

Q. Why Me? A. Who Else? Mentoring with Myk Rose

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Abstract

Burnout and a lack of sustainable formal leadership are challenges for the field of signed language interpreting. While formal leaders often face attrition and a lack of support, informal or everyday leaders can fill mentorship and leadership gaps in their communities. This case study highlights Myk (Michael) Rose. Rose's mentorship style leads by example, by creating spaces that promote growth through safety, resilience, and trust. As the interpreting field and its practitioners are changing, Rose's approach to supporting emerging interpreters and colleagues shows success. Rose's example demonstrates that leadership begins with care and taking responsibility, and that everyday informal leaders can transform people, a community, and the profession.

Keywords: Interpreting, Mentoring, Leadership, Safety

The field of signed language interpreting is fraught with burnout, with research citing many factors like pay, physical strain, lack of support, and perfectionism (Schwenke et al, 2014; Humphrey, 2015; Pollard et al., 2021). Burnout is also rampant among the formal leaders in the profession. In the case of signed language interpreting, formal leadership includes interpreter educators, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) national and affiliate chapter board members/title holders, and members of various task forces and teams tackling issues. In this field, formal leadership often comes with baggage. Practitioners are relieved someone else will do it, new leaders are left to flounder, and exhausted former leaders disappear from the scene (RID Affiliate Chapter Handbook, 2004). This type of unhealthy and unsustainable treatment of our leaders is perpetuated every time practitioners leave “someone else to deal with it.” Is it any wonder that affiliate chapters are desperate for willing volunteers to step into these kinds of formal positions with little success?

With the current state of formal leadership in hot water, the support of formal leaders becomes incredibly important. One aspect of this happens on the home front, concerning the everyday practitioner, how they conceptualize their responsibility to the field, and their actions. If conceptualized in a way that is generous, responsible, and dedicated, an everyday leader is created. The everyday leader does not hold a formal leadership position, yet has an extraordinary impact on the profession. A key void that everyday leaders fill within the profession is mentorship. The field of signed language interpreting has mentorship opportunities for

practitioners, but lacks the formal standards afforded to most practice professions (e.g. nursing new grad programs in hospitals, social worker paid internships, therapist supervision). Without consistent standards throughout the field, mentorship often becomes an optional path. Signed language interpreters often turn to their local community for support and mentorship. The transformation from interpreting student to expert needs a key ingredient: community mentorship. Leadership experts Kouzes and Posner (2021) argue this point, demonstrating that real change is not orchestrated by those in formal leadership positions but by grassroots leaders and everyday people who decide to care enough to become better and to better those around them.

One such leader is Myk (Michael) Rose. This case study is dedicated to documenting and honoring the impactful leaders in local interpreting communities. Due to Rose's experience and success in mentoring, Rose's expertise is a valuable addition to this body of knowledge. Rose is an interpreter local to Western Oregon University (WOU) and is a key fixture in the local community in Monmouth, Oregon. Rose is often called on by interpreting professors to talk to students about the realities of being an interpreter. In addition, Rose makes a point to create opportunities for students to join him in community endeavors where they can grow their skills in safe, supportive environments. While Rose engages in mentoring in many capacities, perhaps the biggest yearly endeavor is the Community Cantata Choir. Every October, Rose assembles a team of volunteer interpreters to create a choir of interpreters, performing in various venues throughout December. To many novice interpreters, Rose is a valued mentor, ever patient and knowledgeable, coming alongside to support professional development. Rose has valuable experience and insights into mentoring approaches and what he currently sees occurring in the

field. Rose's attitudes and practices can guide practitioners and leaders towards successful mentorship and leadership.

Rose graduated from WOU's Interpreter Education Program (IEP) in the spring of 2008, was hired at WOU as a staff interpreter in the fall of 2008, and has been there ever since. The bulk of his career has been in post-secondary education, with the occasional freelance work on the side in a variety of flavors. Rose is recognized by his local community for his interpreting skills, dedication, support of others, and easy-going personality. As a fixture in the community and supporter of interpreting student success and novice development, Rose is a successful mentor and leader in his community and profession.

