Disability-Led Leadership in Practice: Power, Privilege, and the Missing Pathway

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Introduction

I am Autistic and multiply Disabled, and I have spent my career researching, consulting, and advocating for people with disabilities. It is work that I am good at, work I care about, and work that keeps placing me in the same position. I am invited for my lived experience and strengths

and then excluded from decision-making. I am in the rooms, but I am not at the tables. The distinction between these two things is what this report is about.

At some point, I stopped asking why it was so hard for me, personally, and for my Disabled colleagues, and started asking a structural question: why is there no path to enable Disabled professionals to move from advisory roles into leadership? Not an under-resourced path, not an imperfect one, but no path at all from the advisory chair to the decision-making table for Disabled professionals. I looked for mentors who had already navigated what I was navigating. I looked for a roadmap. What I found instead was that most Disabled professionals I knew were doing the same thing I was: building workarounds, surviving environments not designed for their success, and calling it a career. The absence of a clear path is not an individual experience. It is a structural condition, and structural conditions require structural analysis. ~~And~~ I do not walk this path alone.

My perspective as a Disabled professional is embedded throughout as data. I bring my identities into this work on purpose, and with purpose. The analysis begins with my story evidence of a broader pattern, and the pattern is what the literature confirms at every turn, once you know where to look.

The Big Picture: What This Report Investigates

This report investigates a problem the field of disability study has been reluctant to name plainly: there is no reliable pathway to leadership for Disabled professionals. Not an under-resourced one. Not an imperfect one. No pathway at all. What exists instead is a series of structural barriers that a small number of exceptional Disabled people have learned to navigate without equipment, without a map, and usually without anyone watching, encouraging, or supporting them to ensure they make it through.

Disabled people remain severely underrepresented in formal leadership and governance across every sector, especially in the United States, where the bias is colloquially referred to as the "employment gap." (Howard, 2024) When we do appear in organizations that are not led by disabled people, we are most often in advisory or programmatic roles, not in positions of

decision-making authority. Many times, we are there to give the appearance that change is imminent, or simply to make the rest of the people in the room feel better about themselves. We are brought in under the guise of sharing ideas, brainstorming, or feedback, not for leadership. That distinction matters more than most organizations are willing to admit, and this report makes it the center of the argument rather than a footnote to a broader diversity conversation.

Two terms appear throughout this report that are worth distinguishing from the outset, *disability-inclusive leadership* and *disability-led leadership*. *Disability-inclusive leadership* describes leadership practiced by non-disabled people who work to reduce barriers and create more welcoming environments for Disabled employees. It has produced more accessible hiring practices, broader awareness of accommodation needs, and a growing vocabulary around disability inclusion.

Disability-led leadership describes leadership grounded in the lived experience and perspectives of Disabled people, requiring decision-making authority, not advisory presence, and centering Disabled expertise and collective accountability. These points are structurally different arrangements of power and voice, not merely points on a spectrum. The field has been too comfortable treating advisory positions and decision-making positions as interchangeable. They are not. Disability-led leadership as a distinct concept remains largely unexamined in scholarship and systematically underfunded in practice (Valuable 500, 2023; Valuable 500, 2024). This report was created as a step toward changing that.

Why This Topic Is Worth Investigating

Leadership is where values become decisions. Those who lead determine what gets built, what gets funded, and whose needs get centered. The absence of Disabled people from leadership is a policy failure, an innovation failure, and an equity crisis operating simultaneously. It is not a diversity statistic. And it has consequences that extend well beyond the Disabled professionals it most immediately harms.

Here is what the field has not been saying loudly enough: Disabled leaders are better leaders because we've navigated the systems designed to exclude us. Not despite having navigated systems designed to exclude us, but because of it. The flexibility, innovation, resilience, curiosity, and empathy that Disabled professionals develop through careers spent adapting to inaccessible environments are not incidental to leadership. They are central to it. We have been solving problems that others never had to see, building workarounds that became best practices, and designing for access in environments that were not designed for us. That is not a deficit. That is a qualification, and Part 5 of this report makes the affirmative case in full.

The scholarship that currently exists treats disability primarily as a variable in inclusion research, not as a leadership identity, framework, or field of inquiry in its own right. My experience as an Autistic, multiply Disabled professional navigating toward leadership without a roadmap is not exceptional; it is common. This means it’s time to stop celebrating the exceptions and start building the necessary infrastructure.

Approach

This report synthesizes scholarship from Disability Studies, organizational behavior, Disability Justice, intersectionality, and governance published between 1995 and 2025, following narrative review methodology (Cronin et al., 2008). Included sources address leadership, organizational culture, disability, belonging, thriving, identity, mentorship, sponsorship, and governance. Excluded sources include clinical disability research, K-12 educational leadership, and general employment literature not explicitly tied to leadership contexts.

The theoretical framework draws from Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2015), critical leadership studies (Korkmaz et al., 2022), and the social model of disability. These frameworks share a foundational position: that the barriers Disabled people face are in the systems, not inherent in the individual, and that dismantling those barriers requires structural change, not personal adaptation.

One adjacent work, the Valuable 500's Unlocking Disability-Inclusive Research (2024), deserves explicit acknowledgment here because the distinction between it and this report is substantive. As the field's most comprehensive recent examination of disability and C-suite leadership, it documents how non-disabled executives can become more inclusive of Disabled employees and identifies the leadership competencies most developed through proximity to disability. It is rigorous, empirically grounded, and important. This Rise Report builds beyond it. Where the Valuable 500 study examines how non-disabled leaders become more inclusive, this report examines the structural absence of Disabled people from leadership itself. The distinction is the argument, not a criticism. Disability-inclusive leadership practiced by non-disabled leaders is necessary but not sufficient and treating it as sufficient is exactly how organizations score well on inclusion metrics even when there are no while having zero Disabled people in the rooms where decisions are made.

Scope and Limitations

Author's Note*: *This report is a conceptual analysis and literature review. It does not include primary data collection of any kind. All research directions proposed are conceptual, intended to inform future empirical work rather than to represent findings from the original study.

The literature on disability-led leadership specifically is sparse. This report draws from adjacent fields to build a conceptual foundation where direct scholarship does not yet exist, and it names that gap as requiring urgent attention rather than treating it as a reason for caution. Intersectional data on disability and leadership outcomes is limited by systematic underreporting and the widespread exclusion of disability from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) data collection, both of which are addressed directly in Finding 2. This report is centered on the professional context of the United States, with some reference to international governance frameworks where the scholarship is particularly instructive.

These limitations are real, and they are named here so that the work that follows is not overstated. A conceptual analysis is a beginning, not a conclusion. This report is designed to make the next body of work possible by establishing what the problem is, how it operates, and

what a framework for addressing it might look like. The empirical research agenda that would follow is outlined in the Conclusion.

Potential Impact

This report is designed to document the problem clearly enough that it cannot be minimized, name the forces that sustain it, and make a concrete case for investment in disability-led leadership as a distinct, urgent, and overdue priority.

For funders, it offers evidence-based rationale for directing resources toward disability-led organizations and the leadership infrastructure that produces and sustains them. For organizations, it provides a framework for auditing and transforming their own leadership pathways, starting with the data they are and are not collecting. For researchers, it lays the conceptual foundation for establishing disability-led leadership as a construct that requires its own research agenda, its own validated instruments, and its own longitudinal study. And for Disabled professionals still navigating toward leadership without a roadmap, the path didn't exist and it is time for us to build it now.

The Path That Wasn't There

A Leadership Story Without a Map

I have been in a lot of rooms I was not supposed to stay in.

I do not mean that I snuck in. I mean that I was invited, deliberately and specifically, because someone with decision-making authority recognized that my perspective was needed. I was asked to sit on advisory boards, to attend meetings, to contribute analysis, and to shape the direction of conversations that mattered. I showed up. I prepared. I brought the expertise I spent while building my career. And then, reliably, the meeting would end, the room would clear, and the people who had invited me in would go somewhere else to make the actual decisions. My expertise was essential for Phase 1, to provide material for the people who make decisions. But it was clear that I was not to be part of the debate or the decision-making.

I told myself, for a long time, that this was temporary. That I was building something, accumulating credibility, earning my way toward the table where the real work happened. I worked my way into leadership roles. I delivered results. I documented my contributions carefully, in writing, with evidence. I had learned early on that my word alone was not sufficient in the way that other people's words were more than sufficient. I met every standard I was given and then discovered a new one waiting on the other side. I proved my value repeatedly, in formats I had not been asked to use before, to audiences who had not been part of the original conversation. My non-disabled, neuromajority-aligned colleagues were building careers without documenting every decision and recommendation they made, while in the same rooms I was in. My only path was a seemingly endless audition for a part I had already been cast in.

And still I found myself, years into a leadership role, outside the rooms where strategic direction was set. Not because I lacked the expertise, but because somewhere in the architecture of every organization I worked inside, there was a ceiling I could not see until I hit it, and when I hit it, no one would confirm or even acknowledge it was there. It certainly was not because I lacked the expertise or the professionalism. And not because the results I provided weren't impactful. That is a tough pill for any professional to swallow.

What I was looking for, throughout all of it, was someone who had been where I was trying to go. Not someone successful in the general sense. Someone Disabled who had made it to the executive level and could tell me what it had actually required to get there, to provide at least the beginning of a roadmap for my career. I looked for that person in every professional space I entered. I looked for a mentor who would not be offended by the clarifying questions I needed to ask. A colleague who was flexible enough to understand that my communication style was not a character flaw. A manager who would pay me for the value I brought instead of the value she was comfortable attributing to someone who presented like me. I did not find those things in institutions. I found pieces of them, in individual people, in community spaces, in relationships I built outside the systems that should have been building them for me. One disappointment followed another. Empty promises. Work that was taken, used, and credited elsewhere. Doors that opened and then closed again before I could grab the handle.

