

EMILY HARRIS:

Welcome to the Disability and Philanthropy Forums Learning Series. My name is Emily Harris. I use she, her pronouns, and I'm proud to be part of the disability community. I'm executive director of the Disability and Philanthropy Forum, and come to you from the Unceded Land of the Council of the Three Fires, the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi Nations, now known as Chicago. As part of our commitment to accessibility, our speakers and I will each provide a short audio description. I'm a white woman with dark, curly hair and glasses, wearing a patterned pink and black shirt over a black turtleneck. Behind me is a wood and paper screen. My access needs are met today because we have CART captioning.

A few housekeeping items. There are two ways to access our live captions today. Use the CC button at the bottom of your screen. Or to access the captions in a separate window, see the link in the chat. Today only our moderators and panelists will be on camera. You will be muted throughout the event. This webinar is being recorded and you'll receive a link to the recording in the next few weeks. Although we will be using the chat to share links with you, it will not be available for you to communicate out. Instead, please use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to share your questions anytime during the session. We will try to integrate them into the discussion as they come in, and we'll also make time for questions at the end. If the Q&A is not accessible to you, feel free to send your questions to communications@disabilityphilanthropy.org. We'll be live tweeting today and hope that you will join us on social media using the hashtag DisabilityPhilanthropy. You can also follow along by connecting with us on Twitter [@DisPhilanthropy](#).

Before we start today's conversation, just a short reminder that disability is a natural part of the human experience. One in four US adults, 61 million people, have disabilities. And our community continues to grow as the population ages, and as people contract long COVID, other chronic illnesses, mental health, and other conditions where society creates barriers to full participation. We have a poll question that we will look at later in the conversation. Please answer it now. It asks what percentage of disabled people hold management positions? 9%, 36%, 3%, or 22%.

Before I introduce our panelists, I want to reflect about this moment in time. Yesterday, on International Women's Day, the disability community gathered for the funeral of Judy Heumann, often referred to as the mother of the disability rights movement. I can't think of a better way to honor Judy and all women leaders than to have a discussion about disability and leadership with two young women who are leading us into the future.

I first met Judy during the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 2015 when I had the opportunity to build and lead a disability leadership program as a legacy of that historic anniversary. Judy known as an activist, infiltrator, a mentor, and a friend to all, was hugely supportive of the idea that we could connect and mobilize disabled people to serve on boards, commissions, task forces, and as community activists in Chicago. She was the kind of leader who believed that leaders don't build followers, they build more leaders.

And I think that is one of the things I appreciate most about many of the people I've gotten to work with across the disability rights and justice movements. I met one of our panelists, Azeema Akram, when she was a fellow of that leadership program, now known as Disability Lead. And I'm thrilled that she is now bringing her own leadership to the board and program committee, and to her professional life in the state of Illinois as an administrative law judge for the Human Rights Commission.

And I only met our other panelist, Rasheera Dopson, recently. But my team and I were blown away by her essay in Alice Wong's Disability Visibility Project Blog about Black women and disability justice. And we felt that we had to meet and learn from her. You can learn more about both panelists from their bios that are linked in the chat. But what I want to do now is get right the discussion. So Azeema, would you please introduce yourself quickly, and tell us how has your personal story shaped how you navigate the world?

AZEEMA AKRAM:

Thank you, Emily. Absolutely. My name is Azeema Akram. I use she, her pronouns, and a brief visual description of myself. I am a South Asian woman with long, dark brown hair, and I'm wearing a pink button up shirt with a black blazer over it and black wire frame glasses. And I'm sitting in front of a virtual background that is a series of bookshelves with legal appearing books on the bookshelves. And I identify as being hard of hearing. And sometimes when that description is not enough to describe my needs, I will say that I'm partially deaf, and I wear hearing aids in both ears.

I discovered my disability as child. I was about three years old, and I was in a daycare center. My mom's best friend was one of the teachers there, and she knew me well. But she noticed that I wasn't following directions. And one day, I was playing in the back of the room. I assumed it was free time to play. And all of a sudden, I just got picked up by the shoulders and taken to a table. And I was shocked and humiliated. That was certainly not her intention, my mom's best friend's intention, I think. Now we know that she had actually asked the kids to move toward a different part of the room, and I didn't hear it. And so she just took matters into took her own hands. And she had a conversation with my parents who had no idea that I might have a disability.

