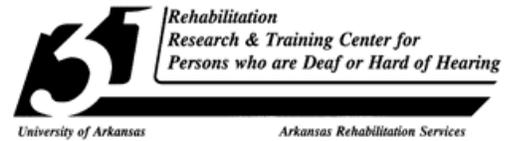




## Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2005



# Managing Your Communication Environment for Success

Presented By: CHRISTINE SEYMOUR

**CHRISTINE SEYMOUR:** Good afternoon. My name is Christine Seymour. I'm a late-deafened adult. I had a hearing loss, that affected my mother, my grandmother, my aunt, myself, and, recently, my youngest brother has been diagnosed with the same loss and my son at 27 is losing his hearing.

My hearing loss was first noticed when I was ten years old and they told me to sit in front of the classroom and watch the teacher so I sat in front of the classroom until I graduated from high school. I had a dream of having a music career. I went to the school of music of my dreams and they said, you don't hear right. Bye-bye, we don't want you.

So, there I was at 19 years old with no direction to go. I didn't know what to do with my life. I didn't even wear hearing aids yet. I got hired in my aunt's business office. Everyone knew I was hard of hearing. One day, my boss came up to me and said, if you don't go get a hearing aid, I'm going to hang a cowbell next to your desk so I can get attention when I want you. Because it was in the family, I went to get my hearing aid and it was in good humor. I went to get my first hearing aid at the age of 20 years old and I was shocked by sound I had not heard for a long time, sound of running water, sounds of feet going across the linoleum floor, the sounds of business machines where I worked. It was obvious that my hearing loss was severe. From that time on, every two or three years, my hearing dropped. And every time my hearing dropped, the technology came up. The hearing aids were better and so my hearing would drop, technology came up. My hearing would drop but it was like going from deaf to hard of hearing to deaf to hard of hearing. It was really a miserable experience for me until I reached age 44. I went to the audiologist and I threw my hearing aid at her and I said, fix these dam things, I can't hear anything with them.

She put my hearing aid on the machine and let the dials go, you know and she took me and put me in that padded room, you know, that padded room. Do you wonder why they put us in a padded room? She slams the door, *boom*, got the handset on and I'm

ready to start. She came back in and she took the headphones and said, "I'm sorry, Christine, there is nothing wrong with your hearing aids. You're deaf."

I had lived in fear for 24 years that I would become deaf, trying to pretend that I was a hearing person when I could not hear. And when she said that to me, what I thought would be the most devastating news in my life was the most incredible relief because, 24 years of fear just floated off my shoulders. The wait was over. I did not have to pretend to be hearing anymore. My hearing loss was now black and white. I can't hear. And from that time on is when I started getting involved with support groups for people with hearing loss and realized how many people had a similar experience to me, but I had sort of gone that one step beyond to deaf. And I became part of the Say What Club. Through the Say What Club, I was introduced to ALDA and SHHH groups. And I worked as an accountant for a school district. When I had been there in 18 years, they hired a supervisor that I could not lipread. She refused to believe me because I could lip read other staff and I could not lip read her. She told the superintendent of schools that I had no skills for my job that I had been doing for 18 years and I was just using my hearing loss as an excuse to do a lousy job. An eight-month fight resulted in me walking off the job, filing a discrimination complaint with EEOC mediating a settlement, deaf, no college degrees, 25 years of accounting but no one would hire me. Because of my experience with this association, I met people who worked for DCARA, (deaf counseling advocacy referral agency) in northern California. We stayed in contact and they heard what happened. They gave me the opportunity to come to California, abandon a career in accounting and provide support services to people who are hard of hearing and late-deafened.

That has just opened up my whole world, my whole life. In that place in Washington State, where I lived before, I became deaf. I had no connections with other people with hearing loss. I didn't know any deaf people. I learned sign language. I used interpreters but my world just shrank to exactly whatever entertainment I could come up with on my own. I came down to California. Everybody in my life is in ALDA, DCARA, or SHHH or has a hearing loss, because that's what my world brings me to now. So the experience that I bring to you in this workshop today is not just my experience, but it's the experience of thousands of people that I have come into contact to, that I have talked with, that I have gone to workshops with, that I participated in the organization. It's a culmination of everything that I learned along the way, and I hope you will find some information in here to benefit you. For those of you who have been in communication, coping skills class before, some of this information won't be new but I hope that the approach I take is new enough that you will take something out with you that you had not thought about before.