Survival required actions from me not required of others. It required jumping through hoops whose purpose was never explained and whose height kept changing. It required absorbing microaggressions with enough composure that raising them would not become the thing I was known for. It required navigating stigma and stereotypes and unconscious bias every day, in environments where naming any of it would mark me as difficult rather than accurate. It required pain that accumulated over years into something structural, a kind of tiredness that is not fixed by sleep. The cycle left almost no room for joy. I do not say that for sympathy. I say it because the energy that went into surviving those environments is the energy that was supposed to be going into building a career and a life. The absence of that energy in the ledger of my professional life should be a loss that belongs to the institutions that required said survival, not to me.

Almost five years ago, I stopped climbing and started looking at the ceiling. The invisible ceiling that sits directly above Autistic professionals in organizational hierarchies. In the Autistic community, this is known as the 'Autistic glass ceiling." The point at which the accumulated weight of the neuromajority's expectations, their professional norms, and the compounded cost of years of masking become an impenetrable barrier to executive and C-suite leadership. It is not a metaphor. It is a structural feature of most organizations, built from policies written without us, cultures maintained by people who have never had to think carefully about access, and credibility frameworks that consistently undervalue exactly the capacities we have spent the most time developing. I was not failing to break through it because I lacked the qualifications. It was designed to keep me, and my Autistic and Disabled colleagues, stuck, whether intentional or not.

That recognition changed the question I was asking. I stopped asking why it was so hard for me and started asking why there was no path. Not why I had not found it. Why it had never been built.

The Bridge: From Story to Structural Argument

The experience I have just described is not exceptional. I know this because I have spent my career in community with other Disabled professionals who are living inside the same pattern, in different organizations, across different sectors, at different points in careers that are running out of room to grow in the same places mine did. The advisory chair instead of the board seat. The leadership role that requires proving on paper what others are trusted to deliver. The strategic conversation that happens in the room you were not invited to after the meeting you ran.

This section of the report is not a record of my resilience. Resilience is what you need when the system has failed you and you are building something from what is left. This report is an argument for something better than resilience: structural conditions that would make resilience an attribute but no more foundational than for any aspiring leader. The story I have just told is the data on which this analysis is built. What follows is the explanation of why it is not mine alone, and what needs to change for it to stop being anyone's.

Conceptual Analysis

This analysis synthesizes the literature across five thematic areas that together explain the absence of a pathway to Disabled leadership. Each section moves from what the research documents to what it means and what must change. Readers are approaching this as practitioners, funders, advocates, and researchers with varying levels of familiarity with disability scholarship. The analysis is written to be accessible to all these audiences while remaining rigorous enough to make a contribution to the field.

Part 1: The Representation Gap - Documented and Understated

The data shows that Disabled people are essentially absent from leadership positions. It is not about Disabled people in low numbers, or the wrong types of roles, or even that we are proportionally underrepresented. We are absent. It also shows something even more

egregious; the data collection itself fails to collect the reality of what is happening in most organizations today.

This section documents what we can measure and then makes the case that the most important things are not being measured at all.

***Finding 1*: Disabled people are severely underrepresented in formal leadership across all sectors, and the data understates the problem.**

Governance research shows very low disability representation on boards and in executive teams across corporate, nonprofit, and government sectors (Inclusive Boards, 2022; Purple and KPMG, 2018; Özbilgin et al., 2023). These numbers sit on top of a labor market baseline that compounds them. Working-age Americans with disabilities are unemployed at nearly double the rate of their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). This gap is the foundation from which the leadership gap grows, at every stage, in every sector, over the course of entire careers.

Where Disabled people do appear in organizations, the picture requires closer examination. Advisory roles, program roles, and community liaison positions show up in the data as representation. Board seats with fiduciary authority and C-suite roles with decision-making power show up in the same data as representation. They are not the same thing. An advisory committee and a board are not equivalent, and counting both as the same evidence of inclusion is how organizations demonstrate commitment on paper while maintaining exclusive control in practice. The data as it currently exists does not distinguish between a Disabled professional who has been brought in for her expertise and then sent home before the votes are counted. A Disabled professional who with authority and resources to lead or contribute where and when the decisions are made. That distinction is the entire argument of this report.

The analysis here is not subtle. We, researchers and the Disabled community, are measuring the wrong thing and calling it progress. Presence is not power. A head count is not decision-making authority. And organizations that point to advisory committee membership as evidence of disability inclusion are not exactly lying. They are using a measurement that was never

designed to capture what actually matters. That measurement needs to be adjusted based on accurate data that has not yet been collected. Until our data collection process changes, the data will continue to show improvement in inclusion while the rooms where decisions are made remain unchanged.

The impact of this measurement failure is practical and immediate. When organizations report disability representation to their funders, they must consider where that representation exists within the organizational hierarchy. This approach supports accountability and helps organization demonstrate meaningful inclusion across all levels. Any reporting framework that does not distinguish between role type and decision-making authority, is measuring the appearance of inclusion, not actual disability inclusion.

***Finding 2*: Disability is systematically excluded from DEI data collection. The absence of data is a structural choice, not an oversight.**

Finding 1 documents what the existing data shows. Finding 2 makes a more fundamental argument: the data that exists is not the data that would tell us what we need to know, and that is not an accident.

Unlike race and gender, disability is frequently excluded from organizational DEI reporting altogether. When it does appear, it is most often tracked as an accommodation compliance issue, a legal obligation to be managed, rather than as an identity category relevant to advancement and leadership, **as I've seen in organizations across the spectrum of industries.** The result is a systematic absence of information about how Disabled professionals move through organizations, where they stall, where they leave, and how rarely they reach the rooms where decisions are made (Valuable 500, 2023; Candid and Disability and Philanthropy Forum, 2024).

The disclosure data makes the scale of this gap concrete. Only 4.6% of employees self-identify their disability status with employers (Accenture, Disability:IN, and AAPD, 2023). That number is evidence of environments where people have correctly assessed that disclosure carries risk and have acted accordingly. It is not evidence of a low-disability workforce. When the

overwhelming majority of Disabled employees do not tell their employers they are Disabled, it is the culture of the organization itself that is making it unsafe to report. The lack of reporting compounds the data collection issue. And the default becomes silence.

At the leadership level the numbers are starker. Research on C-suite executives and their direct reports finds that 80% of those with disabilities do not disclose them. (Accenture & Disability:IN. 2023) The executives who do reach senior leadership are, in many cases, actively concealing the identities that this report argues are their most relevant qualifications. That is a cultural indictment, not a data collection failure.

Practical measurement tools exist. For example, The Valuable 500's ESG and Disability Data whitepaper (2023) proposes a five-KPI framework for corporate disability inclusion reporting, covering workforce representation, disability inclusion goals tied to leadership accountability, manager and employee training, disability-specific employee resource groups with executive sponsorship, and digital accessibility review. These are measurable, reportable, and still not standard practice in most organizations. The gap is a lack of willingness to use the tools available, not a lack of tools. The neurodiversity data gap reflects the same problem in a more recent form. Neuroinclusion is rising as a workplace concept, and yet safe and meaningful data collection on whether Neurodivergent employees are actually thriving at work remains largely absent in practice. The Diversity Council Australia and Amaze guide (2026) represents a practitioner-level step toward closing that gap. It is the first of its kind, which is itself a data point about how far this field has to go.

The analysis is direct: you cannot close a gap you are not measuring. When organizations exclude disability from DEI data collection, they are making a decision about whose representation matters enough to count. That decision has consequences for every Disabled professional navigating a career inside those organizations without the structural supports that visible representation would signal are available. The absence of data is not neutral. It is a policy choice with a body count.

Any organization that names disability-led leadership as a priority must start by collecting data on it. That means disability representation tracked by type, by role level, and by decision-making authority. It means creating environments where disclosure does not carry professional risk. And it means measuring whether Disabled people have both presence and power, including the power to make financial decisions. No data means no accountability. No accountability means no change.

Author's note: During the initial review of this Rise Report, Marcie Roth, read the paper, and introduced these powerful questions that we do not yet have answers to. I decided to include them here, because it echoes the need for more exploration, research, data collection and analysis needed.

Discussion Point:

Should measurement of disabilities start from the point of the hiring, at mid-career, or when a member of the C-Suite acquires a disability after C-Suite promotion? Failing to count these separately will surely skew data. Marcie Roth, Executive Director, World Institute on Disability

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Part 2: Systemic Exclusion Across the Career Arc

There is a version of the disability and leadership conversation that begins at the point of executive recruitment. An organization decides it wants more Disabled leaders, posts a role, wonders why the pipeline is so thin, and concludes that Disabled professionals are not putting themselves forward in sufficient numbers. This version of the conversation is wrong in a way that really matters. It looks at the end of a thirty-year process and asks why the outcome is unequal without examining a single one of the conditions that produced it.

Exclusion from leadership begins before the first job application. It operates through every performance review, every networking event, every sponsorship conversation that never

happens, and every accommodation request that costs political capital. It is the journey of exclusion for Disabled professionals, from the beginning, that sets the stage. By the time a Disabled professional reaches the threshold where leadership might be possible, she has been carrying weight her non-disabled colleagues were never asked to lift. The gap at the top is not a leadership gap. It is the accumulated product of a career-long obstacle course that most organizations have never bothered to map.

This section documents what that obstacle course looks like and names the three structural conditions that sustain it: inaccessible and hostile career infrastructure at every stage; a definition of professionalism that requires Disabled people to hide who they are in order to be taken seriously, and the near-total absence of sponsorship for Disabled professionals at every level. These are not accidents. All of them are manageable, but none of them will be addressed by a public diversity statement.

***Finding 3*: Exclusion from leadership is not a threshold event. It is cumulative, compounding, and present from the first day of a career.**

The barriers that keep Disabled professionals out of leadership are not clustered at the senior level. They begin at hiring. Research documents that inaccessible hiring processes screen out Disabled candidates before careers begin, through application systems that are not compatible with assistive technology, interview formats that penalize communication differences, and assessment processes built around assumptions of non-disabled performance norms (Gutterman, 2025; Sharma et al., 2025). The professionals who do not get hired are not visible in any leadership pipeline data because they never entered the pipeline in the first place. That invisibility is itself a data problem, and it compounds the measurement failures documented in Finding 2.

