

**Episode 2: Power of the narrative**

 Hello, my name is Lesa Bradshaw. And whilst we've not met before, I'm really pleased that you've chosen the next 20 minutes or so of listening to me and my podcast, I'll try and make a time well spent. To give a bit of context to the topic of this podcast today, The Power of the Narrative, I thought I'd introduce myself as the social entrepreneur with a disability and someone who really has a passion for the topic of inclusion.

Not only because it's relevant to my world as a wheelchair user, but also because I have a lot to say about my experiences as a consumer, as a business person and a member of global society generally. Now usually what I say is a bit sassy, sometimes humorous, but I like to think always relatable and something that you can use in a way that will provide a different take on life and the assumptions that we sometimes make as we try to make sense of life.

So why the topic, the power of the narrative? Well, given that each of us have travelled such a unique journey in life, it stands to reason that each of us have a different story to tell about the life lessons that we've gathered along the way. Our personal stories have power. They have the ability to change the way people perceive the world.

For me, sharing my lived experience stories to challenge unconscious biases that so often influence our behaviours, it really works. And fortunately, there's never a dull moment in my life, which gives me plenty of material to work with. Why are personal stories such a powerful way to connect with people and to challenge those unconscious biases that divide us?

Well, I think the simple answer to this is that the more relatable somebody is to you, And the more you have in common with that person, the more you're likely to consider them to be part of your tribe. And that's human nature in its rawest form. But when it comes to disability inclusion as a topic, how do we get people to see themselves as part of the tribe of disability?

Particularly if they don't have a disability. How do you find that common connection? Well, firstly, to me, you get people to see the human rather than the stereotype. And so those human stories that you have that can connect is really, really powerful. Secondly. You get them to see how disability is so inherently weaved into our entire society, that if we could recognize and respond to that positively and proactively, rather than with fear and distance, we would stop talking about disabled people and start talking about disabling situations.

We would stop trying to fix the person. I would rather start fixing the situation. And if you do that, you create an economy which enables everybody. And that right there is good for everybody. So let me share a personal story that I sometimes use to illustrate how stereotypes and stigmas on disability can stop you from getting to the next phase of a relationship.

So back in 2012, my first husband decided to end our marriage. And I found myself back on the single scene. Dating in your forties is not an easy feat. Add to it that you're a wheelchair user and you add a little more complexity into the mix. Not only do you have to find somebody who suits your personality and with whom you actually have a nice mutual attraction, but I had to find someone with a fairly strong back.

I mean, in case I needed to be carried around. As a wheelchair user, that's really important. Not all places are accessible, you see. So, in the event of me going out and about with a partner, and if I'm stuck, well, I need them to pick me up. So that's harder than you might think. When you consider How many people over 40 actually have bad backs?

Oh, and yes, incidentally, the ideal candidate also had to be able to look past their unconscious biases and to see the personality that makes me, me. Now, the tricky bit in dating is to get the person to see your personality before the stereotypes kick in. I decided internet dating was definitely just the ticket to do this.

Challenge accepted. Now, let me tell you the story of how I went about this. I just start by packing this little stick of dynamite, that is me, into a way that would Balance all the good stuff about me. You know, my abilities, my redeeming qualities, um, hopefully some of my personality quirks. The things that I think would market well and, and attract people to want to know more about me.

I had to balance that with being open about the fact that I was a wheelchair user. Now here's the thing. Tell them too soon and they jump to all the assumptions that are filled by those stereotypes and those fear of offending and so on. Tell them too late and you're being a bit dishonest to yourself.

And a little bit deceptive to the person because they're forming a vision of who you are and that vision, if they think that you are an athlete doing acrobatics, well, that's going to be wrong. So, here's an example of what worked for me. And I'll tell you the story. So, I put myself out there and I think I used Zoosk. I think that was the dating app that I used. It had the photo of me from the head, from the shoulders up. So just the face profile, it had a couple of bits of information about me. And it said things like, you know, I'm divorced. I've got a daughter, I run a business. So, all the usual stuff that gets put together.

