, teach and lead (now how is that for guilt!). Now, it (society) is asking for something back. Increasingly, it isn't just about you anymore, it is increasingly about "us." Society wants and needs for you to join its national and international conversation through your research, writing, presentations, editing, and leadership.

Imagine this, I have some guidance for you to consider----.

## **1. Clarify Your Professional Mission.**

A clear professional mission will guide your decisions. I began this process in 1967 when I wrote the following---My professional mission will be to assist those with the most severe communication disorders to communicate more effectively (through intervention, personnel preparation, research, writing, presentation, and leadership), so that they can participate more fully (1988) in the activities and roles that they choose (1992).

I promised myself that I would evaluate each request made of me according to this mission. At the end of each week, month, and year, I would take some time to determine how true I had been to this mission. These evaluation periods can be difficult and are easy to ignore. Yet, a clear professional mission

will guide you as the demands on your time increase. It will support your decisions to say “yes” and “no” to the requests that you will receive.

## **2. Identify and Understand Your Strengths.**

There are many different ways to be a strong teacher, researcher, writer, or leader depending upon your strength profile. Now that you are finished being a student and are emerging through tenure, you can increasingly "go with your strengths and manage your weaknesses." To do this, I have used the Gallup Strength Finder. Operationally, I bought the book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Covington and Clifton. An access code is printed in the book jacket that will allow you to take the Strength Finder online. It will identify your five greatest strengths. The book will provide you with some information about what your strengths are and what roles are best suited to your strength profiles. To be open about this, my top strengths are:

**Maximizer:** Enjoys getting the most out of situations or opportunities. Expects excellence, Sets high standards.

**Learner:** Is drawn to the process of learning.

**Developer:** Sees potential in others. Enjoys assisting people to develop---mentors, coaches others.

**Responsibility:** Takes psychological ownership of what they say they will do.

**Connectedness:** Sees his or her endeavors related to a greater cause.

**Now:**

You don't see "arranger" as one of my strengths-I wish it were, but it isn't--that is why I hire and collaborate with people who help me manage the details.

You don't see "competitive" as one of my strengths--that is evaluating myself compared to those around me, so I find it easy to collaborate.

You don't see "woo"--winning others over--I am not your great public relations guy--so I hang out with Mark Hakel--for him it is effortless.

More seriously, when requests come I evaluate them based on my professional mission to determine the fit. Then, I evaluate them based on my strength profile to determine the fit. Very occasionally, I will allow my mission to trump my strengths because I realize the "need" to serve even though my strengths are not consistent with the request. In each case, I confirmed that someone else would also be involved, who could compensate for my weaknesses. I accepted the editorship of the AAC Journal even though it did not fit my strength profile at all (Thank goodness for Nancy Brown). The early Medicare funding work also fit that pattern (Thanks goodness for Sarah

Blackstone and Lew Golinker). Most of the time, I try to stay in my strength areas, however.

I have also learned to collaborate with persons who can help me manage my weaknesses. Of course, I first had to admit to myself that there were areas in which I was simply “not very strong.” There is a tendency to collaborate with people who are like us or with whom we might be friends. In fact, I had a colleague tell me once, “I could never collaborate with him/her, I would never even want to be friends with that person.” This statement reflects a misunderstanding of a collaborative relationship.

### **3. Learn How to Manage Your Time.**

As you become involved in a range of different activities, the need to manage your time becomes a more complex task. When you were students, others set the agenda for you. Even during clinical work, your schedule was set by our clients’ schedules, team meetings, and so on. However, for faculty and for leaders, the need to manage and prioritize becomes increasingly important. Depending on our personality, there is a tendency for us to do (1) what is easiest, (2) what will give us the most recognition, (3) what we know how to do, (4) what others push us to do, or (5) provide desired social connections. However, as your leadership role increases, and you work collaboratively, a more complex time management strategy is often necessary. For this I use the book, *First Things First* by Steven Covey and colleagues. Following this model, I seek to divide my activities into those that are:

Category 1. Urgent and Important (I try to reduce this to about 30% of my time)

- True Crises

- Pressing problems

- Deadline driven teaching, writing, projects, & meetings

Category 2. Important but not Urgent (I focus on Category 2 in order to reduce Category 1)

- Preparation (of vision, of people, of resources)

- Prevention (of problems, or crises, to difficult deadlines)

- Values clarification (just why are we doing this, how does it fit the mission)

- Planning (of strategy)

- Relationship building (Affiliated Centers, Collaborators, mentors, informants-about threats and opportunities)

- True recreation (that leaves one refreshed, not guilty because it steals time from other commitments, restores one's energy)

