

One Voice Lost and Found

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Those of us that can and do identify as “baby boomers” recognize the time. It was 1981 and while about to experience the most significant recession since the great depression, we had a new President. Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as the 40th President of the United States. We seemed to be filled with hope fueled by anticipation of what lies ahead. At the time, I was a 35-year-old insurance agent looking forward to a successful career. I accepted a new job, moved my family to El Paso and was given my first real opportunity to manage an insurance agency.

I didn’t know a whole lot about management, but I did realize that people relationships were a key component of what it took to be a success. That should be an easy task. I did like people. Prior jobs gave me wonderful opportunities, all of which I felt I handled well.

This time, a kid from Milwaukee was given an opportunity to manage an insurance agency. I quickly learned how important people relationships would become. I was to replace an aging homegrown insurance guy who had earned the respect of not only the public but particularly the relatively small group of key employees. Before I knew it, reality set in. I was smack dab in the middle of fusses and fights that all seemed to be caused by people-related conflicts. Some of the staff wanted me there, others did not. My opponents seemed to be resenting the fact that the “old days” were gone, and new ones stared them in the face. I learned most people resist change.

I had to win them over. It was clear I could not do it alone. I will not fail. One by one, they all came over to my side, and while not the largest in the area, my team and I made an impact in the community. We gained a reputation that we were all proud of. That reputation eventually led us to the point where we were a target for a larger insurance firm to recognize our talents and purchase our agency to be part of a larger local insurance firm.

The new idea of “personal computers” used in business seemed to be everywhere. How could that happen? It seemed like new ideas happened last in the desert town of El Paso. I was determined though, to somehow make automation part of my business plan. I purchased a ten-thousand-dollar personal computer (without home office authority, I might add). I seemed to be off to the races, professionally speaking. Thankfully, I was not alone. Other local businesspeople had the same idea. Teamwork taught us that together we had a much better chance of success.

One of the first “Users Groups” was formed. Being what I would consider to be an outgoing person, I became a founder and took an active role in the group. I organized and conducted meetings that were designed to present ideas to a diverse group of people with diverse skills. My new role was more like a schoolteacher than anything. I loved the challenge. Our meetings grew to the point where we were constantly searching for larger meeting space. I needed to speak to a growing audience.

Never having needed to do a whole lot of public speaking, I found that I enjoyed it. Others have said that I was even good at it. We made great strides. We found real practical business use for these personal computers.

Others recognized success. My office became the target of acquisition by a larger locally owned firm. I had arrived. My talents were recognized. I was truly at the top of my game. I was comfortable in people relationships and truly loved to be in the middle of people-based relationships. What could go wrong? I'd soon find out. Almost ten years after being acquired by the larger insurance firm, I noticed a change. I seemed to become less comfortable in one-on-one conversations. More people added to the conversations made it worse. Avoidance seemed to be my choice. Something was wrong with my voice. The change was gradual. I thought perhaps it was something medically induced. I felt it was harder to speak. I can't say it was a sore throat. There was no pain. The words just did not come out smoothly. They were broken. Perhaps I just needed to slow down. After effort to do that I still had difficulty with speech. It seemed the more technical and detailed the conversation, the more difficulty I experienced.

Voice difficulty continued and seemed to be worse during phone conversations. Noisy background made speaking to one person difficult and impossible to two or more people in a noisy room. When ordering food from a menu, I started ordering things that were easy to say. I realized this had gone on for too long. I started to avoid group presentations in favor of one-on-one conversations. Even those were hard.

Feelings of inadequacy surfaced. Maybe I just didn't know my subject matter. That didn't seem to be the case. Time to seek medical advice. My search began.

My Internal medicine Dr. seemed to think that this fifty-two-year-old was just a victim of stress. He thought that if I relaxed, my voice problem would improve. That improvement was not long lived. Voice problems continued and in fact worsened. It became more serious when I started to avoid people, phone calls and the use of my voice for anything. I did not want to talk to anyone, not at home, not at the office, not anywhere. When the phone rang, I refused to answer it. Indeed, I became a recluse.

Further medical attention was necessary. Maybe it was allergies causing irritation to my voice. Maybe I had a case of acid reflux. Maybe I had a cold. Maybe something more serious. Nothing more serious was evident. One ENT likened my vocal problem to finding the sweet spot in a golf swing. He suggested speech therapy. I made an appointment with a speech therapist who obviously specialized in children.

Their office was equipped with little chairs and tables, obviously equipped for six-year-olds. I was given all that was available at the time a "See Jane Run" story book. I sat down in my little chair. I made every effort to read aloud, but once again the voice problem prevailed. I had never felt so humbled.

