Emily Ladau:

Hello and welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. I am so excited today to have a friend of mine, Catarina Rivera, who is such a dynamic disability public speaker, and she's also a DEI consultant. And she'll be with us to talk about why it is so essential to incorporate disability into your diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. And I feel like people use DEI so frequently as this buzzy catchall phrase for efforts to create workplaces that are supposed to be welcoming to everyone. But then all too often disabled people are entirely left out of that equation, and Catarina really does fantastic work to educate people about best practices for meaningful accessibility and inclusion. So I know that I could not think of anyone better to be having this conversation today, but before we dive in, I would also love to have Catarina share a little bit more about herself. So Catarina, hi, I'm so excited that you're with us today, and I'd love for you to tell us what you do and talk a little bit more about your work.

Catarina Rivera:

Hi Emily. Thank you again for inviting me for this very important conversation. I'm thrilled to be here. So as you already said, I'm a public speaker, DEIA consultant and content creator. I work with companies and organizations to improve disability awareness, inclusion and accessibility. And like I said, I really try to make things approachable and easy. Because I started my career in education, I think that that's what I'm doing all the time. I'm approaching this work like a teacher. Someone who is welcoming, someone who's going to make things achievable. And in terms of my background professionally, I have two graduate degrees in education in public health as well as in accessibility certification. I focus on disability because of my own lived experience. I have Usher syndrome, which is the most common genetic cause of combined deafness and blindness. I've been hard of hearing since preschool.

I wear hearing aids. My vision disability was not discovered or diagnosed until I was 17. It was challenging for a long time to adapt, but I've been on this journey with my identity and now I'm in a great place. I feel that disability pride, I'm always sharing about this concept and talking about it. My biggest issues today are with inaccessibility in the world around me and barriers that make it unnecessarily difficult for me. I have to do a lot of work to adapt to this inaccessible world instead of the world adapting to me.

And so in terms of my services and things that I'm doing, everything's on my website, caterinarivera.com or in Spanish, I love to say Caterina Rivera [inaudible 00:03:23]. But yeah, I think that really where I started was just storytelling. I started Instagram in 2020 with blindish Latina. My goal was really to be everyone's disabled friend and unlock empathy because a lot of people don't know publicly disabled people in their lives. Knowing that just having a relationship with one person can reduce prejudice. I wanted to be that person for people online with fun content that's also educational. So I love connecting with my community who I call the stigma smashers.

Emily Ladau:

And I have to say that I have loved being a part of your community, and I know that we've gotten to even collaborate a bit just on showing people what it means to be out and about as disabled people in the world and experiencing joy and living our lives. And I think that what you do is so incredibly important because you provide these reminders for the people who follow you that disability is not just a niche issue. It's really part of what makes a person who they are, and it's part of their identity, and that's why it's so crucial to incorporate disability into the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But that being said, sometimes I think we can get a little ahead of ourselves in these conversations. And because as you said, your background is in education and you want to make things approachable and understandable for people, I think we should just back up a little bit and make sure that everybody is aligned on how we can understand what DEI work actually entails. So can you tell us a little bit about how you define DEI?

Catarina Rivera:

Well, sure. And it's so important to define terms and concepts like this because oftentimes they end up getting used without a deeper analysis or awareness of what they even mean. So let's go here with DEI. D stands for diversity, the E stands for equity, and I stands for inclusion. So we're talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Other letters that get added to make a modification of this acronym include the letter J for justice, the letter A for accessibility, and there are others. So I think it's important to note that there are different forms of the acronym. And when we think about what DEI work is about, it's about creating equitable workplaces for everyone. And it sounds simple, it's not simple to do. When we think about diversity dimensions, these are about someone's identity and is broader than you might think. So when we think about diversity and creating that diversity, that's who we have in our space or who we have in our organization.

We can look at identity dimensions like disability, race, age, caregiver status, immigrant status, veteran status, religion, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and so on. So I think if you are listening to that list, you probably heard something that you don't hear often when we talk about identity. But all of these dimensions are important to acknowledge and think about when we're trying to create true diversity in our workplaces. However, just having diversity is not enough. We need everyone to have equitable opportunities to participate in an organization and to really be included. Because without those two things, equity and inclusion, we don't realize the power of diversity. People don't get to express themselves, they don't get to contribute. So I think that's a very simple look at it, but it's also important to acknowledge that DEI work is not only part of human resources or a DEI department. It can exist at every level of an organization in all functions and all processes that happen in an organization like hiring management, employee engagement, marketing, communications, program design, product design, it is part of everything and it needs to be.

