

Welcome, all of you.

I'll introduce myself in a second.

But before I'll just introduce the theme that we will be discussing in this short session.

We're looking at leadership in this conversation and specifically around leading artistic practice rather than participating in other people's.

So, my name is Kate. I am a white middle-aged woman.

Today, I'm wearing black jeans, brown boots, I have a stripy jumper.

I have black glasses on and my hair is long with a fringe.

My left arm is shorter than my right arm, and I have one hand.

It would be really great if we could just go around and introduce ourselves, so I'll start on my left.

Hello, everyone.

I'm Dalibor.

I'm a tall white male.

On myself, I have a black hoodie.

And underneath I have a t-shirt with hard to describe, cool motives.

But these motives are from some science-fiction horror movie.

And I'm wearing jeans and shoes.

Hi, my name is Chisato and my sign name is Chisato tapping the tip of my nose twice.

I'm an East Asian woman. I have short brown hair.

I've got purple flowery dress on and I'm middle-aged.

And I'm deaf.

Hi, my name is Maria Oshodi and my pronouns are she/her.

I'm a middle aged, brown, mixed-heritage, blind artist.

Today, I'm wearing a black jumper, underneath a terracotta corduroy pair of dungarees with brown boots on.

My name is Marc Brew. I use he/him pronouns.

I'm six-foot-two.

I'm a wheelchair user,

I have a shaved head, I'm wearing a cap.

I'm wearing a black top and jeans, brown boots
and some beads around my wrist.

And I'm an artistic director, choreographer and dancer.

Thank you.

Actually Marc, that's a really great reminder.

I'm going to reverse the semicircle and I if we could just give a sentence
about however, you want to identify what you do, your practice.

So Marc, are you happy? Does that feel good for you?

- Yeah, that's great. - Brilliant.

If we can go background starting with you Maria, that would be great.

I'm an artistic director
and CEO of a disabled-led company.

I'm also an independent artist and access consultant as well at times.

I am a deaf artist and director.

I'm a performing artist. I'm also a BSL art tour guide.

I'm also a disabled artist, I co-produced...

There is one of our performance from Parity Inclusion,
which is an artistic inclusion institution.

And one of our performances is based on my idea.

And the other performance is almost all based on my thoughts,
my ideas and other things.

Great. Thank you all.

I am a self-identifying crip artist researcher
and mainly these days, I work in producing the work
of other crip and disabled artists.

So I'd like to kick us off with a provocation
and that is...

Do we feel that it is important that deaf and disabled artists
initiate and lead on projects rather than participating in projects

that have been devised by non-disabled directors or leaders.

This is Marc speaking.

I do feel like it's important and from my personal experience, 25 years ago, when I acquired my disability, there was no disabled leadership. There were no what I'd like to say more role models to aspire to or people that I could relate to.

To go "oh, I could do that or I could continue my career as a dancer or as a choreographer." Initially, I was told "no, I couldn't" because I was disabled.

So I think having that representation and that disabled and deaf leadership is really important also because they then come with that lived experience and knowledge and empathy to know that...

to us the questions create space.

So everyone is heard and everyone's needs are met.

I agree.

Why not to have a deaf or disabled leader?

Because deaf and disabled people can show their performance art as well and their work is there so why not show that more and I feel like it needs to become more widespread.

It's like a new emerging thing almost, but it needs to be shown more.

Thank you all of you.

One thing that I'm getting from what you're all saying and there's little differences in all your comments.

The difference between representation of deaf and disabled artists on stage or in performance

and the work that has been initiated and led by deaf and disabled artists.

It feels like I'm aging myself here. But when I began working as a dancer, it seemed that deaf and disabled artists were somewhat restricted to performing in the work of other people.

And I'm hearing from all of you now

that it's important that we address that difference,

the value of having our artistic inquiry and our artistic voices as leaders,

- Am I understanding that? - Yeah, completely.

That's why 25 years ago, I set up the Extant, which is a company around and visually impairment and...

kind of trying to elbow some room to have this space for visual impaired people who felt like they were not really... which we didn't have that space to just inquire and investigate and do that kind of exploratory work on...

what it meant to have our bodies and our perception on a stage and also as audiences as well,

and finding creative ways to integrate access and all that.

I felt like no one was going to do it, so we had to do it ourselves.

And so... yeah.

I can't remember what you said, but whatever. Yeah.

Kate, I also did want to mention that I think there definitely are benefits to also disabled artists and deaf artists,

working with their peers of non-disabled artists

and also potentially being led by non-disabled artists.