And just a brief background on my family, my parents immigrated from Pakistan in the early '80s. And the culture there around disability, I mean it kind of depends, just like everywhere else, but some people think that disability happens to you because God is punishing you. And there's various religions out there. So this isn't applicable to any one religion. But so hiding a disability is something that became a theme of my childhood.

My parents, once they found out about my hearing loss, once I was diagnosed and I started wearing hearing aids, they were great about encouraging me to do whatever I wanted to do. They never made me feel less than or different than anyone else around me. But the flip side to that was that I didn't understand what my different needs were. I didn't know how to advocate

for myself and communicate what those needs were. So I struggled in elementary school, middle school, high school, and then I got to college.

Fast forward to college. And I requested accommodations through the Office of Students with Disabilities. And I also worked in that office as an assistant to someone who needed a wheelchair and had cerebral palsy. And I finally found community, people with different types of disabilities, but we all had something in common. And that really inspired me to be more open about it.

But then I decided to go to law school, and part of that decision was based on my disability. The fact that, because of my hearing loss, I preferred for writing, communicating in writing. So my reading and writing skills are strong. And so I decided to go to law school. And then I again ran into some hardships not knowing exactly what accommodations I needed in this type of setting, different treatment by my peers. Some of the professors refused to accommodate me. And the accommodations that I did have were cumbersome and exhausting because I basically recorded the class and went to class twice.

And after law school I had a job that I loved. And I was there for a couple of years, but then I had to quit after some difficulties getting accommodations. So the long story short on that is I left, and that was a blessing. It put me on the path that I'm on now. I found Disability Lead, as Emily described the organization. I became a fellow. And I for the first time really got to understand how I could use my disability in my leadership style and how that integration was crucial to being one of my strengths. And so Disability Lead really taught me how to lead with my full self. And now I'm in a job that values me, my skills, and my perspective as a Brown woman with a disability. So I think that's all I'm going to say for now on that. And I'll turn it over to Rasheera.

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Yes. Hello everyone. My name is Rasheera Dopson, and a brief visual description is I am an Black woman with brown skin and my hair is short, and I'm wearing a burgundy sweater with a gold necklace. And my backdrop is a teal bluish type color with a picture hanging up in the background, and it's a little blurred. And sort of just introducing myself, and even as Azeema was giving her story there, there's so many commonalities we share. I also, growing up as a person of color, a Black woman raised by a single mom, and being the youngest of my siblings, and being the only one in my family and my community to live with both a disability and a chronic illness and a rare disease.

And I use all of those distinctions very purposefully because I lived my life a lot in the margins of having a chronic illness, which developed into a disability. And my chronic illness also being labeled as a rare disease. And so I think statistically there's only one out of 25,000 people who have my condition. And so the first time I met someone else with the same condition and disability that I had, I was 25 years old. And so I grew up in the community where I very much

felt isolated. And the only people that I really trusted with my chronic illness and disability, who I felt understood, was my mom and my sister and my older brother.

And so my mom did a phenomenal job in really having to advocate for my needs, especially in school in which they didn't really know where to place me, because due to chronic illness, I missed a lot of time of my elementary and middle school education. So it was really difficult for me to matriculate during my educational process because there were large gaps in learning, and just having a lot of absenteeism in the classroom. But somehow I was passed along and I was able to graduate high school and went to college, and then went to college and graduated.

And really up until that point, even though I knew that I had a disability, because I had been in special education in which they typically placed me in for kids who had any type of medical complexity, they put me in special education. Not necessarily because I had a learning disability per se, but like I said, they really didn't know where to place me. And so even though I knew I had a disability and I lived with a chronic illness, again, I fell into a lot of those gray areas. And so I really didn't identify in being a disabled person. That word was never used in my home growing up. When my mom talked about my chronic illness or disability, they would just say, "Rasheera is special," or they would say that I was medically complex, all these different euphemisms to kind of talk around what I was actually dealing with.

And so I kind of had that same mindset. By the time I got to college, I completely wanted to hide my chronic illness. Because due to my chronic illness, I've had 103 surgeries. And so I was stigmatized a lot in school because of the, oh, she's a freak, and she's had all these weird surgeries, and is in the hospital all the time. So by the time I got to college, I wanted to completely run away from that and disappear from my disability identity.

But I realized that that didn't work because it was so much a part of who I am. And so when I became an adult and graduated college, I was thrust into this workforce environment that I was not prepared to handle or navigate as a Black disabled woman. And that was a very traumatizing experience. I faced multiple encounters of job discrimination, being let go from positions and jobs, and really facing a lot of bullying and teasing on jobs because unfortunately sometimes when people see differences, and being that I have both invisible and visible disabilities, people can use that and perceive it as weakness and take advantage of that.

