



Fostering Respectful Relationships in the Workplace

Disability Awareness

Now, more than ever people are realizing the importance of respecting the individuality of all people who work for you or with you. The work environment, including offices, cubicles, work stations, conference rooms, elevators, the cafeteria, the courtyard, and washrooms, are places to model, learn and teach disability awareness and etiquette. When we model respect in everyday interactions, employers, and employees see this and learn to value and admire all people for who they are and what they contribute to the job and the company.

The messages that leaders and co-workers convey play an important role in how everyone reacts. The fast pace of today's society, including the media and social networking, bombards everyone with multiple messages. All employers and employees have the potential to model pro-active disability awareness messages for other employees and each other.

Establishing respectful and trusting relationships is fundamental to achieving an appropriate workplace environment for all. People without the experience of living or working with a person with a disability, may not have a frame of reference and may find it awkward or uncomfortable being with a person with disabilities, special health care needs, or who needs accommodations. As an employer and co-worker, creating equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities or chronic health care needs based on respect and understanding is an essential ingredient for their success.

Guiding Principles: Showing Respect and Building Trust

Be Prepared: Prepare for an upcoming project or assignment. If there will be a person with a disability or chronic health care need working for you or with you, prior to the first day of the project or assignment, arrange to meet with the person and their advocate or aide, as appropriate. The discussion should include the person's needs based on the disability, health care, and medical routines, and any accommodations required. Throughout the project or assignment, do the same when a new person with a disability or chronic health care need comes on board.

Maintain Confidentiality: Individuals with disabilities need to be assured that information will only be discussed in appropriate settings with the people who need the information and shared only as necessary.

Acknowledge the Disability: Do not act as if a disability does not exist. Ask clarifying questions. Do whatever you can to limit a person's feelings of isolation and stigma. Treat the person with respect and dignity and expect that others do the same. Define needed support based on the disability but omit the diagnosis (unless absolutely necessary) or "label."

Ask Questions with Sensitivity: Ask only those questions that lead to a greater understanding of the person and the issues related to the disability. Provide assurances to the person that limitations due to the disability are not misunderstood. Listen carefully to statements about medical needs and continue to respect and address stated needs as these arise.

Use "Person First" Language: Language is a powerful tool. Identity is a person's name, not his or her disability. For example, do not identify a person as "the diabetic." Instead, as necessary, refer to the person as "a worker with diabetes." A person's disability does not identify who she is, what she can do, and what she needs. Using "person first" language is a subtle but powerful way to shift the

focus from the disability to the employee. Speak about the person first, not the disability or barriers. Place the focus on abilities and achievements.

Use Positive Language: Avoid negative and limiting terms such as “handicapped bathroom” or “confined to a wheelchair.” Use enabling and empowering language, such as “accessible bathroom” and “the person uses a wheelchair.” Set the tone in the workplace and convey a positive message about the acceptance and treatment of employees with disabilities.

Clarify Expectations: Ensure that an employee with a disability is aware of the expectations of the job, including required tasks and responsibilities. Work with the person to provide appropriate consideration to any modifications and accommodations as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Provide Adequate Personal Space: Individuals with disabilities who use medical equipment or devices should be given the same personal space as those without disabilities. Mobility or medical equipment are part of the personal body space of the individual who uses it. Respect the need for personal space. Be respectful of a person’s privacy. Expect this of all who interact daily with the employee.

Respect Decisions: How much and when to disclose a disability is up to the person and should be respected by all. The employee and employer should decide how peer awareness and involvement might enhance or detract from the person’s success in the work environment.

Be Aware of Multiple Service Systems: Individuals with disabilities and their families interact with multiple service systems, professionals and agencies. Navigating these systems, with varying terminologies and requirements, can be overwhelming and confusing. Be aware that each system places numerous and conflicting requests and demands upon individuals, multiplying stress levels and anxieties. Keep this in mind when placing expectations on an employee and those that provide support.

Seek Out Proper Medical Advice: Individuals with disabilities and chronic health care needs often have complex medical issues. Assume that specific regimens have been implemented for good reason. Offering your own advice, while well intentioned, can add undue stress and feelings of being misunderstood. Ask questions and enlist the help of trained professionals when medical issues arise.

Offer Objective Observations: Be conscious of what is happening to a person during the entire work day. Communication with on-site medical staff, other professionals, family members, and advocates leads to better care and prevention of complications that could jeopardize completion of the work and alter a person’s employment goals.

Additional Resources

United Spinal Association, 60th Anniversary Special Edition, "Disability Etiquette" Tips On Interacting With People With Disabilities, by Judy Cohen, illustrations by Yvette Silver. www.unitedspinal.org

From University of Northern Iowa: Disability Etiquette
<http://www.uni.edu/equity/DisabilityEtiquette.shtml>