Category 3. Urgent but not Important (I try to control and reduce these activities when I can, as these tasks are usually initiated by others)

- Interruptions-some phone calls

- Some mail

- Some reports

- Some meetings

## Many popular activities

Category 4. Not urgent and not Important (I try to eliminate these activities, as they are usually initiated by me in response to excessive activity in Category 1. It is important to distinguish these from true recreation)

Trivia

Busywork

Escape activities

Irrelevant mail and e-mail

Excessive TV

You all have Category 1 activities in your professional lives. You learned early that you should complete these urgent and important activities, if you wished to be successful. However, as you move into leadership, Category 2 activities become increasingly important. Almost without exception, when young leaders are feeling overwhelmed and stressed, it is because they are spending too much time in Category 1 and not enough time in Category 2. Earlier this year, I spent some time with an emerging leader who complained about two things. First, she was overwhelmed with work and responsibility. Second, she found that it was just more efficient to do tasks herself, rather than assign them to someone else. During a series of conversations, I introduced her to the book, *First Things First*. It seems clear to me that she had overloaded herself with Category 1 activities, and is not focusing on Category 2 activities. She is not preparing others to share the work. She is not managing herself and others to avoid deadlines. She has spent little time developing relationships with individuals and organizations that could become long-term collaborators.

People who are overwhelmed with Category 1 tasks, often engage in Category 4 activities because they are too tired or overwhelmed to seek real recreation. To her credit, the young leader described above had learned to engage in recreational activities that she enjoyed and restored her.

Personally, I think that my greatest use of the *First Things First* model has been to focus myself on Category 2 activities as my leadership roles have expanded. It requires considerable foresight and planning to look into the future to predict and prepare the resources, personnel, and relationships (people and organizations) needed to achieve professional projects and goals. There are days when I am preparing proposals, managing money, preparing personnel, and preventing potential conflicts, that I think I would rather be involved in the day to day execution of a project. However, that is not my role at this stage of my career.

## **4. Learn to Focus on Issues and Conditions over Which You Have Influence**

Another important concept from the *First Things First* book is to clarify your areas of concern, influence, and focus. Typically, you should focus on activities and tasks where you have influence and relate to areas that concern you. It is potentially deadly to focus on issues and conditions about which you are

concerned, but over which you have no influence. Futility will get you in the end. You are also vulnerable when you focus on issues, conditions and activities that are unrelated to your areas of concern. Pick your assignments with care--community, profession, and employment--so that the alignment is good. It explains why I have served on the board of Nebraska Cerebral Palsy Association and avoided some other volunteer requests. It explains why I serve on vision and planning committees for the department, college and university that will impact the AAC program, rather than on curriculum committees. It explains why I serve on space and technology committees rather than parking committees. It explains, in part, why I served on the Medicare funding effort (even though it wasn't the best fit, but I had collaborators to cover my limitations) rather than a wide variety of other efforts in the profession. Lack of Medicare funding of AAC technology was a true concern, and I (with others) had some influence. Be particularly careful to not acquire or be assigned tasks that are not related to your true concerns. I have found that universities often assign tasks to emerging leaders because no one else wants to do them, or because it is the newcomer's turn, or because you have the organizational strengths to get "it" done. I urge young faculty and staff to review the tasks that need to be completed, and volunteer for the one(s) that best fit their area of concern and mission. Then, they will be in a position to decline that which others may want them to do. Recently, I asked a young faculty member why she had agreed to serve on the faculty senate. She replied that she was honored to be asked. I inquired whether that task was consistent with her mission or area of concern. She admitted that this task was not a fit in these areas. She will probably look like a good departmental citizen for serving on the senate, but I know that she could have accomplished that while focusing on activities that were important to her.

## **5. Learn How to Manage Your Energy**

Finally, a professional career is a marathon, not a sprint. As I write this, I realize that in 5 months, I will have been practicing speech language pathology for 40 years. During that time, I have learned a good deal from my colleagues and my clients about resilience, endurance, and tenacity. My family has given me a lot of subtle and not-so-subtle help in the area of personal and professional balance. Recently, I read a book that contains considerable insight into these areas-- *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz.

These authors describe energy management strategies in four areas: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. As the demands on your time increase, it is necessary to manage your energy levels in order to be consistently productive, remain resilient, and to avoid "burn-out." I would encourage you to take a look at this book after you have clarified your professional mission, identified your core strengths, and learned the basics of time management and focus.

## **6. In Closing**

You have now prepared yourself for a career of contribution. Thanks for what you are doing and for what you are going to do. You are our greatest resource, guard yourselves and your missions, support and encourage one another, and don't get snarky before your time.

**References:**

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