So I experienced a lot of that fresh out of college. And so then I came to a point where I really had to embrace the disability identity and label because for me it was a source of protection. And that's when the ADA became alive to me because I was like disability, even though the world stigmatizes it, the label gives me protection and it strengthens me. And so kind of like Azeema said, I was introduced into this beautiful community in which I not only found protection with, but I also found a community and a family with.

And so since then, that was kind of 2016, I've been on this journey. I started getting really involved in grassroots advocacy in the state of Georgia and really connecting and diving head first. First I started in my chronic illness specific condition, and then I realized this is such much

larger than I am. So I got more specific in the disability movement at large. And so that's kind of where I've been working now for the past, I would say, eight years.

I decided to go back to school during the pandemic. I know. And I got my master's in public health because it gave the perfect platform for me to be able to advocate for health policy, especially for rural states and southern states that don't have necessary progressive laws and policy protections for people with disabilities. And so now I work as a public health researcher researching how to advance health equity for underserved and minority population groups. And so I'm really excited to be here today and to have this much needed conversation around disability leadership and what that looks like.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you both so much. Amazing to hear your stories. And that grounds us so much in conversation and in the experience, while so different in every community, but also so universal. I acquired my disability very much later in life, didn't even recognize that I had a disability until I got welcomed into the community through a professional encounter. And then all of a sudden started realizing I could demand my rights for things like people to use microphones under the ADA, which was revelatory. So completely understand that and resonate so much with how you both described that welcoming into the community and realizing what a strength that is both for you personally.

Let's close the poll and see the results. And when you do that, I'm going to ask about each of your definitions of leadership, but also to reflect on what we're seeing. So interestingly, the poll is showing that 42% of you thought that 9% of people with disabilities are in management positions. Only 1% of you thought that 36% of people with disabilities are in management positions. And 51% said 3%. 6% of you said 22%. So went from lowest to highest. And actually according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the correct answer is that 36% of people with disabilities are in management positions. So Azeema, can you talk a little bit about how you think about leadership? You mentioned how disability... Respond to what we're hearing in this poll about what that means about people's perceptions.

AZEEMA AKRAM:

Absolutely. First I want to say that I love that you mentioned Judy Heumann's definition of leaders. I think I'm going to steal that for my answer, but I also will describe a couple of things that I think are important to effective leadership, good leadership. So I think of a leader as someone who generates enthusiasm and develops others rather than just using them for what they bring to the table, but really developing them to become the next generation of leaders. Someone who shows how things are done instead of just knowing how things are done. Someone who depends on goodwill, not just their position of authority. Someone who says we instead of I, and fixes things instead of blaming, and asks without commanding. Those are some of the characteristics that I like to see in leaders that I admire and that I am trying to emulate.

And the interesting thing about the poll, when I talk about disability in the legal profession, and how to recruit, hire, and retain lawyers with disabilities, I think one of the things is that people often attend these lectures from a place of, I don't think I have anyone with a disability on my staff, and that's why I'm coming here, to learn how I can get people with disabilities to join my team. And I heard a quote by Joyce Bender, who's in Pittsburgh, who said, "You already have them." And I think that is what we have to shift our mindset around is that I think one in four adults, or maybe more than that, Emily, as you mentioned, that people are not necessarily disclosing, so the number is probably higher than we realize, but so many of us either have a disability, or know someone who has a disability, or you may acquire a disability later in life. So the number is much higher than we thought. So the poll, it was very interesting. So I'll turn it back to you, Emily.

EMILY HARRIS:

Well, and Rasheera, let's hear your thoughts about that, and also how these experiences that you talked about define your outlook and understanding of leadership.

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Yeah, I would definitely say as a researcher, so I deal with a lot of data on a daily basis. I thought the whole results were really interesting. And it's really a reflection of what we perceive to see in disability in leadership in general. And so I always say that data, it tells a story. Because like I said, it shows do we even know what disability leadership looks like and what's actually there? I thought that was really interesting.

I will say my interactions with leadership has really transformed within the past couple of years, especially when I decided to get an advanced degree in healthcare setting, public health, and entering into this medical school academia territory, that I'm first generation college student. And so I was not prepared for the hierarchy that's often found in these cultures. And so in medical culture and healthcare culture, leadership is very much seen as it has to look a certain way.