What does communication environment mean? It's everything, positive and negative, that affects communication in a specific situation. It's the speaker—how they speak. It's the listener—how they pay attention. It's the environment itself—the room, the lights, the rugs, the wallpaper. When we talk about the speaker and the listener, anyone of us in this room has both of those roles. When we are the listener, we are the

hard of hearing person that needs some sort of support to understand the person who is speaking to us. When you are talking to me, you are the speaker and I need that same support from you that you need from that hearing person that speaks to you. So, we have to learn all the roles, not just one side.

And why do we need to manage our communication? You know, the common term for the skill of asking for the communication support we need is usually called coping skills. I have a real problem with vocabulary. If a word does not sound right to me, I reject it and come up with something else. For me, coping is putting up with something that you don't like. Communication management to me means taking control of the situation the best you can. And that feels more positive to me. So why do we have to manage it? Hearing loss can make us feel out of control. And when we are out of control -- we feel out of control, we are fearful and we can become humiliated. We encounter difficulties in communication in every aspect of our lives—shopping, restaurant, doctor appointments, banking, hairdressers, barbers. Every day of our lives, we are challenged to get the information we need when we have a hearing loss. We need to manage communication so we can have successful conversations with our family and our friends and our coworkers.

One of the most important things that you have to do to start managing your communication is to identify it. You have to identify your hearing loss, whatever way you want to call it. You know, we all have different degrees. There are so many names: deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, hearing impaired. Somebody once said they were half deaf or a little bit of a hearing loss, whatever term you feel comfortable using, use it. The first thing you have to do is identify your hearing loss. What do you do when you first encounter a situation when you didn't hear or understanding what was being said? (mumbling).

Most typical response, I'm sorry. I'm hard of hearing, I'm deaf, I didn't understand you. Why do we do that? Why do we apologize? There is a good reason. We are embarrassed.

We are expected to hear what was said and we didn't. We are expected to pay attention and they believe we aren't. We feel we created a burden on the other person for communication. We feel like the fact that we didn't hear is our fault. Or for some people, apologizing is just a polite way of explaining their hearing loss. They are comfortable with that. I'm sorry, I'm deaf. I didn't hear you.

But what kind of reactions do you get from that?

Oh, that's okay.

Never mind.

Shout.

Can you hear me now?

Or like a brain freeze.

What happens after you say that? Oh, I'm so sorry. Oh, can you understand me if I talk like this? (Exaggerating) We already did the shouting thing. So, now, we know the things that are really uncomfortable. We don't like to tell people we are hard of hearing because, they might respond, "Oh, I'm so sorry, that's too bad." But if we don't tell them that we can't hear, we are embarrassed and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I can't hear." These are the first things that we want to overcome so we can feel comfortable in communication.

What does not work? If you are talking like this to me, (rapid speech) I can't understand. You can talk to me just like this and I'm not going to understand or you can talk to me louder and faster and I still can't understand you. But if you talk to me like this, (very slowly) I'm going to fall asleep before you finish. We know when they talk like this (over enunciating), all we see is teeth and tongue and I want to throw up. It doesn't work. Really, it distorts their mouths. We can't understand them. We can appreciate their effort. If they've done any of these things, if they have stopped and looked at us or talked too fast or really slow or exaggerate, we have to at least appreciate that they tried.

What's more comfortable for us? What works? If a person speaks slowly and clearly and enunciates their words. We could ask, "Would you please speak slowly and clearly and enunciate your words?"

Do you think I have time for that?

But that's what we need. We need someone to speak at a normal, moderate pace, moving their mouths and enunciating their words. At a normal speed, maybe a little bit slower. We want that person speaking to ask me if I understand. If you are the person speaking, if you are speaking to me and I've got a blank look on my face, I want you to say, "Do you understand that? No, not did you hear me?"

