

ACCESS Keynote - The Power of Authentic Disability Representation - 3Play Media

[00:00:00.38] ASYA CALIXTO: Welcome and thank you for joining us on day two of ACCESS 2024. My name is Asya Calixto. I'm the General Counsel at 3Play Media. I'm a woman with brown hair and oversized glasses. I'm wearing a button-down shirt and a sweater, and I go by she/her pronouns.

[00:00:16.10] Before we dive into the session, I want to go over just a few housekeeping items. The first is that the presentation is being live captioned, so you can view the captions by clicking on the Closed Captioning icon in your control panel. The session also features both ASL and BSL interpretation as well, courtesy of Deaf Services Unlimited. You can view the interpreters by clicking on the Interpretation icon in your control panel. And then finally, please feel free to ask questions throughout the session using the Q&A window or the chat.

[00:00:47.39] So with that, I'd like to welcome everyone to the session, "The Power of Authentic Disability Representation." I'm joined by Katy Talikowska, CEO of The Valuable 500, who will share her perspective on the impact of authentic disability representation, particularly as a business strategy and not just as the right thing to do. Thank you so much for joining us today, Katy. I'm really excited about this discussion.

[00:01:10.86] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Thank you so much. Good morning.

[00:01:13.23] ASYA CALIXTO: Do you want to take a moment, Katy, to introduce yourself?

[00:01:15.57] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Sorry, thank you. I'm very excited to be here. That's my enthusiasm getting the better of me. So I'm Katy Talikowska. I'm the CEO of The Valuable 500. And I'm a 49-year-old woman with shoulder length, sort of brown blonde hair, and today, I'm wearing a bright, sort of orangy-red top with a gold necklace. And my pronouns are she/her. But thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:38.40] ASYA CALIXTO: Great. Thanks, Katy. So I want to kick it off and just talk about your background to get started. You had a significant career in advertising before taking the lead of The Valuable 500. Would you talk a little bit about your journey, your personal motivations that led you to the accessibility space?

[00:01:57.33] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yes, of course. So, yeah, prior to joining The Valuable 500, I did just over three decades working in advertising and marketing. I was what's referred to as client service. So I was doing this sort of business strategy and the client relationships. And the majority of my time was working for big, global agencies. Latterly, I was the global brand lead for Snickers. I worked a lot on Mars Wrigley Confectionery. I was terribly popular because I had free cupboards of chocolate. But the majority of my time was working in advertising and marketing, working with big brands.

[00:02:30.75] And it was actually through my role at a BBDO office in London that I was lucky enough to meet Caroline Casey. And if I may, I'll just explain the context and the background. So if I go back, if I take you back all the way, actually, to 2016, it was a Paralympic year. And it's when Channel 4 from a UK perspective-- so Channel 4 are, in my opinion, probably one of the most pioneering and diverse broadcasters in the UK. And they had the rights to air the Rio Paralympics in 2016.

[00:03:02.19] And in the run up to that, they had done a really sobering, somber piece of research looking at the state of disability representation in UK advertising. And they discovered, the results of the audit showed that 0.1% of the protagonists in advertising across the UK were disabled. And what was even worse was when they dug a little bit deeper, the majority of that paltry 0.1% were actually non-disabled actors who were asked to sit in a wheelchair, carry a cane, whatever it may be.

[00:03:37.35] So they launched the results of this research. And to try and address it, they laid down the gauntlet to a UK brand to, for the first time, authentically represent and accurately represent people with disability in their advertising to start on that journey to try and address the situation. And I suppose the carrot that they dangled was they gave away a million pounds worth of airtime, and the ad campaign would be aired during the center break of the opening ceremony of the Paralympics.

[00:04:08.55] Now, for me, I saw that as a massive opportunity, as someone-- I was overseeing a brand called Maltesers. They're sort of bite sized candy. And I saw it as a massive opportunity in the first instance because the advertising that we were generating, to be frank, really wasn't cutting through. It wasn't particularly interesting. It wasn't particularly disruptive or innovative in any way, shape, or form. But I also had a moment of personal reflection, because looking at the results of the advertising, I realized that I was part of the problem.

[00:04:37.54] So at that time, I'd done about two decades in advertising, and without sounding sort of trite or simplistic, I was someone who I thought was decent, had a human-first, inclusive approach, wanted to be representative and authentic in everything that we did. And yet I hadn't thought properly about representation of people with disability. And not an excuse, but at that time in my life, I didn't have lived disability experience. Now I do. But it really was a moment of reckoning for me to think from both a personal and a professional perspective how can I start in some small way to address this problem.

[00:05:18.46] So we entered the competition. We were lucky enough to win. And it was an amazing thing to do because I think what started off, in my mind, to try and disrupt our advertising and do something good, and also what I felt was a moral and human imperative to do right by society and start in some way to truly and authentically represent the 1 in 5 of the global population who live with a disability. It started off with that motivation. But there was a massive unlock because the campaign was and still is the single most successful advertising campaign for Maltesers in its 18-year history, with a 7% uplift in sales, which-- trust me-- is really, really big for a confectionery brand.

[00:05:59.14] So suddenly I had this data point. I had this proof point that we could take back to the business, I could take to my other clients and go, look, what's right for society is what's right for business. You have to do this. You are bringing in 20% of the world's population who you haven't been talking to in an authentic way before.