And part of the things that I talked about in the essay I was able to do for Disability Visibility with Alice Wong. As I was saying, oftentimes that images of leadership are shown as typically white male people who are tall, people who have loud voices, who are charismatic. And so for me, none of those words fit me, my personality. I'm short in stature, I'm five foot exactly. I have a soft voice. I'm Black. I like to dress a little sassy sometimes. And so none of those images that I grew up with portrayed leadership. And so even for me, having to retrain and recalibrate my mind into what exactly a leader is.

And I think what was really the icing on the cake is when I was actually able to have experiences, and one, being exposed to disability leadership, which is something also that I had not seen growing up. I've seen Black leadership, I've seen white leadership, but I didn't necessarily see disabled leadership. And so I think that phrase alone is so powerful. I was able

to be an intern for American Association for People with Disabilities, AAPD — some of you may be familiar with the organization — while I was in school getting my master's.

And I remember the first time they asked me, as a little intern, to come into the meetings for the staff, and I was introduced to Maria Town. And I was sitting there, and I don't even know if she knew that this is what was going on in my head, but I was sitting there thinking, this is one of the leading disability civil rights organizations in the country. And I'm sitting next to the CEO of this organization. She's a woman and she has a disability. And it wasn't that just the president had a disability. I will say probably over 70% of the staff were either gender minority, women or people who identify in being gender minority, and they were all leaders. That alone, I think, it really set the precedence for me to say that, not only is leadership as a disabled person possible, but it's happening and there are really people with disabilities out here who are really dominating and leading in their field. And so really that inspired me to say, hey, I'm actually seeing this in real life, and if they can do it, I can do it.

And so a lot of those things, that's what I talked about in that essay that I did with Alice Wong, was when I began to get more into these policy sectors, and just really it changed and transformed my mind into- we are now seeing more images of Black leadership. And then because the door is opening up for Black leadership to occupy in policy spaces, being able to work for a political candidate like Stacey Abrams, and her having a completely inclusive campaign, it extended the bridge and the table of equity to say, that not only can Black leadership come into the room, disabled leadership can come into the room, and they can coexist.

And I think the power of just being able to coexist. There doesn't have to be one over the other. But one of my most favorite sayings I like to say when it comes to leadership is the greatest leader in the room is a servant. And so when I was able to work on the campaign, when I was able to work with AAPD, what I saw most was not only disabled leadership, diverse leadership, but I saw people in the room who had the title of leader but had the heart of servants. And they were committed to serving their communities and to making sure equity was applicable for everyone.

And so I would say that that has been my experience with disability leadership, and how it's really something transformational to see evolve and what that's even going to look like in the next couple of years, especially as we go through some of these election cycles and seeing more disabled people elected to House of Representatives and to the Senate, and to different local or state level positions. I think for me, it encourages my heart as a disabled leader to see that this is happening, it's going to continue to happen, and it's very much going to be normal within the next five to 10 years.

EMILY HARRIS:

Wow. You both just have so much to tell us. It's fantastic. And we're really remembering here that we want to also make sure that philanthropy as an audience is hearing us and hearing

these stories. So I'm conflicted about what to ask you next. But one of the questions that I wanted to ask you, Azeema, was really building on what Rasheera had been talking about. What impact would it have if leaders self-disclose their disability and how would that change things?

And there's a question in the Q&A that is directly related to law school, but I think weaves into that. And the question I will read, so I'm sort of asking you to talk about two things at once with the idea that maybe you could give this person a little offline mentoring as well. But this person says, "I'm a person with a disability interested in starting law school. I'm struggling during the admissions process because although I would like to be open about my experience as a person with disability and how it motivates me to pursue law school, I am also aware there are stigmas within law schools, such as assumptions that people with disabilities will be extra resource administrative burdens or won't be able to uphold the 'rigor of law school.' I would really appreciate your thoughts." And I think you could substitute law school for any workplace, for the medical profession and public health, as Rasheera said. Azeema, what are your thoughts about that, and how do they relate to the self-disclosure of leaders?

AZEEMA AKRAM:

The first thing that I want to say, it should be always the baseline, is that self-disclosure should always be a choice. Even though I'm encouraging you to self-disclose. Self-disclosure will reveal the disabled leaders that you already have in the philanthropy space and invoke increased representation for others such as the person who's interested in going into law school. The first deaf attorney I met was in my first year of law school. Her name is Rachel Arfa, she's the commissioner for the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities in Chicago. And that was the first time I had ever met anyone with a disability in law school. But there are a lot of people with disabilities in law school, various types of disabilities. I would love to talk more offline about the law school question because every school is different, but they have to accommodate you.

