



# UNIT-4

## Communication Essentials For Disability Awareness

Staff Training Solutions

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

## Unit 4

# Communication Essentials for Disability Awareness

## Ground Rules to Get Started

When it comes to diversity and disability awareness, we suggest that you call on the absolute best of your communication skills. You also have to call on your ability to read people and take a leadership role. Be confident and speak with authority in your meetings, whether you are meeting with managers about diversity and disability awareness or trying to arrange an accommodation. When you speak with current employees or prospective employees about what you can and cannot do, be truthful and don't exaggerate. If you don't know if something will be possible, say so. This will serve you well in coaching conversations around disabilities and accommodations.

When arranging for or assisting with accommodations, there are things that people need to know. For example, the employee needs to know what to expect, to what extent you are able to accommodate them, and if you can't, why not. A manager who is hiring an employee with disabilities, or accommodating an existing employee, also needs to know exactly what to expect of the disabled employee and the company (for example, support and resources available and who to turn to for questions). If there is a physician or other health care providers involved, they may be providing you with information on functional abilities and limitations so that you can properly plan the work environment.

As you work through this process, we recommend that you use tools that demonstrate your knowledge of the work you are doing, and your understanding of the role you have. For the human resources consultant involved in these situations, this may include booklets and fact sheets for employees, letters and questionnaires to treatment providers, e-mails with return to work or hiring plans for managers, and more.

There are some companies where all accommodation efforts are managed by one person who is a coordinator for all required areas. Other companies have other approaches. If you live in a region where all of this is new, there can be a range of possibilities.

## Respecting Confidentiality

Although we are within a business context, and as workplace leaders we understand confidentiality, sometimes our employees do not. It is of critical importance that when we speak to an employee, or a prospective employee, about their medical status they understand the limits of confidentiality in certain circumstances. We will tell their supervisors only limited information, such as return to work or start dates and ability levels or limitations for work. We will not (and must not) disclose condition names, symptoms, medications, or physician's names.

That being said, of course, in some cases it will assist the employee if the supervisor has a better idea what is going on. In any case, we must obtain signed consent from the employee to even discuss the situation with the supervisor. Advise the employee that it may help the supervisor to know what is going

on. If the employee is comfortable, they could share more details with their supervisor than you are going to.

You'll find that employees who have serious or life threatening illness (e.g., cancer, heart disease, etc.) will have already told their supervisor. This is not the case with mental health conditions, where employees may prefer to simply say that they are feeling unwell. It's not always in the employee's best interest to disclose their mental health issues due to stigma in the workplace and a lack of understanding in society when it comes to mental health issues. These types of issues in particular need to be handled carefully.

If you are in a role where you are not ready or able to manage these types of situations, you can get help from your human resources consultant. Consider contracting out disability management or case management services to a vocational rehabilitation consultant.

No matter which route you choose, you will need to ensure that the work that you do with people with disabilities is done with the individual's consent and cooperation. You will need to create a consent form that you can have the employee sign and share with caregivers that are involved with the work plan. We have provided a sample below.

**Sample Consent Form for Release and Exchange of Information**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of employee or prospective employee) authorize and permit  
\_\_\_\_\_ (name of physician or treatment provider)

-and-

Diversity (or HR) Consultant

ABC Company

City, State

to exchange medical information relevant to managing my work plan / absence from work / return to work plans, and providing rehabilitation and other services relating to my work plan including modified, graduated, or accommodation opportunities.

I agree that a photocopy or facsimile of this authorization is as valid as the original. This consent shall be valid for six (6) months from the date of signing.

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Preparing Documentation

### Asking the Right Questions

When you are asked by an employee for an accommodation, you need access to good information in order to make good decisions. This will start with information from the individual themselves. You will often need corroboration, explanation, or additional support from caregivers involved. Information may be sought from physicians, psychologists, physiotherapists, or occupational therapists.

