

Talking Inclusion With...

Series 1, Podcast 9: Staff networks with Co-op – National Inclusion Week special

Talking Inclusion With... Stephanie Hirst

Stephanie Hello and welcome to Inclusive Employers podcast 'Talking Inclusion with'.

I'm Stephanie Hirst and I'm delighted to be here today during what is National Inclusion Week as we talk about the role of staff networks in inclusive organisations.

The theme of this year's National Inclusion Week is 'United for Inclusion'. And I guess there's no better way to unite for inclusion than to be part of an active staff network just like today's guests.

But before I introduce them, in case you don't know us, we're Inclusive Employers. Our mission is to make every workplace an inclusive employer where every colleague values differences and contributes their skills and experiences fully to their organisation. These podcasts are for everyone and anyone who has an interest in inclusion and diversity. In our podcast, we share life stories and experiences, learn about best practice and hear

practical advice for employers from our guests, as well as Inclusive Employers own inclusion and diversity experts.

Now today I'm joined by two guests from Co-op. We've got Claudia Carvell now Claudia is inclusion lead for Co-op and Chair of their Respect network for LGBTQ plus colleagues. Claudia is also trustee director and chair of the people and policies Trustee Board subgroup for the Gadem Centre in Manchester.

Hi, Claudia. Welcome along to the podcast.

Claudia Hello. Thanks for having me.

Stephanie And also joining us today is Natalie Clegg, Technology Officer and Chair of Represent, Co-op's network for disabled people. Hi, Natalie, welcome along.

Natalie Hi. It's great to be here today.

Stephanie It's great to have you. Plus, we have Inclusive Employers Senior Inclusion and Diversity consultant Steven Copsey, who you will of course heard hosting some of our podcasts. But today, it's on the other side as a guest. Steven has been involved in a number of in-house LGBT networks, and is a former co chair of the cross industry award winning network 'Link - the LGBT Insurance Network'. Hi, Steven, welcome back.

Steven Hello, it's strange to be on the other side of the mic

Stephanie On the other side of it... Now today, we're going to talk about how to set up a staff network some of the common issues that people face. And we'll go on to discuss some of the successes that our guests have seen from their own networks.

If you're interested in setting up a network, maybe you're already part of a network, or just want to understand more about how networks can support inclusion in your workplace, then this is the right place for you. So let's get deep and deep straightaway. Actually, Steven, we'll start with you. I mean, can you tell us a bit about the benefits of networks and why we should have them and why they're so important for an inclusive organisation?

Steven

Yeah, I think if we start with the real basics here, the benefit of having staff networks shows that you're willing to invest, not necessarily financially, but from that time and energy perspective, they show that you care about having discussions, important discussions on certain topics, they show that you care about people who might need safe spaces, they might need support, they might need a place to honestly talk about experiences within their business, maybe even their personal life, but they can also be really great forums that can vastly increase engagement from a business perspective. You know, whether that is in that wider organisational mission statement, or if it's something very specific, that you're working on a very specific initiative.

As well, they can be really great beacons for positive values driven behaviour within the organisation to, you know, members of staff networks can become role models throughout the business, they can start to change behaviour on the ground. It's not just about that policy and procedure change sometimes, they can also reach people who your comms might be missing.

Stephanie

And it's sharing those lived experiences as well. Because that across the business then is educational. We all can learn from people's experiences, because everyone's lived experience is different, of course, isn't it?

Steven Yeah, absolutely. That storytelling is really, really important across the board when it comes to inclusion and diversity, but from a network perspective, you're potentially giving people who might not have been comfortable or brave enough to have a voice, the chance to speak up to share to educate, and when we make these stories relatable, that's one of the best ways to engage in that inclusive behaviour change.

Stephanie Amazing. So Claudia, can you tell us about the network you lead and the origins of the network?

Claudia Yeah, absolutely. So I chair the LGBTQ plus network at Co-op 'Respect', and Respect actually has been going for a really long time.

It's one of Co-op's first colleagues networks, so I can't claim to have started it or launched it. I've not been the brainchild behind it, but I did take over earlier this year with my colleague, Mark, who was the deputy chair, and we were actually voted in despite the fact that I'd only been at Co-op since September. And people who didn't know me, I think they felt that I had some experience to bring to the table that they valued. So I actually have a background in the LGBTQ plus non-profit sector. I'd have a bit of a history as a professional lesbian. I'd worked for a lesbian dating app and run events in Manchester & all sorts of exciting things like that.

So I actually just have a lot of experience in creating safer spaces for LGBTQ plus people, and really thinking about what it means to have a community and to kind of nourish that community and bring us together for kind of affirmative, enjoyable time, I guess. And that's what I saw as an opportunity with the network. I think there's a lot of passion. There's a lot of people that really want to be involved and to meet other people like them, and have an affirming space. But what they were lacking really was diversity and representation.