[00:06:16.69] So that, I suppose, started me on my personal and professional journey to be inclusive. And it was through that that I met Caroline Casey. I'm sure people on the webinar today will know about the formidable, phenomenal Caroline Casey, who's the founder and creator of The Valuable 500. But The Valuable 500 was initially named #Valuable. That was Caroline's first idea.

[00:06:44.59] And I knew that she had a speaking slot at Davos through the World Economic Forum in January 2019. And incredible as Caroline is, I thought, she can't do this alone. So I put my hat in the ring, and I approached her and said, campaigns was what I did. I said, can we create a pro bono campaign to help drive awareness of what you are trying to do, which was to end the CEO silence on disability and basically get CEOs to put disability inclusion on their board agenda?

[00:07:19.20] So I tell that story because it was from the outside as an ally and a passionate advocate of what Caroline was trying to do that I was able to help in some small way. And so when I got a call from Paul Polman, the chair of our advisory board, over a year ago now to ask me to interview for this role, it's certainly not job done. We've got a long way to go. But it felt that there was beautiful sort of almost coming full circle.

[00:07:51.42] So that really, I suppose, was sort of my personal motivation. And I hope this doesn't sound-- for me, it is more than a job. It's an opportunity of a lifetime. And I think what we're doing now is probably one of the hardest things that I've ever done. But it's certainly the best and the most important.

[00:08:09.57] ASYA CALIXTO: Yeah. Thanks for sharing that, Katy. I love this story so much, and I think there's something so interesting about the arc of that and having gone through that from a personal level and then taking the lead at The Valuable 500, where you're encouraging others to do the same. Is there anything you might want to go into a little bit more detail for those who might not be familiar with The Valuable 500 of just a few more words about its mission?

[00:08:37.74] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yeah. So I suppose simple to say, harder to do. But our mission is the end of disability exclusion in business. And we work with now 529 global organizations. We won't be changing our name to Valuable 529. Doesn't quite trip off the tongue. But we work with 529 global organizations, and as importantly, over 90 phenomenal disability experts and organizations.

[00:09:06.22] So I always see The Valuable 500-- this is my own personal interpretation. I see us almost as the matchmaker, the cupid, the bridge broker between the needs and passions and ambitions of the global business sector and matching them with the expertise and the insight and the learning of the disability business community.

[00:09:27.74] Because we don't claim to be the experts. We don't have all the answers. I don't think anyone does. But what we do claim to do is to be conveners of like-minded people. We really push for what we call synchronized collective action. I can come on to that in a moment. But really, it's about the power of, I would say, radical empathy and radical collaboration. Because the 529 organizations that we work with in and of their own right, genuinely-- and like all good leaders and all good organizations, they're very humble. But genuinely, in my opinion, the companies that we work with are making really, really good progress.

[00:10:09.74] But if we're going to deliver true system change at the pace and rate that is required, then we need to come together. And I think we talk specifically about synchronized collective action because we believe passionately in the power of us all collectively addressing the same problem at the same time in the same way versus working nobly but working in silos. So it's very much about collaboration. And I believe that beautiful things happen when we come together, and that's when you're going to see true transformative change. So that's effectively how we work.

[00:10:48.08] And then if I may, I was talking about addressing the same problem at the same time in the same way. We're not going to be successful if we try and boil the ocean. So working with our companies through innovation and research, we identified three strategic areas of focus that were underpinned by what we felt were the biggest system barriers. And that was lack of inclusive reporting, lack of inclusive leadership, and lack of inclusive representation. So we're working specifically and exclusively on those three areas, and that will take us to a accountability summit that we can talk about it a little bit later.

[00:11:31.35] But effectively, we are-- yeah, think of us as the people in the middle with the ambition to bring together the might, the power, the influence, and the ambition of the corporate sector with the knowledge, the expertise, and the lived experience of what we call our directory. And that's effectively our disability business community.

[00:11:52.78] ASYA CALIXTO: That's really helpful, Katy-- thank you-- and a great setting, I think, for us to dive a little bit deeper on the name, actually, of this session about authentic representation and what that means for this collective action. What, in your view, is the difference between authentic representation and maybe tokenistic or superficial representation? What does that mean?

[00:12:18.43] KATY TALIKOWSKA: So I think the critical thing is authentic representation and accurate representation is a non-negotiable. I actually would go so far as to say that any organization that is just tokenistic, it's actually offensive, and it's a waste of time. It's an absolute waste of time. Because if you are going to truly appeal and be able to connect with the people with whom you want to connect, you have to take the time and energy and respect to fully understand the full, beautiful, nuanced, sophisticated, meaningful, rich, and diverse gamut of disability.

[00:12:58.87] You've got to ditch the stereotypes. You've got to ditch all the cliches and the tropes of-- people often talk about the two tropes of it's either the victim to be pitied or the superhuman to be elevated. You've got to ditch those tropes-- tropes, rather. So I think it's really

critical that organizations take the time to fully understand what that means. So you look at mental health. You look at learning disabilities. You look at the invisible disabilities, neurodivergent. So it is rich and it is beautiful, and it deserves to be accurately portrayed.

