

Bad Attitudes, Bad Impact: An Editorial

By: Nan Hawthorne

Nan Hawthorne shares her own and others' experiences with people who are visually impaired and seem to push integration back instead of forward -- because of their bad attitudes.

The Myth of Sisyphus

One of the reasons I feel privileged to be associated with eSight Careers NetworkTM is the emphasis we have placed from the start on shared responsibility for integrating and advancing blind and partially sighted people in competitive work. The self-defeating "us and them" approach is avoided, and the role we, as blind people, have in our own success is emphasized.

Two questions seem to be part of every discussion: "What is standing in the way, and what can we do about it?" I personally can't keep asking those questions without thinking of all the blind people I have known who had attitudes that not only spoiled their own progress but, in my opinion, everyone else's.

In the Greek myth of Sisyphus, this unfortunate fellow, having somehow ticked off one god or another, is sent to Hades to perform a frustrating task for infinity. His job is to roll a huge boulder up a hill. But the monkey wrench is that, just before he gets the boulder to the top, it gets away from him and rolls back to the bottom. Every time. Another expression comes to mind: "One step forward, two steps back."

That is what happens in the blind community. Every time we seem to make progress, to improve opportunities for rewarding, gainful work in some small way, it seems like we get knocked back. So often the mythical boulder is knocked out of our collective hands by one of our own.

As educators we say, "Blind people are strong and capable!" But I know that, back in the minds of many of us who teach, are images of those people who were far from strong and far from capable -- not so much from blindness as from attitudes and behavior that were their real handicaps.

The destructive attitudes and behaviors I have seen can be boiled down to three:

1. Having a rather odd perception of how the world of work operates and how one fits into it
2. Preferring an "easy way out"

3. Holding paradoxical beliefs that make heads spin

I can't offer solutions myself, except to ask blind people who may be tempted to exhibit some of these attitudes to think long and hard about what they are doing. Don't commit these acts of sabotage yourself, and don't let other people get away with them.

I also ask employers and others similarly concerned to recognize that these are bad attitudes which have a bad impact. We must remember that these are not essential, individual characteristics of people who happen to be blind.

A Weak Grip on Reality

Barbara had a bachelor's degree in psychology but had only worked in a sheltered workshop. When I asked her why she had not pursued a career in her own discipline, she told me, "I tried, and I couldn't get the job I wanted." What job was that? "Executive director of a counseling agency." On a bachelor's degree with no experience either in counseling or management? "That's right."

"All I can find are entry level jobs," Sandy fumed during a phone conversation with me. "That's all they'll give me because I'm blind and female." My own husband (sighted with many years of experience and a specialized degree) had moved to a new part of the country and had just finally found a job after several months of looking. And, like everyone else I knew, he had only been interviewed for entry-level positions. Sandy refused to believe it.

Jill, who called me at work, stated emphatically during our conversation about jobs, "Well, you know, Nan, they won't hire us!" When, taken aback, I pointed out that I had a job, she responded, even more unaccountably, "Yeah, you stinker!" They won't hire us --- and, if they try to, we shouldn't let them? Jill was the same woman who once told me she had told an interviewer that he himself was not competent to do the job she was applying for and that he had then discriminated against her by not giving her the job.

Jill, Barbara and Sandy are three real people, all partially sighted, whom I've known. They appear to have a rather puzzling view of the world of work. They seem to be entirely unacquainted with what non-disabled people face in the workforce. Maybe that's a way to avoid being really discouraged: "If they have to struggle, what chance have we got?" But no one,

sighted or blind, gets anywhere by being ignorant of "the rules" or refusing to accept that they have to follow them.

Whether they truly believe this view or have developed it to sabotage themselves, I can't say. I can't understand preferring indignant protestations to really achieving my goals -- especially in others who seem otherwise quite normal. It can be tempting, but it is dishonest and risky. Someday, others will see you more clearly, and you will no longer be able to "borrow respect."

Barbara, now in her 50s and gray, seems stuck at about 18. Sandy burned one bridge after another, taking others down with her. Jill -- well, everybody I know just writes her off as less than intelligent.

Getting Away With Murder

Bill took advantage of sighted guides to "cop a feel" every time the guide was a woman. All us blind women knew it and somewhat guiltily took advantage of his being totally blind to cut him a wide path. But sighted women were afraid to call him or other blind men on it.

My older sister got mad at me once for suggesting that a blind man she knew had an ulterior motive when he said he needed constant physical contact to feel "connected." And there was the event planner who asked me how to deal with blind men who molested women volunteers. He was surprised when I responded, "What would you do if the guy weren't blind?"

A human resources specialist told me about a co-worker who drank wine at work. The boss refused to call the drinker on the carpet because he was uncomfortable correcting a blind person's behavior. I also had a co-worker we all knew was drinking on the job, but, when she finally lost her job, the company eliminated the whole position instead of dealing honestly with her. In both cases, the sighted people may have believed it was the blindness that "drove him to drink" -- much like the talk show host in Seattle who accepted a blind panhandler's assertion that he had to beg because he was blind.

