By Pauline T. Newton, Ph.D.

Last summer, I obtained a copy of Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In, which encourages women to network and advocate for better pay and flexible hours in order to maintain a work-life balance. Sandberg has remarkable credentials: two Harvard degrees, a position as Chief Operating Officer (COO) at Facebook and a former vice-presidential position at Google. At times, her advice, while rightfully encouraging, seems daunting not only to women who are not COOs, but also to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing (D/HH) and who gratefully grip their desks once hired, knowing they’ve beaten great odds by landing a position.

As I read Lean In, I kept scribbling notes. Sandberg’s suggestions were excellent, but they did not address a question that has vexed me, a bilateral cochlear implant user, for years. Putting the gender question aside for a moment, do individuals with hearing loss face a similar glass ceiling that hinders their climb to promotion in the workplace?

Mulling this question as I continued to read, my mind wandered to tennis player Venus Williams, who relentlessly pushed, with the help of Billie Jean King and others, for equal prize money at Wimbledon. As she battled for this purse, Venus not only advocated for herself but for other women in different professions.

Advocating for Ourselves

Like Sandberg, Williams stands at the top of the “jungle gym,” but women and men with hearing loss—not just COOs of Facebook and professional tennis players—need to do the same: advocate. They are not just speaking up for themselves; they are paving the way for others who follow in their footsteps. I still bite my nails at times when I request CART for specific lectures at Southern Methodist University (SMU), where I work. “Is it really necessary?,” I ask myself in a little voice. Then I think of the others that might come after me: SMU students with cochlear implants, colleagues who might gradually or suddenly lose their hearing due to aging or a head injury.

The same goes for promotion. I was relieved when I landed my job at Southern Methodist University (SMU), which, at the time, was a one-year lecturer position. I quietly followed the rules. I reported enrolled students who never came to class. I met with students in my office for extra conferences. I attended departmental meetings and worked with interdisciplinary committees. And yet, one day, I mentioned to a mentor that I had not been considered for a teaching opportunity. He replied, “Don’t assume that you’re being ignored. Step forward and volunteer yourself.”

True. Few recognize that diligent coworker in the corner. Toot your own horn (but don’t blast it). Sandberg notes that women are less likely to advocate for themselves. She cites an example of this failure to speak up. When she was finishing a lecture, she noted that she would take two more questions. At that point, all the women put their hands down. The men kept theirs up. I fear the same rings true for people with hearing loss. We’re grateful that we have titles that label us as employed. We dutifully sit with our work. We don’t keep our hands in the air when an opportunity arises.

Timidity Costs Dearly

Failure to promote oneself can be costly. For example, women are less likely to negotiate for a higher salary when offered a job,
an error that can impact one's income over a lifetime. According to the WAGE (Women Are Getting Event) Project, if Candidate A doesn’t negotiate his/her salary before being hired, Candidate B, who negotiates and who starts out making only a few hundred more than Candidate A, can make more than $1 million more over a lifetime.

The same proves true for promotions; if a person who is D/HH does not get a promotion, then s/he will earn considerably less over a lifetime than a colleague who was hired at the same time for the same pay and who was promoted—even if the promotion initially bumps up the salary minimally. Individuals with hearing loss need to speak up and volunteer themselves for better positions. However, are individuals with hearing loss overlooked, because a promotion might, say, include more communication via telephone?

Don’t Wait to Request Support

It’s possible that a supervisor or boss may believe that a person who is D/HH cannot succeed with a promotion because it requires skills that may seem difficult to master with a hearing loss. For example, if a promotion requires an individual who is D/HH to communicate in a variety of group settings, an employer may wonder if the candidate will struggle.

The best thing to do is to ask. Both parties should ask questions of the other, respectfully. Journalist Lisa Goldstein, who worked at a bookstore in the 1990s, found herself in this position. She was not promoted to manager, and someone hired after her received a promotion. If an individual with a hearing loss like Goldstein recognizes that s/he was overlooked, s/he should discuss it with a supervisor. This may prove awkward, given the sensitive nature of the topic—an employee doesn’t want to sound like s/he is accusing a supervisor of discrimination without concrete evidence—but the employee should consider addressing any potential concerns in a circumspect manner by demonstrating that s/he can fulfill the requirements. For example, if conference calls might be part of a promotion, then s/he should make sure her/his boss knows about services that transcribe such calls.

