A WIRC learning project

Disability and Leadership:
New Challenges – New Possibilities

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Preface

This learning project has been guided by our collective ambition:

with partners, colleagues, advocates and friends across business & enterprise, public service and the voluntary sector, to ensure that the perspectives, talents and contributions of disabled people are firmly embedded within the new post-Covid leadership endeavour, and in all spaces and places.

This short report summarises key learning from an exploratory project on disability and leadership (D&L) seed-funded by the Work Inclusivity Research Centre (WIRC) at the University of Birmingham. We identify several 'big' possibilities that emerged from an early scoping literature review on this topic, and from guest speaker presentations and participant discussions at our WIRC Webinar held on 2 June 2021.

In break-out sessions during the Webinar, participants were invited to react to presentations from three influential guest experts, and to share their own experiences of and around three interrelated D&L themes:

D&L theme 1: To what extent are disabled people making progress in/with leadership roles? What is getting in the way?

D&L theme 2: What could people in positions of power and influence (business, education and voluntary-sector leaders and policymakers) do to improve progress?

D&L theme 3: Beyond the current Covid-19 pandemic, what might the term 'successful leadership' in business, education, the voluntary sector and public policymaking comprise or mean for disabled people?
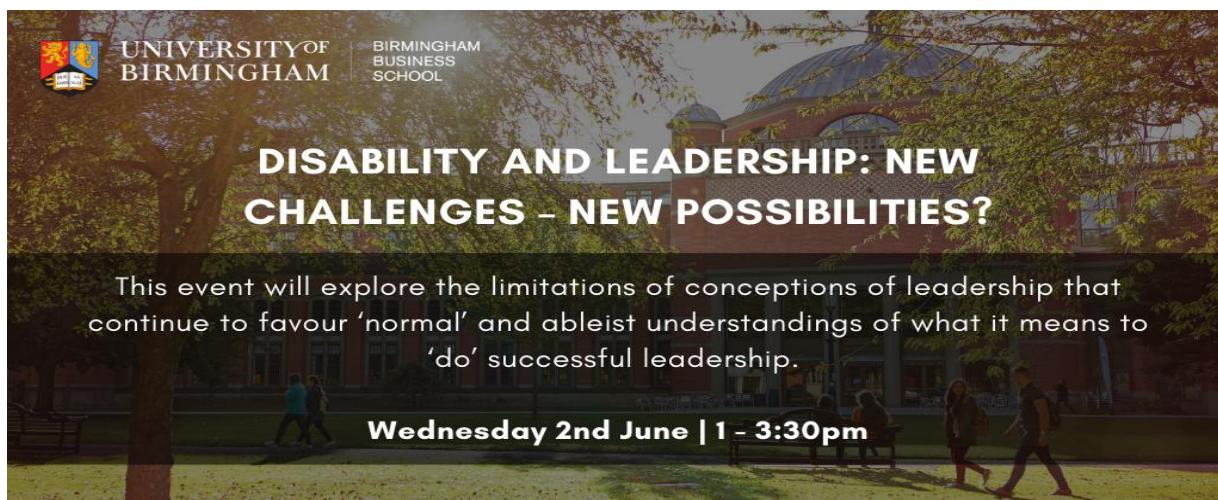

Figure 1. Advertisement for WIRC Webinar, June 2021

Acknowledgments

Thinking about disability and leadership

Conventional hierarchical, leader-centric and 'semi-conscious' performance-metrics-oriented conceptions and practices of leadership generally favour 'normal', and at times overly ableist, understandings of what it means to 'do' successful leadership. So just who can be thought of as a 'leader'? Who is allowed to be a 'leader'? How should 'leadership' be enacted, and what does 'doing' successful leadership mean for disabled people?

We argue that it is possible to surface a much more *expansive, socially literate and co-creating idea of leadership* that will be 'fit for purpose' for disabled people in the post-Covid world, informed by the most contemporary research and insights around equality, diversity and inclusion, and thus including how we might understand, explain and enact leadership differently. Consequently, fresh reflection is now essential to enable new discussions of how concepts of leadership can be further developed through the unique perspective that disability brings. This should focus both on the unique skills and experience that disabled people bring to leadership as a result of dealing with their impairments and ableism on a daily basis, and on how more flexible and open definitions of what constitutes 'leadership' might empower marginalised groups to take on formal decision-making roles.

