



# Civic Reinventions, Inc.

*Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation*

## **INLCUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN MEETINGS**

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The Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1990. Since then, awareness of how to include persons with disabilities has skyrocketed. Nonetheless, meetings are common in which little or no accommodations are made for persons with disabilities. Even groups committed to inclusiveness too frequently exclude. Listening, building awareness, and training can reverse these exclusive practices.

In this article, I include a number of recommendations for meetings in which persons with disabilities are treated as equals and their gifts honored. I encourage everyone who values inclusion to read further in this area than this short article permits.

The need for skilled facilitators able to work with a range of persons with disabilities and to craft meeting designs accordingly cannot be overestimated. The number of persons who need accommodation is staggering. According to the U.S. Census, 57.6 million Americans reported having a disability in 2010. Over 20 million of these either "have trouble" seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, are blind, or unable to see at all. Thirty million have a hearing loss. One in eight people in the United States aged twelve years or older has hearing loss in both ears. Approximately 8 million Americans have some type of mobility impairment that necessitates the use of adaptive equipment such as a cane, crutches, walker, wheelchair, or scooter. Sixty million Americans nationwide have learning and attention issues. Millions more struggle with autoimmune disorders, cancer, diabetes, service-connected disabilities, or cardiovascular and respiratory challenges. Temporary disabilities from falls, accidents, and broken bones number in the millions as well. With the number of aging baby boomers growing, these statistics will climb. As the truism says, "All of us will eventually have a disability."

Preparing for meetings with persons who have disabilities begins long before the meeting. Considerations include meeting location, parking, entrances, exits, the meeting room or rooms, and the location of restrooms. People with mobility disabilities want to know if there are safe and convenient drop-off areas, sidewalk cutouts, and safe and wide pathways

to the meeting rooms. Like everyone else, they want to know where the food, beverages, and restrooms are located; and where to register attendance. Some will want to sign up for the next gig, buy a book, or know where to find the petition to lobby elected officials.

The planning team and facilitators begin by listening. Who will the attendees be and what advice do they have about accessibility? Persons with disabilities are the experts, along with their companions and advocates. Listening to their needs begins the inclusive planning process.

The meeting planners need to address a variety of questions. Will the event need to be on one level? Will captioning be required? Will a signer be needed? Will a companion dog attend? Will a full transcript of the proceedings be helpful? Will invitations need to be in Braille or is large print sufficient? Do aisles and table layout need to accommodate mobility devices such as wheelchairs, scooters, and walkers? Are assistive listening devices needed? What type of furniture and layout facilitates full participation? Asking these questions up-front goes a long way toward inclusion and making meetings accessible. Empathy, decency, and fairness require that they be asked.

Meeting planners may need to arrange for recording the proceedings in real-time for persons who are deaf, hearing impaired, or who need a readable record to trigger their memory. Graphic recorders can be an excellent choice for visualizing and summarizing meetings. Graphic recordings benefit the visually dominant, persons who cannot hear, and who are hearing impaired.

People with mobility needs require the meeting room to be configured for wheelchairs and other devices. Narrow aisles need to be expanded and obstacles cleared. Braille handouts and large print versions may be required. Guide dogs need to be accommodated. Signers and caption writers may need to be recruited.

One way to communicate that your group values inclusion is for the invitation to contain details about the meeting's

accessibility. Receiving an invitation and noticing that one's needs are accommodated builds trust. People feel welcomed and honored. They are more likely to attend and will engage more fully in the meeting.

If possible, send out agendas, PowerPoint files, charts, and other hand-outs in advance. When agendas and supporting materials are received ahead of time, participants can more easily prepare for the topics to be addressed. This improves meeting flow. Participants need to calculate the time required to get to the event and their return, so include starting and ending times in communications to help everyone plan accessible transportation.

Greeters are a wonderful way to welcome everyone when they arrive at the meeting location. For those who are blind, greeters are essential. They can describe the pathway to the meeting or escort the person whose sight is impaired to the first stop.

If a registration table is needed for signing in and receiving handouts, make sure that people with mobility disabilities can approach the table. The same goes for refreshments. Make sure the tablecloths are short--no long hanging frills and frippery. Be ready with kind people to help fill plates and glasses for those who need help. If needed, help bring full plates and liquid refreshments back to the person's table.

If there is a podium where a speaker or facilitator stands or sits, make sure it is adjustable. Make sure she or he can be seen from all angles. The better selection is a table with chairs and microphones. If there are translators and signers, make sure they can be seen. For the leader or facilitator, provide a small table with a glass of water and a place for notes. If there is a raised platform from which people will speak and it is not accessible, do not use it. Bring a table down in the midst of the crowd. It will enable all to participate. As a side benefit, having people sit at a table on the same level creates intimacy and warmth.

For those who are blind, facilitators should briefly describe the room layout and the location of restrooms and refreshments. Describe where tables, chairs, and the podium are located. Remove clutter and keep aisles open. When meetings begin, invite participants to share their name.

During the meeting, invite speakers to repeat their name before they speak. This allows the blind to know who is in the room and who is speaking.

If the meeting includes audiovisuals with projected slides, summaries of discussions on whiteboards, or flip charts, the facilitator should describe what he or she sees.

When translators, captioners, and graphic recorders are to be used, planning teams should be aware that it takes time to secure contracted services. Plan the date of the event mindful that it may take weeks to line up professionals whose services are in high demand.

Prior to the event, facilitators should dedicate time to talking with interpreters, real-time captioners, and graphic recorders to describe meeting expectations. Provide handouts, agendas, and background material to help these professionals plan.

On the day of the meeting and well before the meeting begins, have the facilitation team review the set-up. Make sure that seating, lighting, and equipment are in place. Review the table setup and other fixtures to make sure no obstacles exist in aisles and between tables. Test assistive listening devices. Make sure that interpreters are positioned adjacent to speakers and facilitators. Make sure sight lines are clear.

Making meetings accessible and accommodating persons with disabilities are not lofty goals. They make practical business sense. The amazing variety of life experience and the stamina and courage it takes to navigate life as a person with disabilities means that all of us should cherish their contributions. All can learn from their stories of frustration and hope.

Facilitators, planners, and consultants who seek to learn from and comply with the ADA requirements can find a wealth of resources and trainings online. Articles, checklists, and webinars abound. For designing accessible meetings see <http://www.adahospitality.org/topic/planning-accessible-meetings>. For a complete list of ways to accommodate persons with disabilities, visit <https://adata.org>, the website of the Americans with Disabilities Act National Network and its ten regional centers. Other nations have similar resources.

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