

Hello, and welcome to my podcast, Looking Up the Nostrils of Ableism. Now, this is part of my special to equal series around disability confidence. And the aim of the series is really to stimulate a rethink on the conversation of disability and its role in our economy and in our society. My name is Lesa Bradshaw.

I'm a disability inclusion specialist and known for having a lot to say about the topic of disability confidence. I'm known to be a little bit sassy, um, but to bring hopefully quite a bit of relatability to the topic. My area of focus is bringing disability confidence to our economy. So, if you've listened to any of my other podcast episodes, you probably realize that I like to come up with some interesting titles of my podcasts.

And this one actually came to me when I was trying to find a clever name for the episode, which would reflect my life experiences from down here, being in a wheelchair, to deliver relatable messages to people who may be up there, as in not in a wheelchair. So, when I was conceptualizing the topic, this imagery popped up into my mind.

And it's about how I often have to look up to people when I'm talking to them. Now, I'm not sure if you ever have really thought about it, but it really does result in me looking up the nostrils of a lot of people. If you can just picture someone sitting in a wheelchair, someone standing in front of them, my head tilted back, looking right up into their faces, right up into their brains.

Right, now psychologists will say that if you want to assume a position of leadership and power, you should always hover slightly above the individuals that you're addressing. This makes you a lot more intimidating to those who may want to argue back. And that got me thinking about power balances, or rather the imbalance of power between mainstream society and persons with a disability.

So, in this episode, it's about the notion of ableism, what it means, how we recognize it, and what we can do about it if society is going to have a half decent chance of enjoying the rich benefits that come with a disability confident society.

So, let's start with what we mean by the term ableism. Ableism is the term referred to the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. So, let's unpack that in, in a real-life situation. People of typical height are normal; people of shorter heights are abnormal.

So, then we'll build a society for typical height people. So, our manufacturing environments, our transportation and driving tools, our elevators, these are all built for people of average height. And that's really restrictive of your world if you want to go anywhere above the second or third floor in a building.

So, if you can't reach the upper buttons of an elevator, well then there's something wrong with you, not the actual elevator panel. So, it doesn't really matter if a few people are left out because at the end of the day, as long as the typical person's height is catered for, well then that's okay, casualties don't matter.

Then you remember, it's not just people of short stature that can't reach. It's wheelchair users. It's people with mobility impairments that might not be able to reach up. It's people with missing limbs. It's people with rotator cuff injuries, which is a lot more common in pedestrians than you might think.

People with shorter arms. And so, the numbers start to grow of how many people can't access anything above the second floor in an elevator. So, to make that abnormal official that allows us to sort of justify exclusion, well, we'll have to be able to put some sort of official backing to it. So, we'll have to scientifically or medically diagnose the problem that explains why the person is not as important as everybody else.

And that in a nutshell is ableism. It assumes that people with disabilities require fixing, that the problem with that disability lies within them rather than their disabling environment. It also assumes that people with disabilities are defined by their disability alone, and not all the other multiversal experiences that make them able and valuable individuals in society.

And it also assumes the abilities of people in generalistic or stereotypical terms. So, we make assumptions about what a whole group of people can do, based on our stereotypes that we use to back those assumptions. Okay, so let's unpack some examples that I've may have experienced along my journey. The one that really drives me bonkers is when people decide what is best for people with disabilities.

So, let me give you an example. My husband is getting a little long in the tooth now, he's less agile than he used to be, and he finds it picking me up and carrying me around puts a bit of a strain on his back. You know how pedestrians get over 40, you start to wear out from all your activity. So, he's not able to transfer me.

So, I want to purchase a transfer chair, which is a really good option. It allows them to kind of get me up off the bed and onto the loo and into the car when we travel without having to physically lift me. So, I applied to, I live in the UK, and I've applied to the NHS and I've said, well, can I have this particular model?

Because I think it'll work well for me. And they said, um, no, it's not approved on our list of the most safe and, you know, suitable transfer devices. So, the one that they've approved is not practical at all. I can't travel around with it. It's a ginormous hoist and it definitely has no place in the, um, sexy disposition that I'm trying to put out there when I'm traveling.