Beginning with our WIRC scoping webinar held in June 2021, in parallel with a review of the literature, we seek to initiate new thinking and interdisciplinary debate about how and why differently conceived approaches might better address obstacles to the participation and representation of disabled people who occupy formal leadership and decision-making roles across business and enterprise and public-service settings. This is because we feel that there are still many challenging issues around enabling equality, access and inclusion for disabled people. In particular, improving levels of participation and representation requires a significant re-think of the meaning(s) and purpose(s) of leadership and its everyday practices, including the perspectives and talents of people with lived experiences of disability and work.

How are we contributing to the principles of WIRC?

Through our ongoing learning project on the theme of D&L, we aim to encourage scholarship and engagement, and influence work across the main equality, diversity and social justice activity streams of the WIRC. In particular, we contribute to:

- the WIRC **Diversity and Inclusivity within Organisations** stream through investigation of organisation- and individual-level experiences of leadership, access to leadership roles, and barriers to such access, by and for disabled people;

- the WIRC **Inclusive Governance and Employee Voice** stream through consideration of disabled workers' voices, and the extent to which they are genuinely expressed, listened to and responded to within organisations.

- the WIRC **Labour Market Inequalities and Disadvantages** stream, through critical reflection on, and analysis of, representations of disabled people in leadership roles and their access to such roles.

Why do we need to address the meaning(s) and practice(s) of leadership – and why now?

At a time when the disruptive economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 health pandemic are radically changing conditions of employment, business and enterprise for disabled people, the following points are clear.

- Disability is not a 'silo' issue in the workplace. It touches everyone at some time in their lives.

- Despite progress achieved to date, disabled people of all ages continue to have to work hard in the workplace to overcome political and cultural constructions of them as dependent, 'vulnerable' and less capable of performing as 'ideal' leaders. This leads to reluctance to disclose disability and efforts to minimise and mask it, and sometimes to a perceived need to act as a 'disabled super-performer', well above the level of non-disabled peers. Both have potentially damaging impacts on people's health and well-being.

- Leaders within organisations have responsibility for ensuring disability equality for both employees and, where a service is provided, users. Hence, we need to better understand what supports successful leadership on disability equality and inclusion, including the presence of disabled people in decision-making processes, and other structures that encourage and support leaders' accountability for disability issues.

- Disabled people remain significantly underrepresented in (formal) senior leadership and decision-making roles across public service, business and enterprise and the voluntary sector, so important and consequential decisions that impact on disabled people are still being taken without us. Genuinely 'disability literate' decision making must take on board the new and insightful learning embedded in the contemporary lived experiences of disabled people in and around work and employment.

- Policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK have at times been profoundly ableist, further disabling people living with impairment and/or chronic illness. This applies to how policy is conceived and the needs of disabled people understood and accounted for, to the tone and language of policy pronouncements, couched in 'performance management speak' and with ready and easy recourse to 'inspiration porn', and to the execution of policy, including the implementation implications for disabled people of policy and business responses to Covid-19 disruptions.

- The lived experiences of disabled people, especially during periods of economic and social turbulence, shine a harsh light on leadership and decision-making cultures that remain disability-unfriendly in too many workplace settings. At best, the experiences and needs of disabled people often seem to be afterthoughts in decision making and future (scenario) planning; and at worst, the lived experiences of disabled people seem hardly to be considered at all.

- Intersectionality matters. However, the diverse experiences of disabled people who also face other types of marginalisation, such as disabled women, disabled people who are parents/carers, BME disabled people and LGBTQ disabled people, are both under-voiced and underresearched.

Key learning from our discussions

Barriers to disabled leaders include issues around disability disclosure, difficulty securing adaptations and adjustments, negative attitudes to disability, and lack of opportunities for promotion and bespoke leadership education and development. However, far too many daily micro-obstacles to access are encountered by disabled leaders, such as meetings held on the top floors of buildings with no lifts, and leadership training and development events held in places difficult to access by public transport. These very basic access issues appear 'low level' but can prevent disabled people from even getting to the 'front door' of leadership opportunity.

- Many disabled people feel they are regarded as 'a problem' or 'more trouble than they are worth' or even 'lucky to have a job at all', excluded from normative constructions of the 'ideal' – able-bodied, able-minded, neuro-typical, white, cis-male, heterosexual – leader.

- The conversation around D&L commonly identifies mentoring and peer support, robust and well-implemented procedures embedded in organisational policies, and changing attitudes to disability as enablers for disabled people seeking to progress in their careers.

- While individual leaders and managers certainly do matter in terms of their character, skills and behaviours, albeit differently in different times and places, for disabled people, leadership is best 'done' and experienced as a negotiated and genuinely inclusive and creative co-production.

- We need to encourage employers to include disabled people in a positive way, and to update their understanding(s) of the meaning(s) and practices of leadership, since for disabled people a collaborative worldview of work and performance aligns with their particular circumstances and talents.

