

Creating an Inclusive Workplace for Individuals with Disabilities, Diagnoses and Differences

By Kristine R. Lonsway, Ph.D. and Brian R. King, LCSW

U.S. organizations will soon be more accountable for establishing inclusive workplace environments for individuals with disabilities when the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) becomes effective (January 1, 2009), allowing for millions of more Americans to be covered by the law. An inclusive workplace is not just required for individuals with disabilities, it is good for all employees, and it is good for the organization.

As Walgreens discovered in their Anderson, South Carolina, distribution center, (where 37% of the employees have a physical or cognitive disability such as autism or mental retardation), hiring, accommodating and holding individuals with disabilities to the same work standards as individuals without disabilities had a positive impact on employees without disabilities and on the bottom line. The overall morale and teamwork at this distribution center is greater than at other distribution centers in Walgreens. Employees help each other out and derive unprecedented levels of job satisfaction from their workplace and coworkers. This distribution center reports occasional top productivity performance, consistently equal turnover rates, and lower absenteeism among individuals with disabilities. Walgreens also found a smaller number of safety incidents and lower costs associated with safety incidents that involved a worker with a disability. Observers of this phenomenon suggest that it is perhaps the greater loyalty, positive attitude, focus on the job, and lower desire for “water cooler time” among the Walgreens employees with disabilities that account for their high productivity and engagement.

It is apparent from Walgreens’ success story that creating an inclusive workplace environment is one of the keys to optimizing performance of individuals with disabilities. These practices can also unlock the potential of employees with undisclosed challenges, such as ADD, ADHD, learning disabilities, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and social anxiety, that may impede one’s ability to communicate, concentrate, read, or think effectively in the job under certain conditions. In fact, who doesn’t have challenges that could be better alleviated to make them more effective in the workplace?

What does an inclusive environment look like?

Wouldn’t it be great to work in a place where *all* employees are utilized and recognized for their strengths, provided accommodations for their challenges, and are well respected, and where employees work collaboratively with coworkers -- or independently if desired -- towards a common purpose while being accepted for who they are? An inclusive workplace helps employees move beyond labels of disabilities, diagnoses and other dimensions of diversity to focus on each individual’s strengths, needs and challenges to achieve individual and organizational goals.

What do you do to create an inclusive environment?

Desirable workplace environments do not create themselves. Management, with the support of Human Resource professionals and other experts, must take specific actions to create a desirable culture that provides support for, and leverage talents of, individuals with disabilities and other differences in order to optimize employee engagement and performance. Below is a glimpse of specific steps to create an inclusive environment:

- ***Set Clear and High Expectations.*** All individuals have a propensity to perform to a level that is expected of them, which is why “self-fulfilling prophecy” is so prevalent. Individuals with disabilities and other challenges are no different if given the appropriate accommodations.

- *Put Everyone on Common Ground.* Everyone has strengths and challenges, including those with and without disabilities. This must be recognized publicly to level-set the playing field so that accommodations and supports are provided to all employees, as appropriate, to foster perceptions of fairness, mutual respect, and teamwork.
- *Teach Self-awareness.* Since everyone has strengths and challenges, often the most self-defeating challenge is merely one that an employee doesn't understand or recognize. Under what conditions do employees work best, and how might those optimal conditions vary for each employee? Managers and coworkers can coach unenlightened employees by saying things like, "I notice you really work well under these circumstances," or "When people speak to you in this way, I noticed it doesn't seem to work for you."
- *Promote Self-disclosure.* Make it OK to disclose one's passions, strengths and challenges in the workplace. High performance and job satisfaction are most likely when an employee is performing a job that matches his/her abilities and passion. Similarly, if management and coworkers are not informed of an employee's challenges, opportunities for simple fixes may be missed that could mitigate those challenges. It is critical for management to role model self-disclosure by disclosing their own challenges and how they met their these head-on in the workplace. When Michael Phelps won eight Olympic gold medals, he was recognized in the media for his record setting achievement *and* the strengths and challenges that came with his ADHD, such as his amazing ability to hyperfocus on swimming, although he initially struggled to get his face wet as late as the age of seven.
- *Encourage Self-advocacy.* Encourage and expect people to ask for help when they need it. This minimizes anxiety and wasted time for the employee who struggles to accomplish a task that he/she is not equipped to handle. Then, acknowledge the value of when someone speaks up for him/herself, such as "I really appreciate you speaking up and letting me know my comment was hurtful so that I can learn to be more sensitive."
- *Assign Jobs to Leverage Strengths.* Place individuals in jobs where they will be successful and where their strengths meet essential requirements of the job. The very traits that may hold an employee back in one job may be an asset in the right job. For instance, an employee who lacks social and communication skills and dislikes social engagement may excel in an individual contributor role, while being more productive due to spending less social time with coworkers.
- *Recognize Desirable Behavior.* Publicly recognize employees who demonstrate the above behaviors to reinforce what is expected of all employees. Setting expectations of behavior, practices and performance is the first step. Ongoing reinforcement is critical to sustaining desirable culture change.

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