So what we see a lot in LGBTQ plus networks is a focus on as we've kind of any other group of marginalised people, I kind of focus on the most privileged in any community. So we had lots of kind of really passionate gay men invested. But we didn't have a lot of people with other marginalised identities. We didn't have a lot of LGBTQ plus people, such as people who are nonbinary or trans.

There are some lesbian women involved, but there aren't many bi people involved. So whilst that's fantastic that we have people invested and engaged, and an incredible work has been done over the past couple of how many years, it has been, kind of starting and maintaining the respect network, but we didn't have was a network that really truly represented the communities that we aim to serve, and that we 'say' that we serve. And that's the bit for me, that I felt was really important.

And I have a lot of experience in kind of working more intersectionally and thinking about how we bring underrepresented groups of people to the forefront and make sure that their voices are, you know, as loud and as central as anybody else's.

Stephanie And Natalie is with us today as well. Can you tell us about your network and how you got involved and your story?

Natalie Yep. So 'Represent' is actually Co-op's newest colleague network. And we're really clear that it is for everybody. So in terms of people who are personally disabled, who are parents or carers for those who may be, and also non disabled allies as well.

I would say that we are first and foremost a community. So you'll hear me talking about more about that today. And I will often refer to the Represent community for that reason.

In terms of our network, we want to be really clear that it's a peer to peer support network, really, which is why it's a community, and it's a real kind of colleague led initiative. So although we have a team of volunteers who amplify the voices of our disabled colleagues, we never speak for people. And I think that's a really critical thing when it comes to disability, because a lot of people feel very disempowered and unable to be independent. So actually giving people the opportunity to have their voice and have their say and be part of something bigger, really helps build that kind of support and confidence that people need.

You know, looking back at the history of the network, we only really started coming together early last year, probably just before the pandemic started, actually, and I think there was a few colleagues in the Co-op, particularly in the support centre who realised that actually, they felt quite alone in their experiences. I was one of those people. And I was thinking surely these barriers that I am feeling and facing and for me as a newly kind of disabled and chronically ill woman, it was quite a lonely experience, and actually finding others who were starting to come together to have conversations about what that experience was like, that was actually the birth of our founding members, which is actually a really lovely story to tell.

And we were originally being led by a wonderful friend of mine who is a Paralympian. So it's quite a hard act to follow, she left the Co-op a few months back, and I was asked to be the new chair, which is a massive honour to be able to lead that community but also a very hard act to follow. And I am supported by two deputy chairs. And we work together in a very non hierarchical way.

We're a team and I am not as a leader as such, because I don't think that's the right way to be in a community. And we have a very small group of volunteers, probably about 20 people who come together every week to talk about our priorities and where we need to be focusing. But we have a

huge amount of allies and sponsors around the business who are helping us to make the change that we really need to see in the organisation, which is just amazing that we've got that support around the Co-op, and people really understand the journey that we need to go on.

Stephanie And is this, as you mentioned, is one of the newest networks within the Co-op.

What was the process like of getting it set up? You know, getting funding from the business as well, and then deciding and guess what the network looks like?

Natalie Yeah, so it's quite an interesting one actually. I don't think we ever really asked permission. But I think that's the nature of disabled people right? We are faced with barriers every turn in our life and careers. And I often talk about how disabled people are actually perfect candidates for promotion and managerial roles, and we should be seeing more of that because they are incredibly resilient.

You know how many times disabled people are told no, and we still find a way to do it anyway. So we just kind of cracked on you know, we started creating this network because we thought it was the right thing to do. And it's just grown from there. And we would say we don't really have any funding. This is all built around people's personal time and support and commitment to supporting others. And part of the work that we do is around partnerships with leaders and teams across the organisation who own the services and processes that we really need to make changes in.

So we are helping them to understand the insights and experiences to enable them to do things in their day to day roles. So in a way, we are creating the change by identifying the owners of things rather than us

leading that change and therefore needing funding, so it is quite an economical way of doing it, if you know what I mean. So yeah,

Stephanie But that's what this podcast is about is getting these stories out. And other people will hear that story and just go 'we can do that'. It inspires other people to start networks, doesn't it?

Natalie Yeah, absolutely. And I think you know, you do need a lot of self organisation within a network coming together, particularly at the start. So we did spend a lot of time kind of going back and forth and what our main priorities were because my God, when it comes to disability, there is so much to tackle.

So we actually partnered with a team in the Co-op, who have digital skills, and they teach and support other areas of the business and new techniques. And we utilise their support and guidance in working through what our vision and mission should be, what our strategy looks like. And really, you know, taking things into really small, simple steps working through these larger problems. And actually, we ended up finding our alignment through going through that process. Because you know, setting out you're like, oh, I want to fix all the processes, I want to fix all of the service problems, I want to fix people's education, I want to you know, find funding for X, Y and Z, but actually, when you start you've got to start small and grow. So going through that process of step by step definition of the vision and mission and purpose and strategy really helps to focus a group around what the core principles are and where you begin.

