

# **Quick Trust and Slow Time: Relational Innovations In Disability Performing Arts Practice - Six Spectrums of Allyship**

Bree Hadley

## **Introduction**

In the arts industry, individuals and companies are increasingly committed to allyship, defined as doing the work to make sure d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists have equal work opportunity.

Government, industry organisations, and training institutions have developed strategies to include d/Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent writers, directors, artists, and performers.

In Australia, however, our national funding body Creative Australia continues to provide information indicating Disabled artists do not work as often, or make as much money, as non-Disabled artists.

In this article, I look at what methods and techniques create positive relationships between Disabled artists and allies, to support Disabled artists work in the arts.

I look at six things Disabled artists say effect positive – or less positive – relationships.

My goal is to provide a tool to help Disabled artists and allies reflect on what they want and need in a working relationship, to make sure Disabled artists are represented and included in the arts industry.

## **Method**

There is not a lot of research about how Disabled artists and allies work together.

In this article, I draw on academic research, activist articles, examples of arts practice, and my own experience, to look at six approaches that influence positive – or less positive – working relationships.

I look at each approach – labour, capital, community, power, risk, and safety – along a spectrum, from the working methods Disabled artists find difficult or upsetting at one end, to the working methods Disabled artists find useful at the other end.

## **Findings**

**Labour** is the work an ally is willing to put in to supporting a Disabled artist. This may include work planning, creating, presenting, or promoting an arts project.

Artists, activists, and researchers are critical of 'optical' allies. 'Optical' allies want other people to 'see' them liking a campaign on social media, signing a petition, or adding language to a company strategy.

They are not 'active allies' who mentor, recruit, or employ Disabled artists. They may say they cannot find skilled Disabled artists, it costs too much, or does not appeal to a wide enough audience.

Disabled artists prefer more 'active' allies, who put more time, effort, and energy into educating themselves to identify way to work with Disabled artists.

**Capital** is the reward an ally seeks for working with a Disabled artist.

'Allies of convenience' work with Disabled artists when it will help their own career, when they will receive credit, or when there is funding. They may include Disabled artists as consultants, or in roles where Disabled artists do not have control over decisions, do not get credit, or do not get money.

Disabled artists prefer more 'committed' allies. 'Committed' allies work with Disabled artists longer term, to break down barriers. This includes providing physical and digital access – ramps, captions, or audio description – changing content, changing work processes, and creating opportunities for Disabled artists to lead.

**Community** is which people's celebration or criticism an ally is most concerned with.

An 'entitled ally' feels they have the right to lead, create work, and tell Disabled artists' stories. They may not listen, or care, when Disabled artists are critical of when, where, and how they do this.

An 'endorsed ally' is more willing to listen to what Disabled artists want. They will change their contribution to support Disabled artists to work, and take leadership roles, in the industry. They will listen, and be willing to learn, if Disabled artists have feedback or concerns. This may say this is as important, or more important, than credit or financial reward.

**Power** is the amount of control an ally wants over a collaboration.

A 'pseudo ally' wants to remain in charge of who does what, when, where, and how, for what money or credit. If Disabled artists say they are concerned about an issue – the work process, the story, the credit, or the pay – a 'pseudo ally' will react negatively to what they see as criticism. They may say the Disabled artist has misunderstood or been oversensitive.

An 'authentic ally' will make mistakes. They will, though, be open to conversations with Disabled artists about what changes may improve the collaboration. This is how they become skilled in working with Disabled artists to create a positive working relationship, that produces the work that Disabled artists want to share.

**Risk** is how comfortable or confident an ally feels about changing work methods.

An ally who does not feel confident they have the skills to work respectfully with Disabled artists may focus on the logistical part of access – ramps, interpreters, and captions. They may not focus on changing the content of the stories, or the work processes, to be more inclusive for Disabled artists.

More confident allies have often had long term exposure to the work methods Disabled artists find inclusive. They feel more confident to experience. They feel more confident to change a company or project to use new approaches, even if this makes it less clear how the process, or the work presented, will turn out.

**Safety** is how physically and psychologically safe both Disabled artists and allies feel in a work process.

An ally who has found their attempt to create an inclusive working relationship has become challenging – the workload feels unequal, or the Disabled artist has stopped engaging with the work, for example – may feel unsafe.

This ally may not be clear if this is because more changes to make the working relationship are required, or because the artist and the ally simply do not have compatible artistic styles.

More experienced allies are better able identify factors in and beyond the artistic work that can create challenges. This includes whole of life factors, like availability of reliable treatment, transport, and adaptive technology.

## **Practical Applications**

The six approaches that effect positive – or less positive – working relationships are all connected. Looking at them in isolation, or looking only at the far end of each spectrum, is not the most important thing. The more important thing is the way each can help Disabled artists and allies reflect on what will support a positive working relationship, and, as a result, a more inclusive arts industry.

## **Author Bio**

**Bree Hadley** is author of *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts Culture and Media* (2019, with Donna McDonald), *Public Space Performance & Spectatorship: Unconscious Performers* (Palgrave 2014), and articles and commentaries on diversity, access, and inclusion in the arts across journals, industry press, newspapers, and other platforms.