

Reaching Beyond the Requirements

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Abstract

Reaching beyond the requirements . . . President Bush has stated that there will be “No child left behind.” What will it take? Speaking from her experiences as a counselor, teacher, administrator, and consultant, Dr. Pressman shared some of her personal stories and triumphs in working with the deaf and hard of hearing community. In her words . . .

“We know that deaf and hard of hearing people have always worked. However, the bigger issue to grapple with is career advancement, promotions, and leadership opportunities. Teachers, counselors, and administrators — those of us who are the role models and hold the keys to influence the goals, attitudes, learning, and direction of our deaf and hard of hearing children, students, and workers — are challenged more than ever to instill the skills necessary to help our children, students, and workers not only survive but to also compete and lead in a global market.”

While we may not be entirely responsible for our client’s or student’s success or failure, we do have the ability to encourage continual performance management. Performance management takes us a step beyond. It is the key that opens chosen doors. Stepping beyond the requirements means reaching outside the box and going beyond our given title to serve as a partner and advocate in lifelong learning and career development. How do we accomplish this?

Through a multimedia presentation, Dr. Pressman shared with the audience first-hand information on programs and methods she is using with deaf and hard of hearing people and research-based data that is helping guide how she advises organizations in order to create inclusive environments so that no child is left behind, no student is left behind, no worker is left behind, and no *person* is left behind.

Reaching Beyond the Requirements

When Ramon Rodriguez of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services asked to me to consider delivering the opening keynote for this conference, I immediately thought about this incredible opportunity to bring a message to you, the leaders in postsecondary education for deaf and hard of hearing students. I see postsecondary education programs as the cornerstone that leads to a satisfying career. For the next few minutes I will share with you a few of my experiences, research, observations, and perspectives of being a career counseling practitioner with people who are deaf and hard of hearing for almost 25 years. Please follow along with me for the next few minutes as we begin a learning journey by reviewing a bit of the past and bring to light the realities of required performance in order to succeed in today’s workplace.

My career, which is a combination of both work and leisure activities, has been a winding path just like many of yours — not without its bumps and challenges, though. At first, I had dreams of becoming a speech pathologist until I realized what was required. My focus then turned to Audiology until I realized what was required. I finally found Gallaudet and Rehab Counseling, and I realized what was required! Afterwards I found Gallaudet’s Counseling and Placement Center and realized that there was work to be done and I wanted to do it. By setting a goal and with just a little bit of experience and a lot of drive, doors opened, programs developed, and students were placed in jobs. There were summer placements, such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, and full-time placements, such as Marriott, IBM, and the federal government.

From the simplest perspective, my performance as a career and placement counselor early on was successful, because I met the organizational mission by placing students in jobs and helping them transition from school to work. Today success is still largely measured by helping the organization meet its mission. However, missions change over time and so does the work that needs to be done. In hindsight I now ask: Was placing students in jobs — even if they did have a say in where they went — enough? At the time, I thought it was. You see, success was measured in numbers. I placed 18 students in one national park and 23 in another. I was commended. According to the State Rehab system, the number “26” meant your client was

gainfully employed (was now no longer dependent on the State) and that the rehabilitation counselor had done his/her job well. As a matter of fact, I had a colleague – perhaps you did, too – that became the State “Counselor of the Year” because she had so many “26”s, meaning she had a good number of case closures.

At the university level we tracked our graduates through an annual placement survey. We paid close attention to those who were gainfully employed and measured our success by employment and unemployment numbers. Most of the graduates were gainfully employed; we career and placement counselors and faculty felt pretty successful. Were we truly successful? Yes and no. Yes, we filled or met the task at hand and transitioned students from school to work. No, we did not have the foresight to prepare students early on for a mainstreamed world.