And I will tell you that my personal statement when I applied to law school talked about my experience advocating for myself growing up, and how I thought that would make me a good lawyer. I thought I wanted to do disability related law at that time. So I disclosed during admissions in my personal statement. On the job, I will disclose when it becomes an issue. So my interview for this job that I'm in now was during COVID, during the middle of it. So it was virtual. And I didn't need as many accommodations because of the type of hearing that I have. And I had headphones and captions and all of that.

But in person, sometimes I will mention to people that I may ask them to repeat themselves, and it's not because I'm not listening to them, it's because I couldn't hear them. And I'm just wanting to make sure that I hear every word that they have to say in order to accurately respond. So those are my personal experiences with self-disclosure. Sometimes when I'm out and about in places of public accommodation, I don't mention anything at all. So it always depends.

And I think that self-disclosure would absolutely lead to a more inclusive workplace culture, just our culture in general. Because the statistics that we've talked about are so much higher than we think they are with respect to how many people have disabilities. So as I mentioned before, ultimately all of us would benefit from changes made for people with disabilities who self-disclose.

So some more examples from my personal experience, if I am conducting a trial, and I try to get everyone mic-ed up. If I have issues, I can plug in headphones. I work with my court reporters. Microphones and captioning, if virtual. And a lot of these accommodations that I need, other attorneys have come up to me. Some of them are losing their hearing due to age, and they've talked to me privately afterward, and said, "Everything that you did helped me out so much more. And I had never really had to ask for these things before because I didn't know how. So the fact that you just did it made me feel more open about telling you that I am sharing your experience." So you just never know.

We talk about some of the examples like ramps, and how that would not only help people who use wheelchairs, but people who have strollers or other various mobility aids. And another thing I want to mention about self-disclosure is it will force us to think more about, not just about accommodating, but actually having what they call a universal design. So making sure that everybody would have access to the same thing, rather than just having to find accommodations for people with disabilities to join those that don't necessarily. So those are some of the thoughts that I have about how it would reduce stigma and it should always be your choice.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you. Thank you. Rasheera, I'm going to do the same thing and combine two questions. So we were going to ask you to talk about how you would respond to a foundation leader who said, "We're not ready to bring in disabled people." And we have a question from the audience about whether you or Azeema can speak about transformation within an institution. How can an institution that is not currently centering disability and leadership and other practices work to embrace it?

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Well, those are two really great questions. The first one, to organizational leaders, especially in the field of philanthropy that you feel like my organization's not ready to accept disabled people. I would first challenge you to ask yourself why? Because when we're able to identify why you think your organization is not able to, I think then we can begin to find the answers to that why. And so you may be thinking as an organizational leader, well we don't have the necessary accessibility aids that we need in place. And so as an organization then I'll push back and say that, "Okay, well maybe we need to start doing additional research in what accessibility tools and platforms that we need to be able to facilitate and to house people with disabilities within the organization."

It may be I don't think our organizational culture is there yet where it's as inclusive and as friendly. And so part of doing our due diligence in creating and fostering an inclusive environment means that being able to identify, like I said, those necessary tools. So maybe bringing in a disabled speaker, a consultant, someone who can speak to how to create more adaptable or inclusive work environments. We hear about it all the time, DEI training, sensitivity trainings. All of those are very resourceful sources that can be implemented into an organization, and that can help facilitate and help you begin to recruit disabled people.

And then I will also say that I don't think we're ever going to be fully ready. And it's kind of one of those things that you just have to do it because it's the right thing to do. One of my favorite movies and quotes is *The Great Debaters*, if any of you've seen it. And she said, "The time for justice is always now." And so it's an act of justice to recruit and to secure disabled people in your organization and make them visible and soon.

And so I would say that take a leap of faith, and partner with your new disabled employees and your recruits, and see how you can work with them, work with us. And that's one of the things that we talk about in the disability community a lot is that's the power of allyship. That's the power of partnership. That we don't necessarily need you to do the work for us, but we need you to work with us. Taking some of that onus and building out a framework together in which we can make a sustainable organizational structure that's inclusive and that works for everybody.

And I'll say this, it's not going to happen overnight. Any type of systematic change is a process. We see Judy Heumann started advocating for disability rights in 1970. When I was attending her memorial service via stream yesterday at work, and I began to think of the decades of what she's seen and experienced in being a disability advocate. And then even today in 2023, and how we are still fighting for some of the things that she started. It just goes to show you that it is a process and it's not overnight.

