

7 common misconceptions about disability and accommodations at work

Many people shy away from talking about disability, but it shouldn't be a taboo topic. It's simply a fact of work life for many.

There are lots of misconceptions about disabilities and accommodating direct reports who have them. Once you understand your obligations to your team members with disabilities, you can embrace being more inclusive and leading accommodation conversations that enable everyone to perform better.

Research indicates that organizations that employ workers with disabilities can be more profitable and having people with disabilities on a team can improve the team's productivity.



Misconception 1: I would be able to tell if I had a direct report with a disability.

Disabilities are both more common and less visible than you might think—so make no assumptions. Globally, 1.3 billion people (or 1 in 6) have a disability—a physical or mental condition that limits a major life function, such as walking, seeing, hearing, or communicating. In the US, about 61 million adults (or 1 in 4) have a disability. So, it's likely that the team you lead has at least one member who lives with a disability—whether or not you realize it.

Many disabilities aren't easily seen, including anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, brain injuries, hearing loss, and some autoimmune diseases. Disabilities can be permanent, temporary, or intermittent. And they include conditions people are born with or that occur later in life—possibly due to an illness, an accident, or complications from a medical procedure. So, even if you know someone's disability status at one point, that status could change over time.

Misconception 2: If a direct report needs a disability accommodation, they'll ask for it.

There are lots of reasons why people don't speak up. They might be (understandably) afraid of discrimination or of others thinking they're weak or looking for a handout. Or they might not know that their condition could benefit from an accommodation or what change to ask for.

When team leaders like you talk openly about disabilities and accommodations as part of your effort to build an inclusive team culture, your direct reports will most likely feel more comfortable telling you what they need.

Here's a good way to lay the groundwork to make it easier and safer for people to speak up:

- Ask HR for resources that you can share with your team about general disability and accommodation rights in the workplace and about the process to get an accommodation at your organization.
- In a team meeting, make it clear that you want your direct reports to speak up about accommodations they might need by saying something like, *"I want to support everyone to do their best work."* Then share that your organization offers accommodations and share the HR resources.
- If someone follows up with you about needing an accommodation, refer them to your HR team to start the accommodation process.

Also, in your daily work, listen for mentions of disability or the need for an accommodation, even if your direct reports don't frame it as a formal request. For example:

- *"Since I hit my head, I'm struggling to manage my calendar."*
- *"I've got a bum knee from an old football injury. What would really save my knee is working more at floor level, and not having to climb ladders five times a day."*

Misconception 3: Accommodations are expensive and time-consuming—and they help only a few people.

Some well-intentioned but underresourced leaders worry that making an accommodation will put a big strain on their time and budget for relatively little payoff.

In fact, accommodations tend to be:

- **Low cost:** Employer surveys by the nonprofit Job Accommodation Network show that more than half of workplace accommodations cost nothing (such as turning on closed captioning in video meetings) and the remainder typically cost about \$500 per person. So, you'll likely get more value from your great employee than what your company will spend to accommodate them.
- **Quick to implement:** Many accommodations are essentially one-and-done (for example, purchasing an ergonomic chair or adding a wheelchair ramp to a building entrance). Others need to be revisited periodically (for example, updating screen-reader software).

- **Useful for many:** Accommodations not only help employees with disabilities—they often positively affect everyone else. For example, making a worksite more accessible for people with mobility impairments can make it easier for everyone to navigate. And adding captions to your marketing videos can help everyone understand and absorb the messages.

Misconception 4: If I think a direct report might need an accommodation, I can't ask because that would violate their privacy.

You've noticed a direct report struggling and you want to help without running afoul of the law or common decency. What do you do?

You can't say to the person, "It seems like you have a health issue" or "Do you have X condition?" (In the US and elsewhere, that would be illegal.) But you can approach the subject like a standard feedback conversation: Start by sharing the behavior you noticed (e.g., *"I noticed that you accidentally double-booked three meetings on your calendar last month and missed two other meetings"*). Then ask a question to show that you want to help them succeed. For example:

- *"How can I help you be successful?"*
- *"Is there anything I should know in order for me to be as supportive as I can be?"*
- *"Is there something the organization can provide to help you do your best work?"*

This approach invites them to say what they need without you assuming what they're experiencing. The person may open up or not—no one is obligated to disclose a disability at any time. But you will have opened the door for a future discussion.

Misconception 5: If a direct report has a disability, I can't hold them to the same standards as their peers—or discipline them if they don't meet standards.

You might feel like you need to go easy on someone who has a disability. If so, your heart may be in the right place, but you're making a poor assumption—that having a disability means someone can't perform at a high level. And you're falling short of your duty as a manager to hold all your direct reports to the same standards.

Relaxing performance standards for one person helps no one—overburdening the team members who have to pick up the slack and causing possible discord among teammates. It can also expose you to liability if you treat team members differently based on a legally protected characteristic, such as race, gender, age, or disability status.

Ultimately, you have the same obligations to all of your team members to:

- **Hold them to the same performance standards.** For example, customer service level, number of tickets completed, or sales quotas.
- **Support them to meet performance standards.** Work with your team members to get an accommodation if they need one. Often, someone's disability has no bearing on their ability to meet standards—someone may be able to answer just as many customer calls whether they sit in a wheelchair or a desk chair. If a disability does impact someone's job duties, making an accommodation helps level the playing field so everyone can meet the same standards.
- **Address the issue if someone falls short of the standards.** Explain how someone's work isn't meeting standards, then engage them in finding solutions (e.g., *"I want you to succeed. What's blocking you? What can I do to help clear your path?"*).
- **Document the feedback and warnings you give.** Doing so can help you track people's progress and support any disciplinary decisions you make.

Misconception 6: If I encourage direct reports to ask for accommodations, I'll have to grant all kinds of unreasonable requests.

In general, people act in good faith when asking for accommodations. They're not trying to manipulate the system.

And your job isn't to decide whether or not to grant someone's accommodation request—it's up to HR and legal teams to review the request and determine whether the person's condition meets the legal definition of a disability and how to proceed. (In the US, the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) says that most employers must accommodate people who have a known disability, unless it would cause "undue hardship" for the organization, financially or operationally.)

Your role as the person's manager is to connect your direct report with HR when you learn they might need an accommodation and to advocate for them to get the help they need. As the person who will help implement the accommodation, you need to engage in the conversation to try to find one that works well for everyone. If the organization can't provide what your direct report requests, help try to find an alternative. The Job Accommodation Network offers a [searchable database of accommodation ideas](#) that you, your direct report, and HR can explore.

Misconception 7: Making an accommodation for one direct report will lead to resentment from other direct reports—and there's nothing I can do about that.

Typically, if you're giving each person on your team the individualized support they need, they'll care less about what their peers get—whether it's an accommodation or another kind of help.

Resentment might never surface, especially if you don't call attention to someone's accommodation. But if resentment flares (another direct report asks, "Why does Marta get a special chair and I don't?"), to protect privacy, don't talk about anyone's specific accommodation. Instead, address how to help the direct report who raised the issue. You might say:

- *"I want to create a team environment that supports everyone. Is there something you need to do your job effectively?"*
- *"I provide support for my team members in a variety of ways. The organization has a process to get the accommodation you want if you need it, and I can show you what that process is."*

For more on building an inclusive team culture, see our topic [Addressing Unconscious Bias](#).

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