

THE FUNCTIONS OF A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION

TOM COLEMAN

Any consideration of the establishment or continued existence of a professional organization must first deal with the question—"Is there a true need for the group"? Traditionally, as any collection of people with similar interest have considered the origin of a new agency or association, those responsible for organizing such efforts often have accomplished their mission (i.e. establishing something) without proper objective preparation in terms of study, soul searching and evaluation. In fact, we often find that the establishment of a new organization was sparked by such questionable motives as dissatisfaction with other professional organizations, a desire for better identification of self with professional peers, or protection of the proprietary interests of a particular group of people.

Rarely do we take the time to deal in depth with the problem of a new professional organization until it is a full-grown infant "mewling and puking in its mother's arms." Then comes the big challenge, the obvious questions,—What is it?—What do we do with it?—How do we make it a contributing member of society?

Initially we must still face the difficult task of naming our newborn. In consideration of this era of comprehensive care in which we are now engaged, do we severely limit by name the present and future mission of our protegee? For instance, shouldn't we consider the total job that must be done for the adult hand in hand with the overall efforts of rehabilitation and health, for all deaf people? It is proper for us to be called the Professional Rehabilitation Workers with the Adult Deaf? Would we be closer in line with the trends in our society to use something more appropriate and more inclusive such as "Professional Workers with the Deaf"? . . . or, " . . . with the Communicatively Handicapped"?

TOM COLEMAN is Executive Director of the National Association of Hearing and Speech Agencies, Washington, D.C.

Next we must decide on the purposes and objectives we would like to allege that our newborn association will follow in its developmental period. Will it be of such personality, intellect and prowess that only you and I (and God) can fully enjoy an association with it? Or will it be an intelligent, strong, but practical medium through which we can coordinate the abilities and activities of all who desire to help solve the problems of those who need our collective help?

Perhaps at this point you may think I am being unreasonable in my approach to the topic. However, at this time in history when our human and material sources are most inadequate for accomplishing the tremendous tasks facing those in rehabilitation and health, it seems necessary that we remind each other to give careful consideration to the organization of any activity which may either make a needless encroachment on the time we have available to serve people or which further splinters the professional service world at a time when we must take a collaborative approach to comprehensive care.

Assuming that PRWAD has adequately faced up to the aforementioned thoughts, I will try from here on out in this paper to capitalize on the conduct and misconduct of other, more mature professional groups in attempting to offer you some guidelines on the functions (or, if you please, *responsibilities*) of a professional organization. These have been gleaned from many years of fighting for and with such professional groups as physicians, dentists, audiologists and speech pathologists, educators, nurses and others.

Initially, the only reason for a professional organization to exist is to improve and increase productive services to patients or clients through a leadership that will insure the quality of the professional workers within the field. An organization such as PRWAD must constantly engage in the pursuit of excellence for the individual professional as well as the total field in order that those we serve will be assured of the best possible care available.

In providing leadership you must not be influenced by proprietary and self-protective measures for the professional himself but rather you must concentrate on the nature and design of professional workers in terms of the quality and quantity of services needed by those we serve.

Unlike some other professional organizations, do not attempt to establish status for your membership merely through allegation, promotional activities or mandate. Rather let them also prove themselves to the public by their performance.

In terms of establishing and maintaining the professional qualities of your individual members, several interrelated activities must be established by PRWAD; education and training programs; a pro-

gram for individual certification; consideration of state licensing laws; and some appropriate mechanism for enforcing a sound quality of professional performance.

Your education and training activities basically should be in the form of continuation education, that is providing short courses and workshops designed to constantly update the knowledge of your membership. This in turn should be related to other activities . . . certification and licensing . . . in the sense that these functions (which initially indicate that an individual meets certain basic educational and knowledge requirements) must be designed to provide periodic checks on an individual's ability to perform throughout his professional career. Present methods of certification or licensing for a professional unfortunately approve him for lifetime practice unless he is found guilty of malpractice. Thus, in lieu of periodic re-examination and re-licensing to reasonably assure protection of patients/clients, we must insist on certification and licensing programs which have mandatory continuation educational programming built into them. This can only be done through the initiative of the professional organization involved and its acceptance of an outlook which concentrates on what is good for the client rather than for the professional.

Once effective programs for certification, licensing and continuation education have been established, then some means for establishing an appropriate mechanism(s) for enforcing professional performance under these programs must be accomplished. In fact, such thinking should be involved during the formation period in order that our regulatory activities will have some system of enforcement built into the original programs. It is recognized that this is a most difficult area for concentration, solution and activation. However, if it is not accomplished by the professionals themselves, it is reasonable to anticipate that some enforcement will be activated by a non-associated regulatory group.

Another major responsibility of a professional organization should be that of serving as a "feedback" or sounding board for educational programs. This continuing activity involves objective and subjective evaluation of the graduates of training programs in your field and providing feedback to the institutions as to the strength and weaknesses of curricula in terms of their adequacy in preparing young professionals for participation in the reality of a work situation. It is assumed that the wisdom of your leadership will assure that this is done in full collaboration with those responsible for the educational programs.

Besides the aforementioned continuation educational programs,

other continuing communication efforts also are important to any professional organization. Recognizing that most of your membership is involved with services to people, your journal-type publications basically should be in the form of practical articles which directly assist a member with his ability to improve and increase services to clients. Various informational pamphlets, often in collaboration with other professions, should be made available to your membership for distribution to clients and/or relatives to reinforce the oral guidance and recommendations that you provide from time to time. Audio-visual materials should be developed for such important programs as recruitment, client and family education as well as general education of the public. One important area of communication which must be activated and constantly maintained is that of relating the work of your profession to other professional disciplines in order that they might be aware of (and therefore encouraged to use) the unique services that you provide.

Active programs in research and studies also must be inherent to your organization. These should be conducted in various areas, including those concerned with improving the methods of providing services to people, training and use of supportive personnel, improving the transmission/reception/utilization of informational and educational materials, improving the multi-disciplinary or team approach to rehabilitation of the communicably handicapped, and many other important areas. Some of your leaders also should be constantly studying the trends as well as proposed changes in such fields as health, rehabilitation, education, welfare, employment and so forth in order that they can do a better job of planning for your immediate and long-range future.

Naturally there are many other areas of activity that should be conducted by a professional organization . . . such as their participation in legislative activities, liaison with other national organizations, and the development of preventive measures which ultimately would one day work us all out of our present jobs. All of these are geared to one single objective . . . providing greater services to people, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As you conduct the programs of your organization certain pitfalls should be avoided. Perhaps the most important of these is controlling your efforts in order that your consideration is not on developing status for the professionals but rather developing high quality professionals to provide services to people. Along with this would be avoidance of the proprietary attitude often developed by professional organizations, i. e. failing to involve other professions and organizations in a comprehensive approach to the people we are attempting to re-

habilitate. No longer can any of the professions work in isolation, but rather they must develop a rapport, a cooperative team approach which one cannot avoid if he concentrates on the welfare of clients/patients rather than on his own status. In line with this, those involved in providing professional service to the communicably handicapped cannot afford to become involved in such time and energy consuming pastimes as the battle between oralism and manualism. Rather we must recognize the need for using every method at hand for properly communicating with those who have communicative disorders. A warning should be issued to avoid a disproportionate emphasis on the needs of our clients vs. all of the people who need rehabilitation. By working together and with others on comprehensive planning for communities, states, regions and the national effort we should be able to learn fairly and practically those things that we can accomplish for our own special type of patient/client.

All in all, the mission of a professional organization will become obvious as its membership concentrates on meeting the needs of client/patients in an objective and business-like manner.