I just don't think our voice can be forgotten

and not be a part of that, which I think is a key word, collaborative process.

And I know when I first came to UK and started working, it was being led so many times by non-disabled choreographers.

And then, I remember I wasn't able to teach on my own, as disabled artist.

I had to teach with a non-disabled person

Where now I teach all my workshops on my own.

And that's been a 20 year progress to happen to prove that I could do that on my own.

Because of disability doesn't mean I cannot do that, or it's not valid, which it is, of course.

I think there's also benefits in working collaboratively with non-disabled artists

or if people are leading projects that are non-disabled,

I would encourage them to...

If they're work in this integrated or inclusive setting,
to bring the voices of disabled artists into those decision makings
and into the project,
so it's not forgotten about and becomes a non-disabled led project
without that collaboration.

It is also a good way for people to know us better.

Yeah, absolutely agree.

This notion of elbowing in it is something I...

I equate with leadership is the notion of failure.

So, Maria, when you talk about...

artistic inquiry and exploring,

I think that space feels equally important in terms of deaf
and disabled artists leading.

That we have space to go wrong and to fail and to try again
and emerge into leadership rather than have leadership put on us,
which actually I think can feel like a real pressure
to say "there's no disabled leaders, quick!

Be one!"

And I think actually

I've many times experienced that not quite working
because the steps aren't in place to kind of emerge into leadership
in a gentle way.

Does that resonate with anybody?

Yeah, definitely. I think that's right.

I've been in a situation where there's a non-disabled person leading
and also where there has been a disabled person leading
and I found it difficult to show the deaf elements of my art.

As a deaf artist, communication is key and it can really be an issue obviously.

Of course, I have interpreter access right now.

That's what you would need in place.

But if you are trying to communicate with deaf people or hearing people,

the rhythms can be very different.

So sometimes you'll find one or the other is slightly left behind.

So, deaf leadership works well for me. It's the rhythm of it, it's a deaf rhythm.

With the team of people I'm working with, which are mostly hearing people actually,

and some have invisible disabilities or a few people I work with are also deaf.

What I try and do is bring everyone into my deaf rhythm of communication.

And the pace moves at such a way that everyone's kept up with it

and it's a melding of two worlds.

And communication is a really important thing.

And that is a really useful and helpful space

in a place where I can show my deaf elements and I can create that art

because I've set up that space

and it's like if you had a blind-led piece of work

and you had a room which is set up to be conducive to that way of working,

I think that's a good thing for me to do.

Thank you.

I think that...

that links for me in what needs to be...

We focus a lot on what the obstacles to deaf and disabled leadership are.

And actually I really like the way you've just explained that rather than looking at obstacles,

It's for me, very interesting to explore what the optimum circumstances are, rather than looking at what's lacking.

Actually saying if the space is set up like this

in terms of practical access, communication,

the access in its broadest sense,

then authentic leadership feels much more possible.

So thank you for that. That's a really great point.

So, moving on, if that's okay.

This is kind of...

Just for all of us...

I'd like to offer the provocation of how are you a leader?

In your practice or in your life? However that question lands for you.

And we don't have to go in a line. You can just...

I can start. This is Marc speaking.

That thing about putting a title on you, I think for me...

Maybe I'm seen as a leader in the work that I do,

I feel like I lead through collaboration.

That is definitely key to my practice as an artist

when I'm working in workshops or choreographing or at work,

whether I've been commissioned or leading on a project

as the key leader.

I always feel like... It's all of us in the room.

For me, my role is to create a space that everyone feels they're a part of,

that feel that it's safe, but also a brave space to try things

and that we're working collaboratively, because I want to hear other people's

voices as well.

Obviously there are times that I need to make decisions

but I feel like I hopefully am trying to lead through participation

and through collaboration

and not so much just using the title "I'm a leader"

Yeah, deaf leadership...

It definitely means awareness of communication,

within the space and also...

Really, it's a sensory disability.

So it's not physical disability, it's sensory.

And so that's a big part of the leadership style for me,

and everyone's different senses are different, obviously.

And a deaf leader becomes like a curator almost

of everything in the room and the senses that are there

and what you can make from that. So it's quite unique.

Thank you. That's really interesting.

It's really interesting the idea of curation.

