

TDN's Disability Awareness Training Philosophy "Person First Disability Awareness" versus "Experiential Sensitivity"

Disability is often left out of the conversation when it comes to DEI. This is why The Disability Network (TDN) has created a number of DEI trainings to help increase diversity, equity, and inclusion specifically around disability that are rooted in Independent Living Philosophy.

TDN uses and advocates for a "**Person First**" approach to Disability Awareness Training that includes **people with disabilities in an accessible discussion format**. This format is endorsed and agreed upon by leading disability advocates and businesses as providing the highest impact for disability awareness while respecting the culture and dignity of people with disabilities. A "person first" approach **focuses awareness on the person, communication, and similarities**. Whereas the experiential or functional loss techniques focus on the disability and differences (i.e. using blindfolds, glasses with Vaseline, placing cotton balls in mouth, wheelchair obstacle course, disability for a day, etc.). Studies have shown that using experiential style training or simulating a disability for disability awareness creates more fear, pity, and confusion about people with disabilities. While experiential training is of great value for barrier-specific training (i.e. architect uses a wheelchair to find building or structural barriers, web developer turns off the monitor to find visual website barriers, etc.), it has no place in disability awareness training.

Four Best Practices to Gain Disability Awareness:

1. Employ trainers with disabilities and/or have speakers with diverse disabilities and abilities share their experiences.
2. Plan for and highlight accessibility throughout the training (*e.g. select an accessible location, use captioned and audio-described videos, provide large print, etc.*)
3. Contact your local Independent Living Center(s), managed by people with disabilities, to talk about the independent living movement, disability culture and the history of the disability rights movement, how people with disabilities have been viewed and treated over time, civil rights laws, and heroes such as Ed Roberts, Gini Laurie (*grandmother of the independent living movement*), and Justin Dart (*father of the Americans with Disabilities Act*). The disability community has a rich and illuminating history.

4. Attend meetings of disability consumer groups, where people with disabilities take leadership roles. Nothing illustrates the "independent living" philosophy like a group of people who live it!

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