

My Hearing Journey through the Corporate World

By: Dale Webber

Looking back

There were so many indications I wasn't hearing as well as others. Knowing more now, I likely have noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) from rock concerts and dances in my teenage years with my ears ringing for a couple of days after each. In my early 20s, my friends seemed to be able to have conversations in loud environments, but I was always bending my head so they could talk directly into my ear. I would get restaurant anxiety if the chosen one had a ceramic floor and high ceilings. Of course, there were the typical spousal complaints of "Do you really need the TV to be so loud?" And, at work, I was always the one who would reach across the conference table to increase the volume on the speaker phone. I knew I wasn't hearing as well as others and, like many with hearing loss, I ignored it, denied it, faked it and lost a bit of my self-worth with every conversation I got lost in. It didn't register in my mind as a hearing issue. It registered as silent shame, thinking I was in cognitive decline despite a good friend referring to me as "the smart one".

Many will say I am extroverted, the type who gets their energy from being around others, joking, playing and socializing rather than being quiet and reading. Just recently, my husband described one of my redeeming qualities as being like a snowplow (bless him, romance is not his forte). But he clarified to say I seem to have this ability to deal with obstacles by just plowing through with passion, focus and emotional strength, regardless of what comes along. Not the best personality type to be denying hearing loss.

The Big Reveal

When a close friend delicately suggested I get my hearing tested after shushing me for speaking too loudly one too many times, I learned I have mild to moderate high frequency hearing loss in both ears. My ski slope audiogram revealed I was unable to hear birds, rustling leaves, as well as certain consonants resulting in words or sentences not making sense. Since background noise would make it worse, I was likely overcompensating by increasing the sound of my own voice. "High frequency hearing loss is very common as you age" I was told. "Hearing aids will help but your condition is not severe enough for RAMQ to cover the cost" ... "It is recommended you get hearing aids.... Oh and yes, that ringing in your ears, it's called tinnitus. Nothing can be done for that." **What???? I'm only 53!!!!**





Denial and the Downward Spiral

I tell myself my hearing loss can't be that bad if it's not at the threshold covered by Medicare. But I start to pay more attention to what others hear. "Can you make sense of that announcement? Don't you have trouble hearing out of that speaker phone? Can you hear in this restaurant? What I didn't realize was my hearing loss was also working against me at work. I was trying to swim while wearing cement shoes! I loved my job and I was passionate about what I was doing. It was my time. I wanted to prove what I could do. Leave my legacy! My son was about to finish high school and my husband was able to pick up the slack at home. I was involved in leading change and I was so energized. I loved that my project was so progressive. It allowed me to research, analyze, leverage my past experience, business sense and contacts, and be creative all at the same time. But just when those young whipper-snapper MBA's are coming in and licking their chops with career goals of their own, challenging everything their more senior colleagues say and do (just like me more than 20 years ago), I'm denying I have a hearing problem.

The corporate world isn't very kind to those who can't keep up with the conversation. Talk is fast. You are to hear things the first time they are said, whispered or nuanced. And you are expected to remember. If not, you are not paying attention. There is little patience for people saying 'What?' 'Pardon?' or 'Can you repeat that please?' Meetings are often in dim light with the speaker behind you as the PowerPoint is projected in the front of the room. Best practice presentations no longer put all the information on the slide, you are expected to listen. Things have gone global and support departments have been offshored. The squelchy voices over the speaker phones all have

different accents. What a nightmare! It was exhausting. But despite never having anything but a stellar performance review, sometimes senior management would lose their patience:

- "Why are you taking notes? Just listen. You are expected to remember!
- "Why can't you understand French? Here's a tape.... Practice!
- "For God sake! Why are you asking those questions now? The meeting is over!
- What kind of question is that? Were you not even paying attention?
- "So Dale, what is your position on this? Pardon, can you repeat the specific issue?... ' . "Oh, never mind." (eye roll).

A year went by before I saw a hearing aid acoustician. I'd waited so long I needed to get another hearing test. Same result, but the delay to get hearing aids and support has taken a toll on my self-worth. There were times I wanted to crawl into the carpet. Each time was more self-shame, a knife in my gut. But, being the snowplow that I am, I just worked harder. I was becoming irritable at work. "Why are you taking my constructive criticism so personally?" said my new young, whipper-snapper, soft-spoken boss who would now lead my project. What's next? Burn-out, sick-leave, early retirement. Very common next steps for those who don't know better. This snowplow, who was in denial for so long needed to heal and forgive herself to repair her battered ego.



To Acceptance and Beyond!

In all, retirement has been quite good to me. I've been able to sail, golf, play pickleball, play on three ringette teams, herd cattle in Wyoming, take mogul lessons and ski in Switzerland, be present for family, manage my son's hockey team and volunteer. All which make me very happy. But I would not wish a burnout on anyone. There should be no shame in having a physical disability. When I retired, I didn't even know what communication accessibility was. I didn't even know there were organizations like Hear Québec dedicated to improving the well-being of those affected by hearing loss. I didn't know a community existed to learn from others dealing with the same issues. And I didn't know I would find a new passion in being part of an organization that helps people who have hearing loss. I look forward to the next stretch of my journey, now having passed through denial, anger and acceptance. There is lots to learn about the not-for-profit world and lots can be done to improve awareness of communication accessibility and eradicating the stigma and shame. Hmmm. Time for this snowplow to restart her engine!

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Dale is now enjoying retirement and the ability to focus on volunteer work after 31 years in the corporate world. Having mild to moderate hearing loss, she has enthusiastically embraced Hear Québec's mission serving as both a board member on the governance committee and a volunteer on the fundraising committee. Sailing, golfing and skiing locally are just some of her many favourite things with dreams of travel and getting together with friends and family once the pandemic is over.