- Employers need to re-think how leadership outcomes are rewarded. If we believe that leadership and progress in the workplace are better thought of as co-creating/co-producing endeavours where disabled people's contributions are concerned, rather than the result of any single individual's inspirational or 'heroic acts', then from an economic justice perspective, how should we reward everyone involved, whether disabled or non-disabled, more equitably for their contributions?

- It is important to remember that many people are also indirectly affected by disability, including close partners, wider family, friends and work colleagues.

- While some progress has been made in the workplace, too many people recruited to (formal) leadership and management roles still do not understand (unconscious unawareness), and in some cases do not want to understand (conscious unawareness), the specific needs of disabled colleagues, and are inadequately prepared and/or experienced to enable the right types of inclusion, access and support.

- More work is required by organisations and employers to dismantle systemic barriers that prevent disabled people from being recruited to, progressing into and sustaining leadership roles, and to adapt a default 'universal design' approach to implementing accessible infrastructure.

- Valuable learning can be gained from the experiences of disabled people during the ongoing COVID-19 health and caring challenge, in terms of embedding flexible working approaches

previously considered impossible. This offers a unique opportunity to consider what changes can be made to how, when and where we work, and the potential benefits of creative flexibility to disabled people, other marginalised groups and all employees generally.

- The law really matters! The Equality Act 2010 provides an important legislative platform for change, but its implementation and reinforcement is not always straightforward. Some disabled people question whether the Act's provisions go far enough to truly facilitate disability justice in more collective terms.

Opportunities for progress

We must make the most of the opportunities for employment and workplace change afforded at this time. In particular, we must:

- challenge overly simplistic 'heroic' notions of leadership and work through our own research, teaching and leadership practice to re-define the meanings and practices of the words 'leader' and 'leadership';

- encourage organisations and employers to make time and space to identify and promote the many good and impactful ordinary and everyday disability and leadership stories and experiences;

- act where we can, as disabled and non-disabled people together, to give voice to disabled colleagues and promote their intimate involvement in leadership and decision making, by sharing and vocalising, through all communication modes and media, our own experiences of and learning on disability, leadership and work;

- encourage future leaders and managers, through our own teaching and research, to take responsibility for learning about disability and to become active in making and shaping a more humanising modern workplace;

- bring about feasible changes to how, when and where we work, and reap the benefits of creative flexibility for disabled people, other marginalised groups and all employees generally;

- champion the idea of more flexible ways of working, across time and place, and approaches such as 'mainstreaming' assistive technology and other helpful adaptations and adjustments, as well as creating supportive environments for disclosure, and rethinking how leadership norms are presented and perpetuated;

- ensure that leadership and co-leadership opportunities at all levels are also available to part-time colleagues;

- educate employers, taking advantage of a real opportunity at this time to develop better awareness of disabled experiences and the unique contributions and specific needs of disabled employees across leadership and management;

- build relationships and networks with other staff groups and movements representing marginalised identities, to address common issues and ensure that all activities take an intersectional approach;

- continue to promote and expand the good awareness-raising and leadership development work being carried out by disabled staff and employee networks, such as NADSN, NADP and others working in the private sector, including PurpleSpace and Result CIC;

- identify and disseminate international real-world examples of good outcomes in and around the practice of D&L.

Other thoughts

Taken together, the initial scoping review of the literature and our collective discussions at the WIRC-hosted Webinar have flagged up several other important learning themes, and have raised some further questions. So, what might leadership success and successful leadership look like for disabled people? What seems to work best? What gets in the way? What can those in positions of power do to help?

What might leadership and success look like for disabled people?

- Leadership norms, or how we think and talk about leaders(hip), may exclude disabled people, who may find themeselves passed over for learning and development opportunities that would help them to become leaders. We need to think and speak about leadership differently.

- Conventional approaches to and methods of leadership development, and the conventional 'stepping stones' to leadership that employers put in place must take better account of specific and individual circumstances such as physical disability, learning disability, chronic health and hidden disability, which may differ considerably for different people. In other words, more agile and creative approaches to leadership development are needed for disabled people.

- Leadership behaviours are more often than not based around non-disabled ways of working and ideas of meaningful work. More inclusive ways of thinking about leadership need to incorporate broader conceptions of methods, approaches, and the types of skills and experiences that should be recognised and valued.

- Different models of disability may affect how we think about and research leadership. For instance, how do we consider the lived experience of impairment, and the impact of societal barriers that create disability as a social phenomenon? Do we talk about disability as 'ordinary'? Do we consider 'barriers to doing', 'barriers to being', or both?