[00:13:38.24] So I think from my perspective-- and we recently authored a white paper on the importance of inclusive representation. And we conducted a piece of research with the fantastic Open Inclusion and Yale University. So it was a global piece of research. And it was a combination of quantitative and also qualitative data through really rich, engaging focus groups across multiple countries.

[00:14:07.49] And again, I'm sure for the people on the webinar, it sounds really obvious, but too many people forget that you've got to bring in people from the disability community into absolutely every single phase. Again, if I think back to my advertising and marketing career, shamefully and sadly, I would sit in conversations when you were at the final stage of producing an advertising campaign, and you were talking about casting.

[00:14:35.69] So you'd done the strategy. You'd written the ads. You'd got the director involved. You knew which exotic country you were going to fly to to shoot it. And then suddenly, it's like, who are we going to cast in it? And if, if there was a conversation about casting someone with a disability, it was just incidental and it was tokenistic. And you can't just sort of plonk things on at the end.

[00:15:00.42] So you've got to start from what I would call the entire go-to-market process. When you're producing a campaign or a product, you've got to be inclusive by design. And you need to bring in expert voices both from externally. But then a critical thing-- whilst I totally subscribe to the fact that sometimes it is important for an organization to bring in that external vetted expertise, make sure you've got that talent, you've got that voice, you've got that perspective within your organization as well. And it's across every single layer of the organization. So for me, I think, as I say, it's a non-negotiable to be anything other than accurate and authentic.

[00:15:44.42] And it will deliver dividends. It really, really will. I wrestle a little bit because, as an idealist, I would love to think that the start point is a human-first approach. And you know what? This is just a right thing to do. But I think, sadly, we have to face in the fact that for some, it's not. For some people still, I think people think, oh, it's fashionable. It's the hot topic. We need to be seen to be doing this.

[00:16:12.08] For those shameful people out there, if you can't get your head around being a good human and making sure that no one is left behind, then think about it from a business perspective. Your brand will grow. You will drive affinity. You will drive long-term loyalty. So whilst I would like there not to have to be a second lever, there is for some. But if you're going to push on that lever, if you're going to pull on that lever, rather, then it has to be authentic representation and you need to involve the disabled community and bring those voices to the fore at every single touchpoint and every single point of creation.

[00:16:50.36] ASYA CALIXTO: Do you think that audiences can sense that? You mentioned before the statistic around even when you have people with disabilities represented in campaigns, it's a person who's not disabled, like being asked to sit in a wheelchair. Does that become apparent to audiences? Do you think that a lack of authenticity can be felt?

[00:17:12.64] KATY TALIKOWSKA: I think so. And I think often it comes through the fact that if the portrayal is really incidental, then I think it just feels slightly sort of slapped on and tokenistic. I mean, interestingly, if I can reference Channel 4, they talk about three layers of authentic and accurate representation. And I think mature representation, both in film and also advertising and marketing campaigns, should seek to try and address all three.

[00:17:40.16] And I think one is disability being central to the narrative and the story that you're telling. The second layer is having a disabled actor as a central character as opposed to a sort of a sidebar character or an extra. And the other one can be-- because again, this is a accurate depiction of real life-- is having someone in a secondary role. That is also OK, but it can't just be that. So I would encourage all organizations and all marketeers or filmmakers to think about that sophisticated, mature layering of representation.

[00:18:20.57] Because I think from an audience perspective, it's fine. It's fine to see an ad if you're just looking at one of those layers. But if the next one is the same layer and you're not broadening the scope and you're not going deeper, then I think that's when you start to have challenges.

[00:18:36.57] And I also think-- and this is a good thing-- the industry and people will call out people. I know there's a lot of-- you think about films and people who have been cast historically who are actors asking to play someone with a disability. Forgive me. I may get the statistic slightly wrong, but I think at the time of the 2020 Oscars, I think there was a piece of research done. And I believe there had been over 127 nominations for films that featured, in inverted commas, "disabled protagonists." I think there were 27 winners. But I think it's something like only five or six of those winners were actually actors with a disability.

[00:19:21.57] And I feel that has to change because there are phenomenal disabled actors out there-- I know recently, the phenomenal James Martin from *The Irish Goodbye*. You've got to bring in that talent. You've got to give everyone a chance. So I think there's a combination of I think the audience will spot it. But I also happily think that there are mechanisms in place to call that out if the representation isn't authentic.

[00:19:50.83] ASYA CALIXTO: It seems like part of-- one facet of what you're saying is that there has to be a connection between the organization and the disability community, too. It's hard to have authenticity and accuracy without that. Can you speak a little bit about what that relationship would look like ideally?

[00:20:07.44] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yeah. So forgive me. I don't want to be a one trick pony, but I'm going to talk about Maltesers again, because this is a very real, live experience that I was part of. So when we were writing the scripts, I was working with a fantastic team. And they were

non-disabled creatives. And we briefed them. I had a disabled planner on my team, and we chatted, and we gave the brief. And we were all excited about the competition.