Emily Ladau:

I am so glad that you gave us some of that grounding in what DEI work actually means. Because as I mentioned earlier, I think it's a buzz phrase and people sometimes miss that there is work involved. This is a commitment, but it's not something that we should be intimidated by. It's really something that we should be leaning into because it's a way to make the workplace better for everyone. And so when I am talking about DEI, I do often add, as you mentioned, another letter at the end, the A for accessibility. And I recognize that that is sometimes where people are a little bit unsure. And I am really conscious of the fact that everyone who's listening to our podcast is at a different point on this journey of learning about disability.

And you and I share this value of meeting people where they are when we are educating. So I'm wondering what you might say to the people who are leading this DEI work who may not have considered why it's so important to include accessibility in their initiatives, and what is it that makes that aspect so essential to this work that would improve workplaces for everybody?

Catarina Rivera:

This is an important question. I feel such a sense of responsibility here because we're really talking about a foundational mindset that we need people in the DEI space to have. And yet it's so difficult to see that many people have not learned about disability, have not learned about accessibility. And I really want everyone listening to know that the message here is not that disability needs to be prioritized over other groups of people. We are not in a competition here. What is so important to recognize about accessibility and disability in particular is that disability is intersectional. That means anybody can have a disability, anybody of any other identity can also be disabled. And this is very unique. There's not many other identities that can intersect with every other identity like this. So the other thing that I think is very important to know is that not everyone even knows they have a disability.

Many people are not diagnosed yet for various reasons. There are barriers, there are issues with accessing specialists, sometimes long waiting periods, and sometimes it's just not recognized. There are also so many people who are disabled and know they have a disability but are not open about it, are not publicly sharing it. So when you don't include accessibility as a default, as something that extends beyond providing accommodations in the workplace, you are leaving so many people out. And these people are your employees. They matter. What the limitations of accommodations are, just to clarify, is that they're only provided upon requests for a specific individual, and they don't make the entire workplace inclusive. They are addressing one specific context for one person at a time. So I am always pushing for everyone to focus on disability, inclusion and accessibility because that will then support all your employees.

Unfortunately, disability is often left out of DEI. It's not often thought about. According to a March 2020 Harvard Business Review article, although 90% of companies claim to prioritize diversity, only 4% consider disability in those initiatives. I really hope the percentage is higher now. And I think that there's so much privilege in seeing the world from a non-disabled lens. You don't see the obstacles and challenges that we as disabled people face, the lack of inclusion and how much effort and emotional energy it takes to navigate inaccessible situations. Well, I'll share a story. I remember a holiday party at work, which was supposed to be celebratory. It was supposed to be very fun coming together with all my colleagues to celebrate during the holiday season. However, for me, as a deaf blind woman with limited vision in dark spaces, it wasn't something I was looking forward to.

It wasn't a space where I felt comfortable. The whole space was dark, dimly lit. It was seven o'clock and I was very hungry. I needed food. I know that people listening can relate to that moment when you are like, I need it right now. There was a buffet being set up, but the buffet area was not well lit at all. There was no additional lighting in that space, and I couldn't even see the food. I asked a colleague of mine that I worked with who was a friend to please help me get a plate of food. This was his first time helping me with something like this. So we kind of figured it out. He would tell me what the item was. I would shine my cell phone flashlight on it and let him know if I wanted it, he would put it on my plate.

I can't help but think, well, what did everyone else think who was observing this that couldn't raise their eyebrows, they couldn't have questions. There were many other colleagues who didn't know yet about my blindness and wouldn't understand why he was making my plate because I was often in a well-lit environment in the office. I memorized the office layout, I did not even need to use by white cane in the office. So I hadn't made a public declaration to everyone that I had only 5% of my vision remaining. But in this context, I really couldn't see. So this is just an example of how non-disabled people plan this celebration and didn't think about the inaccessible situation that they were creating. And that led to me feeling less included and less connected to my coworkers, which was the opposite of the company's goals and intention for this today.