I like that word. I never think about us in terms of that because I just sort think about exhibitions and museums. But it's a lovely word, isn't it? It feels like a kind of a really whole engagement with the space that you're occupying everything. And I think that when you're thinking about that in terms of... particularly when you're integrating access into your work as well, It becomes that, you know? But to get to that point as a human who is perceived by society as not much as expected, you know? I think that's where the "how" comes into it. Because I think that just... working with the mindset that... you are that much expected of you, and that you need to get to the point where... you... are taken seriously is a big thing around leadership, just to get to that point. To get into the room and sit with people to collaborate with in a serious way. And that sometimes is just the minutia of managing your own life. And then everything else that it takes to be an artist. And... You know, I just think that thing shouldn't really be underestimated because it's massive. Thank you for raising that because in terms of a discussion, all of us here, who I would say from my own objective position are in different ways and at different times being leaderful. But Maria, your point feels really important, especially here, that this conversation is going to be publicly available. I don't... I'm sorry cause I haven't prepared for this provocation,

but you've just made me think about it.

I think often my experience of feeling like a leader can...

I have this duality,

and you've just made me think about it.

That in my everyday, if you like, pedestrian life,
sometimes even traveling to a moment where I'm going to perform my leadership,
whether that's speaking at a conference or doing something like this,
when I'm in the world outside of this place I've created for myself,
I'm aware I'm often very much perceived as someone of whom not much is expected.
And I think that's useful information to put out into the wider world.

That there's a navigation there

that I may get in a taxi and it would be unthinkable

that I would be coming to lead or be autonomous.

When I'm encountering that kind of "what happened to you?" thing

And then I'm often dipping in and out of leadership.

Does that resonate with any of you?

Absolutely.

I don't have a distinction.

They are different ways of doing the same thing.

I find it sometimes more challenging being in the practice space
because...

some of artistic aspirations are dependent on a collaborative model
and the input of people's contribution

But like Marc said,

there are certain points where you have to make decisions.

So I'm really interested to hear

what Dalibor has to say about the way the family model works

because I don't understand, but it'd be really good to hear

because I'm at some point someone has to make a decision somewhere,

and those times... for me,

as a sensory impairment like Chisato,

Some of those decisions are around visual things

and I have a very strong internal visual barometer
but that's reliant on the way that those things are interpreted to me.
And sometimes I will go with my instinct,
which goes completely against what everyone else is seeing in the room
or telling me,
and I have to be really quite bloody minded about it.
I've been in this game for a while and I'd say most of the time
the decision I make is right.
And what that's based on...
I don't know apart from the distance, a kind of like a gut thing.
But you know, that's the bit where I found
the whole leadership thing is really weird because I'm having to...
I occupy that space as, you know, this is a space that I've created
and I'm going to take, you know...
but I'm basing decisions on things that a sense that I don't have...
Seemingly... Well, I don't have it, but, you know...
and that's where it gets a bit weird.
Yeah, that's all I can say.
It gets a bit weird and I just have to go with it
and I've become quite bullish about it
and, you know, it's like...
I think in a moment, Dalibor, I'm gonna ask you
to talk about this family model,
but I just wanna add, Maria,
I think there's a really important distinction there,
and if you bear with me while I'm slightly anecdotal,
the beginnings of so-called inclusive contemporary dance,
there was a big argument that improvisation was probably
the only way that deaf and disabled people could fully...
it was the best way because it was less codified and all those reasons.
And so I think you've made a very important distinction there,
I wouldn't want to send us down a path where deaf and disabled artists

have to lead collectively or collaboratively.

I actually want to make space where we can have collective and collaborative leadership, but we can also have bloody-minded, bullish leadership from deaf and disabled artists, who actually want to be "No I am the decision maker" that in an ideal world...

Thank you for that distinction.

I hadn't made sense of that for myself, and I think it's a really important one.

I would also like to add something.

I would try to be really fast now.

For me it's hard to practice leadership and to be a leader.

For example because in this...

Now, a little bit spoiler alert again,

in my performance called "Something Very Special",

There are many parts of this performance that I read or talk

and in some parts, I have to sound like a teacher

in some parts, like some yoga instructor

or in some parts, I need to sound a bit angry.

So I need to practice...

lots of different models of leadership for this,

for this performance.

Thank you for that.

And I wonder just if you can briefly, just as Maria suggests,

how do you experience this family model of leadership?

How does it operate for you as a member of the company?

Well I feel...

I experience family model as leadership in a way,

as I said before, like...

that we function like collective consciousness,

but we are also...

Our communication is really great.

We are also talking about our other problems that are not connected

just with our artistic work.

We are sometimes trying to solve when someone has some personal psychological problem.

Also, for example, we have our group, where we sometimes write some things that happen to us or... put some photos.

I'm I will just tell briefly that we...

we made this group when the pandemic started to be in contact and not to feel alone.

