Building a Disability-Inclusive Culture: Managers Make All the Difference

Introduction

Buy-in from managers is crucial for building a disability-inclusive workplace culture. One way to build this support is through diversity training, which helps develop and maintain an organization-wide commitment to inclusion. Research indicates that diversity training helps meet organizational goals, such as:¹

- **Changing** behavior toward members of disadvantaged groups.
- **Complying** with legal regulations and ethical standards.
- **Creating** a more cohesive organization.

In order to create a disability-inclusive workforce, organizational leaders, including C-suite leaders and diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility (DEIA) leaders, must provide accurate information about the organization’s commitment to inclusion to all employees. This information enables employees to understand this commitment and effectively implement disability-related policies and practices. Managers are especially important, as they often set expectations for their employees. This Research to Practice Tool examines available research on how organizations can prepare and support managers as they lead teams that include people with disabilities.

Training Managers to Support Inclusion

Manager training is an important part of building an inclusive workplace culture that welcomes employees with disabilities. This training helps ensure the successful hiring, onboarding, and retention of disabled employees. Research provides some insight into elements of manager training that help support the success of employees with disabilities, including:²

- **Knowledge** of disability and its impact on work and the organizational commitment to inclusion of people with disabilities.
- **Understanding** of disability-related organizational policies and procedures and how to implement them.
- **Self-awareness** to adapt management style to meet the needs of individual employees.
Knowledge of Disability

Accurate information about people with disabilities is the foundation of effective manager training on disability inclusion. Managers, including disabled managers, must understand some key concepts about disability. According to Dr. Theresa Haskins, a professor and expert on employment for neurodivergent employees, this conceptual information helps managers understand how having a disability may affect an employee at work. This type of training addresses many assumptions and misconceptions about disabled workers and can alleviate common concerns managers may have. This training also helps managers create a new understanding of disability that they can apply to their everyday behavior.

Disability inclusion training for managers should:

- Address assumptions about people with disabilities. Low expectations of disabled employees present very real barriers to success in the workplace. Training should teach managers to avoid making assumptions about the skills and abilities of employees with disabilities.
- Offer tips on interacting with people with different types of disabilities to ensure that any uncertainty about interacting or working with disabled people does not get in the way of building and maintaining strong working relationships.
- Provide a basic understanding of the rights of people with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the responsibilities employers have under the law, including the provision of reasonable accommodations. If an employer is a federal contractor, the organization should share information about the organization’s Affirmative Action and Non-Discrimination obligations under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act with managers. This knowledge helps ensure equal opportunity at work is available to all candidates and employees.
- Reinforce the knowledge that anyone can have a disability, including managers and organizational leaders.

Applying Organizational Policies and Practices

Knowledge of organizational policies and practices should build on the foundation laid during the general disability inclusion training. This information helps managers recognize when and how to respond to specific workplace situations that involve workers with disabilities. It should explain how company policies, processes, and practices support employees with disabilities.

Research indicates that a combination of training sessions and practical, on-demand tools contribute to the successful implementation of this knowledge. This type of training ensures that managers understand why these procedures are important and why it is necessary to have practical tools to help support implementation. These tools may come in many forms, but they should include information on:

- The policy or practice and its purpose.
- What it helps the organization achieve.
- The process or the steps involved in implementing the policy.
- Where to go for help or support should it be required.
These tools should be easy for managers to read and use and link to additional resources. Suggested resources and techniques to support managers as they apply disability-related policies and practices include:

- **Creating an easy-to-use online resource or intranet to access tools to support implementation of disability-related policies and procedures.** Include job aids to support managers in a variety of situations, such as what they can and cannot ask during an interview, and how to respond to a reasonable accommodation request, among others.

- **Teaching managers how to respond when a candidate or employee discloses a disability, including what actions they should take in response.** If an organization is a federal contractor, managers should receive training on the contractor’s obligation to invite its employees and applicants to self-identify as a person with a disability. Clearly communicate the availability of reasonable accommodations to all employees. Define the reasonable accommodation process within the organization so that managers understand which staff members help ensure employees with disabilities receive any needed accommodations and how the organization implements the interactive process.

- **Reviewing the process to address training and the performance management needs of all employees,** including workers with disabilities.

### Adaptive Management Skills

Effective management requires “people skills.” Managers have to adapt to each of their employees’ learning styles and support needs on a regular basis. A manager’s communication style, leadership style, and ability to provide support on a day-to-day basis impacts the success of their employees. A manager’s metacognitive skills, or self-awareness, helps ensure they can evaluate the needs of their employees and adjust their behavior to provide appropriate support. To be successful, organizations must ensure that they have good people managers who work to empower employees and teams to maximize the potential of individual employees. Good people managers have integrity, communicate clearly, are conscientious, and empower their employees.

Organizational support for the development of adaptive management skills could include:

- **Providing training on effective management practices to all managers.** Clear communication, expectation setting, and well-defined workplace structures are good for all employees. For some neurodivergent employees, for example, this stable foundation helps to ensure success at work.

- **Asking managers to confirm communication preferences** (e.g., discussion, email, email with follow-up discussion) with their employees to ensure that critical information is not lost.

- **Allowing managers to learn from each other by documenting best practices** used throughout the organization and create forums where managers can seek and offer support.

- **Providing training on alternative approaches to communication and management styles** to allow managers to consider how these might work for them when a challenging situation arises.

- **Offering instruction and support for managers to coach employees with disabilities** to ensure all employees have access to the day-to-day support they need to be successful. When done well, coaching from a manager increases employee confidence, improves communication, and enhances teamwork.
**Conclusion**

Managers play a critical role in the success of their employees as they determine much of the support that is available to their employees. Concerted efforts to train managers on disability-inclusion will help ensure that your organization can successfully recruit, hire, retain, and advance employees with disabilities.

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**Endnotes**


9 Hillier et al., 2007.