But then I would talk about my abilities, and I'd do it in a very sneaky way. For example, instead of saying, well, I can't walk, I'd say, well, I don't do long walks on the beach. And, you know, sporting and hiking and camping, not really my thing. All true information, just lacking a little bit of specifics.

All right. Once they meet the personality and not the stereotype, well then it comes down to whether that person finds me entertaining, whether I find them entertaining, whether it's easy for us to talk, whether we can talk on equal terms. And so, what they get to realize is that there's a personality here that they really find quite pleasant.

Once that initial marketing chatter is done, it's eventually going to come to the time where the person wants to take you out for, you know, a cup of coffee or that first date, and here's where the journey to disability confidence had to begin for them. So now the time comes to get that person over that initial awkward about disability.

How did I go about doing this? Well, I always found it quite interesting to see how people become awkward when they realize that they're talking to a person with a disability. I know it's different for different people in different cultures, but in my culture, we're so programmed to avoid offending a person with a disability that we think different rules apply when it comes to like general manners and etiquettes.

So, helping someone through that initial awkward feeling is really important before meeting them because you don't want them to be terrified upon that first meeting. You're already nervous as it is. So, here's generally how I would do it. I would say to the person, they'd say, oh, would you like to meet for coffee?

And I'd say, oh, I'd love to meet you. You should probably know that I'm in a wheelchair though. So, it would need to be a wheelchair accessible venue. And you might need a moment to process that. You might have a couple of questions. I know it's a little out of the ordinary. And there would be that awkward silence initially.

But what I find quite interesting is there was a fairly systematic way that people would work through this information. So, the first stage would be disbelief. Gosh, really? You're joking, but you don't sound like you're in a wheelchair. Whereupon I'd say, well, I'm so sorry about that. I'll, I'll try and do better.

You know, how should I sound exactly? And they go, well, you just sound so normal. And I go, well, yes, but word on the street is that that's not really a criteria for being on this dating site. Generally, if you say this in good spirits, people start to realize the absurdity of that comment and start to laugh at themselves.

The next stage is the apology. Here's where the individual would start thinking back to what they've said that might be offensive. You know, what did I say? And I'd laugh and I'd say, don’t worry, if you're thinking back to times that you may have offended me, you clearly haven't, because I'm still here, and that's okay.

The third phase would be the attempt to understand those disrupted stereotypes, and that's really important. The realization that I don't in fact align to any of the previous stereotypes and unconscious biases that they might have about disability, well that causes curiosity. And to me, curiosity is a good thing.

And I'll tell you why, because people start to question and understand how you get things done. So questions about logistics, but how do you drive then? These questions, again, these are good because they focus on the fact that although I might do things differently to the norm, I still do the same sort of things.

It's not about me not driving. It's about how I drive and understanding this allows people to really start to appreciate that you have similar abilities, but sometimes delivering on those abilities is done a bit differently. Now let's think about how to link the story I've just told you to the point that I want to get across.

Let's say I wanted to use that to illustrate the importance of how to navigate a recruitment and selection process when you're applying for work in a disability confident way. The first thing you have to do is you have to market your ability. So here it's about saying, what are my strengths? What are my abilities?

What do I want to project out there for a potential employer that would get them to see my abilities and not my disability. How you package your abilities, how you focus on the qualities that make you attractive to that potential employer, how confident you are in presenting your abilities as a person with a disability.

Well, that really matters because remember. They're going to have those fears, those unconscious biases and those stereotypes. So, you need to do a bit of self-reflection. You need to project those abilities that will be a valuable to a potential employer, and you need to make sure that you create a positive impact on those roles or companies that you're interested in joining.

Very similar to how I marketed my profile on the dating site, because effectively recruitment is its employability dating, isn't it? The second win factor is to never apologize for who you are. For me speaking with confidence, staying calm when people look nervous and being ready to correct people's assumptions in a positive manner.