As a general rule, we recommend that you seek support from the family physician but do not ask for specific ability levels unless they have a way to measure them. You'll need information that explains the functional abilities of the individual. This is a specific focus of occupational therapists and physiotherapists (for physical conditions), and psychologists, psychiatrists, rehabilitation specialists, and occupational therapists (for mental health conditions).

In order to create the best possible plan for an individual coming to work with you, or for someone who has been off work following an illness or injury, you need concrete information.

Remember that you need to have the employee's signed consent in order to ask question.

When you begin preparing a work plan, make sure that you provide a copy of the job description and the physical demands of the job to any caregivers you will work with. (Sometimes a job title will lead people to assume certain job duties are required. You need to ensure that they are working with accurate information.)

You should also keep your questions simple so that your correspondence is returned quickly. A simple summary of the demands of the job in categories such as the ones below is easy for practitioners to complete.

<b>Sample Work Plan Information Request</b>	
<b>Please place a checkmark next to the appropriate work placement.</b>	
	<p><b>Interim Work Placement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sedentary activity (i.e., mainly sitting)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No requirements to lift, carry, or climb</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Light Duties</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing and/or sitting as required</li> <li>• Walking or moving from one task area to another</li> <li>• Limited lifting, pushing, pulling (no more than 10 kg/22 lbs.)</li> <li>• Limited carrying (no greater than 5 kg/10 lbs.)</li> <li>• No climbing</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Medium Duties</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing, walking, sitting as required</li> <li>• Limited lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling (no more than 15 kg/33 lbs.)</li> <li>• Limited climbing</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Regular Duties</b> (no restrictions)</p>
<p><b>List any restrictions not captured above:</b></p>	

<b>Are restrictions and limitations temporary or permanent?</b>
<b>Indicate the anticipated duration at the level indicated above by writing in a date or number of weeks below:</b>
<b>Name:</b>
<b>Signature:</b>
<b>Date:</b>

### **Sending the Right Message**

When you prepare documentation for care providers, make sure that they see you are serious and professional. Sending documentation that has been photocopied or faxed until it is of poor quality doesn't endear you or your cause. Also, if you have an abilities style of form that the doctor fills out, remember that quality of your form says something about your organization.

In many regions, note that the employer is responsible for any charges a care provider invoices for answering your letters or completing forms. Do not expect that your employees or potential employees will pay for medical information.

## **Communication Styles**

### **Dichotomies in Theory**

Differences among groups of people can be identified by marked preferences among pairs of opposites like those in the following list. We will call these pairs of words "dichotomies." Some examples:

- Cooperative and Competitive
- Assertive and Passive

- Direct and Indirect
- Individualistic and Team-oriented
- Optimistic and Pessimistic

### Test Your Knowledge

What are the advantages of the direct mode of communication?

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What are the disadvantages of the direct mode of communication?

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What are the advantages of the indirect mode of communication?

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What are the disadvantages of the indirect mode of communication?

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### Dichotomies in Action

- abstract - concrete
- accommodating - competing
- active - passive
- animated - lethargic
- arrogant - humble
- assertive - meek

- attached - detached
- big picture – details
- decisive - indecisive
- deep - shallow
- direct - indirect
- factual - intuitive
- formal - informal
- harmonious - disruptive
- hesitant - impulsive
- individualistic - team oriented
- listening - talking
- objective - subjective
- optimistic - pessimistic
- organized - chaotic
- patient - impatient
- personal - impersonal
- playful - serious
- realistic - idealistic
- reflective - impulsive
- simple - complex
- structured - flexible
- taking turns - interrupting
- tense - relaxed
- yes, and - yes, but

## Critical Conversations

### Introductory Elements

If you're daunted by the idea of conversations with disabled people, or about people with disabilities, we've got some help for you. This is a coaching methodology that is effective for all kinds of interactions, even beyond diversity conversations.

#### **Remember that you are speaking with and about people.**

Try not to be intimidated. We're all human beings with the same kind of needs and wants.

#### **Focus on the immediate future.**

We do not need all the details of their past; we just need to know where we are going (back to work in some way or another). We don't need to know why they stayed working under that same miserable boss for 5 years. We need to know what they are willing to do next.

