

What can we do?

by
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A few months ago, I had a novel and pleasant experience: I was requested by a representative of a corporate house to give a talk to their middle-management on corporate social responsibility. My dubious qualification for giving such a talk was what this representative had seen of my writing in this column. Having never before been asked to give a non-technical talk, I was tickled pink by this invitation and agreed to give this talk in spite of my reservations about stepping into the uncharted waters of public speaking (outside of mathematics!)

My talk was basically a re-cap of my life in the past ten years, with an emphasis on how my life had been transformed, ever since I had been diagnosed with a neurological condition, from a happy-go, care-free and globe-trotting mathematician to one whose mobility had been reduced to whizzing around in a wheelchair - when I was fortunate enough to find myself in a barrier-free environment which permitted such 'whizzing around'. I talked about some of the incidents leading up to my periodically writing pieces in this column. I also spoke about how I had been very fortunate to be working in a very supportive institution, and made some off-the-cuff remarks on how organisations could help in attaining a more inclusive society.

My talk went off fairly well in that it seemed to have struck a responsive chord in many of the young managers I had addressed. I was asked quite a few questions after the talk, the common denominator of many of them being: *What do you think we, as an organisation, can do in helping to attain that elusive state of 'an inclusive society' which you speak longingly about?* At that time, I could not come up with snappy answers to many questions; I found myself saying that I was myself new to the game, was just becoming increasingly aware of the problem, did not presume to have any answers, and was merely asking my audience to recognise the existence of the problem, be increasingly sensitive to it, and try to formulate workable answers in the context of their own organisations.

I shall now venture to suggest some answers to the italicised question above, the appropriateness of these different proposals being a function of how far down the road the concerned organisation has progressed towards the desired objective:

- Make it a point to hire people with some manner of inability, preferably also in the human resources department; such a hire would help to:
 1. identify the kinds of work which can be competently performed by employees with specific disabilities;
 2. design a testing procedure which could identify the better qualified/competent among the disabled applicants for jobs;
 3. put in place an efficient orientation programme to help a new employee learn the ropes quickly; it might not be a bad idea to assign a mentor to each fresh recruit with disability, The role of this mentor would be to basically 'hold hands' until the difficult initial gestation period is past. She would make it her business to identify the several special difficulties encountered - physically and psychologically - in the work-place, and ensure that her ward is not unreasonably harrassed or victimised by such of her colleagues who might get their highs by bullying defenceless people!

- Identify a section of the organisation, which would normally attend to the periodic infrastructural needs, and be assigned the specific task of improving the state of accessibility of the work-place; here are some of the sort of things they could concern themselves with:
 1. conduct periodic 'access audits' of the work-place;
 2. make sure that adequate 'handicapped parking' spots are assigned and made available to people and in choice spots which would minimise the distance from their parking spot to their seat of work; and levy hefty penalties when these 'plum spots' are poached by non-disabled people;
 3. install braille signs and auditory signals in elevators (for the visually impaired);
 4. have evening classes to educate your colleagues on sign-languages and braille so as to better communicate with your hearing and visually impaired colleagues;
 5. create a barrier-free environment - meaning ramps wherever there are stairs, accessible toilets, etc. - if you have employees using wheelchairs;

6. pro-actively think and act on how potential problems faced by people with different manners of disabilities can be minimised by thoughtful infra-structural design.

Let me conclude (as I did at the talk that led to this article) with something which cannot be repeated often enough:

*What people like me need is **not** meaningless and cloying sympathy. What we **do** need, nay demand (in increasing order of greediness) are:*

- *an opportunity to work and be productive members of society;*
- *a work-place that is sensitive to our special needs, as against victimising us for having them; and*
- *an inclusive environment that permits us to contribute our mite to society and lead fruitful lives with dignity.*