That's really, really important. In a recent project that I was involved in. With a UNDP, it was interesting because I was interviewing people in a talent program for young professionals with disabilities and their supervisors. And we were trying to ascertain what were the success factors that you think got you noticed, got you the opportunity and got it converted into a really positive employment journey for you.

And one of the strongest themes that came out was that people with a disability were confident in their own abilities and how to navigate the barriers and remove those so that they could demonstrate those abilities, as well as people around them being disability confident. So I always find as a person with a disability, if you use, in my case, a bit of humor, a bit of sass, a little bit of a laugh, but calming people down about my disability, not apologizing and being quite open around educating them so that they know what they don't know, that for me is a great way of being able to reposition how people perceive you.

So that confidence for me is key. Know your value, know your worth, and never apologize for having a disability. You know, for you, it's about educating and creating disability confidence in that relationship that you're wanting to build. Now, lastly, it's about balancing their needs and yours. It's about perceiving yourself as equal, expecting equal and delivering equally.

And that's like a mantra that I live by. Let's look at a relationship, a personal relationship. So, for example, I know that in, with my husband, we have a debit credit system. I know that when we travel, he has to help me a lot more physically because I don't have all my enabling devices around me. So, when we travel, he is the, he brings his strength to the relationship.

He helps me a lot more with showering and transferring and doing day to day activities. Okay. However, in our team, I don't think he's very good at all at doing any kind of research to get quotes and building done and all the logistics around, you know, renovating or upkeeping a home. That's my strength.

I'm really good at researching. So, I'll spend time on the internet. I'll go and find the information that he needs, and I'll give it to him. And together we can do a project on, on the house, et cetera. I bring my strengths to the party. He brings his strengths to the party. Together we bring what we need.

And it's the same in the workplace. It's about saying, how do we make sure that we are delivering our abilities, but that we are holding the employer accountable for ensuring that we are able to deliver those abilities. And then how do we make sure that in a team, if someone helps us with something that might be disabling us, that we help them equally in return.

And that way your debit credit system is maintained. So for those of you who might be curious, after two and a half years of dating on that lovely website, I met a vast array of different personalities. And there was only one that when I told them that I had a disability, they ran for the hills and they really did.

They blocked me on WhatsApp and Facebook and they were gone. And that's okay. Everybody else I met along the way, once you disrupted the beliefs and the stereotypes, once they'd seen the personality before the stereotype, once they got to meet me and been okay with my disability, because I'm okay with it, it really had a positive impact and started to make them rethink what they thought about disability.

So it comes down to, I did incidentally land up marrying one of those men who impressed me. With his first response, when I told him I was in a wheelchair, he said to me, Oh, thank goodness that takes so much pressure off me. And I said to him, pardon, that's an unusual response. And he goes, well, I'm a terrible dancer.

So thank you so much for that. It's really created value, which was, I was like, this man is intriguing. I must meet him. And here we are married 10 years down the line. So the learning I'd like you to take away from this whole thing is being real, being authentic in your stories, being confident in your journey.

Being able to engage and build relationships with people, be it on the dating site, be it in society, be it in an employment context. It comes down to helping people lead the way with their own disability confidence.

I hope our story has painted a picture in your mind and made the dynamics of applying for employment something that is relatable. The thing is, we all have stories to tell. We're all connected by so much more in common than we think we have. And so don't be afraid to connect to people through sharing your experiences to illustrate expertise, as well as the learning experiences that you feel that people around you need to know.

Make your stories human, make them relatable. It's okay to sometimes make yourself look a bit more vulnerable because remember, that's how your audience might be feeling too. Anyone can read textbooks on how to create disability confidence in the workplace, for example, but what makes it really rich is a narrative that gives you lived insights.

It's a narrative that is powerful enough to stick with you, make it something that you can build into your common behaviors, because that's what creates positive change. So watch out for my upcoming podcasts, because stories are going to be shared throughout. For me, I'd love to share more stories with you on my journey from special to equal.

If you'd like to contact me to share some of your stories or to find out more about my podcasts or my keynote speaker events, you're welcome to contact me on bradshawleroux.co.za or lesabradshawinternational.com.