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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 9th November 2024 – “ Disabled People must be at the heart of the decision-making”

When December looms people start thinking about Christmas. Who's going to misbehave at the Christmas work do? Which parent in-laws are we going to on Christmas day? Are we going to give presents to the extended whanau? For some of us in the Disability sector we think about the International Day of Disabled Persons on December the 3rd. Every year the day has a theme. Usually, the theme is so abstract and vaguely pompous that it's hard to relate to. Last year it was "Transformative Solutions for Inclusive Development: The Role of Innovation in Fuelling an Accessible and Equitable World". How the hell do you work with that!

However, this year the theme is more relatable and relevant; "Amplifying the Leadership of Persons with Disabilities for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future." It is especially relevant for New Zealand at this point in time, when the Government is making drastic changes to Disability Support Services.

This year's theme underscores a core truth: disabled people must be at the heart of decision-making processes. When it comes to accessibility, autonomy, and support, no one is better suited to lead than those who live with these realities every day. The Government is currently doing its best to rip the guts out of Whaikaha, the Ministry of Disabled People, overhauling the eligibility for Disability Supports through a tightrope of assessment and allocation settings and other mechanisms. Not all superheroes wear capes but some might be in wheelchairs and mobility scooters – and that's who we need to counter this attack. Disabled leadership might just save the day.

And the day sure needs saving! Whaikaha was founded to give disabled people a voice at the highest levels of Government. The birth of Whaikaha was a long and challenging labour, but signalled hope for a step toward genuine

representation. Its essence was to put disabled people in charge of decisions that shape their own lives. Radical?! Well not really -if we were applying this to other marginalised groups – say women, Māori – the philosophy is hardly startling. Well, the Government clearly found the idea unpalatable and the ‘gone before lunchtime’ style announcements in August showed their true colours. Decisions impacting disability support services were made rapidly, with paltry consultation, potentially disempowering the very people these services aim to support.

So, amplifying the leadership of disabled people, has to be the way forward, and the sound system needs to be a grunty one. Disabled leaders have a vested moral and practical interest in creating sustainable solutions, that work for them, their families and the rest of society. By implementing policies rooted in Universal Design principles, benefits abound not only for the disabled community but everyone, ensuring that public spaces, workplaces, and services are accessible to all. When we listen to disabled voices, we’re not only making life better for those individuals; we’re building a society that values inclusivity at its core.

Whaikaha’s treatment raises the question: Are we really amplifying disabled voices, or are we reverting to top-down approaches that silence them? Disabled New Zealanders deserve more than token consultation; we need a genuine partnership where our expertise shapes policies from inception to execution. This kind of collaborative leadership can transform the sector, creating services that are responsive, empowering, and resilient.

Phew – I could be getting into abstract and vaguely pompous stuff myself now, but come on!

As we observe the International Day of Disabled Persons, let’s commit to a New Zealand where disabled people lead the way in shaping their futures. Amplifying their leadership is more than a theme for one day; -it is essential for true equity. The leadership of disabled people must be embedded at every level, from local councils to national ministries, if we are to fulfil our commitment to a fairer and more inclusive Aotearoa.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation