

# How to Communicate With Coworkers With Disabilities

By Eric Hinton

The corporate office can be filled with potential landmines. For example: You meet up with your new coworker, who is in a wheelchair, in the company hallway. Up until this point, you've only had a chance for some limited small talk, but as far as you can tell, you've hit it off well. As you proceed along the hall with some office chit-chat, you notice the corridor begins to slope upward. Noticing your colleague is now having slight difficulty moving the wheelchair up the incline, you think nothing of it as you take hold of the chair from behind and gently guide it toward the end of the hallway.

## **Good Deed, Right?**

Wrong. Instead of gratitude, your new colleague looks at you with an unexpected mixture of anger and resentment. As you come to the end of the hall, he rolls away without as much as a word. The incident leaves you befuddled and a little angry. Where was the disconnect?

"Some people are going to want you to assist them if they're in a wheelchair, and others aren't," says Michael Takemura, director of the Hewlett-Packard Accessibility Program Office. Hewlett-Packard (HP) is No. 3 on the DiversityInc Top 10 Companies for People With Disabilities list. "I'm very sensitive to the fact that if you're a person in a wheelchair, then that is an extension of that person. So you don't go up and lean on it or automatically start pushing it," says Takemura, who's been using a wheelchair for the past 25 years. "It's the same if you're interacting with a blind person. You don't go up and grab them by the arm and start leading them somewhere. You offer your arm."

The gray area between being supportive and overbearing can be difficult to navigate. According to the 2004 National Organization on Disability/Harris Survey of People with Disabilities, only 35 percent of working-age people with disabilities are employed. But what muddies the issue is that there are no set parameters when it comes to interacting with colleagues with disabilities. What might be perfectly acceptable in one case, such as assisting someone in a wheelchair, might be offensive in another scenario.

"We can't use a cookie-cutter approach and believe everyone with a disability will react the same way," says Takemura. "Each person is an individual and just as you would [act differently toward] two people without a disability, you'll find the disabled have different preferences about their personal space and the way they want to be addressed."

## **Be Open, Be Honest**

It's this uncertainty in terms of how to act, and in some cases what to say, that potentially can lead to disruptions in the workplace. Clear communication between coworkers can mean the difference between a profit and a loss.

W. Roy Grizzard Jr., the first assistant secretary for the Office of Disability Employment Policy, believes open communication must start largely with the worker with the disability. Grizzard has retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative disorder of the retina, and is legally blind. Diagnosed in his mid-20s, Grizzard's vision has been likened to viewing the world through a straw, as those with this disease cannot see above, below or beside them.

"What you want in a work situation is for people to feel comfortable. It's my opinion that the person with the disability needs to be open and upfront about it ... especially if it's a condition that is physical and observable," says Grizzard. "Get it out there and let your colleagues know if you have any special needs at work to put them at ease. Make them comfortable."

For instance, Grizzard, who uses a cane, lets colleagues know upfront that he can read print if it's directly in front of him, "but I have no peripheral vision. So I ask coworkers to let me know if they're in a room when I walk in because it's likely that I won't see them."

Such open and upfront communication may run contrary to that old adage that you don't discuss religion, politics or finances in the workplace. Unsaid, but still present in the spirit of that adage, is that you also don't discuss other personal, potentially hot-button issues in the workplace, such as race, sexual orientation or physical and/or mental disability, for fear of offending a colleague.

Open dialogue is critical to putting all parties at ease, believes Grizzard. For instance, able-bodied employees shouldn't feel their communications must be stifled if they're working with someone who has a disability.

"For example, if you have a blind coworker, you should feel perfectly comfortable if you're at the water cooler talking with colleagues, asking someone if they 'saw' the baseball game last night," says Grizzard. "You should understand with a blind person they can watch that baseball game as well, just in a different way."

### **Sharing Without Intruding**

Born with osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bone disease), Deborah Dagit is slightly more than four feet tall and walks with a cane. But as executive director of Diversity & Work Environment for Merck & Co., No. 9 on the DiversityInc Top 10 Companies for People With Disabilities list, she lectures to corporate executives, serves on the Conference Board Workforce Council on Diversity, and has been instrumental in establishing disability-alongside race, age, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation-as part of the realm of workplace diversity. She believes it's normal for a coworker to be curious about a colleague's disability and says sharing that information could be conducive to a working relationship. But there's a way to inquire without intruding on that coworker's privacy. For instance, it would be completely inappropriate to walk up to a colleague with a disability and ask him how he wound up in a wheelchair, or to ask a visually impaired coworker how long has he been blind or how he lost his sight.

"It's similar to acknowledging a difference in someone because of race, age or any other physical sign that there is something 'different.' You should feel free to acknowledge it, but in an appropriate, respectful way," Dagit says. "If it's simple idle curiosity, then it's inappropriate. But if there's a genuine need to know or part of the exchange of information in the relationship-building process, then it may be OK. In that respect, it may be along the same lines of if I wanted to learn more about someone's heritage."

Dagit, who has compiled a guide to accommodating people with disabilities, says what proves to be particularly irksome for her is when a colleague is acting in an offensive manner without realizing it. For example, Dagit finds it exasperating when a colleague exudes admiration for her solely because she excels despite her physical limitations.

"Such a response makes it seem like the person's life is lesser ... and that they are overcoming an obstacle just by existing," Dagit says. "The truth is, many disabled don't view their disability as a liability any more than another person would view their skin color, age or sexual orientation. It's simply a part of who they are."

Nancy Starnes, vice president and chief of staff for the National Organization on Disabilities (N.O.D.), believes the etiquette on how people with disabilities interact with their coworkers is set early in the relationship-building process.