For those who do enter organizations, early career advancement relies heavily on informal visibility and networking. Mentors are found through proximity and social comfort. Stretch assignments go to people who are seen and remembered. High-visibility projects land with professionals who can attend the optional after-hours events, navigate the open-plan offices,

sustain the communication styles that the neuromajority's environments reward, and absorb the social and physical demands of professional life without accommodations that require negotiation and planning. For many Disabled professionals, these are structural exclusions built into the rhythm of professional life, not small inconveniences, and they compound across years and decades (Klinger, 2002; Ezerins et al., 2024).

By mid-career, the mechanism most predictive of advancement is sponsorship, the active use of institutional power by someone senior to advocate for, elevate, and open doors for someone more junior. Sponsorship is distinct from mentorship in a specific and consequential way: a mentor offers guidance, but a sponsor uses her own credibility to advance someone else's career. For Disabled professionals, sponsorship is nearly absent (Candid and Disability and Philanthropy Forum, 2024). The reasons are structural. Sponsors tend to advocate for people who remind them of themselves. The people with institutional power to sponsor are overwhelmingly non-disabled. And the characteristics that make many Disabled professionals exceptional include their:

- Ability to innovate
- Ability to problem-solve
- Ability to address change
- Ability to adapt to inhospitable environments
- Ability to apply a lived experience lens that goes beyond accepting things for what they are
- Ability to identify and define what is *truly* functional
- Unwillingness to perform at "normalcy" at the cost of effectiveness
- Capacity to challenge accepted norms and assess what works and what doesn't work

Organizations that want Disabled executives without building the infrastructure that produces them are attempting to harvest from a field they never planted. You cannot recruit your way out of a pipeline you never built. Effective investment in disability-led leadership requires intervention at every career stage: accessible hiring, inclusive early-career development, visible

sponsorship at the mid-career level, and governance pathways that do not require Disabled professionals to have already overcome every other barrier before they are considered. Starting at the top and working backward is not a strategy. It is a performance of one.

Finding 4: **If professionalism means hiding who you are, it is not professionalism. It is survival.**

Ableism in the workplace does not primarily operate as a series of dramatic exclusions. It does not announce itself. It operates as infrastructure, built into who is seen as credible, how communication styles are evaluated, what counts as professional, and whose access needs are treated as 'reasonable' versus burdensome. Most Disabled professionals navigating a career inside a non-disabled institution are not experiencing discrimination in the form of explicit refusals. **They are experiencing it in the form of a thousand small requirements to perform non-disability as a condition of being taken seriously (Klinger, 2002; Dolmage, 2017).** This another area where further research and development is required. Munir – create a pull quote – love to answer those questions.

The concept of professionalism as it operates in most organizations requires specific things from Autistic, Neurodivergent, and Disabled professionals that it does not require from their non-disabled colleagues. It requires masking communication styles that diverge from the neuromajority's norms. It requires approaching accommodation needs as personal problems to be minimized rather than legitimate access requirements. It involves suppressing your identity so thoroughly that the colleagues and managers making decisions about your career advancement never have to reckon with your actual needs. The cognitive and emotional labor of this suppression is not abstract. It is real, ongoing, and measurable in its costs (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2022; Hyseni et al., 2023).

Every hour a Disabled professional spends managing how she presents herself, negotiating whether to disclose, rehearsing how to ask for what she needs without triggering bias, is an hour not spent doing the work that would advance her career. Her non-disabled colleague does not have that tax. Over a career, that disparity accumulates into the gap that everyone notices

at the top and nobody traces back to its origins. In the Disabled community, we not so fondly call that Disability Tax.

The scale of this suppression is visible in the numbers. For example, only 4.6% of employees self-identify their disability status with employers (Accenture, Disability:IN, and AAPD, 2023). At the leadership level it is more pronounced: 80% of C-suite executives and their direct reports with disabilities do not disclose them. The professionals who have managed to reach senior leadership in non-disabled institutions have largely done so by becoming invisible as Disabled people. That is not inclusion. It is a success story with the most important part edited out.

Neuroinclusion is gaining visibility as a workplace concept, but the measurement infrastructure to assess whether Neurodivergent employees are actually safe enough to be themselves at work remains largely absent (Diversity Council Australia and Amaze, 2026). An organization can declare itself neuroinclusive without being able to demonstrate whether any Neurodivergent employee has ever disclosed a need without professional consequence. That is not a high bar to clear. It is the bare minimum. The basement. And most organizations have not even recognized it.

The correction here is straightforward even if the implementation is not. Authenticity is not unprofessional. Access needs are not excuses. Directness is not aggression. These are not radical positions. They are corrections to a standard that was designed around a narrow slice of human experience and has never been seriously updated. The organizations that address this through awareness campaigns and unconscious bias training while leaving their definition of professionalism entirely intact, are treating symptoms with band-aids. The standard itself needs to be rebuilt, and that work has to be led by the people who have spent the most time navigating its costs. That is, as it happens, exactly the argument this report makes about leadership more broadly.

***Finding 5*: Sponsorship, the mechanism most predictive of leadership access, is nearly absent for Disabled professionals. Mentorship exists. Sponsorship does not.**

Mentorship for Disabled professionals exists, and it matters. Peer networks, Disability Justice communities, and grassroots professional spaces provide guidance, solidarity, and the kind of advice that can only come from someone who has navigated what you are navigating. This report does not diminish that. As seen by the recent growth of identity specific Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), institutions have thus far failed to provide conceptual structure while conflating mentorship and sponsorship. This scenario allows organizations to claim they are investing in Disabled leadership development, when the opposite is true. The actual distinction is that they are funding support structures that Disabled professionals had already built for themselves.

A mentor offers guidance and perspective. A sponsor uses her own institutional credibility and social capital to advance someone else's career, advocates for that person in rooms she is not in, makes introductions that open doors, and takes a professional stake in that person's advancement. Sponsorship is the mechanism most consistently associated with upward mobility in organizational research (Candid and Disability and Philanthropy Forum, 2024; Jackson et al., 2025). It is also the mechanism most dependent on proximity, social similarity, and the kind of informal relationship-building that inaccessible workplace cultures systematically undermine for Disabled professionals. People with power tend to sponsor people who remind them of themselves. The people with the most institutional power are overwhelmingly non-disabled, overwhelmingly of the neuromajority, and largely operating in professional environments that have never required them to think carefully about access. The result is a sponsorship ecosystem that does not extend to Disabled professionals in any systematic way, not because those professionals lack the capability or ambition that sponsorship is meant to amplify, but because the informal mechanisms that produce sponsorship relationships were never designed with them in mind (Disability Lead, 2023).

The organizational implication is specific. Mentorship programs are not a substitute for sponsorship programs. They serve different functions and produce different outcomes. Organizations that are serious about disability-led leadership need to build explicit, accountable sponsorship infrastructure: senior advocates with defined responsibilities, measurable

outcomes, and accountability for the results. Not just encouragement for senior leaders to be more open to mentoring Disabled colleagues. Accountability for whether those colleagues are advancing. The difference between those two things is the difference between a program that signals commitment and a program that produces change.

Part 3: How Ableism Sorts Us

Author's Note on Language: *This section uses "ableist sorting" throughout. The sorting is real and must be named. The language choice locates the agent correctly: in ableist systems, not in the disability community.*

Here is something the disability field has been reluctant to document: ableist systems do not treat all Disabled people the same. This is not a comfortable observation. It implicates organizations that believe they are doing inclusion well. It implicates funders who track disability representation without asking which disabilities are represented. And it implicates the disability field itself, which has often breezed past the sorting it should be naming because we don't do comparative judgements in the disability community. But it is accurate, it is documented in the literature, and it cannot be addressed until it is said plainly and documented.

The sorting is not ours. The disability community does not rank its own members this way. Disability Justice frameworks are explicit that everyone deserves to have their needs met, not the most legible among us, not the most palatable, everyone (Sins Invalid, 2015). The sorting described in this section was built by the ableist systems our society designed without Disabled people involved, and it operates inside every organization that has ever featured only one kind of disability in a visibility campaign while having a completely different conversation about whether another kind of disability is compatible with leadership. It is their architecture. We live inside it. And until we name it directly, we cannot dismantle it.

Not all Disabled people face the same barriers to leadership. The type of disability you have, whether it is apparent, when you acquired it, how much it costs to manage, what intersecting identities you carry, whether your supports can be seen, how much education you were able to

access, and how financially secure you are: all of it shapes whose path to leadership is least obstructed. This section documents how that sorting operates and what it produces.

***Finding 6*: Not all disabilities are treated as equally compatible with leadership. Ableism sorts us by legibility, and that sorting is real, unwritten, and operating right now.**

The ableist sorting of disability in professional contexts operates across three broad tiers that reflect how legible and acceptable different disabilities appear to the non-disabled world. These tiers are not fixed categories, and they do not capture every individual experience, but they describe a consistent pattern in who faces the least obstruction on the path to leadership and who faces the most (Klinger, 2002; Nario-Redmond, 2019; Sins Invalid, 2015). What drives the sorting in every tier is the same thing: the imaginary concept of 'normal', how far you appear to stray from it, and how uncomfortable that distance makes the people with power over your career.

Physical and apparent disabilities occupy the most legible position in this sorting. They are more readily understood within existing DEI frameworks, more often treated as compatible with professional credibility, and more likely to be included in the disability visibility that organizations do when they want to signal inclusion. The bias that apparent disability triggers is real and harmful. It takes the form of pity, unsolicited assistance, lowered expectations, and assumptions about capacity that have nothing to do with the actual professional in front of you. But it is a different harm than what follows for those whose disabilities are less legible to the non-disabled world. The response then is disbelief rather than pity, suspicion rather than accommodation, and an assumption not of incapacity but of fraud (Nario-Redmond, 2019; Corrigan et al., 2003).