[00:20:38.38] And after a couple of days, one of the creatives came down to me and said, Katy, I can't do this. I can't do this. He said, I'm a creative. I'm used to writing stories and making things up. And he said, but I can't. How on Earth can I write an authentic story about a person with a disability when I don't have the experience? He said, I don't feel comfortable doing this. And I suppose with the motivation of wanting to win the competition, do the right thing, and get the million pounds worth of airtime, he said it's just not going to work. And again, I was like, yeah, my goodness me, of course-- and again, a moment of self-reflection.

[00:21:15.26] And so what we did, which is absolutely what organizations should do, is we did focus groups. We partnered with Scope, a leading disability charity in the UK, and we did focus groups. And we spoke to a brilliant, brilliant, amazing group of young disabled women, and they told us about their life stories.

[00:21:37.79] And their life stories were a bit like mine. They laughed at the same thing. They cried at the same things. They had heartbreak over the same thing. They'd made fools of themselves in similar awkward situations. If you guys don't know-- we're probably a little bit early in the day for me to talk to you about some of the scripts, but it's about a sex act. There's a whole host of stuff. Because who knew disabled people have sex? Who knew? It seems ridiculous to have to say this.

[00:22:05.62] But we did the focus groups. We talked to the real people whose stories we wanted to tell. And that was really, I suppose, the catalyst really, certainly from my perspective, in terms of understanding how it needed to be done. And it shouldn't have been such a eureka moment. And I apologize. I'm sorry that I wasn't in that kind of mindset. But I think we have to be. You have to be.

[00:22:36.76] I hear often now, which I think is really interesting if you think about the clarion cry of the disability community, nothing about us without us. I'm hearing happily that that's now evolving and morphing more into nothing without us. So every single step of the way, bring in the lived experiences and the real voices and perspectives and insights of the people that you want to appeal to, because we should-- advertising community, appeal to everyone.

[00:23:09.85] ASYA CALIXTO: So when you talk about the revelations that you had in that process, it makes sense given the context. But ideally, it would be so much easier, right? Everyone would just be doing it. It wouldn't be a part of breaking the norm. It should just be natural

[00:23:24.87] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Be natural, just organic, yeah, 100%. Yeah.

[00:23:28.35] ASYA CALIXTO: You spoke a little bit about part of authenticity is to not play into stereotypes. Can you talk about campaigns that are accurate and that are authentic? How do they challenge stereotypes and how do they impact the greater community narrative about people with disabilities?

[00:23:48.60] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yeah. So I'm going to talk a little bit about the importance of intersectionality, because one story cannot represent the 1.3 billion people globally who self-identify as living with a disability. Ultimately, there will be 1.3 billion different stories that need to be told. And the reality is, we also talk about the fact that the disability community is something that anybody can join at any time through illness, through age, through accident. So to just be really myopic in terms of disability representation is wrong.

[00:24:30.94] So in terms of that authentic thing, you've got to think about it being really multifaceted, a whole group of different interwoven identities. And again, I know looking at statistics, from a US perspective in particular, if you look at the number of disabled people who are represented in film or in the media, when you look at the intersectionality with race and also with the LGBTQ+ community, it's way, way, way lower than it should be. That's not accurate in terms of representation.

[00:25:06.64] Because, again, I think people have an unsophisticated approach of-- and again, I don't want to demonize people because you've got to start somewhere. But then the point is that it's ongoing. It's an ongoing commitment and a journey. You can't just go, OK, we've got an idea of how we're going to authentically represent one person. Again, it's the bringing in the people through the focus groups and understanding the nuance and, I would say, the gloriousness and richness of the disability community. But I think that's the critical thing. I think it's too easy for people who don't have lived experience just to look at it through one lens. And I would really encourage and ask people to go much, much broader than that.

[00:25:50.99] And then I think the other thing is actually through the, I would say, the normality of the stories that you tell, which again, is the way to break down those stereotypes and those tropes. I think it's really important, as I said, to just tell everyday stories that make people understand that we're all humans at the end of the day. And as I say, you will laugh, cry, react to the same kind of things in the same way.

[00:26:20.24] So it's certainly not about pity. It shouldn't be about putting people on a pedestal. It's just about sort of a universal approach to storytelling and a normalization, and as I said, being more intelligent, more sophisticated, and nuanced in those portrayals through multifaceted identities.

[00:26:44.92] ASYA CALIXTO: We've talked about that from an angle of you said you have to do it right. You have to be authentic about it or it's not worth doing. On the flip side of that, what is the risk to a company, a brand of not doing it authentically? What happens if you get it wrong?

[00:27:06.73] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Well, I feel like an imposter because I think I'm way too old to use the term canceled. But if I use it correctly-- My daughter's at school, as she should be, so she's not here to correct me. But I honestly think brands will get canceled, thinking about the younger generation. And I'm not trying to say I'm so old. But I think for a younger generation, it's too easy for people to go, oh, youth of today, they don't notice.

[00:27:30.62] You talk to young people. Actually, you were talking before about it should just be the way of doing. For a lot of younger generation, it's anathema to them that perhaps someone

like me or in a corporate role before was having to have these kind of conversations. It's just about doing the right thing. So I think brands will be canceled, I honestly think. Because, again, if you think about it, it is about-- I know this with my marketing hat on. You want to appeal to as many possible people who can potentially buy your product, engage with your service.