So, you can see that making decisions on what is best for me, well, I'm quite cognitively smart and I've lived 50 years in this body and I'm pretty confident with knowing what will work and will not work for me, but because the government have decided what is safe for me and what's best for me, I'm restricted in my choices.

Now, what about the other thing of keeping us all together? It's just better for us if we put everybody together. So, we have special schools where all kids with disabilities can gather. We have learnership companies, for example, in South Africa, where we run skills programs, and we get people with disabilities all together in a room.

And we go, well, that makes it easier for everybody because you’re kind of with your own kind, and then we can accommodate for your needs and if we've got all people with disabilities in one room, makes it easier for us as mainstream society to deal with you. Now, the problem with that is it results in segregation.

So, I have to tell you a funny story. I go off to one of these companies that provides these skills programs for people with disabilities. And I go to reception, and I go, hello, I'm here to meet your CEO. And the reception said, hello, my darling. Okay. You just wait there for one minute. See. So attitudinal barriers.

I get spoken to like I'm a three-year-old, but that's it for a different podcast altogether. So I go, thank you so much. And the lady goes off and she comes back, and she says, now you follow me, dear. You see. And I go, okay, so I follow her down the passage and we go down and we go into this room where there's a whole lot of people with disabilities sitting in this room, waiting for the instructor.

And I go, um, sorry, why am I here? I actually asked if I could see your CEO. Yes, this is where all the disabled people come to learn, my dear. So, this is the room that you need to be in. I go, sweet pea. I'm not here to learn. I'm here to meet with your CEO to help him revise his strategy on disability confidence, which clearly, he needs.

So, can we go back to the drawing board, and can you do what I asked and phone your CEO and tell him I'm here for our appointment? So anyway, I was having a bit of a snarky day there, but she got schooled. And it's this mental perception that people with disabilities should all be clumped together because it makes it easier for us.

Now let me tell you, it's that kind of thinking that has got segregation all over the world justified. We need to step away. Inclusion is the way we get people to recognize the normal of every human being on this planet. Okay, now let's look a little bit darker into the conversations of ableism. Bit more extreme in our history because we've got to understand where this ableism comes from that makes it seem so common sense like in our assumptions.

Let's have a look at the concept of eugenics. This is my word of the day. And I discovered this word a little while ago. This comes to, or it speaks of the natural selection thinking, in other words, the survival of the fittest. And it's about saying, really, society needs to keep the genetic pool strong, so all those stragglers that aren't so up there, they need to kind of dissipate.

And it was used to justify some pretty outlandish decisions about people with disabilities. So, one of the consequences of eugenics, if we look back into the 1900s, where the theory of natural selection became a thing, it was used to justify who was allowed to be a parent. So, it was assumed that people with disabilities were not allowed to reproduce, because A, it would tarnish the genetic species and B, we weren't capable of being good parents.

And so, things like forced sterilization, institutional norms of not giving people the decision as to whether or not they wanted to have children. These decisions were made in the best interest of society. And on behalf of people with disabilities without their consent. Well, now that wouldn't have worked for me at all because I know my genetics are dodgy, but my parent skills are top notch.

Okay. And my daughter is an incredible credit to society. So I think I actually did society a massive favor, you know, like just taking that moment to let that sink in. But if I circle back, I'm grateful that the culture has moved a little bit past that. That human rights are being recognized and people with disabilities actually have a legal leg to stand on when things are going awry.

I mean, I always laugh with my family, and I go, there's no doubt that had we been born in a different age, I would have been left on a rock by the tribe. And I get that because I'm difficult to carry. No ways I'd be, I'd be managing in a nomadic culture. So, eugenics really justifies eliminating the unfit by citing the betterment of society.

A nasty way that that was really reflected was in World War II, when the whole idea of the perfect race and Hitler's dodgy tactics around that, they used to trick and get families who'd had children with disabilities to either voluntary or involuntary give their children with disabilities to these special sort of institutions where they were systematically exterminated.