Accent. Anybody have a problem with accent? All the hands go up. I have not heard accent for a while. You know, I can see accent? I have some friends that speak Spanish. I can see the Spanish accent. I had a friend who was German and she and I would meet to talk. Her husband came home one day and says, "Can you tell that she has a German accent?" And I said, "Yes, because she moves her head like this with everything she says." I can see accent. Lip reading is impossible. And if you have a hearing aid or a C.I., that sound still is not what your brain is used to when we speak in our local regions with people that we know. They are difficult to deal with. Some people, you can understand, some you can't. Ask the person what works. In our case, if I'm the one that has the accent, ask me to write. Often, writing is the best way and I use writing as a tool.

Facial visibility. There is a difference between facial and lip visibility and speech and lip reading. Facial visibility means being able to see it. Speech reading means being able

to see the expression and the mouth and everything altogether. Make sure that the person can see your mouth clearly or that you can see that person's mouth clearly.

I was in accounting before, people would chew on pencils and talk to me. Accountants do that. They chew on their pencils. This is not made up. They do that. They chew on their pencils or look down on their report and talk to me, "bla-bla-bla". Make sure they are looking at you. Don't speak to the back. If somebody talks from behind you, well, some of us might be able to pick up the voice. We don't want people talking behind us. So part of our management is try to put ourselves where we can visually see people approaching.

Wait for a person to read written material. I have a real problem when someone reads when I'm talking to them. I have been watching communication for so long that it's impossible for me to believe that people can speak and understand without looking at each other.

Misunderstanding, the expression on another person's face is another problem. Sometimes, I have had people say, stop staring at me like that. They were nervous. They didn't know what was going on. Maybe I had not identified my hearing loss. I'm watching this person intently. And the other thing I can't do that, I cannot talk to a tall man standing up. I feel like I've gone into some intimate space that I have not been invited into yet. And to this day, with all my management skills and the confidence that I have as a communicator, I can't talk to a tall man standing up. Sit down, please.

Obstructions to visibility. This is using the mouth for speech only. People are chewing gum, eating at the same time that they are talking. Don't hold things in front of their face when they are talking to you.

Facial hair. Mustaches and beard. Someone was telling me last night, he was thinking about growing a goatie. I said that's a very sexy nice look. I like that look. You know why? Because when they do that, it outlines their mouth. They usually keep it really nice and trim. That outlined their mouth and makes it easy to lip read. Then there are the ones that are just "mountain man" type and the mustaches come all the way down here and the beard all the way down to the bottom lip. How are you going to understand them? You really can't ask them to shave. Depends on how fast we need the conversation and who it is, but that's a problem. It's something for you to understand. If you didn't realize before that a person's mustache was in the way, now, you do.

The other important thing is topic management. We are brilliant people. We are absolutely brilliant. We can take a piece of information here and a piece of information here and a piece of information here and we can put it all together and it will make sense. But that does not always mean that's what they said but we can make sense and for those of us who experienced hearing loss for any length of time, we really do get very good at putting those pieces together. But, when they change topics on us, I still

am picking pieces out of this conversation trying to put it with this word and I'm totally lost. So we need the person to let us know when the topic is going to change. That person that I had to leave my job for, I'm not going to use my bad word about her this time but she was the worst example you ever had in your life of a person not wanting to accommodate. She exaggerated everything I asked her to do. She exaggerated to make a fool out of me while she did that. I asked her to please announce when she was changing the topic. She would be talking to me and stand back and go -- I'm changing the topic now. (sarcastically making quote marks with her hands)

In sign language, there a sign for when you change a subject. Finish. It's part of natural language to let people know you are changing the subject. So, if you get really lost in a conversation, stop and ask the person what are you talking about? Because they have just gone off without knowing and if we don't tell them, they don't know. And then we fall into bluffing because it's too late.

The general demeanor and attitude of a person will determine whether we can understand them or they can communicate with us.