That reminded me what you're saying...

about some of Chisato's comments around...

the importance of shared language or finding shared language.

Does that resonate with you Chisato?

In this kind of collaborative model that a starting point is finding a way to communicate.

- Yes. - That was to Chisato.

- But you can.. - Yes. Sorry.

- It's okay. -Sorry.

- I was thinking aloud. - That's really fine. That's fine.

I know we talk about this word "access" a lot,

for deaf and disabled artist, but...

actually access itself can definitely become art

and our artistic access is

I believe a really great way to bring a space alive

in such a way that something can grow

and come out of that space that really becomes a form of art.

And it's a strong way of working, I think.

I agree. It's a strong way of working. I have a question, Chisato.

I may have to think about...

If I am proposing that our practice is leadership itself,

I wonder if we can say the same thing about access,

that access, rather than being a vehicle to leadership or to our practice

that actually there's something interesting in how we think about access for ourselves and each other that is deeply autonomous and actually deeply leaderful.

Does that make sense for you or anybody?

Yeah, I mean...

access is not one fixed thing, is it?

Because, traditional access, let's say,

obviously it can be a positive thing and you can develop growth from that.

But we don't know what else is to come.

We can still explore that, I think.

I definitely feel that.

This is Marc, I was just picking up on what you were saying,

I think it's inherent, for me anyway, that...

leadership in regards to my access needs does become a part of my job of what I do.

You've got to advocate for your own access needs or accessibility,

but it would be great that actually that is taken care of.

So then you can focus on your job or your role,

whether it's performing, being a leader, or running a project.

So then the focus and energy goes on the art

rather than how you have to get there every day, to be there.

But I also wanted to pick up a bit that we're talking about around leadership

and maybe these different models that we'll talk about a little bit more,

but also about leadership style.

One of those is collaborative leadership.

For me, I feel that's what I try to obtain and create in the space that I work

But there are obviously some leaders who want to take the road of:

"I'm leading this project, this project is my ideas."

I don't know whether there's one that's better than the other.

There are different styles of leadership that I think we're picking up on.

Yeah, I think you're absolutely right.

I mean, I think there's a bit of a discrepancy between

how we experience leadership in the arts in general

and how we understand leadership in society or the world.

I don't know if anyone's encountered it, but there's some fairly terrible writing

around leadership theory that what a leader should look like, the body language of leadership.

If you want a site for thinking about deaf and disabled artists, it's a really great way in because none of us fit into that archetype or "this is what a leader is".

They're upright, they're whole, they're hearing, they're seeing, all these things, you know? They're loud...

Undefinable.

It's impossible to say, "this is what I would..."

I could say that for me, ideal leadership is a space that allows for access in its broadest sense,

where we can make space for multiple voices,

where we can pass decision-making,

But it would be very difficult for me to bullet point what it is exactly.

I don't know.

Does anybody have...

What would ideal perfect leadership look and feel like if there's such a thing?

This is Mark speaking.

Straight away, I just feel like it would be hard to pinpoint

what the ideal is, especially for...

for my circumstances...

It also depends on the project, the work, the people...

There are times when I'm creating a work or working with a group of people that space that I create may shift and change,

because of the needs of the group.

I feel like I'm more of a facilitator creating that space and...

I set the times and work with people when the decisions need to be made.

But also, for me... I've learned through my leadership roles,

where some projects haven't worked so well

or I haven't done so well or I've failed and that's okay.

But I've also learned from that as well,
that not every situation is going to call for the exact same way of leading
or facilitating a project.

So for me, it's also needing to be a bit more organic as well,
and listening to what the space and what the group needs
and the best way it can be supported.

Perfect leadership... I don't think it exists.

I think we all just try to do our best in leadership situations.

For example, if you have a group of people
and everyone's getting on great, but the art you create is...

You know... not.

That can happen!

Sometimes, if someone can create a situation
where everyone's working together fantastically,
and you feel like "what brilliant situation"
but actually the work you've created didn't say anything to anyone.

And sometimes it can be really difficult when you're working with other people,
but actually the work that comes out of it can be stronger and go further.

And digital technology is a massive help with everything at the moment.

That's a great point.

I love that. And just to tie your comment in with Marc's...

Of course, if any of us were going into choreograph or direct
a piece and we had two weeks on the first Monday,
we might be so collaborative. It's beyond belief and lovely.

Listening and including everyone.

But by the Thursday of the second week, we might be grumpy leaders
who are really feeling the pressure of a deadline
so that kind of organic environment...

