Podcast: 6 Tips for Good Engagement

Belle (Host):Hi, I'm Belle, and you're listening to the Purple Orange Podcast.

While there is still a long way to go, we're starting to see the voices of people with disability represented in decision making. One great example of this is a Disability Inclusion Advisory Group that I belong to. It was set up in 2021 by the Local Government Association of South Australia- LGA for short.

The advisory group is made up of 12 people with diverse disability, we get together and meet with local councils and other community organisations. They can tell us what they're working on. And as a group, we advise them on how they can be more inclusive of the disability community.

It's so incredibly important that there are initiatives like this out there. Too often decisions are made without consulting disabled people, and then they get it wrong. If they try and fix these mistakes, it ends up costing lots of money and resources.

It's so frustrating because this could be avoided if they just included us in the decision-making process in the first place. That's why I'm so happy to be a part of this group. In today's podcast, you're going to hear from the LGA and some of my fellow advisory group members about disability engagement.

Carey Scheer has the story.

Carey (Narrator):In 2022, it doesn't seem that uncommon to hear organisations, businesses and government talk about the need to engage the disability community. But how often is it done well?

Jayson:Most cases, I believe, there is really just a tick and flick approach. It's a case of well, we have to do this, so we'll do something. But, that's as far as we'll go.

Carey (Narrator):That's Jayson, one of the Disability Inclusion Advisory members- a group that was really set up to combat that kind of tokenistic approach to engagement.

Merindah:Hi I'm Merindah. I'm the Senior Policy Officer for Disability Inclusion here at the LGA. So this group came about because councils needed to do their disability access and inclusion plans. And so they wanted for it to be more than check the box, we've got a plan.

Carey (Narrator):And so that's what this episode is about- How to do engagement well. You're going to hear more from Merindah from the LGA, as well as Liz, who's the LGA Training Manager. All the other voices that you'll hear from Advisory Group members.

We've compiled their advice on good engagement into six tips. And this is going to be useful anytime you go to engage, whether you're using an established group like this one, or setting up one from scratch, or reaching out in some other kind of way. To kick off, here's Merindah.

Merindah:The really big lesson for me in all of this has been don't provide too much information. The most important thing is to provide time for deep listening, because that's where the gold is.

Carey (Narrator):And so tip number one is listen more than talk. Here's Ayla.

Ayla:Really, the richness of knowledge and awareness comes from stories. When you come away with, "Wow, that really affected me", you are more likely to remember that.

Carey (Narrator):And Jayson furthers this thought, saying the power lies in stories told firsthand.

Jayson:Organisations can talk about the impacts of disability almost ad nauseum. But it's really just words. It's when you sit down with someone who has that genuine lived experience of disability, and you hear the challenges that they've had to face, the discrimination that they have encountered throughout their lives. Storytelling is really the only way I feel that you can get those messages across in a very powerful and tangible way.

Carey (Narrator):But to get those stories and quite possibly painful stories, you do need to create an environment that feels safe and worthwhile to share.

Merindah:Holding space for people in a meeting is an art. Go slow. Give people time to think through and allow that- the deeper work to come to the surface.

Liz:Genuineness I think is the key. It's all about being genuine. And people can tell whether you're genuine or whether you're not.

Carey (Narrator):And that's Liz, also from the LGA.

Liz:The group was really happy to be open and honest, because they trusted us they sensed that we cared.

Carey (Narrator):So you've got tip one listening, particularly to stories. But, who are you listening to?

Ayla:Disability is diverse, very, very in itself the word diverse. It's an umbrella of many different meanings.

Carey (Narrator):And so tip number two is seek out diversity. The LGA sought out people not only with a wide array of disabilities, but also life experiences.

Merindah:We deliberately went out and looked for younger people, older people, people from rural areas, people from regional areas.

Carey (Narrator):And a warning that if you're doing this step right, it might actually create a bit of conflict. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

Jayson:When you bring together a group of people who have had challenges right through their lives that they've had to deal with, and from that have developed strength, wisdom, and a passion to make things better for others as well, that can actually pose some problems in and of itself. Certainly, in our first meeting, we had some robust conversations, you could say.

Merindah:How we teach people about disability, there was disagreement about how we do that. And the challenges we've had around language. You know, so some people are passionate about identity, first language. "I am proudly disabled." Other people, you know, have grown up thinking that disabled is a word we don't use, so we use the word, "I have a disability." So even within our group, there was conflict around how we say things. So that was challenging and fascinating, and required a great deal of repair work at times of, you know, "Let's take you out for a coffee and talk this through so that we can make sure that you're -or everyone's comfortable with the disagreement, and sitting in that uncertainty."

Liz:I wouldn't say it's been a really easy journey. But gee, it's been a worthwhile and fruitful journey.