If I am fearful that I won't be able to understand a person, it takes away from the energy I need to focus. Then when they talk and they see my fear, they start to feel tense, too, because I'm expecting a mistake to happen and they are afraid they're going to cause it and it causes a communication breakdown. That's why it's so important for us to gain -- to learn the skills so that we are confident, so that we look and we told them, I'm hard of hearing, I need to see your face when you speak to me, that we are ready to pay attention and they are ready to give us the information because we looked at them and we have given them our confidence to come back at us with.

Be relaxed when you are in a conversation. You remember the test you blew because you studied so hard and you didn't sleep and you were so nervous that your head goes blank? Any of you having to do public speaking when you are not ready? When we are relaxed, I can come up here completely forget what I was going to say. When I'm nervous, my face turns red, my stomach gets nauseous, and I want to run out of the room. Be relaxed. It's important for to us have all the energy that we can to focus on communication and nervousness and fear steal energy from us.

People with hearing loss are nervous about missing communication, and hearing people are nervous that they are not going to be understood or that they are going to make a mistake. If I just tell a person I'm hard of hearing and I don't tell them what to do, and they do something really stupid, now whose responsibility is that? It's mine. I have a responsibility to inform them what I need for communication and if I don't and they exaggerate or yell or ignore me, I have to take that responsibility. But if I do it right and they turn around and ignore me and do something rude, then they have to take responsibility for their own actions.

That's when we come to a point when we have a choice whether we want to be involved in a communication or not. If your behavior increases their anxiety, it will diminish your understanding.

Be patient and flexible. Sometimes, we are all just too ready for them to do something wrong because it happens so often. It happens so often that people misunderstand us and they make a face at us, they turn their backs on us, they do something that make us shrink in our self-esteem. They make us feel small and then we are not able to get back up and get the successful communication going.

Don't be afraid to ask people to move to a different location, slow down, repeat or to write. This is the part really that goes towards the hearing person. Someone has to tell me to slow down. I was giving this workshop -- it was a family and hearing loss workshop, in my location in San Jose, and we were talking about family members who can't remember to talk slow for us and give us what we need no matter how often we tell them. A woman said to me, (speaking slowly) "My sister-in-law is so bad, (picking up speed) every time I go to her house, she speaks (speaking ver rapidly) and I ask her to slow down and she won't slow down." I said, "What did you just do? You just did exactly what you told me your sister-in-law does to you. You did it to me." How you respond to requests determines the outcome of communication. And this is the speaker. If I ask someone to write and they say no, communication breaks down. It's all over. If I ask someone to move over because the sunlight is right behind them and they move, we have a chance for successful communication. If they look at me like, you are crazy, why do I have to do that? Then my tension comes up and we start having a communication break down. Depends on whether I can calm down or not whether we can get on with the communication.

The listener. The greatest contribution you can make is to manage a situation. What's the first thing we do? We identify our hearing loss. We know what works best. Now, when I say we, I mean those of us who have had experience with ALDA and SHHH and "Say What Club" and other support groups where we have discussed those things that help improve communication with us. Where were you before you found the groups? I went out there flopping around with no idea what to do, not understanding when I miss things, not knowing what to do when I did miss things. So as we learn, we know best what works for us, and so we need to take the responsibility for managing the communication. If something's working, let it go. I mean, if somebody is talking fast to me and for some reason, I'm picking up what they are saying, I don't have them to tell them to slow down. Let it go. We don't have a rigid set of rules that it must be, bump, bump, bump. Every person's lip is different. Every person's body language is different. Everybody's eyebrow is different.

There is not one strict set of rules. It doesn't matter if you are following suggestions or not. Let it go.

If it's not working, we have of the responsibility to decide what's the problem? And inform the person that's speaking to us. We are the ones that know. And unless we tell them, they have no reason to change what they are doing.

Example. When my boss would be looking at a report and "bla-bla-bla", I would have to stop him and say, wait, look at me, please, when you are doing that. You know. An example if somebody is mumbling, can you say that again? I need to read your lips? And then if they still mumble, we give them another suggestion. Would you mind writing for me?