Stephanie Steven, as I mentioned, in my introduction, you are a former co-chair of the cross industry award winning network Link, which is the LGBT insurance network. Tell us about how you got involved in that network?

Steven

Yeah, so for me, similar to Claudia, actually, 'Link' was something that existed, when I just happened to come along. It was a case of me reaching out and speaking to one of the co chairs at the time, and one of the founders, in fact, Theresa Farrington, and saying you're doing all this amazing stuff in London, what are you doing up north? And really, the question back to me was, what are you doing up north? And that was kind of that light bulb epiphany moment for me to say, Oh, actually, yeah, that's something that I should be doing. I should be getting involved in this. Why should I be expecting somebody who's 250 miles away, to be bothering with my local community and understanding it.

So it was a case of going out there, trying to find some like minded individuals, we were connected via Teresa actually, very quickly. And we decided, you know what, let's just host an event. Let's get people together who already have these networks in their businesses, from across the financial services from across the legal industry. Let's bring them together, get them in a meeting room, and get them to share some best practice. So they could learn from each other people who haven't been involved in a network before could learn. But also, you know, we could steal with some pride as well, that I think that's one of the classic things when we talk about networks, 'Steal with pride', you know, use it, own it, talk about it and share it. Because I think that's one of the things we miss a lot when it comes to inclusion and diversity. People want to share this stuff. People want to collaborate. People want their work places, their organisations and industries to be safer and more inclusive. So yeah, feel free to steal.

Stephanie

And it's empowering as well, isn't it?

Steven

Yeah, absolutely. You know, after we'd done that first session, we all got asked, actually, do you want to join the National Committee of Link? And as well as that we decided to make let's form Link up north as well. So we thought we can carry on doing this, we can keep that northern

conversation going? Because it was all happening in London, and it didn't need to. And we could add that value. We could add that northern voice.

Stephanie And it's been one together, isn't it? It's coming together as a unit which unifies the entire business.

Steven Oh, yeah, absolutely. Especially, you know, when we're thinking of Link. When I left Link, we had 350 member organisations, we had over 1200 active members of the network. That is massive. And some of those organisations are your big globals who have 100,000 people, but some of those organisations that have joined have less than 10 people. And there might just be one little LGBTQ plus person who is too scared to talk about anything in their workplace, but they can come to this shared network. Feel safe feel like they belong, and realise, oh, actually, there is a career path for me here.

Stephanie Claudia, you mentioned that you've recently become Chair of the network. And it had not really done much for quite some time. Have you managed to gather some momentum in these in these recent times?

Claudia Well, I joined right on time, which is just before Pride Month, and International Non-Binary People's Day, both of which are kind of tier one top level events for us at Co-op. So to be honest, I was a bit busy straightaway, me and Mark sat down, and the thing that we decided to prioritise in that moment was representation. It was galvanising, the people and bringing new people in.

So actually, rather than jump straight to 'right - what can we do?', we were like, 'Who do we need?'.

So we kind of redesigned the structure of the network, not radically, but just so that it accounted for the different areas, so we included a whole

other kind of area working group, called representation, looking at the things I've been talking about. So kind of identity representation, but also geographical representation, representation across the business. And then we spent the past couple of months just recruiting, and we've only really recently pulled together, what is a more representative steering group, and we're due to meet with them next week. And once we have, what we felt was really important is once we have more diverse voices around the table, then we'll make a plan.

Because it's really easy for us to sit down and think, oh, yeah, we know what's important, we'll just pull this, but we're two people who can't possibly represent as kind of that was saying, you know, can't possibly represent all these different voices. And we don't want to, we don't want this to be really hierarchical. And actually, that's part of the journey that Co-op as an organisation is on is how to become less hierarchical, and how to involve kind of more voices all of the time.

So that's, that's where we're at right now is we're bringing people together first, before we start to kind of plan what action respect looks like.

Stephanie Now, while staff networks can be a really important part of inclusive organisations, they can also pose challenges, let's take a look at some of the common issues. And as to overcome them. Steven, what did you find with Link was some challenges that you really had to overcome?

Steven So I guess, when it comes to Link, the biggest challenge for me was always time, you know, I had a full time job as an insurance broker, and then also had to think about actually, how do I fit this in? When do I fit this in? can I convince my boss to do this?

So you know, thinking about that challenge there? It's a case of understanding buy in, understanding if people want to give you that time. If

not, why not? So actually, when I moved jobs within the industry, when I was still a part of Link, I made sure to mention that my interview, actually, this is really important to me, I'm going to be going down to London, once a month, I'm going to be getting involved in these initiatives is that okay? So I kind of set that scene made sure I was really open talking about it, too. And that buy in, from my perspective seems to be there. So I was feeling comfortable taking time out to do this, I was going down to London, I was getting some great feedback, some great input. But it became very clear to me after about six months or so that my business really didn't understand it at all, not from an internal perspective.