Neurodivergent professionals occupy a distinct and particularly difficult position in this sorting, and the distinction is worth naming precisely. It is not only about what can or cannot be seen. It is about the nature of the difference itself. It is not our bodies that unsettle the systems we enter. It is our minds. The way we process, decide, and solve. The way we move through, and interact with, the world at a fundamental level.

The very qualities that make Neurodivergent professionals valuable are the same ones that are read as disqualifying. Pattern recognition, innovative thinking, out-of-the-box problem solving, attention to detail: celebrated in the abstract, but produced by a mind that does not participate in groupthink, does not defer to social hierarchies, and communicates directly with clarifying questions rather than performance. In most professional environments, that gets labeled as unprofessional. And that label, applied consistently and early, reshapes the entire leadership trajectory. Not because the person lacks what leadership requires, but because the systems defining leadership were never built around minds like ours. The source of that misalignment runs deeper than attitude or awareness.

Neurological and cognitive differences can be fundamentally at odds with the way the neuromajority's professional environments are structured, how a workplace communicates, and how they evaluate competence. An open-plan office, an unstructured social hour, a performance review process built around eye contact and affect regulation, an expectation of real-time verbal processing in high-stakes meetings: these are not neutral professional norms. They are the neuromajority's norms, and the discomfort they create for Neurodivergent professionals is located in the environment, not in the person. Yet, it is the person who pays the price for it (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2022; Nario-Redmond, 2019).

The data on employer behavior makes the sorting concrete. Research finds that applicants who disclosed a mental health history were nearly half as likely to receive employer interest as those who disclosed a physical injury, and employers were seven times more likely to recommend hiring an applicant with a physical disability than one disclosing a mental illness (Brohan et al., 2010; Corrigan et al., 2003). These are not attitudes from a different era. They are operating in the organizations currently posting statements about their commitment to disability inclusion.

Disability is also the only identity category that routinely requires workers to disclose private medical and psychological information as a precondition for having their access needs acknowledged at work. No other group is asked to document its identity to justify access. This requirement applies even when an accommodation need is clearly observable, and its burden falls most heavily on those whose disability the workplace finds least legible, the people for

whom disclosure is most likely to trigger suspicion rather than support (Tomas et al., 2022; Brohan et al., 2010; Zhu et al., 2025; Chordiya, 2024; Patton, 2022). The requirement is a structural expression of ableist sorting, not a neutral administrative process, and it operates every day in organizations that have no idea it is happening.

When organizations feature certain Disabled professionals in visibility campaigns and quietly exclude others from leadership conversations, they are not doing inclusion. They are doing curation. They are curating which disability experiences are acceptable enough to be visible, and that is not a diversity strategy. It is a different form of exclusion with better public relations. DEI programming that centers the most palatable disability experiences while marginalizing psychiatric, cognitive, developmental, chronic illness, and multiply Disabled identities is not disability inclusion. It is selective inclusion with a better logo, and the field needs to stop accepting it as progress.

Finding 7: **Nonapparent disability can feel like privilege. It is not. It is a different set of impossible choices.**

Professionals with nonapparent disabilities sometimes have the option of moving through professional spaces without being identified as Disabled. This is frequently read as an advantage, and relative to the immediate, visible bias that apparent disability can trigger, it can function as one. It is not, however, a privilege in any meaningful sense. It is a survival strategy that comes with its own specific and significant costs and confusing it with actual advantage misreads what is happening and what it requires (Chordiya, 2024; Zhu et al., 2025). What nonapparent disability reveals is that the sorting is not only about what others can see. It is also about whether they can convince themselves you are close enough to ‘normal’ to belong.

Passing, or navigating professional spaces without being identified as Disabled, preserves access that disclosure might cost. It also requires ongoing concealment of identity, constant surveillance of one's own behavior, and foregoing authentic community with other Disabled people. The professional who is passing is not moving through the world freely. She is moving

through it while managing an additional layer of performance that her non-disabled colleagues do not carry and that her apparently Disabled peers don't have the privilege to deploy.

Masking, the active suppression of disability-related traits, behaviors, and access needs to conform to non-disabled expectations, is the specific version of this that many Autistic and Neurodivergent professionals live inside for entire careers. Masking is not a choice in the way the word implies agency. It is what happens when an environment makes clear that authenticity carries professional consequences and significant long-term mental health costs. Masking is not a sustainable leadership strategy, and it is not a sign that the person doing it has successfully adapted to professional life. It is a sign that professional life has failed to adapt to her (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Tomas et al., 2022).

The comparison between apparent and nonapparent disability is not a competition for whose situation is harder. It is a documentation of two different kinds of impossible. Apparent disability can trigger immediate bias, exclusion, and the particular indignity of having your competence doubted before you have spoken. Nonapparent disability can trigger disbelief, accusations of exaggeration, and the particular indignity of being told your needs are not real when you finally name them. Neither is safe. They are differently unsafe, and any framework for disability-led leadership that centers one experience at the expense of the other is not built on solid ground.

The goal is not to determine which set of impossible choices is worse. The goal is to build environments where no one has to choose between their identity and their career. That is a different and more useful project, and it requires naming the current reality clearly enough that the distance between where we are now and where we need to be is impossible to minimize.

***Finding 8*: Material conditions create a second layer of ableist sorting that determines who can pursue leadership at all.**

The ableist sorting described in Findings 6 and 7 operates on identity: which disabilities are legible, which are credible, which are acceptable enough to belong in professional spaces. Finding 8 describes a second layer of sorting that operates on access to the material conditions

that make professional advancement structurally possible. These two layers interact and compound each other, and a disability-led leadership framework that addresses only one of them will reproduce the other. Material conditions determine who has access to the tools, supports, and resources that make it possible to maintain the facade of 'normal' long enough to be taken seriously in professional spaces. That is not inclusion. That is the privilege of being able to afford passing.

Education access shapes professional trajectory from the beginning. Disabled people who had access to appropriate educational supports, accommodations, and inclusive environments are significantly better positioned for professional entry and advancement than those who did not. Access to higher education, graduate programs, and the credentialing that professional environments use as a proxy for competence is not evenly distributed across the disability community. This writer's lived experience, research, and collaboration with disabled colleagues leads me to believe that it is, at least in the US, a matter of privilege. And this is why further research is crucial to the next steps.

The professionals who reach visible leadership roles most often come from positions of relative educational advantage. That is not coincidental. It is the predictable output of systems that sorted people by access long before anyone was thinking about leadership pipelines (Candid and Disability and Philanthropy Forum, 2024).

Financial security shapes the infrastructure of career-building in ways that are rarely named in organizational research. Assistive technology is expensive. Therapeutic supports are expensive. Professional development programs, conferences, coaching, and the other mechanisms through which careers are built, and networks are expanded are expensive. Disabled professionals who lack financial resources face higher barriers to every one of these, and those barriers compound over time into the narrower and narrower professional trajectory that organizations later observe and attribute to individual choices rather than structural conditions (Gutterman, 2025).

Professional networks are the mechanism through which leadership opportunities are most often extended, and networking is itself inaccessible for many Disabled people. Physical venues that are not designed for access, communication norms that penalize certain styles and favor others, energy demands that assume a body that does not carry chronic illness or fatigue, social expectations built around informal interaction that requires sustained neuromajority performance norms: these are not minor inconveniences at the margins of professional life. They are central to how careers are built, and they systematically exclude Disabled professionals.

Disabled professionals who reach visible leadership roles most often come from positions of relative material advantage within our own community. This is not a statement about who is more capable or more deserving. It is a statement about what the system rewards and what it is designed to filter out. Investment in disability-led leadership that does not address material conditions will not build a different pipeline. It will reproduce the same narrow slice of disability experience at the top while leaving everyone else exactly where the system already placed them.

Finding 9: **Intersectionality multiplies barriers.**

Disability does not operate in isolation. It never has. The intersection of disability with race, gender, class, sexuality, and other marginalized identities produces experiences of exclusion that are not as simple as each identity adding its own separate burden. They are multiplicative, where identities interact to create barriers that cannot be understood, addressed, or dismantled by examining any single one of them alone (Chordiya, 2024; Sins Invalid, 2015).

A Disabled professional who is also a person of color is navigating racial bias and disability bias simultaneously, and those forces do not operate in parallel lanes. They interact. A Disabled woman is navigating gender-based leadership bias alongside disability stigma, and the specific form those biases take at their intersection is distinct from what either bias produces alone. Disabled people who sit at multiple intersections are the least likely to reach leadership, the most likely to be unrepresented in both the data and the conversation, and the least likely to be

centered in disability-led leadership frameworks that are not explicitly built to include them (Chordiya & Protonentis, 2024).

This finding has a direct implication for the framework proposed in Part 5 of this report. Disability-led leadership that centers the experiences of Disabled professionals who face the fewest intersecting barriers will not dismantle the system that produced the representation gap. It will reorganize who gets left behind. A framework that is genuinely grounded in Disability Justice principles must center the leadership and the needs of those most impacted by intersecting systems of oppression, not because this is a politically correct position, but because it is the only framework that is actually built to produce the change it claims to be pursuing (Sins Invalid, 2015). Any leadership approach that does not start there is just the same system with different people managing it. It is not liberation.

The need for labeling is a human construct, but naming the issue doesn't solve the underlying challenge. By validating the existence ableism, we can begin to take it apart. The question of which Disabled people face the worst discrimination or the least hardship in their careers is not the problem we should be solving for. It is a distraction from the right question, which is why ableism continues to be allowed to run rampant through our workplaces in the first place. All of this sorting traces back to a system worth repeating: the imaginary concept of 'normal', how far you intrinsically stray from it, and how uncomfortable your disability makes other people. That is the architecture of ableism. And ableism must be eliminated from our workplaces entirely. Not managed or accommodated around. Eliminated. True inclusion cannot be an individual workaround or a program bolted onto a broken system. It must be built into and supported by the systems, policies, procedures, and leadership of every organization that claims to value it.

