Words are powerful. Even with the best of intentions, we may say something that is unhelpful or even hurtful to a person in our workplace who has a disability. Or, afraid of saying the wrong thing, we might stay silent. Rather than focusing on a coworker’s abilities, it’s important to establish connections and engage without pity, judgment, or apprehension to foster a sense of belonging and create a more inclusive workplace.

**WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD**

**NOTHING. COWORKERS WITH DISABILITIES MAY OR MAY NOT CHOOSE TO SHARE THEIR DISABILITY.**

**WHAT PEOPLE SAY**

“You don’t look disabled.”

**HOW IT’S UNAWARE**

Although some disabilities may be apparent, such as using a wheelchair or a cane, many disabilities are less visible. These may include physical, neurological, and mental health conditions that limit someone’s activities, senses, or cognitive processes. Some people may have both visible and non-apparent disabilities.

**WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD**

“What can I help you with anything?”

**WHAT PEOPLE SAY**

“Here, let me do that for you.”

**HOW IT’S PRESUMPTUOUS**

People adapt differently to living with a disability. The best way to find out whether help is wanted or needed is to offer support, rather than give it without asking. Listen for and carefully follow the type of help requested. Accept an answer that no help is needed as a positive interaction.

**WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD**

“Can I help you with anything?”

A variety of factors will impact whether someone with a disability wants assistance. Politely offering and asking how you could be most helpful before acting demonstrates respect. Be sensitive to personal boundaries by not touching assistive devices such as a wheelchair or cane without being asked to. It is also important not to interact with working service animals, as they are focused on the needs of their owner and should not be distracted.

Ensure that all your team members know about workplace confidentiality regarding requests for accommodations and self-identifying as a person with a disability. Meeting the needs of all employees enables a strong team dynamic, shows a commitment to inclusion, and helps everyone feel that their contributions are valued.
It's likely that you or someone you know has had or will experience a mental health condition during their lifetime. Make an effort to understand how common these conditions are, how they impact people, and how your empathy can make a difference.

Avoiding a colleague with a disability makes them feel invisible. It is better to inadvertently say something that is inaccurate or uninformed than to say nothing at all. This allows coworkers with disabilities the opportunity, if desired, to communicate what information they are comfortable sharing and/or what terms they prefer.

When accommodations such as flexible work arrangements or standing/sitting desks are used with people who do not have a disability, we do not call them “special treatment.” They are simply how we make work work. A tool or norm that is useful for employees with disabilities is often also valued by others (e.g., automatic door openers, ramps, and meeting captioning).
WHAT PEOPLE SAY
“HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MIGHT BE TOO EXPENSIVE AND IMPACT OUR PRODUCTIVITY.”

HOW IT’S NARROW
In many countries, there are legal protections against discrimination toward people with disabilities. In addition, managers who avoid hiring people with disabilities are missing out on drawing from a rich and underutilized talent pool.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD
“INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS.”

Research has found that, in most cases, there is little or no difference between the productivity of employees with disabilities and those without. You probably already have many people with disabilities in your workforce.

FLIP THE SCRIPT

BE RESPECTFUL
Respect individuals and their privacy. Ask and listen before assisting.

FOCUS ON TALENT
Identify and amplify what each individual has to offer to an inclusive workplace.

PAY ATTENTION
Be aware of your assumptions and language choices, as well as those of others.

KEEP A GROWTH MINDSET
Remain open to understanding and affirming people’s experiences and perspectives.

SOURCES

Flip the Script: Disabilities in the Workplace was created in collaboration with Deborah Daght, President, Deb Daght Diversity LLC.

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