The speaker must be willing to cooperate. One thing that I have learned in learning to adjust my life to suit the fact that I can't hear is that I did not lose the right to have communication, to participate in communication when I lost my hearing. I lost the ability to do it the old way. So the person that we are speaking to must be willing to cooperate and if they are not willing to cooperate, we have a choice, whether we participate in communication with that person or not. We have the right to choose. If it's really important, we're going to have to pick it out of them. We're going to have to do everything no matter what. Get another person, make them repeat it, make them write it. If they are refusing to do that, make demands to get the information we need. If it's not important, we can just say, forget it. They do that to us. We can just say forget it. If it's not important and they are not willing to have the conversation, never mind. We have the right to choose.

We have bad hear days. We do. I talked before about the energy it takes to concentrate to understand what's going on, to look at the environment, make the decisions you have to make to get the communication. If we are tired, it's harder to do that. If we are not feeling well, if we have some emotional tension in our lives, if we are mothers of small children that we are running all over town. If our husband is having problems with the job, all sorts of things that a-- all sorts of things can affect our ability to communicate because it takes more energy to communication than if we could hear normally. We have to acknowledge that. That's a decision we make. I'm really tired. I can't -- I should not really go talk to that person. Because I'm really pissed off at them. We have to acknowledge that, we are having a bad hear day. Take the day off. That's just an idea. I'm not saying, that's take the day off. If your boss is in the room, I didn't say that.

Watch for signs of fatigue and offer to carry things at another time. It's easy to say, I'm tired. If I talk to you now, I'm going to have an argument with you. If you can just wait, we can do this better.

Bluffing. Someone said in the newcomers retreat that Christine told us to never bluff. But they forgot to say if we want to participate in the conversation. The single most counter productive thing that we can do, if we want to participate in the communication is to bluff. We have immediately taken ourselves out of the playing field, because what happens when we start listening, and we didn't understand them, so we start bluffing,

and then we want to get back in the conversation, too late. Because in order to get back to the conversation, we have to admit, I wasn't really paying attention. I didn't really understand what you said and we are back to that humiliation thing. So if you want -- if you really are interested in what the person is saying, if you really need the information that they are giving you, don't bluff. If you start falling off track and not understanding, stop them immediately, tell them what you know so far and ask them to go from there.

It doesn't mean never do it or that is not effective. There are times when time is of the essence and a simple social comment, walking down the hall is not important enough to stop and say what? You know, if I'm at work and I'm walking down the hall and somebody says, oh, yeah, they are having a meeting down there and I didn't understand what they are saying and they keep walking, I figured that's not important. I go back and say, what? I need to see your face when you talk to me. Too much explanation, too much information at the wrong time. That does not mean that it (bluffing) does not work.

Sometimes, it's the most expedient way. I have two examples of bluffing and the different results in my life. The first one is a classic story that some of you may have heard from me before. But back in the eighties, I was out in single bar with my girlfriend and we were going dancing at a lounge in a hotel. We got in there, live music playing, and there were no tables to sit at. So, these three guys invited us to sit at their table. They were buying the drinks. Sure, fine. Good for me. And this guy sitting here said, "bla-bla-bla"—and I'm nodding and smiling. I mean, there is no way I can understand him and he is going on and on and on. Men. He finally walks away. I'm relieved. I don't have to bluff. My girlfriend said, "Christine, do you know where he went? He just asked you if you want to get a room in the hotel. He went to get a key." We ran out the door and were gone before he came back.

The other time that will stand out in my memory for the rest of my life, because it was a very devastating result, was when I was fighting for my job at the school district. My boss was trying to prove that I could lip read and that I was faking when I said I could not hear. Let me give you the background on this. I have a brother who is a police officer in the community with the school district that I worked for. My brother worked with the high school students and high school security at the high school where I worked. My brother was in the office that day meeting with the school administrators. I knew that my brother was there. I knew what he did and I knew why he was there. So in the afternoon, I'm walking down the hall and the superintendent comes by and says, "I just found out that Tom is your brother."