So they ended up saying, "Actually, we're not going to let you go down to London once a month anymore, we're not going to pay for you to go to this event and represent our company". So I ended up having to take annual leave, I had to you know, I was spending like 100-200 pounds a month just so I could continue to be involved in the network. And that was when I really realised actually sometimes the challenge is the organisation you're with.

And sometimes, you know, we talked about that organisational fit, but sometimes does that organisation fit you and realising that I think that's a massive, massive part of this as well, especially from a cross industry perspective. It didn't matter that I was working with industry leaders, I was chatting with our international directors, our HR directors, putting together global D & I strategy. But my manager at the time was like, 'No, I don't want you doing that'.

Stephanie

And this is just once a month, you are going to go to London, to connect to.. Wow. And they just didn't have the foresight to see how powerful that would be. And that, of course, has a ripple effect, doesn't it?

Steven

Oh, absolutely. And, you know, the ripple effect of my work was changing the organisation but the ripple effect on me feeling like that, you know, it makes me far more demotivated in my day job. People could feel it in the office. They were thinking, why aren't they letting you do this anymore? This doesn't seem right. So it really created a really negative environment, that I obviously chose to leave relatively shortly after that. But yeah, I think identifying those challenges and understanding what they really are, can be really tough and can take a lot of time.

Stephanie

And time is something that you mentioned right at the start. And Natalie is that what you found, you know, with the day job, starting this new network as time being, you know, trying, stealing bits of time, from your diary here, there and everywhere to try and get this network up and running.

Natalie

Yeah, I would say at times, it has been quite intense, particularly over the kind of the previous year or so the standing up part of the network.

But I'm really trying to focus, the full kind of volunteer team, myself, the deputy chairs and the volunteers on sustainable ways of working, because actually, when we look at how we continue to sustain the network, we can't possibly be burning ourselves out with the work we're trying to do, because there's going to be nobody left to run it. So we are really conscious as well.

But you know, in the disability world, there is a lot of focus on time and what it means. So, particularly for people whose health conditions and kind of the experiences of health conditions that they have, impact them in ways of fatigue, and pain, and the kinds of things which alter time for people. So there's a whole concept out there called 'crip time', which is around bending the rules of time rather than the experiences of the person and I think the more we focus on understanding how we support others in achieving their goals and the things they want to do with time, rather than

at the expense of someone's health and well being, the more we can achieve. So actually, we're looking at how we can face things differently, or we take longer to do things. And actually, that's okay, because we shouldn't live in a world where we live by structure, especially when it's at someone else's expense. So we're really focusing on how we can make sure we achieve the things we want to but in a sustainable way for us all.

Stephanie Claudia, Steven mentioned about, you know, the trouble he had with leadership buy in, is that is that something you've found at the Co-op, or across the board, has it been completely positive?

Claudia I think... I'm going to be diplomatic. And I think it's a bit too early to tell for Respect. Well, I can see historically, is that respect to get a lot of support. So I can't claim to say that leadership buy in has been a problem. However, that has been on the basis, I think that what respect has been trying to do historically is much more kind of mainstreamly acceptable.

One of the conversations I'm trying to have a lot about the moment is gender, gender fluidity, non binary identities, trans identities, because when you're talking about gay, lesbian, bisexual people in sexual orientation in the workplace, that's a conversation actually, I'm not saying it's there, but it's been had for quite a while. So leaders are much more comfortable having those conversations, when we move into the sphere of gender, non binary identities, trans identities for gender fluidity is more difficult, is definitely more difficult, and people are scared of getting it wrong. Just having a conversation about pronouns identify as gender fluid, and just trying to have a conversation about pronouns, without people shutting down is still difficult.

So leaders kind of putting their head above the parapet a little bit and role modelling inclusive behaviour around gender, and gender kind of nonconforming identities is still a challenge, and I think part of that is a

lack of understanding and awareness, and part of that is that most workplaces just aren't looking at it. So I think we've got a lot more work to do that about as have most organisations.

Stephanie And you find with people and pronouns and gender identity, people will go well, 'I don't get it'. You're not meant to get it. You know, it's acceptance and understanding, isn't it?

Claudia Absolutely. I think like any other difference, you don't need to know everything about it to say I respect you. And you know, I value, that I value your difference. And that's kind of where we get into however, I think it does help people to seem to be more confident when they are educated and informed. So that is part of what I think our network can do, and we'll be doing in with support of the diversity and inclusion agenda at Co-op is, is made sure people have the information that will then particularly leaders that will then help them lead inclusively.

