# Episode 4: Culture and Communication

Hello and welcome to episode four of this Australian Disability Network miniseries podcast on how to make Australian boardrooms more accessible and inclusive.

My name is Andy McLean. In this our fourth episode, we're going to look at culture and communication which are both inextricably linked.

So, let's dive in. Episode Four, Culture and Communication.

Directors set the tone for the rest of the organisation to follow. So, it's vital to foster an inclusive and supportive board culture that values diversity. There are several practical steps to achieve a more inclusive culture that welcomes people with disability and makes the most of everyone's diverse talents and experience.

So, in this part of the podcast, we're going to provide nine practical tips to build a positive, inclusive board culture. That's going to include number one, being open to diverse perspectives. Number two, taking responsibility. Number three, being accountable. Number four, thinking beyond your board. Number five, being proactive. Number six, offering mentoring and training. Number seven, holding inclusive events. Number eight, focusing on the person not the disability, and number nine, celebrating.

So, let's jump in and get started. So, the first of those tips was to be open to diverse perspectives. Previously, many traditional boardrooms would have been intimidating environments where people with disability didn't feel comfortable speaking up. Your aim should be a culture that allows everyone's contributions to be valued, respected and acknowledged. As a board commit to welcoming a diversity of perspectives. Directors with disability should feel comfortable to offer points of view based on lived experience.

Our second tip is about taking responsibility. Ultimately, every board member is equally responsible for ensuring an inclusive culture, and individuals can take on specific roles to support that as well. For example, you might nominate a board buddy for all new directors to assist in navigating the practices and processes of the board. You might also select one board member to lead on advocating and advising on disability related matters. And one board member might be nominated to act as first point of contact, often known as a Board Liaison for queries and requests from any directors with disability.

Our third tip is about being accountable. That means setting clear targets and expectations for disability inclusion, then regularly tracking and reporting on that progress. Hold directors accountable for meeting inclusion goals, commit to making continuous improvements and addressing emerging challenges and opportunities for inclusion.

Our fourth tip is about thinking beyond your board. And that's all about seeking support from those who specialise in diversity and inclusion and drawing upon their expertise and resources. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. For example, you can contact Australian Disability Network, there's a whole bunch of resources they have available that can help you.

Our fifth tip is about being proactive and that's really asking board members with disability what support systems would help them and then scoping out and delivering those.

Our sixth tip is offering mentoring and training. People with disability are underrepresented in most boardrooms, which means fewer chances to gain experience and knowledge. Mentoring and training such as that offered by Australian Disability Network can help your directors to build additional expertise and confidence.

Number seven, hold inclusive events. Board related social events help build culture and camaraderie. Don't assume that someone can't participate or doesn't want to be involved simply because they have a disability. Adjustments can almost always be made so that everyone feels included. So, ensure you consider how events can be made accessible and inclusive for any directors with disabilities. Consider access transport, parking, toilet facilities, noise levels, and any other relevant factors.

Number eight is about focusing on the person not the disability. How should you refer to a person with disability, use their name, refer to Susan who is super organised and chair of the audit committee rather than Susan who has cerebral palsy. If you make a mistake, apologise if you're genuinely trying to support a fellow director to participate. That's what really matters.

And our ninth tip for building a positive inclusive board culture is to celebrate. So, when you reach milestones on your access and inclusion plans consciously take the time to celebrate and to acknowledge directors and others who have contributed and consider how you might use your achievements to showcase your success and share best practice. You might inspire others to follow suit.

So that's a whole bunch of practical tips we've provided for you around building an inclusive board culture. After the break, we're gonna jump into some practical tips for communications.

Welcome back to this Australian Disability Network podcast miniseries, we're now going to jump in some practical tips for communications.

When it comes to communication, the most important thing is to treat everyone with respect. So, in this section of the guide, we're going to share some very practical advice to help your board use inclusive language and provide content that is accessible. Let's start with five general tips for good communication.

So, number one, developing guidelines. Amend your board charter to include clear and accessible communication guidelines that ensure all board members including those with disabilities can fully engage in discussions and receive information. This might include guidelines for offering to provide materials in various formats, such as Braille or electronic text, or it might include using inclusive language, which is something that we'll talk about in more detail shortly. And it might also include making accessibility a priority, again, something that we'll talk about in more detail shortly.

Our second practical tip for communications is around face-to-face interactions. So be considerate of the extra time, it can take some directors to do or say some things. Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort. Best practice is to ask a person about their accessibility needs and adjustments and not about their disability.

Our third tip is about speaking and listening. Look and speak directly to board members, even when they are accompanied by an interpreter or an assistant. Use a normal tone of voice when welcoming a person with disability. Don't shout, use hand gestures or speak extra slowly to someone who is hard of hearing or who has difficulty understanding. Just speak clearly. And never pretend to understand what a person is saying if you don't. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase what they've said or offer them a pen and paper.

Our fourth tip is around communicating with board members who have hearing impairments. Always make sure you're facing the director when you speak to them, so that they can read your lips if they need to. And don't cover your mouth or speak when your back is turned.

Our fifth tip is specifically for communicating with board members who have visual impairments. So, if a person is blind or has low vision, consider describing the layout of the area to them, especially any obstacles like stairs or furniture. And don't distract a guide dog or assistance animal by patting them or giving them food.

In a moment, we're going to jump into some practical tips for inclusive language, followed by some practical tips for accessible content. But before we do, a quick reminder on a point we've made earlier in the podcast series, and that's all about asking the person, don't assume. If you're unsure of how to provide an accessible boardroom for a director, the easiest approach is to stop and ask them. Every individual has their own requirements in terms of adjustments, and they're the experts. It's also incumbent upon board chairs and board secretaries to check in with their directors to ensure the organisation is meeting the individuals needs and maximising that person's contribution to the board.