Well, I hope that everyone doing this work realizes that there are many, many, many disabled people, at least one in four adults in the United States has a disability. We are in the workplace, but 79% of disabled employees are not disclosing to HR. So you don't really have a true sense of how many you have. You just need to assume that you have a big disabled population. And the problem is not a lack of disability disclosure. The problem is a lack of disability inclusion. So when you focus on accessibility, you're going to make a big difference not only for your disabled employees, but for everyone. So I'm going to give you some very simple examples here, and these all come from my TEDx Talk, creating inclusive workplaces for all. So if you want to review them again, they're in there. The one example is closed captions.

Many people benefit from captions. I benefit as a hard of hearing person. People with ADHD benefit from captions that helps them better understand information. People with auditory processing disorders, people who are English language learners, and anyone who is distracted or feeling a bit tired can benefit from having information presented in more than one way. Another best practice for accessibility is setting out meeting agendas in advance. This is not high-tech people. Receiving a meeting invitation without an agenda can cause anxiety or panic for some people. Meeting agendas help the deaf and hard of hearing follow the conversation more easily. They also help introverted employees prepare their thoughts ahead of time. Agendas help anyone who benefits from having extra time to process information.

And the last best practice I'll share here is sending meeting notes out or meeting summary. After a meeting has concluded is another way to be accessible and inclusive. Deaf and hard of hearing people don't miss any important action items or decisions this way. It also helps those with memory issues or learning disabilities, and it supports any busy person who can't find their meeting notes. So I just really emphasize that accessibility, focusing on that will create a better workplace for every single person that you have in your organization. So companies, employers need to prioritize disability inclusion and accessibility as they get hopefully even more deeper into their DEI initiatives.

Emily Ladau:

Catarina, I cannot tell you how much I was just nodding my head and pointing at my screen like, yes, yes, yes. And I think what is so great about everything that you shared is first of all, you gave people context about what happens in an environment that is generally inaccessible and unwelcoming to everyone. And you also gave such actionable to takeaways for how we can shift that in the workplace. And I know that there are so many times that I have been involved in events or meetings or gatherings or whatever the case may be. And so often people will say, if they even bother to check on accessibility at all, oh, well, we have a ramp. And there's this assumption that is made that you can do one thing to ensure accessibility. And that must mean that everyone is welcome and everyone is going to be comfortable in an environment.

And you talked about how we create these accommodations for people. And yes, that does serve a particular purpose, but it's for one individual and it's not thinking about how we can make a broader environment accessible. And so what I have tended to notice is that even the most well-meaning people who are on board with making workplaces more disability inclusive, people who are career DEI practitioners. They'll fall into this a trap of assuming that when we implement accessibility for one person or we implement one type of accessibility for someone, that it's really this one size fits all process. So we gave you the ramp, what more do you need?

But for me, as someone who has multiple disabilities, a ramp is great because I'm a wheelchair user. But once I get inside, I also am going to need captioning for an event because I have a hearing disability. So it's not a matter of just picking one solution that works for everyone. And it's not a matter of just implementing accessibility partially and then washing your hands of it. But I would love to talk about this misconception that accessibility is a one size fits all process. How do we counter this idea?

Catarina Rivera:

Well, you've already started with your personal story. I love that example of how you're a person with multiple disabilities. And that's something that people need to realize, like we exist. There are people who have chronic illnesses and mental health conditions, for example. We're all complex individuals though. Let's talk about this a little further. There's a difference between being inclusive and actually assuming that accessibility looks one way. We don't want to make assumptions. So let's just say... There's a frequent saying actually, if you've met one blind person, you've met one blind person. The takeaway there is that you cannot apply your learnings from your experiences with one blind person to all blind people. You still have to learn what each blind person you meet needs. Let's take me as an example. I went to a restaurant in Mexico City earlier this year where they saw me enter with a white cane, and they were so thrilled they pulled out a braille menu for me.