What I find interesting is there were hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities exterminated during the Holocaust because of their genetic presumed in superiority. That we don't even speak about. Okay. Now, let me tell you, that wouldn't have worked for Stephen Hawking or Elon Musk, who all have disabilities and are pretty magnificent game changers in our society.

So, the point here is be careful who you get rid of, because you never know how they're going to create massive impact to the future of our world.

Now let's have a look at our modern society, where hopefully human rights has moved on a bit since the Second World War. And let's look at some typical examples of ableism in the workplace. So, let's look at this concept of reasonable accommodation. And that is what companies, if you're a person with a disability and you disclose or declare to your employer that you have a disability, they're obliged legally, as well as it just makes good business sense to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace or work environment that will remove the disabling barriers that prevent you from performing at your best.

And it's a fantastic concept but look at the word reasonable accommodation. So, who decides what's reasonable? Because surely that's a bit of a judgment call. So let me use my own personal example. Prior to the COVID lockdown, I traveled a lot on business and as a wheelchair user traveling, it comes with logistical headaches, let me tell you.

You can refer to my podcast called Why Two Inches Really does matter for that story but bringing it back. So reasonable accommodation when I traveled was obviously logistical dynamics that we had to change. And, but I still had to be on site to do my training. COVID impacted and suddenly living in a hybrid world, I was able to work remotely, to train remotely, to do what I do remotely, instead of having all the logistical challenges. So, for me, it was funny how prior to COVID, allowing people to work from home was often not deemed to be reasonable by a company. And yet post COVID, when they had to do it on a mass scale, otherwise it would have affected the bottom line.

Now it's seen as common practice.

So just bear in mind what we decide is reasonable. Who decides that? And who are you to have the privilege to make that decision? So instead of talking about reasonable accommodation, why don't we speak about workplace adjustments? Because everybody needs workplace adjustments, whether you've got a disability or not.

And that just enables people to get on with the job. I also think that things like when I think back to traveling, you have these airline policies that go only a certain number of people with disabilities or special needs passengers may come per flight. Well, they don't have restrictions on how many overweight people can go on the airplane.

And surely that has some sort of impact on the flyability of the airplane. So, they wouldn't do that because gosh, it's offensive. So, since when is it okay that you can restrict how many hassle factor passengers you accept on the airplane? Cause that's actually what it's about. I remember challenging the one passenger assist person and I said, listen, why have you got some sort of quota on how many people with disabilities can get on a plane?

And they said, oh, well, because, you know, we've only got so many staff that can deal with that. And it's an extra hassle. So, there it is where the hassle factor customers paying the same money, the same amount, mind you, and you'll take that money. So, would you mind just, you know, rethinking that ableist notion?

And then what about compliance? When we're talking about meeting quotas of how many people with disabilities that we employ and labor legislation often backs that with compliance regulations, well, you have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have a disability. In fact, you know, one of my candidates who we placed recently had to get a doctor's note to prove that they were missing a leg.

I was like, well, I don't know why you need a doctor's degree to notice that the leg is gone. It's definitely gone, but he still had to prove he had a disability, even though there was an entire limb missing. I mean, sometimes we just miss the wood for the trees in common sense, when it comes to disability.

Another and last example in the workplace is this customer service. So, I'll tell you a story. When I was going to look for a car, I wanted to buy a car and I had the choice of two models, which could be adapted to be driven from wheelchair. And I went to the one salesperson for the one model, the one car make, and he was like, you drive, gosh, isn't that dangerous to let people drive on the road who are disabled?

And then I had the other customer service experience, which was, Oh, absolutely. We can help you. And in fact, you know that we've got some recommended adaptions with our model that they do in Japan, that will be able to give you some insight as to how you could possibly best adapt the vehicle. Now, imagine my impression as a customer.

One going, gosh, you people are dangerous. You shouldn't be on the road. And the other one going, how can I assist you in becoming independent and driving? Customer service people, we seem to overlook it. So, when we're looking at ableism, remember people with disabilities want to spend their money too. So let me circle back of all my stories to the theme itself, looking up the nostrils of ableism.

How do we find a way to connect the nostril to the brain? Okay. And here's a couple of tips for you to take away. Firstly, collaborate to understand and remove barriers. Really, if you collaborate with people with, with disabilities or have experience with disabilities, because they've got a family member or a loved one or a spouse or a colleague, you learn from experience and that way you avoid assumptions.