Part 4: When It Works: Conditions for Thriving

The previous three sections of this analysis document barriers. This section documents something different: what the research identifies as the conditions under which Disabled professionals can actually do the work, advance, lead, and sustain that leadership over time without burning themselves out in the process. This section is shorter than the others, not

because the conditions for thriving are simple, but because the literature on them is nearly nonexistent. That deficit is itself a finding.

There is a version of this section that could be read as a list of best practices, a set of organizational recommendations that well-meaning institutions can adopt and check off and point to as evidence of commitment. That is not the version this report offers. The conditions documented here are not aspirational enhancements to a basically functional system. Instead, they are the minimum requirements for an environment in which Disabled professionals are not simply present and accommodated, but actually able to lead. The distinction matters because most organizations are nowhere near meeting them and understanding why requires understanding what they actually demand.

***Finding 10*: Disabled leaders thrive when specific organizational conditions are present. Thriving is not a personal achievement. It is an organizational responsibility.**

The literature identifies a consistent set of conditions associated with Disabled professionals' capacity to participate, advance, and sustain leadership over time. These conditions are not individual traits or personal strategies. They are organizational choices, and the difference between an organization where Disabled professionals thrive and one where they survive or leave is, in almost every case, traceable to whether those choices were made (Raisėienė et al., 2025; Gutterman, 2024; Zhu et al., 2025; Hyseni et al., 2023).

The first condition is proactive, predictable accommodation. Not a reactive exception process that requires a Disabled professional to identify herself, document her needs, navigate a bureaucratic review, absorb the social cost of being seen as someone who requires special handling, and then wait to find out whether her request will be honored. Proactive accommodation means that access is built into the design of work from the outset, that the environment anticipates diverse needs rather than responding to them case by case, and that a Disabled professional does not have to spend her political capital simply getting what she needs to do her job (Gutterman, 2024). The current standard in most organizations is reactive accommodation offered under legal obligation. That standard is the floor below which

organizations risk liability. It is not a foundation for leadership. Thriving requires something more.

The second condition is psychological safety, specifically the freedom to bring disability identity into professional spaces without risk of penalty, disbelief, or reduced opportunity (Raisėienė et al., 2025). Psychological safety in this context is not a general sense of workplace comfort. It is the specific condition of being able to name your needs, disclose your identity, and operate as a whole person without calculating whether doing so will cost you the advancement opportunity you have been working toward. Given that 80% of C-suite executives and their direct reports with disabilities do not disclose, it is reasonable to conclude that psychological safety in this specific sense is rare. Organizations that have not built it cannot claim to be environments where Disabled leadership is possible. They are environments where Disabled professionals who have learned to hide themselves well have survived.

The third condition is inclusive leadership behavior from the non-disabled colleagues and managers who hold institutional power over Disabled professionals' careers. This means reducing the fear that accommodation requests will be received badly, sharing power rather than concentrating it, and treating access as an expectation rather than an exception (Zhu et al., 2025). This is not a cultural aspiration. It is a behavioral requirement, and it has to be modeled at the senior level to be credible anywhere in the organization. A manager who says the right things about disability inclusion and then visibly freezes when a team member discloses a need is communicating something more powerful than any policy document.

The fourth condition is a disability-affirming organizational culture, one in which disability is understood as a leadership competency and identity asset rather than a compliance requirement or a diversity checkbox (Valuable 500, 2024). This is the condition that most organizations claim to be building and that almost none have built. Culture is not the poster on the wall. It is not the paragraph in the employee handbook. It is what happens when disability becomes inconvenient, when an accommodation request comes in during a busy quarter, when a disclosure happens at a critical moment in a project, when a Disabled leader's communication style creates friction with a non-disabled team's expectations (Hyseni et al., 2023). The culture

is revealed in those moments, and in most organizations, what is revealed in those moments is that inclusion has limits, and the limits are exactly where they would be if no inclusion work had been done at all.

There is a significant gap in the literature that this report names directly: no validated thriving framework exists specifically for Disabled leaders. Research on Disabled employees in general organizational contexts is limited. Research on Disabled people in leadership roles is sparser still. Research that measures whether those leaders are thriving, not just present, not just retained, but actually leading authentically and sustainably, does not yet exist in a form that organizations can use to hold themselves accountable. This is one of the most urgent research priorities in the field, and it is addressed in the future research directions in the Conclusion. The absence of such a framework means that organizations currently have no rigorous way to measure whether their investments in disability inclusion are producing the outcomes they claim to be pursuing. That is not a reason to stop investing. It is a reason to fund the research that would make accountability possible.

Resilience is what Disabled professionals acquire when organizations fail them. It is not a leadership strategy. The goal of this report is not to celebrate the resilience of the Disabled leaders who have managed to thrive despite hostile or indifferent environments. It is to document what those environments would have to look like for resilience to be unnecessary, and to make the case that building those environments is an organizational obligation, not an act of generosity.

***Finding 11*: Community is the primary sustaining infrastructure for Disabled leaders. Its necessity is evidence of institutional failure, not community strength.**

Disabled leaders who thrive consistently name the same sustaining infrastructure. Not their organizations. Not their employers. Not the formal structures that employing institutions are supposed to provide. They name peer community, grassroots networks, and Disability Justice spaces as the relationships and resources that have made their leadership possible (Jackson et al., 2025; Disability Lead, 2023; Candid and Disability and Philanthropy Forum, 2024).

This finding deserves to be held carefully, because it is easy to read it in a way that misses the point entirely. The peer networks and community spaces that Disabled leaders credit are genuinely valuable. The people in them are doing important, skilled, sustaining work. The relationships formed in Disability Justice communities and disability-specific professional spaces provide something that non-disabled institutions have not provided and, in many cases, have actively prevented: the experience of being fully known, fully accommodated, and fully credible as a leader without having to earn any of it through performance of non-disability. It is, for many Disabled leaders, the only environment in which they have experienced this. That is not a small thing.

Let’s not celebrate this. Instead, let’s be clear-eyed about what it means. When the primary sustaining infrastructure for Disabled leaders is the community those leaders built themselves because institutions failed to build anything, the institutions are saved by the community's competence. The community is doing the work that organizations are supposed to do and are not doing. The peer networks are providing the sponsorship that organizational structures have failed to provide. The Disability Justice spaces are offering the psychological safety and identity affirmation that workplaces have failed to offer. The community's strength is evidence of exactly how far and for how long the system has failed. It is not evidence that the system is working. What Disabled people have had to build in response is proof of that.

Investment in Disabled community infrastructure is leadership. It is not the soft complement to the more serious work of organizational transformation. The peer networks that sustain Disabled leaders are performing a function that would otherwise go unperformed. Funding them as leadership development infrastructure, not as community support or social services or general disability programming, is one of the highest-leverage investments available to a funder who wants to move the needle on disability-led leadership. The community has been subsidizing the system's failures for long enough. It is time for the system to pay for what it has been receiving for free.

Part 5: Toward a Framework for Disability-Led Leadership

The previous four sections of this report document a problem. This one proposes a different kind of work, with a different posture. The barriers to Disabled leadership are real and well-documented, in this report and in the scholarship it draws from. What is not documented, what does not yet exist as a coherent construct in organizational or leadership scholarship, is a framework for disability-led leadership built from the ground up based on Disabled people's expertise, lived experience, and authority. This section proposes.

A working framework, not a final one. The empirical research needed to validate and refine it has not yet been done, and this report is honest about that. What this section offers is a conceptual foundation: a clear definition of what disability-led leadership is and is not, the affirmative case for why Disabled leaders are not just deserving of leadership but demonstrably suited to it, and the argument that lived experience is not a supplement to professional credential but a form of it. The framework begins here, with us, with our expertise, and with our lives as the evidence.

***Finding 12*: Disabled leaders are not just deserving of leadership roles. We are better at them. And the field needs to say this out loud to the people who need to hear it.**

The existing literature on disability and leadership is almost entirely a literature of barriers. It documents who is excluded, how exclusion operates, and what it costs. That documentation is necessary and this report contributes to it. But documentation of exclusion is not the same as an affirmative case for inclusion, and the field has been too cautious about making the affirmative case clearly.

Disabled leaders are better leaders. Not despite having navigated systems designed to exclude us, but because of it. The capacities that Disabled professionals develop in the course of building careers in environments not designed for them are not incidental to leadership. They are central to it, and they are capacities that are genuinely difficult to develop any other way (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Hyseni et al., 2023; Valuable 500, 2024).

Flexibility is the first of these. Disabled professionals have been adapting to inaccessible environments for the entirety of their careers. Not occasionally, not in exceptional circumstances, but as a routine feature of professional life. The ability to find a way through when the standard path is closed, to solve the problem that the environment was not designed to solve, to build the workaround that eventually becomes the better practice: this is adaptation at scale, and adaptation at scale is exactly what innovation looks like when it is not dressed up in capitalist language. Organizations that want more innovation and less rigid thinking are describing exactly the cognitive profile that many Disabled leaders have developed through necessity.

Resilience is the second, with an important clarification. Resilience as this report uses the term is not the virtue that non-disabled institutions celebrate when they profile inspiring Disabled leaders who overcame adversity. That version of resilience is a way of making the barrier invisible by making the person extraordinary. The resilience that this finding documents is operational. The practical wisdom that comes from having survived environments that were not built for you and having built something from what you survived. It is evidence of capacity, not of suffering, and it is directly applicable to the work of leading organizations through the complex, changing, and frequently hostile conditions that leadership actually requires.

Empathy grounded in experience is the third. Disabled leaders know what it means to be the person in the room whose needs were not considered when the room was designed. That knowledge is not abstract. It is felt, accumulated, and specific, and it changes how you lead when you are the one making the decisions. Organizations whose leaders understand marginalization as a lived requirement rather than a compliance obligation build differently. They ask different questions earlier in the design process. They anticipate needs that leaders without that experience would not think to anticipate until someone raised them at the wrong moment. Notably, research with C-suite executives finds that non-disabled leaders who develop proximity to disability consistently identify empathy and creativity as the leadership capacities most enhanced by that proximity (Valuable 500, 2024). If proximity to disability

develops these capacities in non-disabled leaders, consider what a lifetime of living with disability brings with it.