[00:28:06.75] So if you are not authentically representing everybody who could potentially subscribe to your brand, have affinity with your brand, be loyal to your brand, buy your product and your service, then you just are automatically shaving off, carving off a significant amount of spending power. And the last statistics that I saw is that the disability community, when you include friends and family, represent a disposable income and a spending power of \$13 trillion USD.

[00:28:41.67] So again, it comes back to my levers. If you're just motivated by the money, then you know what? That's OK. Because in order to get that, you're going to have to do it right. You're going to have to do it authentically.

[00:28:53.63] ASYA CALIXTO: My next question might be short-sighted a bit, but building off a bit on what you're saying about the younger generation-- and hopefully my kids will be in a world where this is totally irrelevant. But what are the obstacles within organizations that you think need to be overcome for this authentic representation to exist?

[00:29:16.64] KATY TALIKOWSKA: OK, so I think very often what holds a lot of organizations back actually is fear, fear of getting it wrong and fear of making mistakes. And that, for me, I have an element of understanding and sympathy of that, of course. But I would say to those companies, the only mistake you will make is not starting the conversation and not starting the journey. Because I would subscribe to the adage of progress, not perfection. Obviously, we want to get to that place, but you've just got to start.

[00:29:48.87] So I think very often, organizations, it's fear of not being as good as perhaps a competitor within an industry vertical. It's a fear of putting my head above the parapet and starting to have those conversations and being criticized because maybe I'm not sophisticated enough in this area and not developed. You know what I would say? That is OK. And again, thinking about The Valuable 500 and the power of synchronized collective action, our companies learn as much from each other's mistakes and failures as they do from their successes.

[00:30:21.07] So don't be hamstrung by fear. Don't get hung up. I'm sensitive to the fact that there's ongoing debate about the right language and stuff. And you know what. I've made mistakes. But I need to be taught. I'm here to be educated. I just ask that everyone understand that everything is-- if you're willing to make that commitment and start that conversation, people have to understand the positive intent. But let's learn from each other. But you have to start. So I would say don't be hamstrung by fear.

[00:30:51.12] I think the other critical thing-- and again, this is a part of the DNA of The Valuable 500-- you've got to have that buy-in from C-suite and leadership. I think I'm going to quote Christopher Patnoe, which I'm sure many of you know. Whether or not Christopher was quoting someone else, I don't know. But I'm going to talk about the importance of leadership,

and I'm going to talk about the ERG, so your sort of grassroots activism through your employee resource groups.

[00:31:17.74] And the quote that I'm going to use from Christopher was he spoke about-- I remember hearing him talk a few months ago about if you focus on the top and you focus on the bottom and the middle is going to take care of itself. Because I think, through the power of leadership and getting your C-suite leaders to talk about disability inclusion, to invest in disability inclusion, putting their money where their mouth is, that's really important because that starts to trickle down and that starts to create the culture.

[00:31:49.32] And again, when you've got employee resource groups, you've got these safe spaces, these forums of trust to empower the disabled community within an organization, then I think what you start to see is a cultural change. And again, let's face it. Leaders, C-suite leaders in business are in the driving seat of change. They can do in a board meeting what perhaps it will take governments decades to do.

[00:32:13.93] So you've got to have the buy-in from the top. You've got to have the passion and the voice and the representation through your employee resource groups. Because I think when the culture is right, and only when the culture is right within an organization, do the important policies and strategies and programs really live and breathe and come to fruition. Because I think-- again, I'm going to quote a management consultant. I think his name is Peter Drucker. He talks about culture eating strategy for lunch or breakfast. I can't remember which meal of the day it is. But culture, culture, culture, culture is everything.

[00:32:55.29] So I think yeah, that's what I would say really to leaders. You've got to speak up. You've got to end the CEO silence on disability inclusion. And again, we've got to get leaders to self-identify as living with a disability. Recent research that we did with an organization called Tortoise Media across FTSE 100 companies in the UK showed that-- and it was an anonymous survey. But the C-suite leaders, only 3%, self-identified as living with a disability. And you just when you look at the UK statistics, 22% of the UK population self-identify. You know that's not true and accurate.

[00:33:35.07] So you've got to think, wow, if a C-suite leader is not comfortable and confident-- and this is not me poo-pooing their rights to how they want to behave. But I suppose I would look at it and I would say, what a wasted opportunity. Because surely you coming forward and talking and having the courage to talk about your own lived experience, that can change the culture overnight for the better.

[00:34:03.93] And also, let's be honest. The reason why these C-suite leaders in wonderful positions of leadership, running hugely successful organizations-- let's be honest-- the reason why they are probably phenomenally successful leaders is because of who they are in their totality and perhaps the fact that they're neurodivergent and they see the world differently in a beautiful, diverse, unique, exciting way.

[00:34:29.14] So own that. Be accountable. Talk about it, and create the right environment so that your peers, your colleagues, the rest of your employees feel that they can also bring their

whole self to work. And then the right environment is created for people to do their best work, which means they're happy. They're rewarded. They're productive. And again, that generates growth for the business.

[00:34:57.83] ASYA CALIXTO: Apart from this characteristic of a leader to be able to self-identify as appropriate, what other characteristics in leadership do you think are significant in supporting authentic inclusion?