Stephanie And Natalie, how did you ensure the network has longevity and stays, I guess, a positive initiative for all of the organisation.

Natalie I think that the basis of it being a community gives it longevity. So it's not just you know, a small group of people who are championing this and actually, it's more of a movement. So I think today, we have several hundred colleagues who are behind this initiative, but it also means that we have several hundred colleagues also talking about disability and helping others to understand their experiences.

I think one thing that has been an interesting kind of journeys, understanding just how many people's lives are touched by disability. And there's a presumption that, you know, because of the medical model, which we don't advocate for in the network, obviously we advocate for the social model, and that's part of the teaching that we do, but the

assumption that disability is somebody in a wheelchair, we're actually breaking that stigma and taboo and helping people understand that when we talk about disability, it's the barriers that people face which are disabling it's not the person themselves and suddenly, people are starting to open up about their experiences with long term health conditions, neurodivergent and impairments that they may have, or people that they know their family, their children, their parents, and suddenly the identification that people feel with the topic of disability means that the conversation is much more rich and widespread.

So I think it'd be impossible to stop it from happening now. Because people start to feel comfortable having that conversation, even if they're not comfortable with the terminology or the language that we would prefer to use. And we are part of that the work we do is helping people with that. But I think once people realise that they have some sort of connection to our community, it's just, you know, the longevity, it's just part of that experience, isn't it because the connection people feel and the conversations they're having are just continuous, and it will just continue to grow, which I think is really exciting for us.

Stephanie Networks can be really valuable to organisations, we're now going to touch on some of the successes our guests have had with their networks, and what advice they'd like to give to people thinking about getting involved.

Natalie, so far, just to touch on what you were saying. I mean, what has been the highlight as a network lead, so far, you've had.

Natalie The highlight for me is seeing the passion and commitment that our leaders across the organisation are having around disability. So one of I think probably one of our biggest successes is a trial, we are actually preparing to launch kind of anytime in the next month, we'll just sparing up those dates, but that is going to provide an enhanced support model to our

disabled colleagues, which is a huge step forward. And something that, you know, 12 months ago, we were dreaming about this, but actually working in partnership with the people who own those services, and the processes that are there to support colleagues, whether that's in occupational health assessments, risk assessments, equipment, IT support all those different types of things, and we've essentially brought that all together and process maps across the organisation, and trained people who will be answering the calls to colleagues to have better conversations around disability, and help them feel comfortable.

I mean, I am so incredibly proud of the work that has gone into that and the support and difference that's going to make to our colleagues is humongous. So I'm so excited to see where that goes. And we're really focused on using like a test and learn iteration model, so we are not kind of claiming this to be perfect, but we've got a commitment from the group of stakeholders there to keep improving and looking at where we can continue to support colleagues in the ways that they need us to.

Stephanie And Steven, you talked about the challenges a moment ago that you faced with, of course, getting that leadership buy in, but what has been the highlights because you've been part of several networks, what was what's been some of the highlights for you.

Steven I think the big one that stands out is winning the Queen's award for voluntary service. And that was for our work in the final financial services, you know, bringing people together making it a more inclusive industry. And that wasn't just a case of, oh, you've been nominated. And someone's written a nice paragraph about you. It's actually 'Yeah, someone has done that'. But then someone comes in, in audit everything you do, how are you doing it, why you're doing what you're doing it for. And you know, we're all volunteers. So we're all doing this on top of our day jobs, so it meant actually, it proved that we had a robust structure that we were doing things

the right way, that we were having an impact. And we were doing it in a very professional way too, which I think is really important.

It is a volunteer thing a lot of the time, but it still needs to, you know, align with business objectives still need to align with some sort of goal, you know, and whether that goal is just supporting people, or whether it is moving the industry forward in a certain way. So that is for me, the big highlight, you know, got to go to Buckingham Palace, which was great, have afternoon tea, really exciting. But it was also a real cornerstone moment for me too. I've been doing this for five years, this is great, but actually maybe this is my time to sit down. Maybe this is my time to let other people come up and do some other incredible things give some incredible thoughts. So that for me, pardon the pun was a real crowning achievement.

Stephanie Wow... Great Pun.... But there is that new now you mentioned, you know, making space for the next generation. There is a new generation coming through societies that constantly changing and evolving and it's letting those young people have voices as well, isn't it?

Steven Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's one of the most important things to think about it.

You mentioned longevity earlier. The most important way to keep that longevity, is for you to realise when it's time to let other people speak. When it's time to say actually being part of an LGBTQ plus group, being male, being white, being cisgender. I have a heck of a lot of privilege still within that community. So actually, if I step away, who else can we bring up? What other sort of demographics can we bring to the table? What other voice?

The last thing you want is you know someone to lead a network, or be a co chair of a network for five years, and then to not be the same passionate and energetic individuals when they started, because most of us will not be, we will be tired, we will be worn out, we will be ready to move on to something else.