Curiosity is the fourth. Navigating systems not built for you requires lateral thinking, the willingness to question why something is done a certain way and whether there is a better way to do it, and the ability to find solutions in places that the system's designers never thought to look. These are not soft skills. They are the cognitive habits most associated with the kind of leadership that produces organizational transformation rather than institutional maintenance. The field documents these capacities. It rarely names Disabled professionals as the people most systematically positioned to develop them.

The question is not whether Disabled people are capable of leadership. That question was answered before it was asked, by every Disabled leader who has ever led without a roadmap, without a sponsor, without a framework, without a field that named what she was doing as leadership rather than survival. The question is why organizations continue to utilize systems that prevent Disabled professionals from exercising capacities the organizations themselves desperately need.

Finding 13: **Disability-led leadership is a distinct construct. It is not a DEI subcategory, and it is not the same as disability-inclusive leadership.**

Two concepts are consistently blended in organizational practice in ways that allow organizations to avoid accountability for actual Disabled leadership representation. The blending is not always intentional. It is, however, consequential, and this report draws the distinction directly because without it, the framework proposed here collapses back into the inclusion work that is already happening and already falling short.

Disability-inclusive leadership is leadership practiced by non-disabled people who work to reduce barriers and create environments where Disabled employees can participate more fully. This work is real, it is documented in the literature, and it is necessary (Valuable 500, 2024). An organization with non-disabled leaders who understand access, who build proactive accommodation into organizational design, and who actively work to make their institutions

less hostile to Disabled employees is a better organization than one without them. This report does not argue otherwise.

But disability-inclusive leadership is not disability-led leadership and treating them as equivalent is exactly how organizations score well on inclusion metrics while having zero Disabled people in the rooms where decisions are made. Disability-inclusive leadership is non-disabled people working to make more space for Disabled people within institutions they control. Disability-led leadership is Disabled people holding the decision-making authority that determines what those institutions do, how they are governed, and whose needs they center. They are structurally different arrangements of power, not points on a spectrum, and the difference between them is the entire argument of this section.

The working definition this report proposes: disability-led leadership is leadership grounded in the lived experience and perspectives of Disabled people, centering Disabled expertise and collective accountability, challenging ableist assumptions about competence and authority, and requiring decision-making power, not advisory presence. It is not a symbolic representation. It is authority. It is not heroic individualism of the kind that turns singular Disabled leaders into inspiration without changing the systems those leaders had to navigate. It is relational and distributed power, consistent with Disability Justice principles of collective leadership and accountability to the people most impacted. Instead of being centered on the most palatable disability experiences, it centers on the people most impacted. And it does not treat access as an accommodation exception. It builds access into the design of leadership itself (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Valuable 500, 2024; Sins Invalid, 2015).

An organization can score well on every disability-inclusive leadership metric that Valuable 500 (2024) documents, have non-disabled C-suite executives who are genuinely committed to reducing barriers and genuinely skilled at disability-inclusive management, and still have zero Disabled people in governance or executive authority. That organization has done work, but it has not done this work. Treating disability-inclusive and disability-led leadership as interchangeable is how institutions substitute culture work for representation and call it

progress. The standard needs to move, and this framework is part of the argument for moving it.

***Finding 14*: Lived experience is a professional credential and a core leadership competency. Not personal context. Not a soft differentiator. A qualification.**

Current professional frameworks treat lived experience as testimony. It adds authenticity to an argument, relatability to a presentation, or emotional resonance to a proposal. In this framing, lived experience is something a Disabled professional brings to the table alongside her actual qualifications, a human element that makes the hard data more compelling. This report inverts that framing entirely.

Navigating inaccessible systems produces operational expertise that is directly applicable to designing equitable ones. A Disabled professional who has spent a career figuring out how to get her needs met inside institutions that were not designed to meet them has developed a sophisticated, granular, practice-tested understanding of how those institutions fail and where the leverage points for change are located. That is not a personal story. That is a skill set. It belongs in job postings under required qualifications, not in diversity statements under the section about values (Valuable 500, 2024; Sins Invalid, 2015; Disability Rights UK, 2021).

The reframing has concrete implications across every dimension of organizational practice. In hiring, it means that lived experience of disability is evaluated as relevant expertise for roles that involve designing for access, serving Disabled communities, or leading organizations through institutional transformation, aka change management. In promotion processes, it means that the problem-solving competencies developed through navigating inaccessible environments are recognized as leadership capacities rather than filtered out by frameworks built to reward non-disabled performance norms. In governance composition, it means that Disabled people are not brought onto boards as community representatives to speak to the disability experience but as leaders whose expertise is directly relevant to the organization's strategic direction. And in how organizations describe what they are looking for, it means that the language of required qualifications expands to include what lived experience actually

produces, the flexibility, the systems-level thinking, the access expertise, and the design sensibility that comes from having needed access and seldom finding it.

This reframing is a correction, not a lowering of standards. The standard for leadership competence was built to identify and reward a specific profile of professional performance, one that centers the neuromajority's communication criterion, non-disabled physical endurance, and the kind of social ease that comes from having never had to negotiate access to the basic requirements of professional life. That standard does not identify the best leaders. It identifies the leaders most similar to the people who designed the standard. Disability-led leadership requires a different and more rigorous question: what expertise does this role actually require, and who has it?

***Finding 15*: Governance is where disability-led leadership either exists or does not. Everything else is atmosphere.**

Governance is where institutional values become structural reality. It is where strategy is set, where resources are allocated, where the questions that determine an organization's direction are asked and answered. It is also in virtually every sector where Disabled people are most absent from positions of actual authority. Board-level disability representation is extremely low across corporate, nonprofit, and government contexts (Purple and KPMG, 2018; Inclusive Boards, 2022; Özbilgin et al., 2023). The organizations most likely to be shaping policy, directing resources, and determining the conditions under which Disabled people live and work are the organizations least likely to have Disabled people in the rooms where those decisions are made.

This is not a pipeline problem that will resolve itself as more Disabled professionals develop their careers. The barriers documented in Parts 2, 3, and 4 of this report operate throughout the career arc in ways that systematically filter out exactly the Disabled professionals who most need to be at governance tables. Without deliberate structural intervention at the governance level, the representation gap will persist regardless of how much inclusion work happens at the organizational level below it. Culture change without governance change is just atmosphere.

Without governance change there is no true culture change and what presents as culture change is a perception of the atmosphere.

It makes the environment more pleasant without changing who holds power.

Governance frameworks from Disabled People's organizations offer concrete models that the broader field has largely failed to learn from. Collective leadership structures, accountability mechanisms built on community trust rather than hierarchical authority, explicit requirements that lived experience of disability is a governance qualification rather than a supplementary credential: these are not theoretical positions. They are documented governance practices that organizations led by Disabled people have developed and refined over decades (Disability Rights UK, 2021; Clore Leadership, 2022). The question is not whether these models exist. The question is why the institutions with the most resources and the most impact have not adopted them.

Funders who require governance-level disability representation as a condition of funding eligibility are exercising one of the highest-leverage structural interventions available to them. Not program-level participation, not advisory committee membership, not a Disabled community liaison who reports to a non-disabled executive director. Governance-level authority: the board seats, the fiduciary responsibilities, the votes that determine what the organization does and who it serves. This is not a radical ask. It is a minimum standard, and it is one that funders have both the leverage and the responsibility to set. Disability-led leadership happens because the conditions that make it possible are built and required. It does not happen simply because organizations want it to. Governance is where that building either happens or does not. Everything else, the culture work, the training programs, the visibility campaigns, the inclusion statements, is atmosphere until the governance changes.

You have to be where the decisions are made often enough to have impact. Never means systems always stay the same. Only occasionally means inconsistencies. Disabled professionals who are invited in once, consulted once, or seated at the table for a single initiative do not have the positional repetition required to shift culture, redirect resources, or hold institutions

accountable over time. Presence without consistency is not governance. It is a guest appearance. The organizations that point to a single Disabled board member, a one-time advisory seat, or a disability-focused initiative led by someone with no ongoing decision-making authority are not building disability-led leadership. They are managing optics. Consistent, sustained presence in the rooms where decisions are made is not a bonus feature of disability-led leadership. It is the definition of it.

Conclusion

Return to the Story

I started this report with a question that took me most of a career to ask correctly. Not ‘Why is this so hard for me?’ but “Why is there no path?’ The analysis that followed is my attempt to answer it rigorously, with evidence, with the full weight of a literature that confirms what Disabled professionals already know from living inside it. I want to return to that question now, not to answer it again but to say clearly what it cost to ask it, and what it would mean to build something different.

The barriers documented in this report are not abstractions. They are the advisory committees I sat on while someone else made the decisions. They are the standards I met and the new ones that appeared. They are the mentors I looked for and did not find, the rooms I prepared for and was excluded from, the cycle of survival that left almost no room for anything else. The research confirmed what I had been living. The gap is real, it is structural, it is compounding, and it has been operating without accountability for long enough.

What I want for the Disabled professionals who will come after me is something I did not have: the knowledge that a path exists before they need it. Not a path that requires exceptional people to survive exceptional conditions. An ordinary path, the kind that does not make headlines because it is simply how careers work. A structure that does not require a Disabled professional to prove her value on paper while her colleagues are trusted by default, that does not send her into strategic conversations through the side door after the meeting has ended,

that does not extract her expertise while withholding her authority. That is not an ambitious task. This report is an argument for building it.

I am not doing this work only for myself. I am doing it for every Disabled professional who has ever been the most qualified person in the room and still been handed the advisory chair instead of the seat at the table. That experience is not exceptional. This report proves it. And proving it is the first step toward refusing to accept it.

Main Findings Summary

This report documents fifteen findings across five thematic areas that together explain the structural conditions producing the absence of a pathway to Disabled leadership.