History tells us that deaf and hard of hearing people have always worked. In 1899, James L. Smith, who taught for 50 years at the Minnesota School for the Deaf, informed the convention of the National Association of the Deaf that deaf people were engaged in as many as 300 different occupations. Virtually every employment or career-related study since the landmark survey of the deaf population by Schein and Delk in 1974 has drawn attention to the fact that deaf people are employed in all occupations from professional to domestic. History even tells us about deaf leadership and successful deaf professionals. Jack Gannon documents the success of many professionals who are deaf. Even though deaf people have representation in every profession including medicine, law, and engineering, the reality is that the numbers are few. Nonetheless, it has been clearly demonstrated that deaf and hard of hearing people do achieve. However, Crammattee showed in his 1987 study of deaf professionals that – more often than not – deaf workers lagged behind hearing people in their ability to convert their educational attainments into higher status occupations.

In 1995 a report published by the Equal Opportunity Commission revealed that 6.8% of the deaf federal employee population had reached professional levels. On one hand, that can be viewed as an achievement. However, let us look at the statistics a little deeper. When comparing that percentage to the rest of the federal population, we see that 23% of all federal employees are in professional positions. Indeed, it is encouraging that some deaf people have attained professional levels in the federal government; however, they still have not caught up with the mainstream.

I conducted a nationwide study of deaf entrepreneurs just a few years ago. I found that 86 deaf business owners across the country from 27 states and the District of Columbia were involved in virtually every type of business from private practice medicine to arts

and crafts to restaurant ownership. I learned that the motivations for many to start their own businesses were their desires for an opportunity to be the boss, their interests in earning more money, their desires to show that deaf people could succeed in private business, and opportunities for promotion or career advancement, something they did not have in the jobs they held. The struggle of business start-up was more promising and less painful than a dead-ended career.

In truth, history only briefly mentions what happens to the mainstreamed deaf and hard of hearing worker. However, I can tell you from first-hand experience that there is still much work to be done in this area.

As a career counselor, I can honestly tell you that the problem of underemployment and career advancement is real. Let me give you an example: For one of my clients with a college degree working in a Fortune 500 company, the problem has nothing to do with skills or competencies, because the talents of this individual would far surpass most others in the same field. The problem is not with this individual’s knowledge of the laws that protect people with disabilities from discrimination. Simply stated, this individual’s workplace problems are nothing new. They include:

1. A lack of assertion and a need for assertiveness skill development
2. Miscommunication with hearing co-workers and superiors
3. Poor marketing skills
4. A lack of awareness in how to apply legal rights in order to ask – without the fear of being fired – for interpreters or other reasonable accommodations
5. An inability to seek and identify role models or mentors in an organization
6. A lack of development in and not enough practice with leadership skills

Because these skills are problematic in this particular instance, the result is an extremely talented individual working for a company for 15 years without the *first* promotion, while hearing coworkers have come and gone and moved into management and supervisory positions. The good news is that this hard working, extremely competent individual transitioned from school to work easily. The bad news is . . . well, you all know what the bad news is. Is this an isolated case? I only wish it were.

Of course, we do have some success stories. Jack Gannon has shown us that repeatedly. However, let us look at success in terms of the federal government. Certainly one does not need to reach executive level to be considered successful. Success is a broad construct as well. However, if we – for the purposes of this discussion – define success to the highest degree in the

federal government, or reaching the Senior Executive Service (SES), we see that we have had *one* deaf individual politically appointed to an SES position in a former White House Administration. However, no deaf person has reached the SES through a career ladder or promotion. To be considered for a SES, it must be determined that an individual has developed the basic skills required of the position. For example, one must demonstrate skill in financial management, teaching at the higher education level, or in conducting research. There are five core competencies required of every career SES member. They are the demonstrated abilities to:

- Lead people
- Lead change
- Build coalitions
- Be results-driven
- Possess business acumen

Certainly, we have many deaf and hard of hearing people who possess these skills. The federal government serves us as the largest employer in our country and certainly the largest employer of those with disabilities, which includes deaf and hard of hearing people. Therefore, the fact that we do not have any representation from deaf and hard of hearing people is a wake up call to all of us. The positive side of this reality is that opportunity is knocking for those with the right “competencies.”

We know that deaf and hard of hearing people have always worked. However, I believe the bigger issues are career advancements, promotions, and leadership opportunities. Teachers, counselors, and administrators – those of us who are the role models and hold the keys to influence the goals, attitudes, learning, and direction of our deaf and hard of hearing children, students, and workers – are challenged more than ever to instill the skills necessary to help deaf and hard of hearing people compete and lead in a global market.