I did eventually see another speech therapist. Margaret Maynard spent the time necessary to listen to me, however uncomfortable that must have been. She, like others, kept an eye on the trunk of my body when I spoke. She taught me the reason for that is that the words were being pushed from my throat. No one ever taught me how to speak. I guess I thought that's the way it is supposed to be. Her guidance was beneficial, but I still had difficulty with a smooth, unbroken conversation.

Maybe it was something more mental than physical. So much of the advice I received seemed to hint that stress made my condition worse. My search was refocused on stress management. I even tried the art of acupuncture. While providing momentarily positive results, the voice still didn't work.

This frustration went on for over two years. The not-knowing was so stressful, causing a worse effect on my voice. I was often asked by others “are you sick”? I really got tired of hearing that one. “Come back when you feel better” was even worse.

The mind does strange things under stress. I was certain a more serious condition was the cause. Continued Speech Therapy, while not that productive made me realize many of them treated stroke victims. Ahh! Another “maybe” surfaced. I bet I had a stroke. After more medical tests, that too was ruled out. Still no diagnosis!

I saw another ENT. Dr. Jim Spier recognized the condition right away, without further tests, probes through my nasal passage or other invasive investigation or interrogation. He broke the news that I had Spasmodic Dysphonia. He described it as a rare neurological condition. I learned the problem originates in a part of the brain that sends signals to your vocal cords. The good news was that there was a treatment. He described a procedure of injecting Botox into the vocal cords. He explained that it was a medical specialty and that I would see an otolaryngologist in Dallas. At the time, no one in El Paso could provide the needed treatment.

Now that I had a fresh approach to what could be a diagnosis, I began Internet research. I quickly found that Botox was frequently used for cosmetic improvement and had some medical purpose as well. Botox is a by-product of botulism. I feared this was another dead end in my quest for a solution. My first reaction was absolute. I will not inject poison in me as another experiment.

I learned though, an insurance man without a voice was useless professionally. I needed to create both a problem and a solution with my voice. I found myself creating the problem and not offering a solution because I was afraid of how I would sound. Some had told me I did not sound as bad as I thought. It was worrisome though, just anticipating that my voice would have a strangled and broken sound. Here is a great place to extend appreciation to my partners and staff at Rogers and Belding Insurance Agency. They realized in a kind, supportive manner that when I was in a bad voice, they pitched in to help. More than once, I took others on sales calls with me just because I thought that my voice sounded horrible.

Perhaps, as a last resort, all I can do is try Botox. What do I have to lose? I saw Dr. Robert Sinard in Dallas. I tried that and after two very stressful injections found no improvement. My high hopes and anticipation were shattered. Could this be just another dead end? As a very attentive Otolaryngologist, Dr. Sinard followed up with me and explained that sometimes the treatment needed more than one attempt, maybe even more than two attempts to take effect. Again, as a last resort, I agreed to try another injection. Presto! My voice was back. Dr. Sinard told me that I may feel some breathiness in a few days. I experienced that breathiness. Even though it may have sounded breathy, my voice was smoother, stronger, and free of breaks. Once again, I was more comfortable using my voice.

I continued with Botox injections with mostly fair to good results for seventeen years. Dr. Sinard moved on to Memphis. I began seeing Dr. C. Blake Simpson in San Antonio who suggested a different approach to treatment. He suggested injecting the false cord with a substantially larger dose of Botox. He did tell me that the result we could hope for is less breathiness after the injection, but that would come at the expense of more frequent injections. That approach has been a life saver to me. Now, after over twenty- three years of 80 injections, I can once again use my voice without hesitation. I will admit that it’s a different voice and depending upon how well I schedule injections, I may sound just a little tighter with some minor breaks in my speech.

I've learned there are hundreds of different kinds of voice disorders. There are even varied types of spasmodic dysphonia. I have the adductor type where my vocal cords close and overlap with each other. There are also abductor types that cause the vocal cords to prevent closure as expected, producing a breathier sound. There are others that experience a tremor while speaking.

Now, bringing myself and my treatment to the current day, Both Dr. Sinard and Simpson have moved on to other assignments, I am now treating with Dr. Z Mike Yang at UTSA in San Antonio. He has continued the same treatment, approach, and dosage. I am quite pleased with him and his staff. I now rely on them as my voice technicians.

One of the greatest assets I have found is Dysphonia International (formerly the National Spasmodic Dysphonia Association) (www.dysphonia.org). They have turned out to be a source of extensive information that literally helps one understand more about this challenge we face and that we're not alone in the battle. I became an Area Contact Leader for the group. If I can help one person navigate the SD challenge, I will have been rewarded many times over.