I appreciate the effort. However, I don't read braille, I don't know braille. And this is the case for many blind people who found out about their blindness or their blindness happened in adulthood, really have to make an effort to learn braille. I just don't read it. So that's not accessible for me, and that's why you need to ask each person about their needs, and you need to provide a wider range of options for everybody. I also don't use a screen reader, and that's another assumption that many people make about blind people that we all use screen readers. And that's not actually the case for everyone. I benefit from large print, readable fonts, fonts that are not cursive or have lots of variation in sizing, readable fonts, well lit environments because I need to read lips, but also light helps me make better use of the vision that I have.

And high color contrast. An example of a color contrast issue with digital graphics is when someone will use a light background, say a light pink background, and then put white text on it. There's not enough difference between the white text and the background for me to easily understand what's being presented in that graphic. So we need better color contrast. So I hope that everyone listening recognizes now that disabilities have variability and being accessible does not involve making assumptions about access needs. However, I do encourage you all to follow best practices for accessibility.

Learn as many of them as you can because when you implement those, you can create a higher likelihood that you are being inclusive for many people. So for example, when you are focusing on website design, one way to improve your website's accessibility for many people is to make sure your website can be navigated by screen reader users and those using only a keyboard to navigate. That will help a majority of people, but you're still going to have other people who have different access needs. So I hope that we all recognize that accessibility needs vary and that we really need to not make assumptions in this space.

Emily Ladau:

I think that disability has variability is something that needs to be a catchphrase in and of itself because that will help really shift the mindset away from this idea that disability is the same for everyone. And like you mentioned, if you've met one blind person, you've met one blind person. And I always take that further to say, if you've met one disabled person, you've met one disabled person because there are more than a billion of us. And so it's not possible for the experience of disability to be the same for every person because there's so much variability that goes into each of our lived experiences. And so I am so appreciative that you named that and you have been giving us already so many clear cut actionable takeaways. But I really love to make sure that anytime I am creating a resource or sharing a resource with people who are really committed to doing DEI work that we are giving them as much actionable information as possible in the hopes that they will begin to apply it.

And then also come back to disabled people and hire us as consultants and hire you, for example, as a consultant to really engage them on this work to put those ideas into practice. So if there's a foundation or an organization who might be more towards the beginning of the process of thinking about how they can incorporate disability into DEI work and they have been listening to this episode and they've taken away so many great ideas already, what are some other steps that they should be taking to meaningfully start the process of actually shifting their workplace culture in the right direction?

Catarina Rivera:

I think it depends on your organizational culture. You are the one who knows this. So I'm going to offer a few options. It's very important to start in terms of understanding ableism. Ableism is at the root of everything. When I define ableism, I say it's the idea that non-disabled people are more worthy or valuable than disabled people. This leads to discrimination, bias and internalized ableism as well for disabled people. Where we are contending with negative messages about ourself that we've gotten from society. So when we think about approaching this work for organizations that are open to a learning journey and going deeper, I would encourage you to start with ableism and then continue that learning journey by learning from disabled voices. Emily has an amazing book, of course. There are people like me who offer trainings and workshops and consulting, and you can go on that anti ableism journey.

So that is one approach that I recommend for people. For other organizations who are not sure if a learning journey will be the way to approach it. You can start with something concrete. You can start with addressing a process in your workplace and trying to make it more inclusive and accessible. Three ideas for this. One could be your accommodations process. The second could be your hiring process. The third could be accessibility in terms of your events and meetings, your in-person and virtual events and meetings. If you focus on your accommodations process, for example, you could make sure your accommodation process is clear that managers understand their role. That you reduce the amount of unnecessary "proof" you're asking for from your disabled employees. And look at what you have done historically. Have you been a partner in the process in helping people to figure out what accommodations might be best for them?

Or have you put the entire burden on your disabled employees to come to you and know exactly what the solution is? So if you're not participating in the process enough, you could become a partner and make it much more interactive. If you are focusing on your hiring process, you could look at the whole process from start to finish. Are you recruiting disabled candidates? Is your application process digitally accessible? If it is digital. Do you have standard accommodations or accessible practices for your interviews? For example, you could send your questions out ahead of time to every single candidate, and that would help deaf and hard of hearing candidates, that would help people who are neurodivergent. So it would help so many different people. You don't really need to know what they're coming in with and who they are, but just putting out a best practice that will work for so many people is the way to go, and that creates equity as well.