So thinking about that succession plan, who's coming next? Who can we get together? Who can we not only teach, but how can they teach us too? That's definitely one of the most important parts of leading a network.

Stephanie I mean, and Claudia, essentially the same question to you, you hit the ground running when you join the network. What's been the highlight for you so far?

Claudia I think for me, it's those smaller moments of someone sending us an email and saying, that is the first time you know, International Non-binary People's Day, Co-op celebrated with a session on Non-binary People's Day, for the first time ever, and somebody messaged us and was like, this is the first time I have ever seen my experience represented at work.

And we got another email a couple months before that, that was from somebody that was transitioning, and was saying, like, I have no one else to talk to, apart from you. And I received that email. And I just felt such privilege and such honour that like I could be anyone in that person's journey, and I think what that's those are the moments for me is when people start to say, Here, it's a really long journey, trying to change the diversity representation of a network of any group is a long journey.

But, you know, hearing people say, You know what, actually, yeah, I didn't see myself represented in this network. But because of the way you've been talking about it, I'm going to apply, you know, I'm going to see if I can be part of this, even if I'm one of only, you know, three people that share

this identity, I'm going to see if I can make a difference here because I'm starting to feel safer. Identifying within your network like that, these are the moments for me that I think are having the biggest impact, because it's that community that really matters to me.

Stephanie There's gonna be people listening to this podcast today who are looking at starting up networks, we're going to try and share as much information as we can. And some of the best practices as well.

Natalie, what's been some of the best practices you've learned, during this, the creation of your network at Co-op?

Natalie Some of the work that we did last year, which landed so incredibly well was the storytelling, and being kind of really fearless in doing that. It's really scary to kind of what feels like airing your personal laundry at work, when actually, it's the one thing that actually really resonates with people and they understand and therefore buy in and join you on that journey. So myself and our kind of our chair team, we have told our stories to teams, we've told them to departments, leaders, the exec, and actually, it got more and more easy for them while we were doing it to the point now we could probably just like reel it off without a script.

But I think you know, the one thing we've learnt in this network journey is, don't be told 'no', because you as the individual who has that lived experience knows best, around what needs to happen, the kind of representation that you need within your community, the kinds of support that you are maybe without at a point in time, and therefore what others will be experiencing. And just using that gut feel of what feels like the right thing to do, usually, for us has been the kind of the nugget of greatness that we've that we've achieved and made a difference to others. So yeah, just kind of go with gut instinct and be fearless about it.

Stephanie I think that's, you know, best practice in life anyways isn't it? Sometimes you've just got to go with that gut feeling that sometimes you find your natural path that way, don't you?

Natalie Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, as Claudia mentioned before, the importance is other people's voices. So we didn't kind of set off thinking that we knew what the right thing to do was the stuff that we'd experienced, and actually listening to what theirs their experiences reaching out to people across the whole of the Co-op. You know, it's not just a Support Centre initiative. This is people in stores, funeral homes, logistics depots, y'know, kind of all over the country. And understanding the experiences they were having that was stopping them from thriving in their roles really helps us to build that picture of actually, where should we be kind of finding that guiding kind of pathway through kind of all the noise and just really cut into what needs to happen and how we do it.

Stephanie And trying to take these networks, I guess Claudia outside the organisation getting it to a wider voice.

Claudia Yeah, definitely. I've been thinking more recently about how it's really easy, and I've actually seen this happen with a couple of networks where they end up just representing the voices or the experiences or the priorities of people that sit in their steering groups, their working groups, maybe you know, their wider membership, but actually if you think about it, we need to represent all so I need to represent I need to think about how respect represents all LGBTQ plus communities because it's a fact that lots of people that will be missing just because they're not sitting around your steering group or they're not part of your working group, so even if they're not part of your membership, that might be because they're not represented there. They don't have capacity. They're on shop floors, and there's no, you know, freedom. They're the one of the only LGBTQ plus

people in their shop. So they don't feel like they can ask their manager for the time to attend, you know, meetings and events.

There's lots of reasons why people might not be engaging with you. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be representing them. And so looking wider, constantly thinking about right well, who is not present? And how do we ensure that their stories are still part of the conversation, their priorities are still part of our priorities I think is really key. And it's challenging, because if they're not around the table, it's really hard to know how to ensure they're represented. But I think it's a question we need to keep asking.

Stephanie And Steven, the Link network is a it's a cross sector network for finance. How did you take that outside of the organisation?

Steven Well, I mentioned this before, that whole sharing thing, that collaborative approach and the inclusion and diversity space is really, really powerful. So being able to take advantage of that is really, really the journey you need to go on.