"Any time there is someone new that is different in some way, there will be discussion," Starnes says. "If that person has a disability, that discussion could be about would this person blend with the team and what will he or she add. Those initial doubts are natural. It can and should be discussed. It's the only way to get beyond what those differences are."

But the first question out of your mouth never should focus on the disability. Instead, offers Starnes, take time to get to know your colleague.

Michael Takemura, director of the Hewlett-Packard Accessibility Program Office, lost the use of his legs when he was 19 following an automobile accident. "I didn't know anyone with a major disability prior to my accident," says Takemura. "I remember seeing a young man in a wheelchair at my church doing wheelies down a hill and thinking, 'Hey, that's kinda cool,' but I had never talked to him. And if I recall, I think I might have even been a little bit nervous talking with someone with a disability. I can remember when I first took on the responsibility of the accessibility program and began to engage with people who were profoundly deaf or blind on an ongoing basis. There were things I needed to learn in terms of being sensitive and understanding that no two people are going to be the same."

As director of the Hewlett-Packard Accessibility Program Office, Takemura is responsible for developing HP's overall accessibility strategy. His office guides corporatewide accessibility in product design, engineering, product development, documentation, Web services, support and programs for people with disabilities. He's also involved in a Web-based training program that instructs all HP employees on how to interact with their colleagues with disabilities.

"The first thing is to be sensitive to the fact that most people are not raised [by] and don't have a close relationship with someone with a significant profound disability," he says. "And if they do, then maybe it's not on an ongoing basis, so perhaps they're not really sure how to engage with that person." Or, says Takemura, perhaps the one person they have engaged with was someone receptive to assistance, whereas another person with a disability might find the mere offer of assistance offensive.

### **Non-Visible Disabilities**

It's easy enough to know to adapt your office behavior if one of your colleagues has a visible physical disability, but there are many who may have disabilities that aren't physical or apparent in nature, such as those suffering from auditory ailments or mental disabilities. Not surprisingly, the rules are very much the same—treat those colleagues with courtesy in respect to their disability.

For example, when working with the hearing impaired, Dagit says much of it boils down to simple common sense. "Just understand different people will rely on different things depending on what works best for them. For someone that relies on lip reading, it makes a world of difference if they can see your lips moving," she says. When working with the hearing impaired, Dagit suggests avoiding behavior like over-enunciating or yelling to them. Also, if that person relies on working with an interpreter, you should direct your conversation at your colleague, not the interpreter. "And if the person cannot rely on spoken speech, today, technology has made it much easier when we can use things like blackberries and text messengers," she says. "There's so much at our disposal that can make communication easier."

When it comes to working with colleagues who have mental illnesses (i.e., psychiatric, learning and developmental disabilities), understanding what specific challenge your colleague is dealing with may be half the battle of successful communication.

"When it comes to issues of mental health, the stigma issues are much greater, and as a result, people are reluctant to disclose that they are struggling with a mental-health issue," says Dagit. "But it's important to maintain a relationship with these workers and provide a supportive work environment because people with mental-health challenges are generally much more productive if they remain employed as opposed to being put on some type of medical leave."

The onus for opening the door on this communication generally lies with the colleague with a disability, largely because he or she will know what special needs or requirements, if any,

they have in the workplace. They also can offer guidance in terms of what type of behavior and language is appropriate.

"It's critical at the very early stages for the person with a disability to have that open-door policy ... to let others know I'm open to talking about this if it doesn't make you uncomfortable," says Takemura. "From my perspective, it's always nice to give that other coworker an out. That's to say, 'Hey, I'd like to talk about this, but if at any time it makes you feel uncomfortable, let me know.' That way, I'm giving that person the opportunity to say 'I'd rather not talk about this.'"

That notion of mutual responsibility is shared by Jim Sinocchi, director of HR communications for IBM, who is a paraplegic.

"It's not solely the able-bodied person's responsibility to make this process work. It's also the responsibility of the employee with a disability to be patient and attempt to find a way to connect with his fellow employees and get them to relax if he sees there's an initial discomfort.

That interaction will be critical to everyone getting the job done," says Sinocchi. "Obviously, if a person can't overcome their fear, there's only so much you can do. But the idea is to let your employees see you as someone to be counted on in the office and as an expert in your field, not someone to simply be spoken to out of compassion."

### **Corporate Best Practices**

Corporations across the country are attempting to make this process easier for all involved. Beginning this month at JPMorgan Chase, employees can partake in a Web seminar on issues of etiquette, which will include working with colleagues with disabilities.

"Our Web teaching seminar will deal with many issues of etiquette, including working and interacting with physically disabled colleagues," says Joan McGovern, a vice president with JPMorgan Chase, No. 4 on the Top 10 Companies for People with Disabilities list, and director of the organization's Access Ability Resource Center.

"It looks at etiquette from a standpoint of how you interact with people in a wheelchair or people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It walks you through what to do and how to respond in particular situations. We reached out to our disabled work force here at JPMorgan and our external partners to put this together," she says.

Such a course could go a long way to ending some of the unwanted "assistance" that often comes his way, says Grizzard.

"I get grabbed all the time," laughs Grizzard. "It's generally people trying to be helpful, but it's not appropriate to automatically grab a person or see someone with a wheelchair and start pushing them someplace they might not want to go," he says. "It all comes down to common courtesy and communication. You can ask a person with a disability if they need assistance. But don't assume they need it."

Adds Dagit, "We have a long way to go, as evidenced by the high unemployment rate of people with disabilities. And as someone with a disability that is very visible, I can't recall a time when I've gotten through a whole week, or day, for that matter, when it hasn't been a challenge. It's still challenging to be a person with a disability because people will struggle with how to interact and include you. And the more critical the relationship, the greater degree of challenge you're going to face."