



CONNECTIONS

Communicating in Culturally Diverse Settings



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Working with Persons with Disabilities

According to the 2000 Census, about 49.7 million Americans live with some form of disability that impairs a major life function (about 19.3% of the population). Over 20 million American families have at least one member with a disability. This includes sensory disabilities involving sight and hearing, as well as physical, mental and emotional conditions. Because of this, coming into contact with someone who has a disability is more likely today than ever be-

fore. This can make some of us feel uncomfortable or awkward because we don't always know what to say or how to behave. To get off on the right foot and improve your communication effectiveness, keep a few things in mind:

1. Work to dispel the "myths" that many of us have about persons with disabilities. For example, one myth is that such persons are unable to lead normal lives. Another myth is that persons with

disabilities can only perform menial tasks and entry level jobs. Yet another myth is that employees with disabilities create safety risks, increase costs and are less productive. Myths such as these have led to significant employment discrimination. That was the primary reason for the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The fact is, persons with disabilities are successfully employed at all levels in virtually every field. A review of numerous studies

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shows persons with disabilities have better safety records than other employees, are equally productive and do not generally cause increases in health care costs. The managers of employees with disabilities

report that they are no harder to work with than other employees and often rate them as harder workers who are more reliable and punctual. Therefore, you should never assume that a person who is chal-

lenged in some way is unable to perform up to the level of other individuals.

2. When interacting with persons with disabilities, the most important thing to do is to be yourself. Do not feel like you must act

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in any particular way to make the person comfortable. Also, don't let the fact that the person has a disability prevent you from interacting with them. Most persons with disabilities want to be treated like anyone else. Not like they have a handicap that prevents them from being a "normal" person.

3. Never treat a person with a disability like a child or a "cripple". Don't hover over them as if you are waiting for something to happen (e.g., for the person to fall). Most people will find this very annoying, and it is usually unnecessary. While this sounds obvious, many of us unconsciously behave in a patronizing manner out of a sincere desire to be helpful and supportive. While our intentions may be honorable, we must be aware of how our behaviors may be perceived by a person with a disability.

4. When it appears that a physically challenged person needs help, offer your assistance but don't insist. Simply ask, "*How can I*

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help?" The person will appreciate your willingness to assist, but allow him or her to make independent decisions. If the person requests your assistance, do what you can to help.

5. If a person with a physical disability does fall, don't panic. Wait for a cue from the person (unless he/she is seriously injured, in which case you must act). He or she will often be capable of getting up without assistance and may prefer to do so. Once again, let the person make an independent decision about how (if at all) you may assist.

Recent Publications

Connecting Training to Performance - An article published in the 2006 Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer HRD Annual.

How to Get the Most Out of Your Meetings - An article published in the 2006 Training and Development Sourcebooks by the American Society for Training and Development.

Five Steps to Create a Climate for Diversity
An article published in the 2006 Training and Development Sourcebooks by the American Society for Training and Development.

