WEBINAR FOLLOW UP

# Unlearning Ableism: Disability in the Age of Social Media

Leadership Council-Exclusive Resource

In celebration of Disability Pride Month, the National Organization on Disability hosted a conversation with content creators and disability advocates Cole and Charisma Sydnor of **Roll with Cole & Charisma**, and Catarina Rivera, known online as **Blindish Latina**, exploring how authentic representation in media can challenge ableist assumptions, reduce stigma, and create equitable experiences for disabled individuals.

# Storytelling as Advocacy

Digital platforms have become essential spaces for advocacy. In creating intentional spaces where disabled creators can show up authentically and consistently, organizations are helping to dismantle stigma, build empathy, and normalize the everyday experiences of individuals with disabilities.

## To incorporate storytelling into accessibility and inclusion efforts:

- Host panels, webinars, and guest speaker events that feature diverse disabled voices.

- Combine lived experience in presentations in addition to academic perspectives.

- Offer platforms for employees to voluntarily share their own stories (e.g., blogs, newsletters, video spotlights).

- Ensure all storytelling spaces are accessible and inclusive in format and facilitation.

- Share daily life, travel, and relationship experiences in order to contribute to a growing shift in public perception grounded in relatability and understanding rather than pity or tokenism.

# Education Through Conversation

Unconscious bias shapes how disability is understood and represented. Exposure to real stories told by disabled individuals is the key to reshaping these narratives.

**Best practices to shift perceptions include:**

- Acknowledging personal bias without guilt or defensiveness, and instead with an openness to learn.

- Engaging with diverse voices and experiences.

- Providing a platform that showcases the variety of lived experiences in our workplaces and communities.

These approaches emphasize the idea that learning about disability is an ongoing process, not a one-time training.

"What we don't understand, we judge. So, take the time to learn."

– Charisma Sydnor

# Addressing Ableism in the Workplace

Ableism appears in the workplace in both everyday language and environmental design. Phrases such as "the blind leading the blind" or "falls on deaf ears" reinforce harmful stereotypes. Describing something as "crazy" or "insane" contributes to ongoing mental health stigma. Beyond language, ableism can be embedded in physical spaces, workflows, and policies.

**Beyond language, ableism can be embedded in physical spaces, workflows, and policies. Examples include:**

- Not sending meeting agendas in advance,

- Hosting events in loud, dimly lit environments,

- Holding long meetings without adequate breaks,

- Placing kitchen appliances or supplies out of reach,

- Using high-effort or inaccessible doors, and

- Assuming someone with a visible disability can't perform a job function without asking.

Inclusive workplaces are continually reassessing, and that begins with listening. Ask "How can we support you in performing your role?"
Then, respond with respect and action.

# You Asked, We Answered

Below, you'll find responses and resources to the questions submitted during the July webinar.

## Ableism & Awareness

**What sort of tools are there to use when trying to educate yourself more on ableist language that has become ingrained in so many people's everyday vernacular?**

A key theme throughout the webinar was the importance of learning and exposure, making self-education a great first step. To learn about ableist language, review the National Education Association has an excellent [How to Unlearn Ableism](#) guide, discussing the pervasiveness of ableist language and disability etiquette.

We also recommend revisiting our earlier Key Fundamentals resource on disability inclusion. It includes a section on inclusive language that's especially relevant to this conversation.

**In my journey to unlearn ableism, I've learned that there are many compliments which to a disabled person can come off as patronizing. What are your thoughts on compliments for genuinely impressive feats like being good at sports?**

Who doesn't love an acknowledgement of a skill or feat?! While compliments can uplift, intent and context matter. It's important to focus on the accomplishment itself, not the disability. Avoid calling it "inspiring" or implying that the feat is impressive only because the person is disabled. Intent and context make all the difference.

**Good compliment:** "That was a great performance, you've clearly trained hard."

**Bad compliment:** "I can't believe you can do that! That's amazing given your condition."

**How can social media be used to help people understand/accept that mental health conditions are disabilities, covered by the ADA?**

Social media is a great platform to educate broad audiences about mental health and further establish it as part of disability. Posts can highlight real stories, ADA facts, and resources from trusted organizations like NAMI. Using hashtags, infographics, and short videos can help spread the message and reduce stigma, reaching large and diverse audiences.