The hardest thing about that is building up that inclusion rolodex actually, who are the people that we need to know who are the people that we need to get involved in this conversation? Not just internally, but other businesses. You know, what else are they doing? Are they doing something similar to something we're working on? Can we work together with them?

You know, and I think that's really important as well, when it comes to things like budgets, because you might not have a budget, you might be begging, borrowing, stealing to get anything for for your network. But someone else in your industry might have a 30 grand a year budget just for one network. And actually, maybe they'd be happy to front the cost. If

you do, you know, the Organising if you get invited the guests if you bring the people along.

So get out there go to as many events as possible, get to know as many people as possible, granted over the last 18 months or so that will have been tricky. But you know, when you get those business cards, keep hold of them, actually do something with them, don't just put them in your pocket, or your suit jacket pocket, and then never see them again until the next event, do something about it.

Try and get those people together do favours for each other, work together. And I think staff networks is the topic but it's also about building your own personal network too. And I don't think you can do either well, without making sure you're on top of both for them at the same time.

Stephanie It's pressing the flesh, isn't it? Getting to know people?

Steven Yeah, absolutely

Stephanie Working the room at events. You mentioned budgets there as well. Going forward. It's vital, isn't it? I'm guessing that organisations put aside budget for networks?

Steven I think eventually, all networks have to get to that point, because you can only run on goodwill and hard work for so long.

Eventually, organisations need to start thinking actually, yeah, we can see the value in this. It's making our people happier, it's making them more productive. It's making them more engaged and open, just in their daily work lives. So actually, why aren't we doing more for this?

Yeah, I mentioned begging, borrowing and stealing, we have been in that position in the past where I literally go to someone and say, if you do this, later I'll get so-and-so to come and speak at your event. But I've also been in the position of working at that big global, who does have a 30 grand spend per network per year. And the stuff that can be achieved out of that is incredible.

You can do your usual events. But in fact, clients will want to use it as a sales opportunity. You can go out there and get involved in redesigning policy and procedure within the business, you can go out there and attract and recruit new people, you can even essentially become part of an Events Management Team too, because that experience you've learned through that staff networks organisation is massive.

So eventually, I think we have to get to a point where organisations start to give some sort of budget to their networks. But it doesn't have to be massive, a little can go a long, long way, in this area of staff networks. And when you see that well oiled network, bringing in that additional benefit, that additional value that's really attractive to an organisation.

Stephanie I can see Claudia nodding on here as well.

Claudia Yeah, absolutely. I think this is a really interesting conversation about capacity and resource ongoing. And I think it's I think you're absolutely right, some of the biggest challenges. I think it's interesting at Co-op that we work really closely. I have to be honest and say I wear two hats because of figuring it out myself. I'm also a diversity inclusion lead within Co-op, that's my day job. So I think what's interesting with the networks is that we both... the D & I team works really closely with our networks, and the networks really work really closely with each other.

And so things like budget and resource actually ended up sitting in D & I. So networks can access it. So networks do kind of technically have a budget to pull from, but they're not necessarily in control of it. And there are different ways in which organisations operate like that. So who controls it? And what's the power and the privilege involved in that? And how easily can networks access resource within organisations? I think is a really interesting conversation probably could take us another hour...

Stephanie Probably over...

Steven Yeah, just to pick up on that power and privilege thing. The organisation that I used to work with that had that big pot of potential money, it was, essentially, all of the networks were pitted against each other and had to almost do a Dragon's Den pitch, put a business plan together, do a 12 month strategy, these are all the events we're gonna do this is how much it's all gonna cost. And then the money got divvied out.

But if we're thinking about those networks, LGBTQ plus network that's heavily populated by white, gay cisgender, men who have a lot of professional experience a lot of connections, a lot of experience doing some of this work, might do better at that pitching than other groups that do not have that managerial professional level representation there. So you're absolutely right, Claudia, how are these budgets been decided? And is it fair, really, really important point there.

Stephanie Natalie is nodding along as well as you as we can all see on the screen, because we're all recording this virtually, of course, what's your thoughts on this matter?

Natalie You know, I think it's really interesting, because how can we say that one minority group of identities is more important than another? Right,

because that's what that fundamentally comes down to in terms of, you know, kind of who gets what budget,

I'm actually reflecting the way that we've done this in Represent is actually quite interesting. And actually a testament to what I was saying earlier about disabled people being particularly resilient, and we find a way. So we're building the case for change across the organisation, right, so in our systems, in our processes in the services we provide, but we have identified I guess, that putting the decision making in the right places, and identifying the sponsors that we need, who own those services and processes and who hold the budgets for them in their BAU capacity, we can influence them in a way to understand that they need to make the changes to help us.