Carey (Narrator):Because Merindah and Liz allowed the time and space for these complexities to emerge, the Advisory Group grew stronger, and ultimately better positioned to give advice on behalf of the incredibly diverse disability community. Here's Dylan and Sisaleo.

Dylan:Even when we're butting heads on issues these days, it's done with the intent of refining an issue.

Sisaleo:We are an actual team rather than a bunch of individuals.

Dylan:Like there's no expert on all of it, that's not possible. And there will never will be. So, I feel like, together as a group, perhaps that is closer to an expert, singular consultant.

Carey (Narrator):Tip number three, pay people for their time and expertise. Many of the advisory group members told me about past experiences, where they were essentially being asked to give free consultations. And then what was even more frustrating on top of it was often nothing ever came from their time and advice. Martin explains further.

Martin:Why do you feel it's okay to ask a disabled person to give up their time to provide expert knowledge, and then not only ignore them, but assume they're doing it out of the goodness of their heart.

Carey (Narrator):Paying symbolises that you take this seriously, and you're more likely to follow through. Tip number four, remember that you're all on the same team.

Merindah:So you're seeking information, you're wanting to improve your services, you're wanting to do things better. And people with disability also want that for you.

Carey (Narrator):This is important to remember because it might feel confronting at times. Abby explains the mindset you need.

Abby:Come with an open mind, be willing to learn. You don't learn unless you learn from your mistakes. And I think that's something that sometimes organisations don't like to be reminded.

Carey (Narrator):and maybe fear of hearing what they're doing wrong stops organisations from starting this journey.

Jayson:The worst thing that you could do is be paralysed by fear or indecision. That doesn't benefit anyone. So be brave, engage with the disabilities community. If you have a genuine partnership with people with disabilities, then you work with them. And they'll contribute and help you through that process, definitely.

Carey (Narrator):And that's certainly been the story of the LGA and this advisory group.

Merindah:Things have gone really well and things haven't gone well. And we've made mistakes and we've learned and we've tried different things.

Liz:It's been a really character building amazing experience hasn't it really.

Merindah:I've become braver and stronger throughout the process.

Liz:For people that don't have a disability, like myself, there's been an element of fear as well, that I feel that I have with the help of the of the group have really cut that.

Carey (Narrator):Martin applauds the LGA, not because they're perfect in regards to disability, but because of the way they handle criticism.

Martin:What I think has gone well, has been the willingness of the LGA to actually acknowledge they don't know everything. It takes a lot of guts to actually go, "I don't know the right way, can you tell me how?"

Ayla:And good engagement isn't saying, we will have all this solved for you. Good engagement is saying your needs matter. We will make this a focus because it's necessary.

Carey (Narrator):And this leads us to tip number five, if things aren't getting solved right then and there, you need to follow up with people.

Merindah:If you are going to be authentic, come back to them and share with them the results of that engagement activity has been, that's really critical.

Carey (Narrator**):** And it's not just letting people know what you've done. It's about finding out how people feel about what you've done.

Abby: I find in places, they'll put these plans together. But, have they gone back to check, "Okay, what's the outcomes? How are you feeling now about your community?" I think that's important.

Carey (Narrator):We're nearly there. So let's just do a very quick recap. 1) You commit to listening particularly to firsthand stories. 2) You seek out a diverse array of people with varying disabilities. 3) You pay people for their time and expertise. 4) You're open to criticism, because you know, you're all on the same team working towards the same common goal. 5) You follow up with people, you'll let them know what you've done, and you find out how they feel about it. If you're doing that, congratulations, because that is great engagement. But, if you only do it all once, then you've lost.

Merindah:So if I could give one takeaway from all of this, it would be constant and never ending improvement. Pick two or three key things. Focus on those. Do them well. And then once that's established, you can move on to the next piece.

Carey (Narrator):And so tip number six is that good engagement never ends. Here's Ayla with the final word.

Ayla:It's about making those everyday steps through for the rest of our lives, and making that consistent commitment to access and inclusion.

Belle (Host):I hope you've taken some useful tips away from today's show. Just know that if you aren't consulting the disability community, then there's a really good chance that you're excluding us. And if you're doing a surface tick and flick approach to engagement, that's just not going to cut it.

If you're interested to learn more about setting up a Disability Advisory Group, you can get in touch with Purple Orange. Email admin@purpleorange.org.au or ring 08 8373 8388.

If you want to learn more about the LGA Disability Inclusion Advisory Group, contact the Local Government Association of SA by ringing 08 8224 2000 or email lgasa@lga.sa.gov.au.

There's also a video that goes with this podcast and you can find the link for that in the show notes. Thanks for listening. I'm Bell Owen from Purple Orange. Talk to you soon.