Check out our partners, the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), who frequently share support and education resources.

# Advocacy Initiatives

**I am a disabled college student advocate who is currently challenging my own university on ableism. How do you go against systems that are supposed to encourage accessibility but aren't?**

We're sorry you are encountering problems with a system that is supposed to protect and lift you. We encourage you to challenge inaccessible systems by documenting specific barriers, referencing ADA and university policies, and gathering peer support. Approach leadership with solutions and best practices while centering disabled voices and pushing for transparency. Persistence, collective action, and strategic storytelling are key to shifting institutional ableism.

**As we think about the potential cuts to services or even the negative stigma connected to disabilities, what are ways we can prepare our communities that may be affected?**

Cuts to essential services and ongoing stigma around disability demand immediate, intentional action. To prepare and protect affected communities, center disabled voices in every stage of planning and decision-making. Strengthen local advocacy, amplify lived experiences through storytelling and public forums, engage policymakers directly, and ensure all communication is accessible and inclusive.

**How can we support employers with being willing to provide reasonable accommodations for disabled employees? I have had a disability my entire life, and I find that many employers fight accommodations requests which can make it difficult for folks with disabilities to remain in the workforce?**

To support employers in providing reasonable accommodations, start or join a disability-focused Employee Resource Group (ERG). ERGs educate employers, advocate for inclusive policies, and give disabled employees a platform to voice their needs. Partnering with HR through an ERG helps push for practical changes and holds companies accountable for fostering an inclusive workplace.

**Do you ever feel like you experience burnout regarding being an advocate? If so, how do you avoid that?**

The emotional weight of advocacy often leads to burnout for those involved. It's important to recognize that making an impact is difficult when you're exhausted or burned out. Taking breaks and disconnecting (even if it feels counterintuitive) is essential. Along with this, setting reasonable goals, delegating tasks when possible, celebrating small wins, and connecting with supportive people can help sustain your energy and resilience.

**I acquired my spinal cord injury at 12-years-old, and many years later I am still adjusting. How can I advocate for myself and others as a more shy and reserved person?**

Advocacy is not one-size-fits-all, and shyness and self-advocacy are not mutually exclusive. You do not have to be outspoken to advocate effectively: conversations in small groups and one-on-one, expressing yourself through writing, and setting boundaries are all forms of advocacy. Being reflective or reserved does not make your voice any less valid or impactful.

# Allyship & Support

**How do we as an organization support our deaf colleagues?**

People with a hearing disability represent [2% of working age adults in the US.](#)

To foster positive interactions with people with hearing disabilities, use these best practices:

- Wave your hand or tap them on the shoulder to get their attention.
- Face them directly, speaking clearly and naturally, and avoid covering your face.
- Use natural, appropriate facial expressions and body language.
- Speak directly to the person — not their interpreter (if they have one).
- Be mindful of your surroundings by selecting well-lit areas with minimal background noise.
- Enable captions in conferencing and call platforms.

**Can you share how allies should approach people with disabilities - i.e., should we offer to help someone cross the street or is that considered ableist? I struggle with wondering whether I'm offending someone who might look like they could use assistance.**

It's okay to offer help, but don't *assume* it is needed. Never grab or move someone without their permission. This also applies to personal items like wheelchairs and canes, which are considered extensions of the body. If someone rejects your assistance, accept that graciously. If they do accept your assistance, ask them what specifically you can do to support them.

Be sure to follow these other general guidelines too:

- Acknowledge the person directly.
- Respond graciously to requests (or rejections) for assistance.
- Ask before you help and do not make assumptions.
- Don't let fear stop you from interacting with someone.
- Be respectful and apologize genuinely if you make a mistake.

A special thank you to our panelists for sharing
their insights and experiences.



**Catarina Rivera**
@BlindishLatina



**Charisma Sydnor**
@HappilyCharisma



**Cole Sydnor**
@Role.with.Cole