And I think Chisato, you are absolutely spot on,
but of course you can have the most amazing process
and less exciting product or one of a better word.

I think that's a really great point.

Dalibor I'd like to ask you just because I know we all work in different...

but as you are currently in a show and working with a company,

When you are being led or when you are leading...

can you kind of speak about where it feels good, when it works?

Is that a possible question?

Do you want me to rephrase?

It is possible to answer this question...

but it is hard... to decide in some way...

because for example...

I like when someone leads me because then I don't have to...

to make too many decisions to be too much responsible...

Think and work much also.

And I also like to be leader...

because then, I feel...

kind of... that I'm in charge... I'm empowered.

Maybe for me that sounds a bit too...

How do you say in English?

Too self forward, because, I'm tall.

I think of myself... I look good.

So I need to look out when I leading something,

or if it's something about leadership,

for me, that I don't look like I'm full of myself or something.

I have to be clear that I'm speaking from personal experience.

Just to relate what you are saying to Maria's earlier comment

that actually I'm aware that I've fallen into...

leadership almost just by being here

that there's nothing conscious that I did, but I am aware...

that I've come into it from a lifelong background of pretty low expectation

of leading.

So I often have that inner... exactly as you are describing,

that kind of "oh, don't think of yourself too highly"

There's often an inner voice that is with me lots of the time,
but I actually think when I'm in leadership positions,
that voice often makes me a better leader.

It makes me a bit more understanding
of the people I'm with.

I'd like, if I can, just to bring us almost full circle
and whilst I am not proposing that we as deaf and disabled artists
can solve the problem of a lack of disabled leadership in the arts,
I do, I'm aware that that just to capitalize...

The knowledge and experience in this group of people.

I wonder if we can just take a few moments to think about...

because actually in the UK certainly the reality is...

the directors, programmers of theaters, directors of festivals, artistic
directors,

these are generally held by our non-disabled peers,

And I wonder if there's anything from our experience that we would...

we would put in place, and I think Maria, your point is maybe

one of those things is allowing experimentation, thinking about ego,
being transparent about what it is to be in those roles.

I don't know, I think...

If I kick us off... I've definitely changed.

Maybe 10 years ago I would be like, "it's not hard. Just do it."

Just make those spaces and it will be all right.

And I still have a bit of that in me, but I think now with more experience,

I would be inclined to say to any theater or organization,

you know, educate yourself on crip time.

Really understand, embed crip time into your organization overall.

Understand that we operate at different pace and time.

That I mean that if I was just going to do one tip.

So I don't know if anybody...

I'm not asking you to come up with an answer, but what do you think would make
it better

if there are people who...

if we agree that having more deaf and disabled leaders
in these positions in the arts would help.

How could that be made possible?

I think that's a really interesting thing about crip time.

Because this keeps coming up and it really resonates with me,
because I'm feeling a bit burnt out anyway.

I've been in the arts quite a while now, and there have been moves,
you know by funders for instance, to include access provision
in their application processes and things like that, which is great.

If my understanding was that access included...

Or maybe that's...

I think that some of those funders have taken on things because...
the disabled movement has made it clear that's something they need to do.
Maybe if there was an understanding that access meant more time as well,
you know, real time...

to be able to generate and recover,
that would be very, very good.

Anyone else on what could make those spaces more accessible? Marc?

I think drawing on my most recent experience of
being artistic director at Axis Dance Co. in America for the last five years,
I got really burned out as being, being artistic director
and sort of leading the company.

Not because I didn't have the passion or the drive, I definitely did and still
do.

But...

I think what would've helped me is to have in place some of the needs I had,
in regards to my accessibility, as a disabled person were in place.

So I didn't have to worry about all of that.

Then I would've had more time to focus on...

my energy on leading the company, on working with the dancers
on commissioning new artists.

But my energy gets wasted with getting to and from,
pushing in my chair or...

We're trying to work those long days.

So if we can look at, "okay, so what are your needs?"

and "how can we support you to be a leader in the arts?"

I would say for me it would be about needing a support worker to assist me.

I need to make sure that the spaces I go into are obviously accessible.

I need to know that I can have regular breaks

or a limited time on computer or only two meetings a day.

Or that we don't work from 10 to 6.

Maybe they're bigger, longer breaks throughout the day.

So I think... looking at how we pull apart...

what sort of model of leadership is, or organisational structure is,

and how we can bring in some of our lived experiences

and what our access needs are to support...

what that could be to help...

other disabled leaders fulfill their role.

Well done, team!

Well done, Kate, to guide us through!