A manager of a volunteer program told me about a blind woman who volunteers at her organization and who seems unable or unwilling to ask for assistance directly. Here's that manager's predicament:

"She talks about what she'd like to do but waits for someone to offer to help (which I have stopped doing) rather than deliberately asking people to help with a project or activity. People at work seem to jump in and help, and then they get tired of it, too. But it's hard to know how to tell someone that she needs to be more straightforward. It's hard when you can make eye contact, and it's even harder when talking to someone who can't make eye contact -- because the connection is more blunt and I don't want to hurt her feelings."

Darlene was more direct about begging rides but then would use her blindness to stretch the favor to ridiculous lengths. She once caused a co-worker to miss picking up her daughter from school because, once in the car, Darlene insisted on being taken somewhere off the route to her home. The driver was equally responsible for allowing herself to be manipulated. The daughter wound up walking several miles in an area with no sidewalks.

And this is the oddest tale I can tell about people who let others hold them to lower standards. Harriet, who had gone to an Ivy League college, drove a car and exhibited no symptoms of being blind (because she wasn't blind) convinced her co-workers she was indeed blind. Her work standards were considerably lower than the rest of us, although several of us really were blind. That we were affronted by her behavior was characterized by our boss as "cruel."

Again, every bit of education we do (and I will mention that Darlene herself was, in fact, a diversity awareness trainer), every effort to convince the world that we can do the same jobs as sighted people can be undermined, sometimes irreparably, by someone who takes advantage of lower expectations. The employer takes a chance based on our assurances, hires a blind person who seems qualified for the job, then watches helplessly -- by their own choice -- as the blind person drives them and the co-workers to distraction with manipulation. The employer thinks to himself, "Well, I guess that's what you get," and never gives another blind person a chance. The self-respecting blind candidate cannot defeat the image created by the manipulator, and the credibility of all public educators goes down the drain.

Other Self-defeating Attitudes

The volunteer manager is puzzled about her blind volunteer's contradictory behavior: "I also find that she is quick to anger and blame others for problems -- like cars not stopping for her or people bumping into her cane. At the same time, she constantly says, 'I'm sorry,' when something doesn't go quite the way we plan -- even when it has nothing to do with her. I get tired of her always being sorry for things she had nothing to do with. She sounds like a broken record, and it begins to feel as if she isn't aware of her conversation and her activities. It feels as if there is a

lack of ability or willingness to accept the world as it is (although, many sighted people have the same problem)."

eSight Careers NetworkTM intern Liz Seger was amazed by her disabled co-workers who accepted outright abuse from "the Boss from Hell" and wonders how any self-respecting adult can convince himself he is destined always to be a victim.

Liz and I both have known the "yeah, but" types who ask you -- pester you -- for advice, since they see you have accomplished something in your life. But nothing you suggest is possible. "Yeah, but this will happen ..." or "Yeah, but I don't know how to ..." The learned helplessness is a barrier over which our well-intentioned advice cannot leap. Often as not, our attempts are rewarded with resentment.

Some blind people are so invested in what they think the world owes them that they lose all sense of the rights of others. I received these three examples from a blind services employee in a poll I took about blindisms:

* "A blind person who we recently found a job for refused to pick up after her dog because she said she had back problems. This was a major problem, and it escalated into a plethora of other problems. The maintenance person would have to follow her every time she went outside and pick up the dog's waste."

* "Another blind person refused to move his guide dog out of a classroom (he was a teacher's assistant in a preschool for visually impaired kids). A child in the class had terrible asthma, and the dog's presence was making the asthma much worse. The employee showed everyone the 'guide dog rights book' he received at school and refused to move. The guide dog school contacted him and encouraged him to move the dog because the dog would be in a nearby, big, air-conditioned office with plenty of light and a window. Still he refused. The mother had to rearrange the child's schedule completely, and it was a big disruption in their lives."

* "A recent graduate of ours was on an interview and asked the human resources director why they did not have talking elevators. The director responded that the elevators were equipped with Braille, and the person responded, 'What about us blind people that don't read Braille? That's being discriminatory against non-Braille readers.' Needless to say the person was not hired."

On top of making unrealistic demands, two of these individuals appear to lack any initiative whatsoever. The first guide dog user seems unaware of pooper-scoopers. The elevator aficionado

doesn't seem to understand the obvious solution is that he learn Braille. One's own selfishness or laziness is not another's responsibility.

As our poll respondent laments, these and other self-defeating attitudes have an inevitable conclusion: "I recently had an employer (who just fired a blind person) tell me, 'I know this is not politically correct, but my experience with blind people is that they say they want to be treated the same, yet, if you don't give them special accommodations when not necessary, they say they are being discriminated against."

Conclusion: Voices in the Wilderness

There are many, many very admirable and responsible blind people. Since joining eSight Careers NetworkTM, I've become acquainted with more and more of them. But, for every one of them who takes us a step forward towards our goals, it often seems like there is someone who thrives by manipulating, by taking advantage, by angrily demanding, by acting as impaired as he feels. And that person destroys whatever education we have been able to do. One step forward, two steps back.

Until we change how we present ourselves as individuals, the image of people with visual impairments as a group will suffer. Until we develop constructive attitudes, collectively we will stay in our place. Each of us, as individuals, needs to commit to responsible behavior. Each of us needs to call others on their bad attitudes. And our society needs to stop accepting them.

(I have used fictitious names in all the stories above.)

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