



# INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP: INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

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*Anyone in an organization can and should strive to be an inclusive leader.*

No matter what position an employee holds or at what level he or she functions, promoting inclusivity is critical for a company to earn and maintain a competitive advantage. It's also the right thing to do. This is especially true when considering the employment of people with disabilities, because they can bring a great deal to the workplace, including the following:

- **Reliability:** Compared to other workers, people with disabilities are absent less often and are quite loyal, which means high retention
- **Productivity:** People with disabilities perform as well as, if not better than, other employees when working at a best-suited job
- **Innovation:** These individuals often have unique and effective approaches when solving common problems

But hiring people with disabilities (visible and invisible) is not enough. We need to integrate them into every aspect of the organization, which requires adopting an open attitude and being self-aware. First recognizing our own unconscious bias is vital if we are to facilitate awareness in others, so that everyone in the organization understands and practices disability etiquette, the comprehensive delivery of information, and inclusivity. This is not only a basic requirement of inclusive leadership, it's a basic requirement to mitigate risk and maximize opportunity.

So what does it take to become an inclusive leader of people with disabilities?

- **Check your assumptions.** Cultivate a nonjudgmental attitude toward individuals with all types of disabilities—visible and invisible. Ask yourself: Are your assumptions based on fact?
- **Assume positive intent.** Participate in meetings and discussions about the outreach, recruitment, and retention of people with disabilities with a positive attitude.
- **Slow down your responses.** Think and listen before you talk. Develop listening skills, especially when

communicating with someone who is speaking with a speech disability, hearing loss, or deafness.

- **Scan social interactions for exclusion behaviors.** Do team members with disabilities tend to be more passive and quiet, allowing other team members to be more dominant? Work to engage these passive participants.
- **Treat everyone as your number one.** Give everyone a voice. For example, someone who is receiving a reasonable accommodation to perform the essential functions of his or her job should be treated with the same respect and included in the same way as any other colleague.
- **Deepen your own and others' awareness.** Recognize how your own behaviors impact team members' behaviors, and work toward becoming more inclusive.
- **Engage and motivate others in learning about disability and proper etiquette.** Speak with peers and direct reports about the importance of the journey to disability etiquette and awareness.
- **Provide individual feedback and coaching to transform exclusion behavior.** Be forthcoming and let people know when their nonverbal or verbal behaviors are exclusionary or perhaps even discriminatory toward someone with a disability.
- **Model appropriate and inclusive behaviors in your sphere of influence.** Leaders influence by example. **PDJ**

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*Nadine Vogel is president of Springboard Consulting LLC. Springboard ([www.consultspringboard.com](http://www.consultspringboard.com)) is considered a global expert, working with corporations, governments, and organizations on issues pertaining to supporting the disability community in the workforce, workplace, and marketplace. She is also the author of DIVE IN: Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce.*