So there, there's so many aspects of the hiring process that you could definitely look at and improve. And one aspect that some companies I think should be doing is having the candidates actually do a task or project related to the role and paying them for that, for their labor. And that's a way for people to shine in different ways who may not shine in a verbal interview. If you're going to focus on your accessibility policy for events in person and virtual, what I love about that is you are going to create a standard that your organization will follow and hold everyone to that standard. There's bound to be improvement from that, from creating clarity around what is actually inclusive and accessible for meetings and events, training everyone on it and informing them of the new policies and putting budget. So if you're going to have ASL interpreters, you have to add budget. Those are concrete improvements that will make a difference in your workplace. So I hope that this offers something to different organizations with different organizational change personalities.

Emily Ladau:

I got to tell you, I hope that people are taking notes. And I know that when I listen to podcasts, I am sometimes doing other things around my apartment or I am on the go, but I really hope that people are sitting down with this one and processing all of the incredible tidbits that you have been giving.

And as we wrap up, what's important to me is making sure that we leave people with a call to action. And so the insights that you have been sharing are so relevant to so many different sectors. But of course, we are a podcast that is speaking to in many ways a philanthropic audience. And so I would love to know what you think needs to happen across the philanthropic sector to ensure that we are moving in the right direction toward disability inclusion. So often I am out there reminding people that every issue is a disability issue because every issue impacts disabled people. And so when foundations are funding anything, they should be keeping disability in mind. And when they are focusing on their internal practices, they should be keeping disability in mind. And so those are my consistent calls to action, but I'm sure you have more that you can add to that. So what is it that you would like to leave our listeners with who are part of the philanthropic sector?

Catarina Rivera:

Throughout the philanthropic sector, we need everyone to be part of challenging your work and your movements to be truly intersectional. We have to include disability. It has to be a foundational piece of what you're doing. And if you are a funder, you need to be the person that is pushing the programs that you're funding to make sure that they've included accessibility, for example. Whether it's their physical space, the way the program's conducted, whatever it is, we don't want people to be left out in our communities. And being the decision makers in the philanthropic sector means that you have a responsibility and an opportunity to make a difference because oftentimes you are setting the guidelines that organizations are going to follow. Please remember, we can't create true change in our world. We can't solve the problems of our societies without including disability in our change work.

An example of this is employment. We have so many disabled people that are talented, ready to work, but the way employment is structured in our country is not welcoming to disabled employees who might need perhaps more flexibility or remote work schedule or a different way of working. But we are here, we're ready to contribute. So unfortunately, there are so many disabled people that are underemployed or who are not employed and are then, it's interconnected to other issues with accessing healthcare, with having housing, food, all the other things. So let's always consider disability and be the person to ask these questions. Have we considered disability? Have we considered accessibility? That is what I would like all of you to do. And please go by the social model of disability. Don't try to fix disabled people or cure us. Focus on creating a more inclusive world and building that into all the work that you are doing.

Emily Ladau:

Catarina, you are a star, and I am so grateful for everything that you shared with us today and for leading us with that really crucial call to action. And I'm sure that there are many people after listening to this who will say, where can I find you and how can I continue to be a part of this work? And so can you let us know where we can find you on social media?

Catarina Rivera:

For sure. I am on LinkedIn at my name, just search Caterina Rivera. I am posting at least three times a week there. I'm on Instagram @BlindishLatina. If you follow me on Instagram, you'll get more of a glimpse into my travel lifestyle as well. And beyond that, I send out a weekly newsletter every Thursday. It is a personal non-salesy message, and that's one of my favorite ways to connect with people. So if you want to sign up for that, go to my website and sign up for the newsletter. You will get some free resources that you can use right away in your workplace. And I also have an accessibility ebook, so I look forward to connecting with all of you. Thank you again, Emily, for having me.

Emily Ladau:

Thank you, thank you, thank you. And thank you also to everyone who took the time to tune in. I'm so glad that you are with us on this learning journey about disability. And if you'd like to keep your learning journey going, in addition to checking out all of the resources that Catarina has to offer, I really encourage you to visit disabilityphilanthropy.org and check out the resources that we have there. Thank you so so much for listening, and we'll see you next time on Disability Inclusion Required.