

A Different Kind of Leader

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At the risk of sounding too much like a nerd, one of my favorite television shows is *Star Trek, The Next Generation*. Its run started soon after I graduated from high school. Commander Ryker was my favorite. He was always there for Captain Picard. I could see how much he handled so that Picard could tend to other matters. I also loved how Captain Picard always called out, “Number One,” when he needed Ryker to follow. For some time I didn’t understand why the second-in-command was called Number One. I always thought they should call him Number Two. I think somewhere along the line it was explained to me that it meant First Officer of the ship. As I think about my leadership journey, I identify with Commander Ryker.

When I first entered our field, professional leadership was never my goal. I felt that my strengths were working with patients, and I surely didn’t think I could ever lead other professionals. I was lucky enough to work for and with fabulous clinicians and leaders, who put a high priority on giving back to the profession, on advocacy, and on lifelong learning. I vividly remember the day when, not too long after I had finished my clinical fellowship year, our director came in and told me that I would need to submit a presentation for the ASHA Convention...just like that, like it was no big deal! I was petrified, but being the rule-follower that I am, I did it. The presentation was accepted, and I survived. And more importantly, I was hooked. Being around other passionate professionals gave me energy, and I’ve been sharing knowledge with other professionals in various ways since that day.

Over the years as I attended many conferences, I was asked to accept different leadership roles by colleagues that I respected, serving on the board of directors for our state association, chairing various committees, etc. I did these gladly, but I never saw myself as a leader. I saw myself as a collaborator, helping those in leadership by serving as a sounding board and offering different perspectives. If I wasn’t president of an organization or a department, then I wasn’t really a leader, or so I believed. My turning point came when I took part in the ASHA Leadership Development Program. I began to feel more comfortable with the type of contributor that I am, my strengths, and my weaknesses. Most importantly, I learned that I had been leading all along in some ways. The things that I love (mentoring students, educating other professionals, taking part in advocacy) DO “count” as leadership. Once I began to realize my strengths could add value, I began to work to expand my roles.

Even today, I don’t aspire to be chair of my department; I don’t want to be president of one of our professional associations, and you won’t see me starting a political movement. However, as I have grown more comfortable with my supportive leadership style, I enjoy helping others find that in themselves. Just call me “Number One.”