

Making disability work



Approximately five million South Africans are disabled. This is around one in ten South Africans. Despite this, less than 1% of all people employed in this country are those with disabilities. Whether this is as a result of lack of demand or whether those with disabilities are less likely to apply for full time employment remains to be seen. What we know however and need to talk about is how to make disability work.

The challenge with disability in the workplace seems to fall into two categories; either organisations are loathed to employ people with disability or those with disability are not easily integrated into the workforce. As such to have the conversation around disability in the workplace, means we need have a wider conversation around culture both within society and our organisations.

It is a culture of inclusion, diversity and openness that are essential for any organisation trying to achieve their mission and especially in South Africa at this time. Whilst we may have become a democracy some 25 years ago, we still have a long way to go in terms of embracing gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social mobility or disability - all equally important factors in the global campaign for inclusion - into our workforces.

The history of intolerance is a long and brutal one where people who don't fit a criterion and set of expectations are not accepted in our society. One need only look to the recent eruption of xenophobia attacks in the country to see that we still have some proverbial road to travel on the path to inclusion. In my life and work I feel that there have been three key points that have enabled inclusion and

openness, and these include;

Shifting Perception

When we are able to shift our perception from 'them versus us' to 'us', we can begin to see that our challenges with diversity are the same challenges we face within ourselves, within our relationships and indeed with our fellow Africans.

Having the conversation

One of my roles as a coach is to have the conversation and to facilitate conversations between stakeholders. Being able to embrace the difficult conversations is what I've seen enable the greatest shift.

Reimagining the future

We are often constrained by the picture in our minds whereas there may lie a number of possibilities in reality. Hiring and embracing a diverse workforce which includes people with disability means opening the business to new ideas and innovation; the very attributes that most organisations are seeking in today's environment of constant change.

In our work as an organisation, we work with teams in a systemic approach to collaboration and diversity whether it be to listen to what the wider stakeholders of the organisation require or whether it be to adopt more collaborative working within the organisation.

What I've realised through this is that truth and irony of it is that all of us are disabled in some respect or another, we are just more fortunate so as to be able to hide our disability. For some of us it's the inability to embrace conflict. For others it's the inability to commit to our actions. For others it's the inability to voice our opinion or to reject change. Recognising this means beginning to see everyone through the same eyes and in light of potential collaboration; in this way we will truly begin to harness the power of diversity and disability.