However we keep the progress going, we keep the movement going forward when we are willing to put in the work, when we are willing to do the right thing, when we are willing to instill justice and partner with the disability community to keep this work going until we come to a finished work, until we come to a place of completion. So I hope that will answer the first question on how can we get more leaders in philanthropy to invite disabled people into their spaces. The second question, and if you don't mind, Emily, if you can read it again. I'm losing my mind at the moment.

EMILY HARRIS:

It's really, and you've touched on it already, but it's if you can speak about transformation within an institution. How can an institution that is not currently centering disability in leadership and other practices work to embrace it? So your example of bringing in speakers, just establishing practices. But it's transformation.

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Transformation is not a quick work, but it's one of those things that you have to look at the end goal. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. And so even for me, I work at Morehouse School of Medicine. It's a HBCU, historically Black college, traditionally Black platforms and spaces, they are not known to be inclusive or disability friendly. And this is just my personal opinion and some of the things I've witnessed in my profession. And so even me being a Black disabled woman openly in that space, just having the bravery, to what Azeema was saying, disclose my disability status. To ask my director to challenge research and advocate for people with disabilities to be reflected in data, that was me taking a leap of faith and being brave and saying, I may be the first one to kind of ignite this fire, but I definitely won't be the last.

And so I think it takes an act of courage to getting at, if you can get one person in your organization to bring disability to this space, then it opens up the door. And that's why we're truly thankful for people like Judy Heumann because it started out with her, or a small group of people, who opened the door for now millions of people with disability to be seen. And I think if we just start on that level and just thinking the power of one, the power of just speaking up. One of my favorite posts by Malala Yousafzai. She says, "I'm not just a lone voice, but I'm the voice of many." If we can just make a commitment to just be the one voice in the room, then it opens up the way for any voices to come into the room. And of course in this instance, we're talking about the voices of disabled people.

EMILY HARRIS:

What you just made me think of is a conversation I had with Judy Heumann at one point where she told me a story about how when she was, I believe in the Department of Education, and she had the opportunity to hire. And she said, "Bring me some resumes of disabled people." And they kept coming to her with resumes not of disabled people. And they said, "We don't know where to find them." And she said, "Go find them." And ultimately, but she said, as a leader, "I was not hiring somebody who's not disabled." And that always rings in my head, that equity issue. Oh, well, where do we find it? So to that end, Azeema, what are your thoughts about, not only bringing people into leadership and management in staffs of foundations, but also into board positions?

AZEEMA AKRAM:

So I'm going to actually use some points that I think apply even in other workspaces. First of all, people with disabilities are creative, innovative, they have to adapt to a world that's not built for them and have to interact with the world in which we all live. So a quote from an article that one of my friends wrote, his name is Michael Sabella, who's a deaf attorney, and this is in the American Bankruptcy Journal. He says that, "People with disabilities develop strengths such as problem solving skills, agility, persistence, forethought, and a willingness to experiment, all of which are essential for innovation." And I think that applies to every level, management, support staff.

Basically, if you exclude this group of people, you are depriving yourself of a rich candidate pool, as the situation that you just mentioned Judy Heumann sharing. "And so a more diverse workplace, whatever that may be, can reduce staff turnover. It improves employee productivity, it increases awareness of diverse needs of our customers, our clients, the company branding. It enhances the company's reputation. It can expand the company's market share to a significant section of the population." Again, these are coming from Michael Sabella's article. "And one study noted that if 1% more people with disabilities joined the workforce, the national growth domestic product could increase by 25 billion." And so looking at the philanthropic side of things, I mean just imagine what could be possible.

So some of the ways, I think Rasheera already covered several ways to transform an organization. And I think, so just to add a few more, would just be to include disability in your diversity statements. Just remember it because I think everybody's much more mindful, as Rasheera mentioned, DEI efforts. So your diversity statements, policies, and initiatives that will force you to hold yourself accountable for foundations having an onboarding process for board members, for your staff that's more inclusive and accessible, and then working intentionally to remove unintentional barriers. And that is what I think Rasheera was talking about also, about working with people to determine what could work best in different situations for people with different disabilities.

And I would say accommodations should just be a standard part of your culture. And when you're training your supervisors and managers about reasonable accommodation policies, this is really the heart of it, I think, is you want to emphasize your organization's commitment to inclusion. And that means that you will never say no. When someone asks for something related to their disability, the first thing out of your mouth should not be no. And you can ask questions. Maybe you have ideas that they haven't thought of based on your resources, things like that. But the first thing should never be no. I think most accommodations are free. And so this idea that we have about how much it costs to have people with disabilities involved in our organizations, I think is a myth, and it's a case by case thing.