Before I move on, let me talk a bit about role models and mentors. In my national study of deaf entrepreneurs, we learned that the majority of respondents identified family members and teachers as their most important role models. For those between the ages of 14 and 19, teachers, indeed, serve this role. Later, friends replace both family and teachers as role models. The implication here is, simply stated, that we need to exercise our influence early. Career development – along with those workplace skills that are keeping people down today – needs to be instilled by our teachers throughout the educational process so that tomorrow these issues will be a thing of the past. As a result, no child, no student, no worker, and no person will be left behind.

As a learning partner and lifelong advocate, I can honestly say that in order to help our deaf and hard of

hearing children, students, and workers truly become a mainstreamed part of our workforce with equal career advancement, we need to – at an early age – start imparting the performance management skills that lead to career mobility. I suggest to you that in today’s world of work there are four interwoven requirements for success.

1. Adding value
2. Interacting with others effectively
3. Relating to mission and organizational goals
4. Self-management

As a career counselor, one of the first things I share with a new client is the advantage of thinking like an entrepreneur or a vendor who has a product to sell. To an organization or company, the employee is selling a set of skills. With that in mind, one of the first questions that must be answered is: What value do you add to the organization? Most people seriously underestimate their contributions to achieving the organization’s mission and, therefore, do not know how to express their accomplishments. This is certainly true for the majority of the deaf and hard of hearing people with which I have been privileged to work.

Let me give you an example: Through the Northern Virginia Resource Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, I recently conducted a series of Saturday morning career workshops. Most of the people who attended the workshops were college graduates seeking job change or ways to advance in their careers. They attended the workshops with expectations of learning what they would need to do in order to change their current work situation. The reality was and is that, individually, they all held the keys to change; however, did not know how to unlock the doors. For those of you unfamiliar with KSAs, let me add that they are the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities – or the competencies – that are minimally required to be considered for a particular position in the federal government. The majority of positions in the federal government not only requires a resume or federal application but also requires applicants to answer several questions (normally between three to six) in essay format that demonstrate that the applicant has the experience necessary to perform the required tasks. As you can imagine, this often produces anxiety on the part of the applicant. Furthermore, most deaf and hard of hearing applicants are doubly tasked: to demonstrate ability *and* to write in a grammatically correct manner in essay format. Then they must think about how they add value. Needless to say, the task is overwhelming, and – for most individuals who are deaf – opportunities are lost everyday.

As a trainer in these career workshops, I found that, by using Socratic methods, workshop participants began to realize their own value. In other words, it would have been easy for me to tell them how to answer a question, but the result would have been that I

would have taught them *nothing*. My teaching technique, then, became simply for my students to teach me. If they can teach me what they have done through communication or writing, then they can convey this information to an employer. The greatest reward as a trainer or teacher is to see the light bulb turn on, so to speak, when a deaf or hard of hearing adult realizes that they have added value to their organization as an instrumental member of a team that wrote an educational policy; photographed a building that became the picture selected for use on a telephone calling card; helped oversee a multimillion dollar contract; or saved their company money by discovering a new accounting tracking system. When these realizations happen, dreams start to become realities. Someone realizes they have added value to an organization.

In order to make sure no worker is left behind, let us look at how employees are valued today. Not so long ago, employees knew specifically what their job tasks were. Hard work, dedication, getting the job done, and loyalty were highly prized by managers and the whole organization. However, in today's workplace it is far less clear what will catch the attention of managers and prospective employers or what will lead to our recognition as effective workers and to new opportunities in the organization. Today job descriptions are broader, more generic, and involve a wide variety of tasks and expectations. In the federal government a new administration means new ways of doing business. In the private sector, partnerships, business alliances, and market share dictate change at a moment's notice. Tasks change and multiply as projects change and programs grow.

How do we prepare our children and students to enter a workforce that is wide open to diversity and abounds with limitless opportunity? After all, as counselors, teachers, and administrators, our students will not always be by our side. This brings us to the second requirement – interacting effectively with others.