Rose was inspired to reciprocate the support given to him as a novice interpreter and to give generously through mentorship. During a time when he needed it, leaders and mentors around him stepped up. As a student and novice, he had lots of chances to get real-world experience. Wanting to give that back to the next generations is what has led Rose to become a local leader in the mentoring of new interpreters. Starting out in the field is extremely difficult. Rose strives to make it safe. Rose has been mentoring interpreters in his community for over a decade. Rose himself has little formal training in mentorship. Rather, Rose took what he experienced as a mentee and intern, and implemented what he believed worked, learning as he went and relying on his own mentors and teams for support. Rose's approach is to create opportunities for growth in soft skills and experience rather than teaching hard skills. One of the overarching principles that guides Rose's mentoring philosophy is "uncomfortable, but safe." Failing is one of the best ways to learn, and expecting failure to happen can be a blow to a profession dominated by

perfectionists (Schwenke et al., 2014). Creating a space where a mentee is stretched to grow, though uncomfortable, feeling safe enough to experiment, try new things, and fail, is key to an environment where development can happen.

Creating a safe space must be intentional and relationship-driven. Rose's approach hinges on genuineness and vulnerability. Having conversations about how the environment can be a safe place for both parties and what interns and mentees can expect from Rose is key. Mentees can expect to be pushed out of their comfort zone. Rose's approach with this type of discomfort is to tell mentees to sit with their discomfort and trust that he has their back. As an experienced practitioner, Rose watches their work, and while he may not step in exactly when the mentee wants him to, he will ensure an equitable product is delivered to the consumers. A mentee's responsibility is to learn, Rose takes care of the rest. In instances where a mentee feels that their discomfort has gone too far and entered the realm of unsafe, Rose expects honesty from the mentees he works with. Without honesty and vulnerability, no change can be made to situations where the mentee feels unsafe, and feeling unsafe does not foster learning.

Rose's favorite aspect of mentoring is seeing someone have their "aha" moment. Pushing a mentee out of their comfort zone requires trust and courage, which can only occur if the mentee feels safe. Pushing the mentee, letting them flounder for a moment, and then seeing them realize that they can is where real development and confidence stem from. That moment is only possible when, in the words of the beloved character Ms. Frizzle's iconic catchphrase, people have the freedom to "Take chances, make mistakes, [and] get messy!" (Cole & Degen, 1994-1997). The profession of signed language interpreting is not always safe for expert practitioners, and

especially not for students and novices. Horizontal violence is a common occurrence anecdotally and in research (Ott, 2012; Hewlett, 2013; Wessling & Ehrlich, 2021). Horizontal violence refers to “infighting within a group of people who experience stress related to powerlessness” (Ott, 2021, p.11). This may look like passive aggression, bullying, microaggressions, gossip, slander, aggression, and many other behaviors. Creating safe spaces where individuals are pushed towards growth is pivotal to prevent attrition from the field and promote the development of skilled, well-rounded practitioners.

Rose has been successful in his local community, skillfully creating uncomfortable yet safe spaces for students and new interpreters to develop into equal colleagues. Feedback plays a large role in any profession, but especially between interpreting colleagues and mentor to mentee. A pivotal moment in Rose’s career where Rose himself experienced an ‘aha moment’ was when a coworker gave him feedback. The substance of the feedback was valuable, although the delivery was poor. Rose understood a valuable truth: feedback is not about the giver but rather the receiver, so how he delivers feedback is important. There is little use in spending time and energy providing feedback if the receiver has made up their mind not to receive it. It must be packaged in a way that is receivable, or it is of no use to either party. This may look like creating rapport, providing detailed objective rather than subjective feedback, and using phrasing that does not put the receiver on the defensive (see Witter-Merithew, 2001). This is yet another reason why creating a safe space for a mentee is imperative. If the mentee does not feel safe, they will be less likely to accept redirection, correction, and feedback. This is counterintuitive to both the mentor's and mentee’s objectives towards growth. Rose is a strong believer in modeling vulnerability and leading with curiosity. Rose’s approach to teaching feedback is to model it.