You can start to appreciate the impact of accessibility and disability confident living on everybody's lives. My child, for example, she sees the world completely differently to her friends. I remember when she went to her first ballet concert, she was little, she was about three and she came up to the principal of the, of the ballet school.

And she said, we can't have the concert here. And the teacher said, what's the matter, dear? Why not? She says my mom is in a wheelchair. She can't get up here. There's stairs everywhere. And so, for, for my daughter, wherever she goes, she notices, yes, mom, it's accessible or no, it's not accessible, or we'll need to go this route or better way to do it as that way.

And that's part of her common sense, everyday thinking. And so the more exposure you have to people who have diverse lived experiences of life, the more those become commonplace in the way that you see the world. And that speaks to inclusion. The second way we connect that nostril to the brain is to recognize that different people need different solutions.

My husband, for example, he has ADHD and he has a completely different response to Ritalin. I don't know if any of you have ever seen that classic ice age and there's that squirrel that's chasing the nuts all the time and he can never seem to grab the nuts and it's driving him bonkers. That's what my husband looks like on Ritalin.

It doesn't suit him, at all. And yet somebody else with ADHD that really does, you know, it works perfectly in terms of their ability to concentrate. So everybody with different disabilities or abilities respond. They have different disabling barriers. They have different enabling requirements and that makes you unique.

And so I think for me, it's really important to start to realize that there's no one size fits all adjustment that fits all wheelchair users, for example. A conversation needs to take place. So, in essence, we need to recognize the multiverse. Of who makes that person that person. If I have a look at myself, my experiences of being a person with a disability in South Africa are very different to my current experience of being a person with a disability in the UK, you know I'm finding this public transport system just liberating and I'm dashing around the countryside like a woman possessed experiencing this liberation whereas in South Africa, what disabled me was the lack of accessible transport.

So for me, what disables me and what enables me is going to be completely different to somebody else, depending on where they are, how they've been raised, how they're recognized. I was raised to be very confident about my abilities and never apologize for my disability. Somebody else who's living in a culture where they've been raised to feel less than or that they should expect less.

Well, they're going to be a lot less disability confident in terms of realizing their potential. So what disables a person could be their culture. It could be their personality. It could be access to money and assistive devices. And we need to recognize that each person is the consequence of a lived journey.

And with that journey comes different disablers and enablers. And so the last thing I think that's important is when you see accessibility not happening in common practice, speak up. It's just, it's not okay. It's a basic human right. It's not a special need. It's an equalizing need. It's a basic human right to be perceived as, treated as and included as equal.

I'm not asking anybody to give me any favors in this regard. It's an expectation. What's important for me as an individual is that once I have demanded to be treated as equally and once, I've been enabled to deliver equally, that I will be self-accountable to ensure that I do that to my full potential.

And so, for me, it's about saying, if you see disabling barriers, if you see things, ableist behaviors, if you see assumptions being made on behalf of people with disabilities, speak up. Raise the issue with people because very often these ableist notions are so entrenched in common practice and what we believe to be true that it needs to be disrupted in order to be looked at a different way.

So, before I wrap this podcast up, I want to be clear. It's okay to be an ableist. When you don't know you're being an ableist. And I think that, you know, even I find myself having ableist tendencies. It's so entrenched in how we're made up that it's something that needs to be disrupted to be changed, but that doesn't always come without that moment of self-awareness.

So for me, just be open to rethinking things. Be open to having conversations that you never thought of before. Be open to challenging and rethinking an assumption. And that is going to be that journey of change that will slowly kind of move you away from those ableist decisions. Well, that is my story for today.

Looking up the nostrils of ableism. If you want to change that, take a seat. That way I can see you square on face to face without that power imbalance. I've got many more stories that I'd like to share with you around disability confidence and how we can build a more inclusive and accessible world where everybody benefits.

Look out for more of my podcasts. And if you'd like to contact me, you can get hold of me on lisabradshawinternational. com.

Thank you so much for joining me today.