[00:35:14.69] KATY TALIKOWSKA: I would say humility. I think humility is really, I often think, the mark of a good leader across the board, but specifically in terms of what we're talking about is a combination of, I would say, audacity. I'd say rather than bravery, audacity and humility. Because I think sometimes-- again, it goes back to take that-- you've just got to start, even if you don't feel you've got all the answers.

[00:35:41.33] And it's tricky because leaders in different sort of organizations, they're trained to have all the answers and to have everything right and button down and be the expert. Be comfortable with the uncomfortable. And I apologize. I do hope this doesn't come across as ableist language, but forgive me from an idiomatic perspective. Take that leap of faith and take that first step and start. So I think that's really critical.

[00:36:08.69] And it goes back to what I was saying. You've got to have that humility and that self-awareness and that comfort to understand that you will not get everything right the first time. And actually, the joy, in a perverse way, of making that error is that then you are educated. And then you've got a nugget of information and that learning that you can then pass on. So I think be audacious enough to start, but have that level of comfort, knowing-- and this is linked to the humility sort of characteristic-- knowing that you won't get it right, but that is OK.

[00:36:45.63] And even if, again, you look at C-suite leaders. And I don't know what the average tenure is, but most CEOs-- hopefully I'll be here for longer, but most maybe two or three years, and then they move on. But also know, because again, I think a lot of people in leadership positions go right, you have your master plan. I'm going to be here for a few years. And by the end of it, I will have done all these things. It will be job done. It will be 100% complete.

[00:37:11.31] Be at ease, be at pace, at peace, rather, with the fact that it may not be job done by the time you hand over the reins to someone else, hopefully a C-suite leader self-identifying with a disability because that's what we need. We need more disabled talent in those leadership positions.

[00:37:31.68] But be at peace with the fact that actually the single most important thing I think you can do as a CEO is to have that legacy of you are the one that started or you were the one that truly and authentically with proper investment, financially and emotionally and culturally, put disability inclusion on your agenda and made it a non-negotiable and made sure it was baked in through every single layer and every single facet of your business.

[00:37:57.58] ASYA CALIXTO: Progress, not perfection, as you said, yeah. I want to slide in a question from the audience. Assuming that you don't have a leader with all of these qualities that

we've been talking about, how would you recommend that individuals help to encourage their organizations to join The Valuable 500?

[00:38:17.31] KATY TALIKOWSKA: It's a lovely question. Thank you. So I'm all for a bit of well-intentioned pressure. So again, I was mentioning the importance of employee resource groups. And I think there is a power in numbers. So I think the joy of a good employee resource group is you have that safe space and that circle of trust. But it just takes one person who has got that confidence to talk to a leader and have that conversation.

[00:38:46.21] And again, hopefully I've shared enough, and there are lots of resources available. But try and understand, get under the psyche of what you think the motivator and the driver is of your current leader, who perhaps hasn't got that sensibility to be more inclusive. So if it is all about business metrics, start showing them the case studies and the results of brands and businesses who are bringing in people with disabilities and authentically representing them in their brand and communications. Start to show them the business results.

[00:39:18.98] I mean, it saddens me that we still need to make that case. But if that is the case, then so be it. But I would say try and talk their language and pull on the different levers. But I think there is a power and a safety in numbers, and I think a well-placed, passionate ERG, hopefully just getting a leader to see that it's a moral imperative. It's common sense, and it's business sense. So never, never underestimate the power of that.

[00:39:48.62] But also, I think there are other things that you can do cross-industry. So if you know other people in your vertical industries, start getting them to share stuff and then get those kind of studies and bake it through. But I think, again, it comes back to just one individual having the confidence to start the conversation and join the dots. Because I'm a believer that if there are leaders out there who don't think that this is important, I would like to think that that's through ignorance and lack of understanding and education versus ill intent. I could be wrong. I hope I'm not.

[00:40:33.60] But as I say, I shared my own personal story where I wasn't doing the right thing. I wasn't doing enough. And I honestly thought that, yeah, if somebody had asked me, I would have said, yeah, I'm always-- And I just wasn't. But I just needed a catalyst. I needed a conversation. I needed a data point. I needed a something that made me readdress. So I would start with the hope and the assumption that it isn't through ill intent. It is just through lack of understanding and lack of education. So I would call on employees within an organization to take it upon themselves to educate and to speak up and to come forward.

[00:41:17.29] ASYA CALIXTO: Do you think there's a responsibility for the company to do some of that education as well? Is that a joint responsibility? Or should it be coming more from either people within the disabled community or the ERGs?

[00:41:30.35] KATY TALIKOWSKA: So I think it is ultimately the responsibility of the organization. But I think you've got to bring in the voice of the disability community to do the education, because otherwise it isn't authentic and it won't be truly representative. So no, I think big corporates have a responsibility to invest in training and education programs. They need to

invest in making sure that the recruitment is right in order to bring in people with disabilities. And it can't stop with recruitment.

[00:42:06.71] Again, it goes back to my point about the right culture. If you look at the rate of attrition of people with disabilities within organizations, it's shamefully significantly higher. So you've got to think about recruitment. You've got to make sure the culture is right for retention. But as critically, you've got to look at promotion and the pathway and make sure that there isn't a glass ceiling.