I picked up enough "Tom and brother" to know that she is talking about my brother, the police officer who was in the office. And she goes "bla-bla-bla", big smile on her face, I'm nodding, smiling. When she stopped talking, I just looked at her and smiled and said I'm very proud of my brother. And I looked up over her shoulder and there was my boss who was trying to prove that I can lip read. And that was the superintendent of

schools and both of those women honestly believed that I understood every word that she said to me. And that was when I lost my case and had to file discrimination for my job because I was no longer credible, because I had bluffed. And what they saw, they thought they saw me hearing.

So, be careful. I will tell you to this day, if I had the exact same situation again, I would do exactly the same thing, because the woman was superintendent of schools. She is busy, she is in a hurry, she took time to acknowledge my brother and his good work and I would just say, thanks, bye. I would do it again. But under those circumstances, it was devastating. It guarantees that communication won't happen. If you start bluffing, it guarantees that communication won't happen because you stopped the communication by stopping listening.

If you get caught, it shows the speaker that you really didn't care what they had to say. You look rude. Again, use your head when you do that. I mean, there are times when people just talk. That guy in the bar? People talk just to hear themselves. They don't care whether you hear them or not. Make your choices, but be careful how you make your choices.

Why do we bluff? Sometimes, it's just because we are so irritated because we have asked this person to slow down so many times and they are not doing it. Why bother? Or we get tired of giving the instructions repeatedly. Again, I want you to come back to make the decision, do you want the conversation or not? Too often, it's because we just give up and there may have been information there that we really needed.

The listener has to be patient. Old habits die hard. What do I mean by that? I want to talk to you about when you grow up as a speaking person. The first thing we learn to say out of our mouths, mama, dada. They teach us to speak. When I learned to speak as a child, no one said move your voice box this way, your mouth this way, your tongue this way and have the sound come out this way. Speaking is an unconscious behavior. The act of physically making words come out of your mouth is not something that we have to think about how to do that. And from day one, we are taught to talk. Everybody wants you to talk. Say that word. Say mom, say dad, say cat. I want you to talk. At the age of 44, I become deaf and I want everyone around me to change how they talk. And they try. But they have been talking to me for 44 years one way and all of a sudden, I want them to change. I have to be patient with that. Their habits are going to die hard. What I have done to make it possible for me to continue to repeat information is take on the role of the educator instead of feeling like I'm a burden to them. Be their teacher. Teach them. Think about when you teach your children. If you teach your children one time to do something and they do it right, and then they don't do it right the next time, do you get pissed off at that kid? No. We nurture them. We teach them again. We give them another chance. We have to do the same thing with hearing people. We have to give them another chance.

Adjust your expectations to the situation. Don't expect the same awareness from someone you have never met as someone that you have talked to on a regular basis. If I go into a group of strangers, they are not going to understand my communication needs. I'm going to have to explain them. And they may or may not care. Adjust your expectations. I never say, lower your expectations, no. Adjust them so they reflect the situation that you're going to be in. I'm going to a huge Thanksgiving dinner with my family. We're going to have 23 people sitting around the table. I'm not going to expect to hear. That's not lowering my expectations. That's knowing my limitations. But I do know that, later, when we are in a smaller group, I can ask them to look at me when they talk. That's adjusting your expectations to the situation.

We can talk about the actual environment. Background noise. Hearing people have some idea what that's like because they go to baseball games, sporting events really, really loud.

I went to a baseball game, so weird to sit in a crowd of 36,000 people and not hear a thing. But they have the idea because when I get in a loud place with hearing people, I can't get my voice loud enough for them to hear. They get an idea of what it's like. However bad our hearing loss is, the background noise is going to bother us. How severe it bothers us is how bad our hearing loss is—how our ability to understand speech is.

Refrigerators running, water running, copy machines. Those are the kinds of things in an office environment that would block you from communication. I might not even be aware that's the copy machine. This person is talking and I can't understand. You need to be aware of sounds around you that are making that noise because then you can move away from it. If a person comes up to me while the machine is running, I leave the copy machine, step out in the hall and have a conversation with them. If I go into the staff room, someone is washing a dish and want to talk to me, I say, I'll wait until you turn the water off. I was never aware.