Because work is not a set of isolated and independent tasks anymore and because everyone's work is increasingly interdependent on teams and others in work groups, one of the most critical components for today's organizations is the skill with which its employees interact with others. Interaction has become an absolutely essential area of competence for those who will be recognized for adding value to their workplaces. The question to all of us is: *how* do deaf and hard of hearing employees become competitive in this arena when most of the time they are at a clear disadvantage? Perhaps this is something for you all to ponder or discuss over lunch and dinner or at roundtables during this conference. Allow me, though, to start the thinking by recognizing that there are no clear-cut answers, for mainstream society business partnerships have become the norm. Just as work is not done in isolation anymore, businesses are teaming up to forge

strategic alliances. It would make sense that our goal is to raise the level of partnering between our deaf and hard of hearing workers and hearing workers. But how can we accomplish this when our deaf and hard of hearing workers are often isolated and are in a dead-ended communication cycle which, most of the time, leads to nowhere? In the federal government, Dr. Victor Galloway – along with a few other deaf federal employees from several different agencies – began to tackle this vicious cycle a few years ago. As a result, a non-profit organization – the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Government (DHHIG), which is recognized by the Federal Office of Personnel Management – was established. This was not easy, and the creation of this organization certainly came with its share of administrative challenges. I know this from first-hand experience, because I was invited to play the role of facilitator during the initial brainstorming and start-up phases of the organization, which now boasts well over 1,000 members across government and the nation and is self-supporting.

Let me talk about this accomplishment for a moment: First, there was my personal accomplishment. Being asked by Dr. Galloway to help the group was an incredible honor to me; however, I would be lying to say it did not take some thick skin on my part. There were the normal deaf/hearing tests required of anyone working with this or any other culture outside of their own, and those, of course, were communication and commitment tests. Please understand that these were not formal or written tests or something that I could study for in advance. Beyond being able to communicate, the only real thing I could offer was keeping the group on task by understanding their passion and desires in staking a claim in equal access to career opportunities and advancement. As a career counselor who has seen the struggles of my clients, I shared their passion. That was really the key to working with the group.

Dr. Galloway's foresight for having the group partner with a hearing colleague who shared their passion helped to keep the group on task through the development of the vision and mission statements. As a result of partnering and bringing people together from different agencies, the determination to expand the group to the hard of hearing population became reality. It has grown, and today it includes and serves any State or County government deaf or hard of hearing worker. This is important, because there is now a vehicle for networking, mentoring, learning, and receiving support from one or any of the many committees the organization has established. More importantly, it is a vehicle for deaf and hard of hearing people working in government to obtain leadership skills through the many volunteer opportunities the organization makes available to its membership. It is also a model that can serve others when seeking to establish similar

groups. It demonstrates that deaf and hard of hearing people can and do interact effectively and successfully with others to reach organizational missions and goals. The work of DHHIG is not made up of independent and isolated tasks. Work is increasingly interdependent on teams, and interaction with others is essential. For more information, log onto <www.dhhig.org>.

This brings us to the next essential requirement for success in today's workplace. It is imperative that workers relate and understand their organization's mission and goals. Organizations exist to fulfill their missions and goals and strive to accomplish that in increasingly better and more efficient ways. Workers must identify with, commit to, and contribute specifically to mission attainment. Not only do workers need to know how to do that, but they also need to know how to be clear about what they have accomplished and how it affects the organization's success. Understanding the organization's mission leads to and allows for self-management.

Today, as roles become more complex and cross-functional, interaction with others inside and outside the organization becomes more critical. The demands on how we manage our own self-awareness and involvement in the organization and how we achieve the recognition we desire becomes more important and require continuous development. This is accomplished by teaching our children, students, and workers how to find their own empowerment through increased responsibility, commitment, and self-direction.

Over the next few days as you deliver and attend workshops on the latest educational strategies and techniques and career management issues and topics, I urge you to think about what I have chosen to bring to your attention today. As educators, counselors, and administrators, you are in the perfect position to affect long term change in the careers of our deaf and hard of hearing children, students, and workers so that, indeed, *no person is left behind*.