Mentees are encouraged to take notes on Rose's work and to tell him what they see. According to Rose, not only is this good practice, but everyone has something to contribute, and he learns from his interns and mentees often. Feedback may never cease to be a source of fear for a mentee, but with a carefully cultivated environment, rapport, and feedback approach, leaders and mentors can successfully reach each other and mentees.

In recent years, the field of interpreting has changed, and Rose is noticing a difference since the COVID-19 epidemic in the young people he sees now enrolled in IEPs and entering the profession. In his observations, students' soft skills have undergone a notable shift that has impacted the way mentors and teams provide feedback. Rose has noted, consistently after the epidemic, a lack of ability to accept constructive criticism and a lack of resilience, unable to turn areas of struggle into growth. It appears, then, that teaching students how to give and receive feedback may become a valuable tool among mentors, not assuming that the topic had already been covered in the ITP or IEP. In addition, Rose has noticed differences in the way people employ coping skills. He observes that the interpreters he has worked with since the pandemic appear to have fewer coping mechanisms to deal with feelings of overwhelm or conflict. Instead of embracing the uncomfortable, they will shut down, unable to work through their feelings. This insight matches with anecdotal evidence from mentors and teachers across the country, and may have implications for the future of the profession and the way that interpreter educators and mentors interact with students. In a consumer and people-oriented profession, a lack of soft skills is a puzzle the profession will need to solve to support novice interpreter development and growth. With this change in mind, how can other mentors, educators, and aspiring leaders in our field emulate Rose's success? Rose's answer is simple: "Be nice. This job is hard. Have grace."

Giving grace, the benefit of the doubt, and being truly curious instead of assuming are some of the attitudes that will enable our profession to fight against burnout, reduce horizontal violence, and successfully mentor future generations of practitioners.

For new interpreters or those interested in entering the profession, Rose emphasizes that interpreting is bigger than just meaning transfer. Interpreting involves a plethora of soft skills and people skills: how to be a good team, how to build rapport with consumers, and, oftentimes, educator and advocacy roles. A key part of mentorship is preparing interpreters to enter the field with more than language competency or meaning-transfer skills. Most non-interpreters in the world do not understand what interpreters do or the process. Interpreting is difficult work, often mentally and physically draining. Rose notes, “If we make it look easy, that means we’re just doing our job well.” Known in his community for being easy-going, Rose stands up for what he knows is right often in his work. When a minority and historically oppressed consumer is oppressed, overlooked, or denied access, Rose argues that part of his job is being an advocate in that moment and responding with action. If one person decides not to sit back and do nothing, but to take seriously the mantra of “do no harm,” one action of resistance to the status quo creates ripples of change that can reach systemic levels.

Leadership comes about when someone cares enough to make a difference; it is something that is chosen, not elected. The field of interpreting and interpreter education could use more leaders who recognize that they can and should make a difference without a formal title. Generosity and grace, rather than individualism and apathy, are a few key attitudes this case study highlights as factors that lead to successful mentoring relationships. The attitude and perspective on leadership

and mentorship Rose lives out empowers interpreters to become active participants in the development of their profession through an increased sense of responsibility. Rose leads by example, showing his community and his mentees that attitude, creating a safe space where growth happens, and key changes facing the profession can inform signed language interpreters on what successful mentorship and informal leadership looks like and how to emulate it in their own communities of practice. This profession prospers and thrives when everyday people assume the responsibility for the issues in the profession and decide to make a difference, regardless of title or perceived authority. The question of “why me?” can be answered by a simple, “who else?” Leadership may mean a formal position, or an informal one consisting of mentorship, volunteer work, and having the hard but worthwhile discussions. Beyond the hard and soft skills Rose cultivates in his mentees, ultimately, Rose teaches by example. By giving grace, our time, and energy to those around us in our everyday lives and interactions with others, we assume the role of extraordinary leadership, making personal impacts that truly make a difference.

About the Author

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