But the first thing that you should do is try to find out more information, stay curious. And then budget for accessibility. Because you want to attract more people in your management, in your support staff. So you need to budget for that. And I'm jumping around a lot here, but I read some of the Q&A, and somebody asked about the buzzword of equality and accommodations and things like that. So I present regularly with a colleague, Rachel Weisberg, of Equip for Equality. And we talk, and they have a lot of information about workplace accommodations and accessibility for different types of organizations.

And I really like one thing that they put together, which is it kind of describes the difference between equality, accommodation, and accessibility. So they show this drawing, and maybe some of you have seen it, where there's three people. One, there's a man, a gentleman writing on a chalkboard. And he's about average height. And then next to him is a woman who is taller, who's able to reach it. And then a person in a mobility aid who's not able to reach the

chalkboard at all. And that is just equality. We're all standing on the same level ground, trying to reach this chalkboard with whatever we have.

Accommodation would provide a step stool for the man who's of average height really able to write on the chalkboard, a ramp with a platform for the person with the mobility aid to be able to reach the chalkboard. But then accessibility is simply just moving the chalkboard lower. And again, going off of what Equip for Equality has said here, "Accommodation is not the same as accessibility. Accommodations are for individuals and are reactive. Accessibility is for populations and is proactive. And accessibility should make content available to all in equally effective ways at the same time. Accessibility is the goal. Accommodations are just tools to reach it." So I urge you to think about that in your training, your onboarding, bringing in people in your leadership positions, as well as support staff, because you want this group of people to be part of your candidate pool. So I'll end it there and back to you, Emily.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you. I am seeing a couple of questions in the chat that relate also to the exhaustion that sometimes disabled people feel. Somebody asks, "How can you jump in beyond the equity without it just being a buzzword into actionable practice? How can you step into this nebulous space while protecting your own mental health?" Somebody else asked, "How do you feel about being the person who people keep turning to and saying, 'Rasheera, what should I do about this?'" Do you want to comment on that sort of phenomenon of bringing your advocacy to work, but also how you protect yourself?

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Yeah. I will say tokenism is definitely a thing, and I experience it a lot. And sometimes I take it, and then there are some days where I don't want to deal with it at all. And that's my choice. I will say that I was literally having this conversation driving home from work. And I was thinking how can we really combat tokenism? And I think we combat tokenism by providing more representation. When we silo an individual in the room, and we make them the go-to person for race things, for disability related things, to gender identity things, we force that person to become a token because there's only one in the room. And so that's where we begin to see the power of evolution and representation. That again, not keeping it to one person in the room, but then inviting people into the room where it becomes less about one and more so about a community.

However, I know that's not realistic for everyone. And so I think as an advocate, we have to have really real conversations around setting boundaries in our advocacy efforts. And I hate to use the word novice advocates, even though I still kind of consider myself a novice in some ways, but I tend to tell people who are really new to this space, you have to decide what mountain you're going to die on today. And that's just a really real answer because, advocates, we are impassioned, especially disability advocates who are really impassioned about the work. I am passionate embodied. And so I can go on one for a long period of time.

But I had to learn how to set boundaries and start to be strategic in my advocacy efforts. And so I would focus on what needs to be done now in a practical way. What can I put on the back burner? What can I delegate to someone else? And who can I collaborate and partner with other people? I think that's how we can alleviate the burden of feeling like we are a token or feeling burnout in a lot of our advocacy spaces is by collaboration, by setting boundaries about what you're focused on and why you're focused on.

And then really thinking, like I said, strategically in honing in what is it the exact thing that you're looking to achieve. And then once you're able to identify that, being able to find people and resources around you that can help you achieve what you want to achieve. And then I always say too, grab the low hanging fruit. I think a lot of times, and I get this a lot, people will see me that I'm in DC, I'm on Capitol Hill, I'm doing all these great important things that are very forward facing, hobnobbing with all the higher up people. And that's great. But after I do those things, I still have a job I have to come back to.

And so it's kind of bringing it in and grabbing the low hanging fruit. And so my job, it helps me to grab the low hanging fruit, that I'm working specifically on our project right now to engage people with disabilities and research. That is something that's obtainable, that's tangible, that's actionable, that I have a strategic thought out plan to attack, and then we'll go to the next thing. And so I think it just comes with experience and taking it in strides, and not being overwhelmed because we're always going to have something to advocate about. There's always going to be an issue, but every issue is not worth your mental health. It's not worth your identity and your sanity and compromising who you are in the space.