Hard flat surfaces tend to reflect high frequency sounds. If you have a room that's all wood paneling and linoleum floor, it's going to reflect the sound and it's going to bounce all over and be weird in our hearing aids and our electronic devices.

Carpeted rooms, the textured papers on the wall, that's all an improvement of the environment for us to communicate. Tile floors are tough, especially if people are wearing heels and they walk across it. Flat walls, get away if you can if you have the choice. But we have to know this stuff in order to make the choice.

Lighting. I'm sure we all know that we can't read lips in the dark. Everyone depends on speech reading a little bit, whether they know it or not. One of the things that absolutely amazed me when I gave up my hearing aid nine years ago was that I was so terrified that I would not be able to read lips that I needed those sound clues to read lips. At that

time, the sound that I got in my hearing aid was so bad that I could not focus. When I took the hearing aids off, I actually read lips better without them than with them.

Now, I tell you, today, that's a different story. I have a hearing aid on for the first time in nine years and I'm actually able to read lips better with them. That's all attitude. We won't go into that. I will have a positive attitude because I will have a cochlear implant within the next month so I can put up with the garbage noise to prepare for that.

Two important factors of lighting are the amount and the placement. Light above and in front of the speakers. A light in front of me will help you see me. I have a spotlight coming from behind me, you won't see me. If the curtains are open and sun is coming through, you won't see me. I walked into somebody's room, a lounge or some place, recently during the conference and curtains were open. She said, "Hi," and started to hug me. I was like, who are you? I could not see her. All I could see was a silhouette in the dark. One time, I was at a conference and a man was speaking. The man was speaking at a podium but the stage had this beautiful lattice work fence partition, and the interpreter was standing right in front of that white wood and it was like one of those puzzles. You watch. You stare at it long enough, it blends and changes the picture. I could not see the interpreter. He faded into the lattice work. Those are the kinds of things that can interfere with our communication. So I have plenty of light behind the hard of hearing or deafened person so they can see speaker.

Be assertive. Not aggressive. Assertive. Aggressive is when you have to fight for your rights. Assertive is when you are trying to get the communication you need in an average environment.

Don't say I'm sorry. It took me a while to learn that. What I had to do was start giving out instructions. Instead of saying, "I'm deaf, I didn't hear you," I say, "I'm deaf, I need to see your face when you speak to me." I found out there are different ways to make that work. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry," I started saying "I'm deaf. I'm hard of hearing." That's a substitute. Whenever one wants to break a habit, we have to start another one. We have to find a substitute. Instead of saying, I'm sorry, say I'm deaf. If you don't give them instructions, they're going to do something weird.

How many of you like to be told what you have to do? I changed the wording. "I'm deaf. I need to see your face when you speak to me." **Need**, people love to be needed! When you tell people you need them, they are much more willing to do something for you than you say you have to do this for me.

Follow with instructions. We can't assume that people know what to do after we tell them that we are hard of hearing or deaf. What happens if we don't give an instruction is they'll do something really weird. We see a reaction of fear. The natural reaction for human people to anything unknown is fear.

It might be a terrified fear—they freeze and don't know what to do. It might be just plain old fear. And what happens when people are afraid? Who want to admit they are afraid? Who wants to admit that I'm afraid that I might not be able to communicate with this person? What do people do when they feel fear? They hide it behind other behaviors. When I was afraid I could not hear, when I was having hearing loss and I didn't know what to do, I hid that fear between attitudes of I don't care. I actually told people, I'm hard of hearing, but don't worry about it. I was afraid to tell them that I needed some help. When we tell a person we're deaf and we don't tell them what to do, they have to figure it out. And sometimes people hide fear behind rude behavior. They want to take control. Well, forget you. Turn around and walk away.

Or they take their fear and transfer it into is some sympathetic emotion. Oh, poor you. Why? Because they don't know what to do. We have not given them any instructions. If we give them instructions, we eliminate their fear of not knowing what to do.

