**Donna Purcell – EEON Summit 2018 Speaking Notes**

**Part 1**

* ***Providing an exemplar employee experience for people with disability (personalisation and not labelling or boxing people)***
* ***The changing narrative of disability (non-deficit language)***

**To D&I practitioners, Unconscious bias is a term we are all familiar with and it certainly still exists when we consider it in the context of disability or, accessibility and inclusion.**

We have heard it all before:

* Isn’t it great that people with disability can have a job: It’s so nice we have created jobs for some of them.
* Can they manage? What jobs can they do?
* Will they take more time off than my other staff?
* Isn’t it great we can employ those people?
* How much will it cost

**What do you notice about these attitudes (seek audience participation)**

(negative –condescending, judgmental)

We need to move beyond this level of thinking and bust some of the negative assumptions or stereotypes that exist.

And, I think one of the best ways of doing this is by changing the language we use.

Roman

* Negative attitude and assumptions - where does it come from? Mainstream Recruiters
* Influence hiring managers
* Affirmative Action Approaches - causes backlash?
* Strategies: Focussing too much on representation (Noah’s Ark) - genuine inclusive practices results in greater diversity

**I have been working in the area of disability and diversity for most of my career and it saddens me to witness the slowness in which these negative attitudes are changing.**

**Where does this attitude come from and why are workplaces so slow to improve inclusion of people with disability?**

**I know it is a generalisation however, I think the recruitment sector play a big role:**

* **Mainstream recruiters feel they need to put the best candidates forward to companies and there is an assumption this does not include people with disability.**
* **Disability Employment Service providers often direct people into entry level roles rather than matching professional skills with vacancies.**

**As employers, I feel we need to do more to educate recruiters.**

**We need to ensure if we are using mainstream recruiters, we tell them we want to recruit from a diverse talent pool including candidates with disability.**

**We need to send our vacancies to DES providers and encourage them to look at skill matching, not just pushing candidates forward to get them off their books.**

**In addition, we need to consider targets.**

**If your workplace does not have a good representation of employees across all areas of diversity, then consider setting some aspirational targets to improve. We have seen this successfully achieved through increasing representation of women in leadership so let us take this learning and apply to our other diversity groups to improve workplace inclusion.**

**So let us return to looking at language we use**

At Commonwealth Bank, our Disability Employee Network has a tag line of:

**Disable the label!**

Some thoughts for you to ponder:

Is the label “disability” a help, a hindrance or something in between?

**Why is it that so many people feel uncomfortable being asked if they have a disability?**

**And, why do we ask or, expect people to ‘disclose’?**

**Do you think we have a problem with the language we use?**

Let’s look at some definitions:

Disability…

Dis: A Latin prefix that means not or none or

…“apart”, “asunder”, “away”.

It means Absence of, lack of, away from…ability

Disability is a negative prefix that sets a person apart from others or stigmatises them.

* It creates a stigma that leads people to treat those they recognise as having disability differently.
* It creates stigma, when I go out shopping with a friend and the assistant asks my friend if I need help rather than speaking to me directly.
* And it creates stigma if we are asking people to disclose disability in the workplace. Disclosure is again a negative word and indicates a person has some great secret they need to expose!
* We need to change the language we use and the way we frame disability and disclosure.
* We should be asking people to share information or asking people in the context of any requirements for accessibility.
* Think about people and talent first, then how individuals may be supported if they have a particular health condition or access need.
* At cabs, we changed the language in our culture surveys from asking about people with disability to asking people if they identified having a range of conditions. This changed the response rate from 3% to 12% simply by taking away the focus on conditions being labelled as disabilities.

I also think it beneficial if we think in the context of universal access and inclusion for all. What do I mean by this?

If we think of universal design like removing steps and having ramp access to a building, this not only creates access for those people who may struggle walking up stairs but also creates access for parents using a pram, delivery trolleys or the ability to move those large mobile waste bins around our organisations.

Universal design and an attitude of inclusion ensures everyone has equal access.

It enables inclusion and treats people with dignity and respect rather than creating a focus on a disability.

What do you recognise these people for?

Jamie Oliver

Lady Gaga

Robin Williams

Is it relevant or important that Jamie has dyslexia?

Or, that Lady Gaga has Fibromalgia a long term condition that can cause pain all over the body and,

We remember Robin for his quick wit and humour and his acting ability. Not his bi-polar or depression. This only became a focus when he died.

So, why can we accept these people for who they are and the jobs they do but we don’t approach people in the same ways in our own workplaces?

Dis…ability, is inherently negative.

And I have some other issues with this word.

It labels people. And people are not labels, people are people.

It defines us in terms of what we can’t do. Not what we can do.

I do not have a disability; I am blind however, the disability is created by the lack of access and inclusion at work and through community attitude.

Or, by making assumptions about my ability or making decisions about what people think I can or can’t do.

It is people who give me a printed handout at a meeting that creates a barrier and lack of inclusion.

This can easily be overcome by thinking about inclusion before the meeting and sending me the document prior so I can bring it on my laptop.

This is being treated with dignity and respect and in the meeting; I am on an even playing field as my colleagues as I have access to the same information.

When we are recruiting, we are not hiring people because they lack ability.

We are actually hiring them because they are people with ability.

So why, if a person has a particular health condition do we feel we need to label them or treat them as “special”? In addition, why do we see the disability first before the ability?

Think about the language we use:

For example, we call Autism a disorder. Yet we employ people on the spectrum who smash data, concentrate better than most of us, do their job more accurately and faster than those who are not on the spectrum.

There is nothing disordered about the way people with Autism do their job.

**In addition, we are not inspirational. Only yesterday I was in the kitchen at work and a person said to me she was so proud of me because I had a job at CBA.**

**A lack of awareness creates clumsiness and the wrong language.**

This attitude instantly insulted me and made me angry.

The other side of this is where people think you are extraordinary or amazing because you have a disability. Alternatively, where you become the poster person for diversity within a workplace because you are defined by your disability.

In closing, we need to be more aware of the language we use and how we think and talk about diversity in our workplaces.

I believe that time is up for “disability”. The word may have utility in some settings however I believe we need to start questioning and challenging the labels and language we use in the workplace.

It is not hard to drop disorder from Autism, and talk about mental health rather than illness. It’s easy to use commonly understood words like arthritis or back injury.

Language has the power to include. To make a person one of us. To focus our minds on talents. And to change the way we think about one another.

If we do this, then one day an employee, who uses a wheelchair, a person with a guide dog or someone on the autism spectrum will be seen for what they bring and not the condition they have or technology they use.

We need to focus on capability, commitment, and contribution and stop labelling and boxing people.

I think time’s up for disability in the workplace, because people are not labels.

People are people. And what we are interested in after all is their ability and what they bring to their role, and there is nothing “dis” about that.