

DIVERSITY & SAMENESS

The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities has been developed as both a “diversity” and “sameness” training tool. Its goal is to make us more sensitive and respectful of people with varying disabilities, while recognizing that all of us (no matter how different we may appear to each other at first) share many of the same values, interests, hopes and dreams.

In the workplace, it is these commonalities that often serve as the first bridges between employees with disabilities and their co-workers. Building on this inherent “sameness” results in stronger working relationships and contributes to the kind of team work organizations need to achieve their larger goals.

Sameness training is about instilling principles of conduct that are the same for everyone, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or disability. And it’s about building strategies of support to help people overcome barriers arising from perceived differences.

With the passage of the **Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)**, this kind of training has become more important than ever, as thousands of employers have made the commitment to hire people with disabilities. Though many companies have discovered this decision has been a good one for their bottom line, thousands of others have yet to learn the valuable lessons of diversifying their workforce.

Many employers have unfounded fears about the efficiency of workers with disabilities. Studies show, however, that workers with disabilities rate just as high in job performance and on-the-job safety as those without disabilities. Others fear the cost of workplace accommodations, though many can be made for free, and research has confirmed the majority cost \$500 or less.

Still, the **54 million Americans with disabilities** remain among the most overlooked of all minorities now guaranteed equal employment opportunities by law. They are the single largest untapped pool of employable persons in the nation, with the highest unemployment rate of any major demographic group of working-age Americans. Although two-thirds seek jobs, only one-third have been able to find even part-time employment.

Today, American needs diversity in the workplace. First, because it is right and just, and second, because it is economically sound. In an era of predicted labor shortages and increasing global competition, this country cannot afford to ignore the skills and talents of any segment of qualified workers.

Now is the time to renew our commitment to include people with disabilities into the diverse mix that is -the American workforce, and to affirm once and for all their right to the same opportunities as all other Americans.

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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- I** Speak directly rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- II** Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
- III** Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate.
- IV** If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen or ask for instructions.
- V** Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- VI** Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a work animal from their job without the owner's permission.
- VII** Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- VIII** Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.
- IX** Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.
 - If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice.
 - Never shout at a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.
- X** **Relax.** Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.

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OUR MISSION: to assist people with disabilities to live, work and socialize within a fully accessible community.

OUR VISION: We believe in and support equitable and inclusive communities for people living with disabilities.