In fact, a supervisor (or the appropriate contact in human resources) should know about such resources early on in the hiring process. If I had not requested CART during my first years at SMU, my contact in the office of access and equity might have wondered why I had waited so long to request it. By the time the promotion arises, the supervisor then ideally should have no qualms about the candidate’s performance.

In Lean In, Sandberg aggressively addresses awkward questions, too, though she clearly wears the supervisor’s hat. In her case, she asked more than one of her team players whether she was turning down a promotion because she was considering having a baby. Sandberg argues that a woman with a promotion will return to work happier after maternity leave, knowing that she is being mentally challenged. Likewise for the individual with hearing loss: if one’s company is not tapping potential, the individual who is D/HH may become frustrated or even bitter. The employee and the company will thrive if the employee is challenged and encouraged as s/he grows into a new position.

The deaf community—not to mention women—needs more team leaders like Sandberg who address awkward issues compassionately, but until then, it must educate employers, early and often, so that, given certain reasonable accommodations, the individual who is D/HH can perform just as well as anyone on the team.

Two Types of Mentors

A mentor can enable an employee to navigate such uncomfortable moments. If a mentor can communicate to a supervisor that a person who is D/HH can perform well with the promotion, that provides that individual with an advocate in his/her quest for professional growth. In “Perceptions of Women in Management: A Thematic Analysis of Razing the Glass Ceiling,” Mindy S. Baumgartner and David E. Schneider stress the importance of informal mentoring, and their suggestions apply to the individual with hearing loss. The women they interviewed encourage mentees to “select ‘someone who has been where you want to go.’”

An individual who is D/HH may need two mentors: one who has a hearing loss and one who works in his/her profession. If an individual is looking for a promotion and s/he thinks that a supervisor may have qualms about her/his hearing loss, s/he can learn what mentors who are deaf have done. S/He can network on Facebook and via email.
From time to time, I have contacted both types of mentors. I belong to a listserv for academics who are deaf and hard of hearing. I have also queried my mentors with typical hearing about applying for specific roles or grants within the university. Christine Anthony, cofounder and COO of Altra Interactive, who has a hearing loss, practiced this advice when she was up for a promotion during her consulting days. When she applied for a promotion as a manager, there were five or six candidates but only three positions. All candidates were qualified but the ones that got promoted were those that had bosses and colleagues present an argument and who advocated on their behalf. Anthony got the promotion because her supervisor at the time and a former boss both made strong arguments in her favor.

“The reason they were happy to argue for me (in addition to my being qualified) was that I made it clear from the beginning that I wanted to be promoted and worked with both people to show I deserved it and asked for their help and support. I kept them in the loop on all the things that I accomplished so they had ammunition to argue. Self-advertising works!”, said Anthony.

**Take the Long Road**

Anthony emphasizes that this self-advertising must occur over a long period of time, and not just before the promotion. She suggests making a list of strengths and skills: “It helps to write this down in a formal list or report; that way, you have clear and logical arguments for a promotion.” She adds, “You can also share the report with someone else to see if they are convinced by your arguments.”

Anthony also cautions against blaming hearing loss for not being promoted, arguing that “people can feel ‘entitled’ to a promotion and when they don’t get it, their first reaction is to blame ‘something else’ like hearing loss, bad boss, etc.” A list of strengths and skills then becomes an impartial way to self-evaluate and to show your supervisor your abilities.

However, “hearing loss makes it hard sometimes to be in the loop with people and conversations (think a business dinner in a noisy restaurant!). When you don’t have the right connections and are not able to ‘schmooze’ in every environment, then the path is more difficult,” acknowledges Anthony. Often business decisions and connections occur outside the boardroom—in a bar or at a baseball game.

A mentor in the Baumgartner and Schneider article suggests that women should “learn how to golf or play tennis. Don’t be afraid to initiate meetings, lunch or to include yourself and show that you are aggressive.”

People with hearing loss could follow this advice. Finally, consider the words of Rabbi Darby Leigh, a strong advocate. During an interview with a hiring committee, Rabbi Leigh said, “I may not hear very well, but I really know how to listen” (Ungar-Sargon).

**Pauline Newton, Ph.D.,** teaches introductory academic writing courses at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas. Her specialty is American Literature, and this academic year she is teaching courses on graphic novels and travel narratives. She was born with a bilateral severe-to-profound hearing loss, and visited the Helen H. Beebe Speech and Hearing Center when she was a child. She lived in Latin America during those childhood years, but spent summers in Easton, Pa., living at the Larry Jarrett House and in the Welches’ house (a summer rental from a Lafayette College professor).

**References**


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