If you leave it up to them, you are liable to find your feelings getting hurt or find yourself in a situation that leaves you angry. You know, when we tell somebody we are hard of hearing and they do that fear reaction of being rude or acting like you are stupid or treating you like a child, we are hurt. We are hurt. Or they piss us off. What's our reaction? Our reaction is fear. Fear that we are not enough, because we didn't hear. Fear that we caused the problem that made them mad.

We hide our own fear behind our own anger. It works all the way around in the communications tree. The more we know, the less fear we have, and that's true of anything. That's why they teach driver's training. You know what happens when you have a nervous driver?

So what kind of instructions are you going to give? Face me. That's when I just said, "You have to look at me when you talk to me," or, "I need to see your face when you speak to me." Which sounds better? What's more gentle? I mean, when I say you have to, my body language, the emphasis on the word "have" starts being demanding of the person I'm speaking to. But when I say, I *need* to see your face, then I'm not demanding anymore. I simply say that's what I need. Can you give it to me?

Speak slowly. We need them to slow down. Write for me. I tell you one thing that I never do. I never ask them if they'll do anything. I tell them very nicely, do this. Why? If you ask them, you are giving them the option to say no. Will you write for me? No.

I still meet those people who will push it out of the way and try to find another way to communicate, but I just tell them nicely. These are the instructions. There is how you communicate with me, please, thank you.

Would you repeat that? I didn't understand you. If you ask, "Can you say that again?" They won't know whether you didn't understand what they said or they didn't understand

what you were talking about. If they think you don't understand what they were talking about, they think we're dumb.

I didn't understand you. Repeat that, please. Or I didn't hear you. Whichever way you are most comfortable saying. But I've learned that when I say I'm deaf, I'm hard of hearing, that makes them nervous. So if I just say I didn't understand you, repeat that, please, assuming that I have already identified from the beginning that I'm deaf or hard of hearing.

I need to you write that down for me and hand them the paper and pen. If you leave them to look for it, it's not going to happen. And in the grocery store, I have grabbed a pen that they have hanging there to write checks with and handed it to them. Hand them something. I always have a pad and pen in my purse with me, in my pockets with me, in my car with me. Hand it to them. You have to give them all the tools.

Take control. If they don't follow the instructions, do you need the communication or not? If you need the communication, you're going to work for it. Anything worth having is worth working for. If you don't need the communication, you have the right to stop it.

If the person does not accommodate you, as you asked, you can repeat the instructions until you get the communication you need. You can walk away. I will try two times to understand you. The first time you speak, I didn't understand you, I'm deaf, I need to see your face when you speak to me. Now, you are making an efforts and I didn't read your lips. Can you say that again, please? Say that again, please. Then they said it again and I can't understand. I say write. Why two? Why two and why not three? By the third time, one of us is going to start to get embarrassed or frustrated. One of us is going to start to feel like we've failed in our part of the communication. Two tries. Then write. Have the paper ready, grab it and show it.

Educate, don't demand. A positive attitude will set the tone for the whole communication.

You know, I have the same problem with signing that hearing people have with speaking. My brain and mind go faster than my hand. When we ask someone to slow down when they are speaking, the sentences are going faster in their head than their mouth. Their mouth catches up and then it's too fast for us. I think we all experience that when we talk. Patience and understanding.

We don't need to feel like less of a person. When we learn to take control of our environment, we can earn respect, if not cooperation. So I encourage all of you to find what's comfortable with you for identifying your hearing loss, give instructions for your communication. If that does not work, give it one more time and then change. So, I hope that you picked up some information here that was new for you.

Christine Seymour has been involved in advocacy both professionally and by volunteering for more than 8 years. She is current president of ALDA East Bay Chapter in San Leandro, CA, as well as an active member of ALDA inc, and SHHH at the national and local level. For the past three years as Client Support Specialist for Hard of Hearing and Deafened people at DCARA (Deaf counseling, Advocacy and Referral Agency) in San Jose she developed a full program directed at empowering clients with workshops, classes and one on one peer counseling toward greater independence through self advocacy.