

the ZALT group

Diversity in the Room

Part of the diversity I had at the call centre that day was a participant with a disability. As a mediator it is my responsibility to use appropriate disability etiquette and language. What happened in the joint session is worth sharing. Not from a content



point of view but from a behavioural vantage point. Debbie's support person kept trying to pat and get the attention of Nina's guide dog. When I advised him that the guide dog was working and shouldn't be distracted he explained that he just liked dogs. It was also obvious that when Debbie spoke to Nina she spoke more slowly, deliberately and loudly than when she was addressing anyone else in the room and she actually didn't look at Nina.

I called a break and had a discussion with Debbie and her support person about blindness, disability and some of the behaviours I had observed. Debbie was open to this feedback, I was impressed by that, and it allowed us to have a frank discussion. The mediation continued with a different tone and we could focus on the content that was actually causing the workplace tension.

Some relevant info...

Here are a few things (and a little more) that I shared with Debbie and her support person:

- 2.2 million Australians of working age (15-64 years) have a disability. 53% of people with a disability aged 15-64yrs participate in the workforce, compared with 83% of people without a disability [Australian Bureau of Statistics. Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2012 \(cat. no. 4430.0\)](#)
- An overwhelming number of people with a disability will not disclose it to those they work with for fear of not being given employment or being treated fairly at work. Odds are you either have a disability or work closely with someone who does.
- Disability includes things like sensory or speech impairment, physical restrictions and psychological disability. The latter being the [most underrepresented in our workplaces.](#)
- Don't assume someone with a disability has other disabilities. That is just because Nina is blind her hearing and mental capacities were unimpaired. Ask the person about their disability.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability. Don't talk to their support as if they can't understand you.
- [Vision Australia](#) estimates there are currently 357,000 people in Australia who are blind or have low vision.
- 1 in 6 of the population has [dyslexia](#) (including yours truly) or a learning difficulty.



The awareness, acknowledgement and accommodation of differences is entrenched in the flexibility of how we support people through difficult conversations. Disability is diversity. Diversity is just managing difference.

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Disability is diversity. Diversity is just managing difference. Like all diversity management having awareness, acknowledgement and accommodation will allow for participation and that leads to productivity (and just good business and social practice in my opinion!). I started my career in Diversity management and creating a level playing field is simply the way I think and operate. Actually, it's a secret (well not so secret) passion. Our latest effort at The ZALT Group is that you can now access our blogs in audio!

If you'd like to speak about a situation in your workplace we would love to hear from you...

Upcoming events:

[Workplace Investigation training](#) 24 May, 26 August and 14 November

[Winter Conflict Intensive Peer Learning Opportunity](#) June, July & August 2016