

Workplace supports and accommodations: Conversation starter guide

Goals

- Give managers the tools to talk to and support their employees.
- Build a foundation for managers to discuss supports and accommodations with their employees.
- Prepare managers to recognize and respond to accommodation requests.

Discussions around supports and accommodations can start in a lot of different ways. And they may not always be obvious. Not every person with a disability will need an accommodation. Many won't.

As a manager, it's important to recognize when your employees might need support. And offer them the chance to ask for that support.

This resource will give you the tools to talk with employees who have learning and thinking differences. But it's not a substitute for legal advice, a guide on the ADA, or other legal compliance.

Starting the conversation

Example

You've noticed some changes with Julie, an employee you manage. Julie has been missing deadlines and skipping morning team meetings. You want to find out what's going on with Julie. But you don't know how to have the conversation. You don't want to make assumptions or appear nosy.

1. State kindly what you've noticed.

- “I notice you’ve missed a few deadlines recently. The overall quality of your work is excellent. But it’s important to our team’s success that all team members meet their deadlines.”
- “We’ve missed you at the last few team meetings, and I want to check in.”

2. Be understanding and ask how you can provide support.

- “That sounds hard. How can I support you?”
- “Thank you for sharing. How can I help?”

3. Work with the employee to find a solution.

- “Are there any tools or supports that might help?”
- “Are there things you’ve tried in the past that have helped?”

Recognizing an accommodation request

When talking about workplace supports, it’s important to listen for something that could be an accommodation request. If the person is connecting a work issue with a **medical impairment** or **limitation**, it could be considered the start of an accommodation request.

Example: Not an accommodation request

Julie tells you she’s been taking online classes. They keep her up late and cause her to miss morning meetings.

The lateness isn’t related to a medical issue, so it’s not an accommodation request.

Example: Could be an accommodation request

Julie mentions she started a new medication. It makes it hard for her to wake up for morning meetings.

Julie isn’t requesting anything. But there’s a connection between what could be a medical issue – new medication and possible side effects – and the work situation of not making it to morning meetings on time.

Remember that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other laws limit what employers can ask about the disability or an employee’s health.

If it seems like an accommodation might be necessary, but you’re not sure, reach out to HR.

What to do if an employee discloses a disability

Sometimes an employee will disclose a disability when they ask for an accommodation. But not all disclosures are requests for accommodation. It's important to recognize what's a request and what's not so you can support the employee.

Example

Julie tells you that she's been adjusting to a new medication for a medical condition. The medication has caused sleep problems. She has a hard time falling asleep, waking up, and concentrating.

1. Listen. And ask yourself: Why is this person disclosing that they have a disability?

- Is it related to challenges or issues at work?
- Is it to explain something that happened?
- Or is it for an unrelated reason?

2. Don't assume.

Each person's experience with disability is unique. Even people with the same disability experience it differently. Don't jump to conclusions about how a person's disability impacts their work or life. Or that you know what kind of accommodation they may need. Also, don't assume they'll need an accommodation. They might, but they might not.

3. Lead with empathy.

How and when an employee discloses a disability is a personal decision. It can be a vulnerable experience. And it may take planning and weighing of risks. Saying "Thank you so much for telling me" or "I'm glad you shared that with me" shows that you understand this.

4. Recognize an accommodation request.

If the employee disclosed the disability because it's impacting their job performance, this can be considered the start of an accommodation request. It's best for you to work with HR to start the accommodations process.

Note: If you're not sure whether someone is asking for accommodation, or how best to support them, it's a good idea to check in with HR.

5. Ensure confidentiality.

If an employee discloses a disability, don't share this information with others. It's up to the employee to decide how and when to share this information, and with whom. You also shouldn't share information about an employee's accommodation. It's up to them whether to share that information.

Finding the right accommodation

When an employee requests an accommodation, the ADA requires that the employer engage in the “interactive process.” This is a conversation to determine the right accommodation.

If you think an employee is making an accommodation request, here are some ways to support them in the workplace.

1. Start with the employee.

In most cases, they’re the best source of information. They may know what’s worked for them in the past. Or they may have an idea about what could work.

2. Work together to come up with a solution.

If the employee doesn’t have a solution, you can work together to explore options. It’s important to **focus on the job-related challenge**. Don’t ask questions about the person’s disability. Instead, figure out what tasks or spaces are the issue and how to address them. It’s important to involve HR in the process to find the best solution.

3. Check in.

Once the accommodation has been requested or granted, check in with the employee. Did they get what you agreed on? And does it work for them and support their needs? If it’s not solving the issue, you can collaborate to find another option.

Example

After working through the interactive process with her manager and HR, Julie received an accommodation in the form of a flexible work schedule. She was able to attend the morning team meetings virtually, and then come to the office to finish the rest of her work. She was also allowed to take breaks in the wellness room if she got too tired. This flexibility allowed her to work during peak productive times and meet all her deadlines.

Phrases to avoid

- “Do you have a disability?”
- “How did you become disabled?”
- “You look OK to me!”
- “You don’t seem like you struggle with [X].”
- “How long have you had this disability?”
- “You’re so inspiring.”

Helpful Tips

- Focus on what someone needs to do their job, not why they need it.
- Limit your questions about disability. It’s up to the person what they choose to share.
- Always ask, “How can I best support you?”
- Requests don’t need to include words like “accommodation” or even “disability.”

Additional resources

- [JAN’s A to Z of disabilities and accommodations](#)
- [Workplace supports for neurodivergent employees](#)