Finally, when offering help, always wait until your offer is accepted before trying to assist someone. And on this topic. We'll now hear a few words from Sharon Paley, who's a Director for the Australian Centre for Restraint Reduction and Elimination.

**Sharon Paley** 08:45

The difficulty for me is I'm not good at disclosing because I don't, I don't visibly look like I've got any additional needs. And so probably it's also been sensitive to the stuff people aren't necessarily talking about up front.

So, if something doesn't seem to fit with what you know about that person, and they've disclosed that they've either got they've got some sort of disability, there's probably something they just don't want to get into. But by listening to sometimes to what they're not saying you're able to adjust things and make things work for them. And just be sensitive really to, to the stuff that isn't so visible.

When people have been a bit curious. I've then felt more comfortable to disclose, and every single time I've disclosed fully what my issues are, people have been really sensitive and actually kind of can't believe I'm managing in the way that I am.

**Andy McLean** 09:39

And that was Sharon Paley, now let's move on to practical tips for inclusive language. By focusing on the individual rather than the disability your choice of language can be a powerful force for inclusion, so here's six tips to get you started.

Number one, focusing on the person, not the disability, put the person first and the impairment second, for example, use person with disability or person with disability or person who is deaf or a person who has lived experience of disability. It's okay to ask the person what they prefer. But all of those examples we just gave there, put the person first and the disability second.

Number two, avoid the inspirational cliche. Directors with disability are just living their lives. They're no more superhuman in anyone else. Implying a person with disability is courageous or inspirational for just getting through their day. It might be well intentioned, but it's also patronising and offensive.

Three, avoid the victim cliche. Just because a director experiences disability it doesn't make them weak, a victim or someone to be pitied. So, avoid terms such as suffering from and struck down by or afflicted with or wheelchair bound.

Tip number four is about specific language so using words like share instead of disclose or declare. In a board setting the terms declaring or disclosing disability can seem like a director is divulging a secret. Instead, try using a simple phrase such as choose to share information about your disability.

Tip number five is about avoiding euphemisms or made-up words. While the intention is often good, it's best to avoid terms like differently abled or diffAbled or special needs. At best, they are euphemistic; at worst, they can be patronising.

And our sixth and final tip for inclusive language is about focusing on accessibility, not disability. Increasingly, we refer to accessibility action plans or access and inclusion plans rather than disability action plans. This makes the focus much more inclusive, and it incorporates the requirements of a diverse range of people who may have access needs, including older people, parents and carers of younger children and travellers. Similarly, car parks, lifts and bathrooms and are appropriately described as accessible rather than disabled or handicapped.

And that brings us to the end of this section where we've been talking about practical tips for inclusive language. Join us after the break when we'll be talking about practical tips for accessible content.

Welcome back to this Australian Disability Network podcast miniseries. So, in this part of the podcast, we're going to look at accessible content and offers some practical tips.

The accessibility of the board documents you produce will hinge upon whether or not you follow the best practice. So, a few simple changes that can make all the difference to your content and make it more accessible include using descriptive links, providing image descriptions, using true headings, using captions for video and transcripts for audio and video, considering readability and thinking carefully about graphs and tables. So, let's talk about each of those in a bit more detail.

First up using descriptive links. So, when you refer to hyperlinks use specific language that describes the destination readers are clicking on. Make sure the link makes sense when read out of context. And if the link will trigger a download on the readers device make this obvious before they click, for example by inserting Microsoft Word Document two megabytes in brackets.

Our next tip is about providing image descriptions, otherwise known as alternative text or alt text. These descriptions are picked up by screen reader software which is commonly used by those who have impaired vision. The description should be short and accurately reflect what is in the image. If the image contains text or a link, include this in the description too. If the image is purely decorative, your description could just state decorative, or you could include null alt which is two quote marks side by side. This is a cue for assistive technologies to ignore it.

Our next tip is about using true headings. Now true headings help screen reader tools to identify a heading hierarchy in your text. For example, H1 is level one, H2 level two and so on. True headings can be found in the Home ribbon of Microsoft Word, the format text ribbon in Microsoft Outlook, and the editing section of your website's content management system.

Our next tip is about using captions for video and transcripts for audio video. Captions appear on screen during videos to provide viewers with a textual transcript of the videos dialogue, sound effects, and music in real time. Transcripts provide a separate textual version of everything that has been said in video or audio, but can also include descriptions, explanations or comments.

Our fourth tip is about readability. Consider your audience and use language that is clear, simple and inclusive for them. Left align your text. Use Sans Serif fonts such as Arial, or Calibri. And make those fonts a minimum of size 11. And avoid excessive use of bold italics and underlining, avoid very small font sizes, and ensure good colour contrast between text and backgrounds, such as the classic black text on a white background.

And finally, graphs and tables which are obviously commonly found in Board Papers and can pose accessibility challenges. These visual elements when not accompanied by alternative text or descriptions, can hinder the understanding of critical information for those using screen readers or other assistive technologies. To enhance accessibility, it's essential to provide detailed descriptions or captions for each graph and table, ensuring that individuals with visual impairments or other disabilities can fully comprehend the presented data.

And that brings us to the end of this jam-packed episode. We covered quite a lot today. So don't forget that you can also download our comprehensive director's guide on improving access and inclusion in the boardroom at AustralianDisabilityNetwork.org.au That's AustralianDisabilityNetwork.org.au.

And that's where you'll also find episode five of this podcast miniseries, where we're going to look at recruitment and how that can increase the representation of people with disability on your board of directors.

As always, we'll be including input from directors who have lived experience of disability, and providing practical suggestions and recommendations that board directors can put into action today.

So, until next time, thanks so much for listening. And goodbye for now.