- For people whose bodies and minds are racialised as Black, brown or other minority ethnic identities, identifying as disabled comes with additional layers of risk. People at the intersections of these identities may be seen by some as even further from the constructed 'ideal' of the leader.

- Career 'success' relates to various internal and external factors, and views and choices influenced by family, education, socialisation and other processes during the whole life course.

- Disabled people in leadership positions may find themselves having to over-perform in their roles, presenting as 'disabled super-performers', and being seen as overcoming their individual hurdles through personal grit and determination. They often feel pressured to be an 'inspiration' to both disabled and non-disabled people in the workplace.

What seems to work best?

Enablers for disabled employees include bespoke mentoring and peer support, robust and well-implemented inclusion embedded in organisational policies from the 'get go', and education and development activities in employment settings that aim to challenge and change perspectives and attitudes to disability. Effective initiatives include:

- 'Mainstreaming' assistive technology and other adaptations and adjustments so that people do not have to disclose, and creating supportive environments for disclosure. Initiatives that encourage rethinking of how leadership norms are presented and perpetuated may play a part.

- Developing and rewarding a flexible co-creating/co-producing culture in the workplace.

- Distributing leadership roles and opportunities more widely.

- Ensuring that opportunities for leadership learning and personal development, in terms of where, when and how they are offered, are also available to part-time disabled colleagues.

- Establishing leadership learning networks of and for disabled leaders in the workplace, and importantly also supporting aspiring young disabled leaders.

- Helping people to be relaxed about talking about D&L. Encouraging private-sector companies and other employers to publish information on their disabled employee policies and their progress in the workplace helps to open up and advance the debate.

What gets in the way?

Risks and concerns around disability disclosure may prevent disabled employees from seeking the help they need. Fears are fed by difficult experiences with securing adaptations and adjustments, negative attitudes to disability and lack of bespoke opportunities for training, development and promotion. Disabled people often have a lot of emotional work to do with line managers. Managers may sometimes feel squeamish about discussing disability in case they 'get it wrong', and disabled people may be reluctant to 'rock the boat'.

Disabled people may also find themselves locked into existing positions and roles rather than pursuing opportunities for advancement for which they may be qualified, because of fears around the practical challenges of having to renegotiate disclosure, relationships, and adjustments and adaptations.

The so-called 'values–action gap' remains an issue in too many workplace settings. There is often a discrepancy between well-meaning policy rhetoric (what employers say they are doing) and the practical application and enforcement of policy (how organisations and employers actually 'do' things). This creates additional barriers that disabled people must navigate, requiring time and physical and emotional effort that puts disabled people at significant disadvantage in terms of their performance, personal development and progression in the workplace.

What can those in positions of power do?

Educate the organisation! Leaders and decision makers, and those who control organisational resources, have a critical role to play in shifting normative conceptions of leadership, promoting different models of leadership behaviour that value the experiences and skills that disabled,

chronically ill and neurodivergent people can bring, and embedding and enforcing policy and resource practices that promote inclusive workplaces, recruitment and career progression.

People in senior roles must work to avoid the dangers of purely individualised responses that place the onus on disabled people alone to disclose their impairment, find their own solutions to what is perceived to be 'their problem', and consequently ending up in the position of being 'the problem' themselves.

Organisational leaders must take personal responsibility for educating themselves about disability, and taking the time to listen and learn from disabled people about their 'actual and real' lived experiences of organisational culture and practices.

Final thoughts

The long history of disability in the workplace, and of the economic and social struggles of disabled people more generally, suggests that bringing about enduring change will require time, energy and investment from employers and employees alike. However, we remain optimistic that, through some of the various impactful ways and actions identified above, it will be possible to energise 'smart' owners, investors, employers, stakeholders, leaders, managers and employees – both disabled and non-disabled – in order to take advantage of the many 'big' opportunities for mutually beneficial change in the workplace.

Some useful resources and links

BBC, 'The Purple Pound', *The Bottom Line,* (discussion on BBC Radio 4 first broadcast on Thursday 24 June 2021), available on BBC Sounds at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000x6wk
Disability Rights UK: https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/
National Association of Disabled Staff Networks: https://www.nadsn-uk.org/
National Association of Disability Practitioners: https://nadp-uk.org/
Martin, N. (2019). 'A practical response to ableism in leadership in UK higher education', in: Brown, N. and Leigh, J. (eds.), *Ableism in Academia*, UCL Press. Available at: https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/researcher/8046z/dr-nicki-martin
PurpleSpace: https://www.purplespace.org/
Result CIC: https://www.resultcic.com/
The Valuable 500 initiative: https://www.thevaluable500.com/

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