[00:42:32.06] So we run-- I hope I can share this. We piloted last year a reciprocal mentoring program that we call Generation Valuable. We piloted it with 67 of our companies. And on the 11th of June, everybody's welcome. We're having a webinar to talk about the relaunch of Generation Valuable, which will be launching in September. So it's a reciprocal mentoring program where we pair a C-suite mentor within an organization with a disabled employee as the mentee.

[00:43:03.14] And as the name Generation Valuable would point towards, it's about identifying next generation disabled talent of tomorrow. And we're running three consecutive six-month programs with lots of education and a real sort of robust program out of which comes, which is mandatory, a blueprint for action for those organizations.

[00:43:29.58] But I think then-- and I spoke about it being reciprocal or almost reverse mentoring from the pilot-- it won't surprise you what was really beautiful and really necessary was that the C-suite mentors who didn't self-identify as living with a disability learned as much and got as much from the program as the disabled mentees. So I think mentoring programs are really important.

[00:43:54.00] But going back to your question about the responsibility and the investment, let's face it. It's the leaders who write out the checks and sign them off. There is an element of expenditure and investment, but it will reap dividends. So I think you've got to have the infrastructure, the investment in terms of the training, the digital accessibility, the goals, the governance, all those important, let's say, infrastructural things that make the ecosystem of an inclusive organization. But the people who are leading and educating have to be the disabled community.

[00:44:31.28] ASYA CALIXTO: The mentorship program, it was within the same organization, right? The mentor and the mentee.

[00:44:36.97] KATY TALIKOWSKA: So currently that's what we're doing. But our ambition, because again, I think it would be really beautiful, to have-- let's imagine that you've got a C-suite leader from Apple paired with a disabled mentee from Microsoft. And I'm not just honing in on tech and innovation, but this is because, again, we will learn from each other. True change requires full what I would call system orchestration, going back to my language also around synchronized collective action. So we try and join the dots and connect within our companies in terms of our learning and everything that we share. But actually within a mentoring program, that would be amazing.

[00:45:19.13] ASYA CALIXTO: Yeah, it's such an interesting approach, and I love how intentional it is in amplifying the voice of the, I guess, quote unquote-- I'm doing air quotes-- of the mentee versus the mentor in that perspective. Are there other ways that organizations can leave space for people to tell their stories, kind of connecting to the point that we were talking about before of having the disability community also participate in decision-making, participate in the process. How does that connection-- the mentorship program is so directive and specific. How do you encourage an organization to do that so that the end goal, I assume, is so that becomes more natural and part of the organic process?

[00:46:10.44] KATY TALIKOWSKA: So I'm going to mention a couple of Valuable 500 companies who I think are doing particularly brilliant work in this space and illustrates the point that I would like to make. So if you think about Procter & Gamble, P&G, and they have their ad alliance that is cross-company, which is amazing.

[00:46:30.10] But what they do within the organization is they bring in the disabled community and their disabled employees for focus groups and also to test and iterate and innovate in terms of all their products. So they are bringing people in at every single stage. It goes back to what I was saying before. So I think what Procter & Gamble are doing, I think, is fantastic in that area.

[00:46:54.35] L'Oreal, another one of our companies, have a program called Breaking The Silence, which again, centers very much around the ERGs. But they have forums within the organization where people can share and talk and they invite people in who don't identify as being part of that group as well. So, again, it's not a didactic thing, but through conversation.

[00:47:17.27] I'm a great believer in the power of just asking some questions. Help me understand. What is it like for you in a meeting? Where do you need to sit in a meeting? Thinking about sensory overload, this kind of thing, just understanding it. So a lot of good organizations just create the right forums to bring people in so they can have those sort of organic and light touch, but actually really powerful opportunities just to be educated, not in an official training environment, but just to start to have a conversation and make friendships, make relationships, and understand more. And again, really, that comes down to the culture.

[00:47:57.16] So yeah, as I say, L'Oreal have got this Breaking The Silence program, which is phenomenally successful. They rolled it out a few years ago now. But they've seen a five-fold increase in terms of employees feeling comfortable and wanting to come forward and self-identify as living with a disability. And that really shows the power of the right culture.

[00:48:20.28] ASYA CALIXTO: It's so good to hear specific examples of things like that. I think it just feels very tangible. And I think it's a good segue to accountability, and I want to focus a little bit of our time on that as well. I think part of The Valuable 500's mission is to promote that kind of accountability. Can you speak to a little bit about the metrics or benchmarks that you think are necessary for companies to be able to measure their progress and hold themselves accountable?

[00:48:50.76] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yeah. So Thank you. So I suppose really simply put, if you don't measure something, then you can't manage it. And if you're not measuring something,

then you can't improve it. And if we will accept that there is a long way to go, getting that first data point and effectively taking accountability and responsibility and ownership of where an organization is right now across a whole host of metrics and areas is really critical. And again, I don't think there is such a bad thing as bad data. I know people talk about dirty data.

[00:49:22.33] But honestly, if a company is coming to me and saying, we've looked at our workforce representation and it's 1%, clearly this isn't a cause to celebrate. But you go, OK, good on you. You have looked into this. You've started to report. And then we need to help you grow. But I think it's really important that companies do establish benchmarks and they look at robust data reporting to understand where they are right now. And again, as we say, across specifically for us across our three areas of strategic focus.