**When you ask, prepare to listen.**

It is much easier to focus on the close things and those that are negative. They are a part of our story, which we often love to share. Instead, focus on the future, pay full attention to what they say, and reflect back accordingly.

**Suspend opinions and judgments.**

This is about them, not you. You will have opinions, but coaching is not about giving them your opinion. Sometimes they will ask for it and you need to turn the statement back to them. Use questions like, “What do you think that you ought to do?” or “What is best for you?”

**When they get stuck, be honest.**

This is you reflecting back some reality if they get stuck in the past, on negativity, or in a fear based reaction. Listen for cues like “I can’t ever,” “At my age,” or “With my problems.” Tell them what you can and cannot do and what the impact of them not participating fully in their recovery and return to work will be.

**Do not ask what you already know.**

If you’ve spoken with someone before, or you’ve received information, don’t ask again about it unless it is pertinent at that time. People do not appreciate you wasting their time. If they know you are asking something that you should already know (perhaps the doctor wrote the surgery dates and details on the attending physician’s statement, for example), you will jeopardize the rapport you are trying to build.

**Getting the Conversation Started**

For those of you not familiar with putting a focus on diversity in your workplace, or who are new at arranging accommodations, we’re going to do a little work on starting those conversations. Naturally, the contents of any greeting you make will vary with the terms and nuances of your program, including union agreements.

The conversation outlined here is an ideal one that you can modify to fit your situation. This is set to take place in an initial phone call to someone who has been away from work for a while, but you can modify it to suit your needs. Consider how you might change it to prepare to accommodate an existing employee or someone who is considering coming to work with you.

**Basic Script**

- Hi, my name is Darryl, and I am calling you from HR with ABC Company. In addition to being your human resources consultant, I also help employees who are off work due to an extended illness or injury by coordinating return to work plans. I have received a note/form from your doctor and need to speak with you. I want to assure you that anything that we discuss is confidential, and not shared with your work area without your express permission. Is this a good time to talk, or do you need me to call back at another time?

- (Assuming this is a good time, proceed. If it isn't, arrange a time to call back.)
- Thank you very much. Part of my role is to also help you to return to work when you are able to do so. Anything that you say to me is confidential, and so although it may seem that I am asking you some personal questions, I need to do that in order to get a good idea of how to help you come back to work successfully, and to get an idea of where you are at in your treatment.

**If the absence is a result of a mental health issue:**

- Your doctor has said that after your hospitalization you needed a few months to recover and continue with daily treatment. He has also said that now that you are feeling stronger, the two of you have determined that a gradual return to work would be helpful.
- I can speak with your supervisor in order to set up a schedule that will offer you some flexibility initially if you need it, and gradually increase your hours over a four week period. How does that sound to you?

**If the absence is a result of physical disability issue:**

- I understand that you are still having some problems with maneuvering in your wheelchair, but you are getting stronger with it. I wanted to let you know that we have installed a new door in the main entry, so it'll be easier for you to get into the office. We're planning a pizza lunch next Friday, and I was wondering if you could join us for the lunch. That will give you an opportunity to see if the door will be a benefit.
- Great! I am glad to know you will try to come.
- I know that you are still in treatment regularly. Can you tell me how it's going? What does your program consist of these days?

## Taking it One Step Further

After you have used the introduction in the previous section, you are going to need to ask questions about individual function. The purpose is to ascertain what can and cannot be done at work, from the employee's perception. Note that as the employer, you need to be careful not to ask for medical disclosure, although the employee may offer it to you as the conversation unfolds.

Two basic questions that you can ask are:

- What is the nature of your condition right now? Please briefly describe what contributes to your still being away, without telling me the diagnosis.
- Please outline any additional medical concerns that you may have if you believe that they should be considered in assessing this accommodation.

### Treatment Questions

- Who is your primary physician and how often do you see him or her?
- Are there other caregivers involved (psychology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, etc.) that we should contact about your accommodation?

