

Seeing (Speaking) Through Her Eyes (Brain): Louisa's Journey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the experience of Louisa, a new employee at a conflict resolution consulting firm, as she navigates her ADHD and the workplace. She faces ableist biases in the organizational culture at her job that cause her to question her own abilities. Louisa's Journey follows Louisa's interactions with her team as she struggles with her skills as a professional in her field and as a neurodivergent person who needs accommodations to function and prosper in her daily life. Louisa soon finds that the nuances of disclosure and workplace inclusivity are incredibly challenging for her, especially as someone with an invisible disability. She struggles to balance her ambitions in the company, her needs as a neurodivergent person, and the complexities of her identity. This case study challenges readers to consider how organizational culture can contribute to ableism, especially toward neurodivergent people and others with invisible disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

In the quest to understand organizations, it is tempting to treat them as independent entities sheltered from the whims of humanity. In this state, they are predictable, stable, and innocuous; people can join them or leave them as it serves their individual interests without consequence. However, as Bisel (2010) reflects, organizations are

as much a part of us as we are a part of them: “Organization is an emergent reality that is constantly in a state of becoming, word by word, message by message, and turn by turn” (p. 126). How we communicate about our membership in organizations in turn impacts how we invite organizations to communicate about us.

Organizational communication does not exist in a vacuum. Organizations are subject to the pressures of external society in how it treats its members, particularly those who are marginalized and disenfranchised by racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, religious intolerance, and ableism. Regardless of how organizations try to negate the mistreatment of minority members through antidiscrimination policies, organizations often perpetuate the social norms of dominant groups in society. Even when organizations do not intend to discriminate against anyone, organizational practices can harm members who do not fit the norms of dominant groups in society. Organizational members with disabilities are often among those unintentionally harmed by societal norms that infiltrate their workplaces.

Disability protections in organizations, particularly the workplace, are upheld by law in the United States (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). Even so, accessibility does not look the same for all people with disabilities. Some people with disabilities need mobility aids such as wheelchairs or canes, which organizations must legally accommodate with features such as accessible parking. Other people with disabilities need access to assistive technology like text-to-speech or magnification software. However, people with invisible disabilities (disabilities that are not immediately apparent to onlookers), have different barriers to accessibility in organizations. An example of one such group are people who are neurodivergent.

Neurodiversity is defined by the Stanford Neurodiversity Project as “a concept that regards individuals with differences in brain function and behavioral traits as part of normal variation in the human population. The movement of Neurodiversity is about uncovering the strengths of neurodiverse individuals” (Stanford University, n.d.). The use of the term indicates the desire to increase inclusivity of those diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette’s syndrome, intellectual disabilities, and others. These conditions are not always considered disabilities, but many people who are neurodivergent are disabled.

To explore how neurodivergent people and others with invisible disabilities (such as chronic pain) experience organizations, we must examine the lived experiences of those who are harmed by ableism in their organizations. This chapter will begin with a review of existing literature on organizational culture and neurodiversity. Next, it will proceed with case study following Louisa, an organization member who has ADHD, in the following sections: organization background, setting the stage, case description, and current challenges. The chapter will conclude with possible solutions and recommendations.

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