[00:49:56.06] But I think going back to-- I spoke before about inclusive reporting. So at Davos through the World Economic Forum in 2023, in partnership with the London Stock Exchange Group and Allianz, we authored a white paper on the importance of inclusive reporting. And coming out of that, we established what we refer to as five standardized, five harmonized KPIs and metrics that we ask all our Valuable 500 companies to report on. So effectively, you're comparing apples with apples. And they're around workforce representation, goals, training, ESGs, and digital accessibility.

[00:50:38.69] And we ask all our companies to really put them into their annual reports, bake them into their stakeholder and investor dialogue, and really make sure that they're properly integrated. So that's a specific example in terms of our inclusive reporting synchronized collective action, where we have those five KPIs that we ask all our companies to report against.

[00:51:03.44] And I think I mentioned inclusive representation. And the piece of research that we've done-- and we authored a white paper that came out this year at Davos. We're working with the disability business community and a panel of our companies to work through what the specific benchmarking tool or specific synchronized collective action will be. And that will be ready towards the end of summer.

[00:51:28.09] So we're just doing the due diligence, bringing in the experts, voices from the disability community, bringing in our companies who are going to have to deliver against this. So we're doing these really sort of indepth panels at the moment. And I think that will be a specific call to action. Because at the moment, as I said, it's better than where we were when I mentioned UK advertising in 2016 at 0.1%, but it still isn't where we should be.

[00:51:58.49] And again, brands and businesses have a responsibility to do that. So we will be reporting against that in terms of the state of inclusive representation right now and where we think it needs to get to and then supporting our companies with the tools and the guidance and the education in order to accurately and authentically deliver.

[00:52:21.22] ASYA CALIXTO: Thanks for that, Katy. And just looking at the time, I want to be able to hear a little bit about in the context of accountability of SYNC25, which we had talked a little bit in our pre-conversation. Maybe we can leave off with that point. But can you tell us a little bit about the event and how that motivates companies?

[00:52:42.65] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Brilliant. So I think nothing drives action and nothing motivates action as much as a deadline and an event. And certainly that is very much my motivation. It's about 20 months and counting. So on the 3rd and the 4th of December, 2025, so 3rd of December obviously being International Day of Persons With Disability, in Tokyo, we will be holding The Valuable 500 Accountability Summit, which we are calling SYNC with a Y, S-Y-N-C 25, referring back to our way of doing things, our way of operating, of synchronized collective action.

[00:53:24.45] And SYNC25 for us will mark the start of a decade of accountability. It's a big, lofty, slightly sleep disrupting ambition, but we're going to do it. And the ambition is that every two years, a different city will host SYNC and we will have five across that decade of accountability. But in 2025, it will be in Tokyo. We're doing it with the support of our strategic partners, the Nippon Foundation, with whom we've had a historical relationship and will continue to do. I'm afraid I can't announce yet, but we have a very, very important strategic and logistical Japanese company who will be a co-host.

[00:54:12.03] And really, I mentioned the fact that it's on two days. So day one is the moment of truth, really. It's the collective moment of reckoning where we will ask our companies to collectively report back on the progress that they have made against those three synchronized collective actions, so inclusive leadership, representation, and reporting. I've said them a lot. I won't be testing people at the end, but hopefully you've got them-- so reporting back against those three areas.

[00:54:40.59] And we'll learn from our successes. We'll learn from our failures. But I think importantly, we will understand where we are collectively. Our 529 companies account for nearly 24 million employees. We work across over 64 sectors and 120-plus countries. It will be a hybrid event. We would like to encourage as many people who can to be there as possible, but obviously it will be hybrid.

[00:55:10.72] But day one is reporting back on the collective progress that we've made. And then day two is working together to identify what the next three strategic areas of focus will be. Sadly, I don't believe-- this isn't me being unambitious, but sadly, it will not be job done on reporting and representation and leadership. But hopefully, we will have made enough progress and learnt enough to set everybody on their way and we'll continue to support.

[00:55:41.92] But then it's looking ahead to the future. What next? That will then be what we report back on for SYNC27. But yeah, it's a two-day event in Tokyo, 3rd and 4th of December, 2025.

[00:55:58.62] And yeah, I think if I can just say one last thing about accountability, I hope everybody on this webinar understands the importance and the power and the necessity of accountability. I think some people can see accountability as a bit onerous or a bit finger pointy or a bit judgmental. Who's doing well? Who's not? It isn't about that. It isn't about naming and shaming. It is about ownership and I think actually a freedom and a knowledge of going, this is where we are, and that is OK. Because we have an accurate position, which means we can then grow and then we can progress and then we can see meaningful system change.

[00:56:39.12] ASYA CALIXTO: Now, that's the tension with the accountability, but also in a place with companies that are, like you said, learning from each other and partnering with each other is really powerful.

[00:56:49.06] KATY TALIKOWSKA: Yeah.

[00:56:50.37] ASYA CALIXTO: Thank you so much, Katy. That's unfortunately all that we have time for today. But it was truly delightful to speak with you and learn from your experiences and your perspectives. So thank you so much for joining us.