

I'm Minnie Baragwanath and I'm the Chief Possibility Officer for the newly established Global Centre of Possibility at AUT, in Auckland.

It's a new role, and a new organisation. Our focus is on creating a future that is truly accessible for the 25% of New Zealanders who live with some kind of access need; what's traditionally known as a disability. I guess the reason I'm so passionate about accessibility, and the wellbeing and the thriving of access citizens - the 1 million access citizens in NZ today - stems from the fact that when I was 15, I was diagnosed with a fairly rare sight condition called Stargardt's, which means stargazer. And this diagnosis and when these impairments started to affect me they had quite a profound impact on my life.

It meant that I couldn't read books I couldn't see the words on the page nor drive. And I found impacts to my education and employment that were actually extremely difficult. The thing that really struck me when I was 14-15 – in those early years – was not only the impairment my disability had on my vision, but actually more profound.

What I found was how other people responded to me, and this generally fell into two categories. They were either incredibly supportive and would say “you don't see so well, so how do we navigate? How do we get around that? What can we do? How do we get creative? What's possible?”

So that's what I call the “possibility world view”.

But the other group – what do I call the “disability worldview” – which unfortunately was, and still is today the dominant worldview – was where they decided – they being teachers, sports coaches, employers, people around me – that I was blind and therefore disabled. They defined what I could not do, often without even discussing it with me. And so all these assumptions were made *for me* by people *around me* that suddenly placed me in a very limited little box with these strict parameters, and it was highly disruptive.

Just because I can't see, shouldn't mean that I'm limited. And certainly shouldn't mean anyone else should limit me, especially if they don't know me. And so I think that planted the seeds for what became the establishment of “Be Accessible” in 2011 as a social change agency, with the mission of making New Zealand the most accessible country in the world.

And, a big part of the work that we did when we established Be Accessible was to challenge the framing of the language that was so dominant. We deeply questioned and challenged this disability worldview that I don't even think most of us are conscious of, and that includes the boards of most of our organisations, most of the leadership in our society today, right through our education system, our health system and through the economy.

We unconsciously operate in a disability worldview and at “Be” we set out to challenge that worldview, to redefine it as an “accessibility world view”. The accessibility worldview fundamentally frames up the fact that we all have something to contribute to the world. We all have deep value.

All of us, actually, if we live long enough, will have the experience of a disability or an ailment. By the time of 65, more than 50% of us have an age-related impairment. And if we live long enough, all of us will experience some kind of impairment. So we can no longer talk about disability as just being a minority of people who use wheelchairs; that itself is very outdated thinking and if boards and political and business leaders are still operating from that basis they're not going to make good leaders, actually- it's as simple as that. Good leaders in the 21st century understand a contemporary accessibility worldview.

Access citizens have fundamentally not been framed as leaders in our society. And one of the things we thought was critical when we set up our organisation was to create a programme that invested deeply in the leadership capacity of people living with access needs.

We've now done that for 10 years through the "Be leadership Programme". We're now starting to see many of these incredible leaders on boards across New Zealand. Many of these leaders are starting to show up particularly in the not-for-profit space, and in what has been traditionally been called the disability sector. I personally would like to see a lot more of these incredibly talented individuals in the commercial sector as well. How can we be running banks or agricultural organisations, or tourism businesses, or whatever it might be, without representation for the 25%, and growing, of our population.

Possibility leadership is deeply focused on the future, and the trends that are coming towards us. It is deeply focused on, how we as society can respond positively and with curiosity about the future world. It's focused on systems thinking. And how we work with the access community and access citizens to create a world that can truly work for everyone.

The reason why we need these new frameworks for thinking about leadership is that the current world does not work for 25% of our citizens. The issue and the reason why boards, leaders, organisations — whether not for profit or for profit — need to embrace accessibility and possibility is the fact that access citizens are twice as likely to be unemployed or underemployed in the world today than any other group in our society. There is a fundamental inequity in our economy and our education and our health system that means access citizens are simply not thriving.

What can we do? There's so much that we can do, but the critical thing we have to start actually doing something. For 10 years now I have tried to engage with all sorts of organisations around accessibility and think — that without exception — that if disability or accessibility is even on the radar of an organisation it is — without fail — the last bullet point on a list of diversity checklist; a list which starts with women, Māori, Pacific other ethnicities, gender, and then — if you're lucky— accessibility is at the bottom.

I think that tells us everything about how we do, or frankly *don't*, value accessibility as organisations.

So, for a start, I would recommend a radical suggestion: flip things up the other way to make accessibility your number one priority right now in your organisation, and chances are you may well be the very first organisation in Aotearoa to actually be bold enough to be transformative.

The other thing I would be doing is looking at who is around the board table right now. Do you have anyone who identifies as having an access need? Now remember, 25% of people live with an access need, so while someone who identifies as having an access need, do they have a deep understanding of accessibility literacy? Because it's one thing to live with an access need and quite another to be literate in accessibility social change and equity.

I would then be looking at the organisation or the community that you're there to serve. What's your accessibility strategy? Is there one for a start? Because if there isn't, I think that speaks volumes. How many people with access needs in your organisation? What's your accessibility engagement strategy with your customers?

Just those simple questions or points of inquiry will reveal an enormous amount about how far along your accessibility journey you are.