### Functional Abilities

- Do you have trouble taking care of your personal needs such as bathing, dressing, etc.? If so, please explain.
- Do you require assistance from another person to perform such tasks as stair climbing, household chores, using public transportation, or driving a vehicle? If so, please explain.
- Please describe your daily routine since you stopped working.
- Have you been able to continue with any hobbies or participate in any other activities such as sports or clubs?
- What duties of your job would be the most difficult to perform as a result of your medical condition?
- What duties would be the least difficult?

### Education/Employment History

Note that you may already have some form of this in a personnel file. Don't ask questions that you already know the answers to!

- Are you now able to do some part of your regular work? Please discuss.
- What kind of work other than your regular work do you think you would be able to do?
- What job skills and expertise have you acquired in your current and previous jobs?
- What's the highest grade level of school that you have completed? In what year was this?
- Did you attend college or university? If so, what diploma, degree, or studies were completed?
- Have you taken any apprenticeships, trade courses, or other job training programs? If yes, please provide details.
- Please list any trade papers, certifications, and/or licenses held and the year obtained.
- Do you have any questions or comments?

These questions are designed to help you understand the person's situation and to consider what elements of accommodation that you might be able to offer. When you speak of accommodation to someone, make sure that you do not go beyond your authority level. Do not make promises thinking that you will be able to work them out later. Accommodation can be quite a complex process.

## How Do We Make It Happen?

### How Far Do You Go In Accommodation?

As you consider making an accommodation, there are also considerations for your existing staff. In some jurisdictions, the employer is expected to endure some kind of hardship to make an accommodation, as is the employee. One group that can sometimes feel left out of the accommodation process are the existing staff, and they must be considered.

Some things to consider:

- If a 22 year old maintenance worker becomes disabled, and as a result can no longer do their job as a maintenance worker, could they be accommodated as a safety officer? What do you do?
- Will you change your answer if you know that the position is highly sought after and most of the maintenance staff hope to do a stint as safety officer before they retire? If the disabled individual is placed in the safety officer position, he could potentially do the job for 30 years, giving the other staff that are much closer to the position in terms of seniority no chance of moving up. This could also have an impact on the group's morale.
- In a small business where there are only three employees and a disabled worker needs many thousands of dollars invested in equipment in order to continue with their work, the costs could put the business in jeopardy. Are there other things that you could suggest, such as fundraising or offering assistance to find something that is a better fit?

Additional considerations for accommodations include:

- Does it seem that the individual can do all or a part of their job?
- Can they remain in their current position but trade some tasks away? Job bundling would mean that you gather tasks from other people that this individual could do (without leaving all the heavy, unwanted, or unpleasant task for the other staff).
- Making accommodations is not about creating a perfect job for an individual.

In some jurisdictions, there are limits as to how far an employer has to go to accommodate someone. In Canada this is referred to as a test of "undue hardship." The test is pretty onerous on the employer to get committed and to be creative about making accommodations work. However, the limits also give the employer reasons to restrict their accommodation. For example, they do not have to create a new position nor promote the disabled individual. They do not have to take all the light work and provide it to a disabled worker, which would leave colleagues doing all the heavy work. They do not have to put their business in financial jeopardy to facilitate an accommodation.

If you are not certain about what is required in your jurisdiction, please consult with your human resources department and legal counsel. The law continues to evolve in this area, and it's important that you know what you are doing and that you are up to date with what's going on.

## Value of Job Shadows

If you are not certain how an accommodation will work out, get creative! If you are considering hiring someone who is disabled, trying to work out whether your workplace needs modifications, or you have a returning worker who needs some assurance, set up a job shadow.

Job shadows are usually held over a period of several hours to days. You can have a candidate or employee come into your workplace and test the waters. One very positive result of a job shadow is that the candidate has the opportunity to explore the physical environment and make suggestions for changes that will make things easier. This also allows the disabled person a chance to meet the other

staff and develop relationships. These relationships help to alleviate any concerns, barriers, or fears that staff may have about working with people with disabilities.

Many of these changes are quite inexpensive, and without the experience working with people with disabilities, we may not think of them.