So it's kind of a reciprocal arrangement, I guess. But we are not using budgets in terms of our D & I work, and actually getting other people to do the work for us that we need to see. So I think, you know, for us, it really comes down to where is that decision making in the organisation? Where does it sit for all these things that we want to see to be changed? Because, we found at the start, we had our decision making sitting in one place an executive level with our sponsor, but actually, you know, why weren't we asking the people who own those things to make the changes for us, and could they could they help us rather than somebody else who doesn't own that service or product?

So a real way of getting around it is finding the decision makers and who wants the budgets in their BAU job, and getting the work done that way? So I suppose it's kind of circumnavigate in that topic. But it really does help you to make the changes you want to see.

Stephanie

And to wrap up this Inclusive Employers podcast, just to go around the room and find out what piece of advice you would all give to anyone who's

thinking of setting up or getting involved in it in a staff network, Claudia to start with you what what advice would you give?

Claudia

I think it's the same advice I would give in most situations that involve kind of communities like this, which is just understand your own privilege, particularly if you're about to step into a position of perceived or actual kind of leadership and authority, people will be looking to you, and you can role model, your capacity to understand particularly if you're representing a marginalised group.

So as an example, like, I recognise that I am a lesbian, I am gender fluid, there are areas where I like privilege, but there's also areas where I have a lot of privilege. So I'm white, I'm not disabled, I, you know, I'm educated, I come from a middle class background, etc. So you have to hold all of these things together, and really take an intersectional approach.

One of the things that concerns me sometimes about colleague networks is you only have to become one thing to actually fit in. We've had jokes about this, but actually fit into almost all of the networks because of you know who I am. And that doesn't mean that I am only one thing and but just because I'm you know, only part of one of these networks, and I think it's a real danger when networks don't work together, because they're like, no, this is about being LGBT. This is about being black or from a minority ethnic background. Actually, no, you are representing groups of people that have multiple marginalised identities. Colleagues, networks therefore need to work together. And anyone in a leadership position slash I think everybody but particularly people in leadership positions, need to understand and own their privilege.

Stephanie

Natalie, what advice would you give?

Natalie

That's a really good point from Claudia around understanding our intersectional identities. I think for me, it's about finding others who are on a similar journey. Are some shared elements of your journey, you know, starting a network and setting one up or you know, kind of taking one forward is a really, really big journey. And one person cannot do that alone.

And you need a team of people who have the same drive and passion and interest in the thing that you are trying to achieve, to work together and be a real community kind of effort to make this thing happen. So I think for me, it's around finding your people who wants to do this. And I think once you've got that kind of strength in numbers, the influence and reach across an organisation becomes much more significant than kind of one person, trying to have multiple conversations all over the place. And suddenly, it becomes much more of a strength in numbers kind of situation than just trying to influence somebody.

Stephanie

Steven?

Steven

I think for me, there's a big point of being honest with yourself, do I have the time to commit to this at the moment? Do I understand the time commitment? You know, especially if you've got a network that's very early in its lifecycle, that's going to take up far more work, they're probably going to be far less people involved. So it might eat into your private life more? Are you okay with that or not? And if not, maybe we need to think about how much responsibility we are willing to take on.

I think, once you have asked yourself those questions have that reflection, think about that timeline I mentioned, you know, actually, maybe you don't want to be in that leadership position for that long. You know, two or three years might be tops, that might be a good period of time for you to say, right? I'm going to stay here for two, three years. I want to get this out of

this. I want to bring this to the network. But also, how are we going to align it with the overall purpose, what we therefore, how do we align it to the business purpose too? And if you can't answer those questions, it might be, again, a bit more time for reflection as needed. It might be maybe I need to do a bit more research on this, maybe I need to think about where I sit right now in my life. Is this the best time for me to get involved, or would it be better if I left it a couple of years.

Maybe you can support in a different way for the time being ,beyond that periphery, and maybe not be actively involved? So yeah, that honesty, am I ready for this now is really important, because I've seen a few people really want to get involved and then suddenly, they've been thrust into this position and realised that it's a lot more work than they originally imagined. And it can be soul destroying for some people, something that they've loved has suddenly taken over the life in in a way that they can't control. So that honesty for me Steph.

Stephanie This has been a truly fascinating edition of our podcasts. We've learned so much and really dug deep.

A big thank you to our guests today, Claudia Carvell and Natalie Clegg from Co-op, also Inclusive Employers' very own Steven Cosey. Thank you so much.

N,C,S Together Thank you.

Stephanie And to find out more about how Inclusive Employers can support you to set up a staff network, just pop along to our website. It's [inclusiveemployers.co.uk](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk).

For Inclusive Employers members, we've got many resources, and plenty of advice on the members area of our website or speak to your Inclusive

Employers account manager. Also, if you haven't already, listen to the other podcasts that we put together. They are truly fascinating. You can find out more about those on [our website](#), or just search for 'Talking Inclusion with' on your usual podcast provider.

Thank you, everyone for joining us today and look out for our next Inclusive Employers podcast coming soon.