

Disclosing My Diagnosis and Finding My Voice



I've been in human resources for close to 30 years now. Something that is interesting to me is the idea of the power of having a voice. You could argue that this was always part of my job description - it was always a part of what I was supposed to do. But there is a real shift that happens when things become really personal, and it crosses over into your life as opposed to just what your job is. I had a real coming out that had to happen to put those pieces together. This is not only a story of workplace culture; it's a story of my personal journey.

As I reflect on my 18 years at Microsoft, I've been really proud of my steep climb to becoming a senior executive. About 12 years ago, I was asked to head up university recruiting. I'll never forget my first day on the job, walking into the conference room and introducing myself to a group of approximately 60 people. I've done this a thousand times in my career, but this specific day when I stood up to give a simple intro, I noticed that my legs were shaky.

I remember thinking, "Wow, how can I be so nervous about this presentation? What is it about this specific talk that is making me this anxious?" Ultimately, I made it through, and everything was fine.

Fast forward a few more weeks and more meetings. I had odd symptoms like numbness on my face and shaky hands. By now, I was thinking that this was no longer just the jitters - and I just happened to have a routine checkup with my primary care physician scheduled.

He asked me a few questions and proceeded to put me through a battery of tests, including my first MRI. This started us on a journey that took close to two years to reach a multiple sclerosis diagnosis.

I remember thinking that literally, all you can do is take it one day at a time. I thought, tomorrow, I'm going to go to work, and I'm going to see if I can make it through that day. I thought that inevitably, my MS symptoms would become so apparent that I'd have to tell people what was going on.

But then it didn't happen. And the next day, it didn't happen, and the next day it didn't happen. I started on the disease-modifying therapy Gilenya and continued to take it day by day.

Early on, it felt really isolating. The only people who knew were my wife and mother-in-law – certainly no one at work. I was being stubborn. I didn't want to appear weak or make others question my abilities. I didn't want anyone to think I was less capable of being a leader. I didn't want this to hinder future promotions. I was carrying a lot of pressure inside.

In the midst of everything, I started to give money to the National MS Society. Shortly after, I connected with Laurie, an individual giving manager at the Society. It didn't take long for us to realize through our conversations that my diagnosis was actually presenting a special opportunity.

With my level of seniority, if I could tell my story, the impact it would make would multiply and spread very quickly. I just wasn't ready to share quite yet, and we proceeded to go through a multi-year journey with the same dance of "should I tell or not."

In 2014, we had a new CEO named Satya Nadella. He came in and started to espouse what inclusion, empathy and allyship truly mean. Satya shared that if we as a company could unleash our empowerment, we would help others feel empowered because it's tied directly to our mission.

At the same time as I was becoming more empowered, Laurie would ask me about getting a national team together for Microsoft. I remember thinking, I don't know who I could open up to about this topic. In that moment, I realized I had to be that person because I was a Vice President and already sitting on the disability employee resources group (ERG). In the ERG meetings, I would talk about disclosure, having a voice and finding ways to ask for help. I was saying all of these things, talking about these ideals, but I wasn't applying them to myself. That became a turning point for me – if I didn't do it, who else would?

Now, I take you all the way to my current state. I shared my diagnosis at Microsoft's Ability Summit in 2020. I'm serving as the vice chair of the National MS Society's Greater Northwest Board of Trustees – I'm both honored and humbled to be involved at this level. And I'm still a disability ERG sponsor, and my job is still going well. I still take Gilenya.

And I continue to take it one day at a time.

My story pulls together work culture and the impact of disclosure – the power of having a voice so that others have a voice.

It's OK to not be OK. The great lesson I've realized is that more and more of a percentage of my job and my role as a leader building company culture is built off of these moments of vulnerability, transparency and authenticity. These are the accelerators of empowerment as opposed to something that one feels they have to hide.

When I share this experience disclosing my MS at work, I'm reminded that someone is listening that isn't as empowered yet and that we must help each other.

At Microsoft, we hire people that are pedigreed, smart, ambitious, with great backgrounds to get them through the door. But now, I actually want to learn about their struggles, too. Because if we understand their imperfections, we'll better understand a customer's imperfections. That is a total shift of what a lot of us have grown up with. I had to get over all of that – you have to get over the paradigm you grew up with, and once you do, it's awesome. It's totally liberating.

Editor's Note: Learn more about disclosing an MS diagnosis at work on the [Society website](#).