Part 1 establishes that Disabled people are severely underrepresented in formal leadership across all sectors, and that the data we use to track that underrepresentation is designed in ways that consistently understate the problem. Presence is being measured where power should be. Disability is systematically excluded from DEI data collection, and that exclusion is a structural choice with predictable consequences: no data, no accountability, no change.

Part 2 documents that exclusion from leadership is not a threshold event at the senior level but a cumulative process that begins before the first job and compounds at every career stage. Inaccessible hiring, inaccessible networking, the near-total absence of sponsorship for Disabled professionals, and a definition of professionalism that requires Disabled people to hide who they are in order to be taken seriously: these are not isolated barriers. They are a system, and they produce the leadership gap that organizations later observe and attribute to a thin pipeline rather than to thirty years of structural exclusion.

Part 3 names what the field has been unwilling to say directly; that ableist systems do not treat all Disabled people the same. The sorting by disability legibility, the compounding effect of material conditions, and the multiplicative impact of intersecting marginalized identities together determines whose path to leadership is least obstructed and whose is most. Any framework for disability-led leadership that does not account for this sorting will reproduce it.

Part 4 identifies the organizational conditions under which Disabled leaders can actually thrive and finds that no validated framework for measuring that thriving yet exists. Proactive accommodation, psychological safety, inclusive leadership behavior, and a genuinely disability-affirming culture are the conditions the literature associates with Disabled professional sustainability. Most organizations are nowhere near meeting them. The peer community that Disabled leaders credit as their most sustaining infrastructure is doing the work that institutions refuse to do, and funders need to invest in it accordingly.

FUNDERS – TAKE NOTE – THIS IS. YOUR OPPORUNITY TO USE YOUR VISIBILITY, POWER, AND PRIVELGE TO DRIVE TRUE ALLYSHIP. Becca.

Part 5 proposes a working framework for disability-led leadership as a distinct construct, separate from and more demanding than disability-inclusive leadership. Disabled leaders are not just deserving of leadership. We are better at it. Lived experience is not personal context. It is a professional credential. And governance is where disability-led leadership either exists or does not. Everything else is atmosphere.

The thread connecting all fifteen findings is the same: a structural outcome produced by deliberate design choices that should be designed to evolve. Design choices can be unmade. Systems can be rebuilt. But not by the people who benefited from building them the first time. Systems need to be rebuilt forward from accurate data collection rather than band aiding what currently exists. The absence of a true pathway for Disabled professionals to enter leadership is not a simple oversight.

What the Field Still Needs to Say

The research is clear enough. What is missing is the willingness to say what it means.

Disabled leaders are better leaders. The field documents the capacities that Disabled professionals develop through navigating inaccessible systems and then declines to make the

affirmative case plainly. This report makes it. Flexibility, innovation, resilience, curiosity, and empathy grounded in lived experience are not soft differentiators. They are the leadership competencies most needed in organizations facing complex, changing, and frequently hostile conditions.

How ableism sorts Disabled people is real, it is operating right now, and it is reproduced inside the disability field itself when we center the most legible and palatable disability experiences in our leadership conversations while marginalizing psychiatric, cognitive, developmental, and multiply Disabled identities. We cannot build disability-led leadership while reproducing a hierarchy we are supposed to be dismantling. Naming the sorting is not a division. It is the prerequisite for accountability.

Inclusion without decision-making power is performance. The standard needs to move, and the field needs to stop accepting culture work as a substitute for representation. An organization can do everything on a disability-inclusive leadership checklist and still have zero Disabled people in governance. That is a very well documented failure. And what we need is progress. That is a very well-documented failure.

Areas for Future Research

Author's Note: *All research directions below are conceptual, proposed as priorities for future empirical work rather than as findings of this report.*

The most urgent priority is the development and validation of a thriving framework specifically for Disabled leaders. The literature identifies the conditions associated with thriving but has not produced a validated instrument for measuring whether those conditions are present or whether interventions are producing the outcomes they claim. Without that framework, organizations have no rigorous way to hold themselves accountable for anything beyond presence.

Longitudinal research on Disabled leadership trajectories across career stages, sectors, disability types, and intersecting identities would provide the empirical foundation that this conceptual

analysis cannot. The compounding effect of career-long exclusion is documented in the literature in fragments. A longitudinal study designed to track it would make the structural argument irrefutable.

Governance analysis examining disability representation, decision-making authority, and organizational outcomes would test the central claim of Finding 15: that governance is where disability-led leadership either exists or does not. The data to support that claim rigorously does not yet exist at scale.

Evaluation of disability-specific leadership programs and their long-term pipeline impact, community-based participatory research centered in Disabled professionals' own frameworks for leadership success, and direct analysis of how ableist sorting operates across organizational cultures and sectors round out the research agenda this report points toward. These are not minor gaps in an otherwise complete literature. They are the primary gaps in a field that is largely still building its foundation.

Areas for Policy Change

The policy implications of this analysis are specific and actionable now, without waiting for the research agenda listed above to be completed.

Public funding eligibility criteria should require disability representation at the governance level, not the program level. An organization that serves Disabled communities but is not governed by Disabled people should not receive the same funding treatment as one that is. This distinction matters and funders have the standing and the responsibility to require it.

DEI reporting frameworks should mandate disability-specific leadership data collection that distinguishes role type and decision-making authority from headcount. The Valuable 500 ESG and Disability Data whitepaper (2023) provides a five-KPI model that organizations can adopt immediately. What is missing is the requirement to do so. Regulators and funders who care about accountability have the tools but they must be willing to use them. And hold them accountable to their standards

Disability-led organizations, those governed and directed by Disabled people, should be funded as a distinct category, not as a subset of general disability funding and not as an afterthought within broader DEI initiatives. They are not the same as organizations that serve Disabled communities. The distinction is governance, and governance is where the work either happens or it does not.

Sponsorship infrastructure for Disabled professionals should be built into organizational HR accountability frameworks with defined outcomes and measurable results. Not encouragement. Accountability.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the findings of this analysis and organized by the audience, because the work of building disability-led leadership is not the responsibility of any single group. It requires coordinated action across funding, organizational practice, research, and the disability field itself.

For Funders and Philanthropists

For funders and philanthropists, the core recommendation is to establish disability-led leadership as a distinct funding category and to require governance-level disability representation as a condition of eligibility, not program-level participation. Invest in leadership pipeline infrastructure at every career stage, not only at the point of executive recruitment. Fund the research gap directly: a validated thriving framework for Disabled leaders does not exist, and without it, no one can measure whether any of this is working.

For Organizations

For organizations, the work begins with data. Audit your leadership data before making any claims about disability inclusion. Track representation by role type and decision-making authority, not headcount alone. Build proactive, predictable accommodation into organizational design as a standard feature. Distinguish between disability-inclusive leadership

programs and disability-led leadership pipelines and invest in both. Create explicit, accountable sponsorship structures with senior advocates, defined outcomes, and accountability for results. And examine honestly how ableism sorts Disabled people inside your own organization: whose disability is visible in your campaigns, whose is excluded from leadership conversations, and whose accommodation requests are honored without question.

For Researchers

For researchers, the priority is to establish disability-led leadership as a distinct field of inquiry with its own construct definition, validated instruments, and longitudinal research agenda. Center Disabled researchers at every stage, not as subjects or consultants but as principal investigators and co-designers. Name ableist sorting as a research variable. Build on the gaps identified here as a foundation for a coordinated agenda rather than isolated studies.

For the Disability Field

For the disability field, the most important recommendation is also the most uncomfortable one. Name how ableism sorts us and commit to accountability for it inside our own organizations, our own funding decisions, and our own leadership conversations. Invest in peer sponsorship and community-based leadership infrastructure as explicitly as we invest in advocacy. Build pathways that account for material barriers, not only identity-based ones. And make the affirmative case publicly and without apology: Disabled leaders are not just deserving of leadership. We are better at it. That argument belongs in our public scholarship, not only in our private conversations.

A Direct Address

To every Disabled professional who has ever been the most qualified person in the room and still been handed the advisory chair instead of the seat at the table: this paper is for you, not about you.

To the funders, the organizations, the researchers, and the field: the recommendations above are the bare minimum. They are not meant to be aspirational. The gap has been documented. The forces that sustain it have been named. What happens next is a choice.

To my own community: the ableist sorting that has ranked us and determined whose professionalism is acceptable was not built by us or for us. It was built about us and making money off of us. Dismantling it requires naming it honestly and demanding that the systems responsible for it be the ones to change. That work starts inside our own field, and it starts now.

And to anyone still wondering whether Disabled people belong in leadership: we are not the problem. The systems are. And systems must be built better.

Glossary

Author's Note*: The following terms are used throughout this report. Definitions reflect Disability Studies and Disability Justice frameworks rather than medical or clinical definitions.*

Ableism: Systemic discrimination against Disabled people, embedded in cultural norms, institutional design, and individual behavior. Ableism operates even when unintentional - through systems designed without Disabled people in mind. It is not primarily dramatic exclusion; it is the accumulation of inaccessible design, stigma, and the small daily costs of navigating spaces not built for you.

Accessibility: The design of environments, systems, practices, and interactions that anticipate diverse needs and reduce or eliminate barriers. Accessibility is equitable design, not simply a special accommodation.

Apparent Disability: A disability that is immediately or readily perceivable to others through physical appearance, movement, use of mobility aids or assistive devices, or other observable characteristics. People with apparent disabilities often face immediate bias, unsolicited assistance, and assumptions about their competence before they have the opportunity to speak. Visibility does not make disability easier to navigate. It shifts which barriers are encountered first.

Autistic Glass Ceiling: A term used within the Autistic community to describe the invisible but socio-structural barrier that prevents Autistic and Neurodivergent professionals from advancing beyond a certain point in organizational hierarchies, regardless of their qualifications, expertise, or results. It is maintained by the neuromajority's professional norms, communication expectations, and credibility frameworks that consistently undervalue the capacities of Autistic professionals.

Belonging: A sense of psychological safety, acceptance, and inclusion that allows individuals to participate fully and authentically. For Disabled people, belonging includes freedom from stigma, identity safety, and access without penalty or performance.

