

## Survey of Australian Disability Leaders – July 2016

The Disability Leadership Institute undertook a national survey of leaders with disabilities to ascertain experiences of leadership, barriers they have faced, and to understand what aspirations and support needs disability leaders have.

The survey was sent to a broad range of leaders and emerging leaders across Australia, with a request to pass the survey on to anyone in their networks who might also be interested. Respondents came from all states and territories, and various fields and levels of leadership. Respondents also had a wide variety of disabilities and named a variety of barriers to participating as leaders in their chosen fields.

94 per cent of survey respondents asked for a summary of the survey results and/or for further information about the Disability Leadership Institute. In an environment where people with disabilities are surveyed repeatedly, and often quite intrusively, this exhibits a level of trust in the Institute team and the work that we are undertaking.

### Summary of key findings

- Leaders with disabilities are operating almost entirely under their own resources and within their own circles of engagement.
- Many established leaders are regularly mentoring several emerging leaders to ensure some continuity for leaders with disabilities over time.
- There was little executive management training and support, most had been gained on the job.
- Training and development for leaders with disabilities is ad hoc with no particular consistency in training received by anyone across governance, management or community representation roles. No specialist disability leadership training was mentioned by respondents.
- There was no evidence that either public or private sector employers had targeted people with disabilities as leaders and provided training or leadership coaching to progress their careers.
- 55 per cent of respondents said that any training they received had not led to any leadership opportunities, or was irrelevant to the work they had subsequently undertaken in both leadership and representative roles.
- 70 per cent of respondents had experienced barriers to undertaking leadership opportunities and development due to lack of accessible format documents, discrimination, lack of reasonable adjustments including flexible hours, transport or travel difficulties, the extra hours required alongside regular commitments to achieve recognition or appointments, cost (most respondents were self-funding), the assumption that people were only experts in disability matters, and suspicion that people with disabilities can't make tough decisions. Respondents had been asked to deliver conference papers from the floor when accessible podiums were not provided, to pay for their own accessible format documents, to self-fund extra travel costs associated with interstate or international commitments, amongst other barriers.

- A particular barrier was the ableist expectation that leadership is only possible within the current paradigm in which it sits. Leaders with disabilities were expected to operate without consideration that they might do so in a different way to existing norms, not just to accommodate their disability requirements, but as a result of viewing the world through a disability perspective. This lack of cultural awareness caused several leaders to abandon training or leadership opportunities due to perceptions of discrimination and ableism. The term “exclusive” was used by several survey respondents.
- The majority of survey respondents were undertaking leadership work using their own resources. While a small number were employed by organisations, the majority were undertaking leadership work in their communities without funding support.
- The majority of survey respondents provided gmail or hotmail email addresses and considered their leadership work a “private” activity. Even those employed by organisations as leaders were still self-funding the “extra” costs of disability.
- Approximately 60 per cent of respondents had received awards ranging from academic recognition to Australian of the Year and Order of Australia awards.

#### **Development sought:**

- Established leaders identified several types of ongoing support that they would appreciate, most notably regular contact with peers engaged in the same type of mentoring work.
- A majority of respondents highlighted a desire to connect with other disability leaders, to access mentoring, career coaching, and to find consistent ways to support emerging leaders. A number of respondents identified funding support as necessary to their continuing leadership work.
- Respondents were interested in a more coordinated approach to connecting disability leaders with a wide range of opportunities from board placement to speaking at conferences.
- The opportunity to connect with peers, and to provide or receive mentoring, was a strong sentiment expressed by many leaders in their responses.

Survey results clearly illustrated a lack of any systematic approach to disability leadership development across Australia resulting in a lack of disability leaders in proportion to their presence in the population (18 per cent).

The expectation that disability leaders will either emerge fully formed or engage in current mainstream programs isn't working now, and is clearly not the solution to change.

*“It is time to change the way leadership is understood”*