I think just when we really are able to hone in on what we bring to the disability space. I had to realize that my niche, and I felt guilty about it for a long time, that why did I have a passion to advocate for people of color with disabilities? And I had a lot of confusion around it because I didn't want to be pigeonholed or stigmatized at that, the Black girl who's advocating for Black disabled rights. But then I had a light bulb moment because I was like that's something that I shouldn't be ashamed of because it's something that is my lived experience. And so now in sticking with that, I'm able to say it's important to me because I understand the intersecting identities and nuances that come with being a Black person, a person of color, and living with a disability.

And so I made my choice to stand on that mountain, to advocate on that mountain. And I don't want to die, but I'm just saying if it took it there, I could take it there too. And so I think we all just have to come to that personal crossroads and really honing in on the why of our advocacy. And when you're able to hone in on the why and the outcome that you wish to see in your community. I cannot touch everybody. There's 61 million people with disabilities just in the US alone. There's no way I can reach everybody.

But I know that when I stand on certain platforms, people will put their ear to me because I am a Black woman, I am a person of color, I have a disability, and they'll specifically hear me. And so I encourage the person who is listening to really sit and understand your why. And then once

you're able to get your why and hone in on that, give it a 1,000%. You won't regret it. So that's my answer. I know that I kind of went around a way in answering that, but I hope that helps a little bit.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you. That is great. There's so many questions in the chat. It's kind of blowing up. And one of them relates to that, and I'm just going to mention it, but I'm going to ask you the broader question in case you want to come back to it. But building what you just said, Rasheera, there is question about how do you deal with leaders in philanthropy who say, "Yes, that's all very nice, but we really have to focus on racial equity right now?" That said, the bigger question is what is your call to action to philanthropy in elevating disabled staff members to leadership roles and to dismantle ableist practices? And we only have about three minutes left. So Azeema, do you want to start?

AZEEMA AKRAM:

Sure, sure. And I think I'm actually going to use some of what Rasheera talked about. So just what I would say, you can't ignore the intersectionality between disability and race, or disability with other things such as socioeconomic status. Like my parents being immigrants and their view of it versus someone maybe who was born here. So intersectionality, you can't ignore it. And if you are being turned away or if you feel like you have to put disability on the back burner, like what Rasheera said, the time for justice is now. And as I mentioned earlier, you probably already have people who are disabled on your team that haven't self-disclosed. And maybe that's something worth considering. And some of the statistics I gave earlier, again, you would just be doing yourself a disservice by ignoring this pool of people that intersect with race and intersect with the other aspects of the community that your organization is trying to serve. So that would be the first part.

And then, let me see here, what was the other... Call to action. I think it's pretty much the same. Yeah, just the time for justice is now, and you already have the people, even if you don't think so. So just keep going with it. When Rasheera mentioned that you're never going to feel like it's the right time, I thought about how people describe parenthood that you're never ready until you just... So I would say keep the ball rolling. I'm really thankful to everyone who's appeared today and attended, and listened to what we've had to say. Hopefully you can take away some of this information, and continue to look at other leaders in our community and what they have to say about this. What other information is out there? Maybe, Rasheera, I don't know if you have more to say about the data out there, but I'll turn it over to you if you have some closing remarks.

RASHEERA DOPSON:

Yeah, I would just, for my call to action, would be engage with disabled leaders, engage with disabled experts, invite us into your space, and we can work together to bring about systematic

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and organizational change that works and is inclusive for everyone. And so those are my closing remarks. I'm so grateful to have and share this space with you all today.

EMILY HARRIS:

Thank you so much. I could spend all day talking to both of you. This has just been a joy. It's flown by. For those of you who asked questions we didn't get a chance to answer, we will do our best to point you to resources on our website when we send the follow up email with the recording of this session. And your questions really do inform us.

Following the close of this session, you will receive a short survey. Please help us to learn from your experience by taking a few minutes to fill it out. And a link is also available in the chat. We hope you'll join us for our next webinar on March 23rd, which is a great follow up. It centers on disability and the lived experiences of people of color. And I can't wait to hear from our colleagues who are going to enrich us just as Azeema and Rasheera did today. So thank you both. Thank you all for being here with us, and visit the Disability and Philanthropy Forum.org early and often.