Disability: A broad, heterogeneous, and socially constructed category describing body-mind variations that interact with environmental, structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers. In Disability Justice frameworks, disability is a lived identity shaped by social and systemic conditions, not an individual deficit.

Disability Justice: A framework developed by Disabled people of color that centers intersectionality, collective liberation, and leadership of those most impacted. Disability Justice goes beyond access and accommodation to address the root causes of systemic oppression.

Disability-Inclusive Leadership: Leadership practiced by non-Disabled people that aims to reduce barriers and welcome Disabled employees. Necessary, but not the same as disability-led leadership.

Disability-Led Leadership: Leadership grounded in the lived experience and perspectives of Disabled people, centering Disabled expertise and collective accountability. Requires decision-making power, not advisory presence.

Disability Tax: When someone refers to a "disability tax" (or sometimes a "crip tax"), they are not talking about a formal, government-imposed tax. This is a colloquial term for the extra, often unavoidable, financial costs, time, and emotional energy that Disabled people must spend to achieve the same quality of life or level of access as non-disabled people.

Disclosure: The act of sharing one's disability identity with an employer, colleague, institution, or other party. Disclosure is not a single event but an ongoing decision that Disabled professionals must make and remake throughout their careers - with each new job, manager, colleague, or context. Disclosure carries differential risk depending on disability type, organizational culture, and intersecting identity. It is never fully safe or free.

ERG (Employee Resource Group): Voluntary, employee-led groups within organizations that provide community and support for members of a shared identity. Often the primary form of disability 'inclusion' in corporate settings.

GHF: Global Heumann Fellowship, a fellowship program of the World Institute on Disability that supports disability advocates in producing research, advocacy, and public-facing scholarship.

Governance: Structures and processes through which decisions, oversight, and strategic direction occur. In this report, governance refers to board-level and executive leadership structures where institutional authority is exercised.

Identity Safety: The perception that one's disability identity, and other intersecting identities, can be expressed without risk of harm, penalty, or exclusion. Foundational to authentic leadership participation. Rare.

Intersectionality: A framework describing how multiple social identities (such as disability, race, gender, class, and sexuality) overlap to produce distinct experiences of privilege or oppression that cannot be understood by examining any single identity in isolation.

Masking: The conscious or unconscious suppression or camouflage of disability-related traits, behaviors, or needs in order to conform to neuromajority's or non-disabled social expectations. Most commonly discussed in the context of Autistic and Neurodivergent people and carrying significant long-term mental health costs. Masking is a trauma-induced, survival strategy developed in response to environments that penalize authenticity. It is not professionalism.

Mentorship: A relationship in which a more experienced professional offers guidance, advice, and support to someone earlier in their career. Mentorship provides knowledge, perspective, and encouragement. It is valuable and often the primary form of professional support available to Disabled professionals. It is not, however, the same as sponsorship.

Nonapparent Disability: A disability that is not immediately apparent to others. Includes many chronic health conditions, hearing and vision loss, mental health conditions, neurological differences, and cognitive disabilities. People with nonapparent disabilities face distinct challenges, including disbelief and pressure to disclose or conceal.

Organizational Culture: The shared norms, policies, practices, and informal expectations within an organization that shape behavior and outcomes.

Passing: Navigating social, professional, or public spaces without being identified as Disabled, either because a disability is nonapparent or because a person has learned to conceal disability-

related traits. Like masking, passing is a survival strategy, not a free choice. It preserves conditional access at the cost of authentic identity expression and community accountability.

Performative Allyship: The act of publicly expressing support for a marginalized group without taking meaningful action to address the structural conditions that harm them. In disability contexts, performative allyship often takes the form of visibility campaigns, awareness months, and inclusion statements that are not accompanied by changes to hiring practices, governance composition, or resource allocation. It is distinguished from allyship by the absence of accountability and the presence of reputational benefit.

Pipeline: The pathway through which professionals move from entry-level positions toward leadership and governance. This report argues that a disability leadership pipeline has not been built, not that it needs improvement.

Sponsorship: The active use of institutional social capital by someone in power to advance another person's career through advocacy, introductions, and opportunity creation. Distinct from mentorship (guidance and advice). Sponsorship is the mechanism most predictive of leadership advancement. Nearly absent for Disabled professionals.

Stigma: A mark of social disapproval attached to a perceived difference from an assumed norm. In disability contexts, stigma frames disability as tragedy, limitation, or incompetence. It shapes how Disabled people are perceived in professional settings before they speak, before they perform, and often before they are hired. It is not a personal failing. It is a structural condition produced by systems that treat non-disabled experience as the default.

Stereotypes: Oversimplified, fixed beliefs about a group applied broadly and without regard for individual experience. In professional settings, stereotypes about disability take the form of assumptions about reliability, capacity, and judgment. They operate before a Disabled professional has the opportunity to demonstrate competence and persist even after they have.

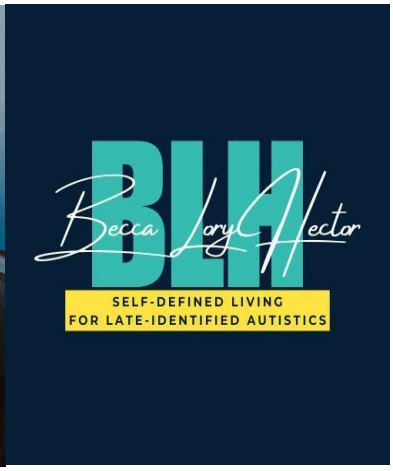
Thriving: The experience of living well, sustaining wellbeing, and leading authentically as a Disabled person. Includes access without stigma, identity affirmation, autonomy, and community connection. Not the same as surviving, performing resilience, or being present.

Unconscious Bias: A preference or assumption that operates below conscious awareness, shaping decisions in ways the person acting on them may not recognize. In leadership and hiring contexts, unconscious bias against Disabled people manifests as assumptions about fit, professionalism, and potential. It produces many of the same outcomes as deliberate discrimination. Naming it unconscious does not make it less harmful or reduce the responsibility of the institution to address it.

WID: World Institute on Disability, an international disability rights organization advancing the rights and full inclusion of people with disabilities through public policy, research, and advocacy.

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To the Disabled community, whose leadership, survival, and community-building made this research both possible and necessary: this report is built on what you have already lived and already know. I hope it gives it the weight it deserves.

And to every Disabled professional who has ever built a workaround, survived an environment not designed for them, and kept going anyway: this one is for you.

About the Global Heumann Fellowship

Creating a Global Bridge to the Future

The WID Global Heumann Fellowship Program honors WID co-founder Judy Heumann's enduring legacy by empowering disability leaders and advocates worldwide to advance disability rights and justice within their regional communities. Through this program, fellows will work on impactful projects aimed at fostering equity, inclusion, and justice globally. Their responsibilities include conducting research, drafting a white paper, cultivating relationships, driving collaborative opportunities, and contributing to program development aligned with WID's mission and strategic focus areas.

During this twelve-month fellowship term, each fellow will engage in a unique combination of opportunities for thought leadership on national and global policy, research strategies, advocacy, program development, and contributions to initiatives aimed at advancing the rights of persons with disabilities globally. Fellows will focus on identifying and leading research with the support of WID, as it regards the fellow's respective region, expertise, and collaboration with WID.

About the World Institute on Disability

Solutions for Whole Community Inclusion

To build a more inclusive global society, the World Institute on Disability (WID):

- Helps assure that products and services are more accessible
- Promotes equity policies
- Provides consulting services
- Offers training and tools
- Supports emergency, disaster, and climate efforts

WID is dedicated to designing, building, and supporting whole community solutions by removing barriers to include people with disabilities.

Our Mission

On a global scale, to continuously advance the rights and opportunities of more than one billion people with disabilities

Our Vision

A world in which people with disabilities live freely where access, inclusion, equity, and resilience are embedded throughout every global community

Our Guiding Principles

Disability-led

Valuing lived experience, with 71% or more of our Board and staff identifying as people with disabilities

Accelerating Inclusion

Leading a global effort to eliminate barriers and advance policies that eliminate exclusion and drive inclusion

Pan-disability Movement Solidarity

Pursuing equality, inclusion, and accessibility for all people with any disability

Advancing Human Rights and Supporting Disability Justice Across the LifeSpan

Securing and enhancing independent and interdependent livelihoods for the whole community

Intersectional and Cross-Cultural Competency

Including the full spectrum of identities and the range of privilege, marginalization, and oppression that impact how disabled people are treated

Ethics, Integrity, and Accountability

Directing our focus and uncompromising standards to the needs of everyone with disabilities, especially people who are most marginalized

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Appendix A: Core Arguments at a Glance

Introduction: There is no reliable pathway to Disabled leadership. The absence is structural, not incidental.

The Path That Wasn't There: The author's story is not exceptional - it is evidence of a structural norm. The analysis begins here because this is where the problem lives.

Part 1 - The Representation Gap: Severe underrepresentation across all sectors. Data understates the problem by measuring presence not power. Disability excluded from most DEI data collection. No data = no accountability.

Part 2 - Systemic Exclusion: Cumulative barriers across the career arc. Ableism as infrastructure, not incident. Professionalism as a tool of exclusion. Sponsorship nearly absent.

Part 3 - How Ableism Sorts Us: Disability type, visibility, and material conditions - education, financial security, networks, mentorship - create an ableist sorting that determines whose leadership is recognized. Intersectionality multiplies exclusion.

Part 4 - Conditions for Thriving: Thriving is organizational, not individual. Community is sustaining infrastructure - and its necessity is evidence of institutional failure.

Part 5 - The Framework: Disabled leaders are better leaders. Disability-led leadership is distinct from disability-inclusive leadership. Lived experience is credential. Governance is the critical site.

Conclusion: The path doesn't build itself. The call to action is specific: fund disability-led organizations, require governance representation, build sponsorship infrastructure, invest in the research gap. Do it now.