



IssueBrief

May 2024

Cultivating resilience at work: A practical guide for supporting employees with disabilities

Resilience is more than a buzzword. It's more than a theoretical concept. It's a transformational framework supporting and strengthening employees with disabilities.

Certified case managers and disability management specialists have a key role in making this happen, explains Ed Quick, MA, MBA, CDMS, who serves as a CCMC Commissioner. "Let's be clear, resilience is not a solitary process. It's a collective endeavor. Building resilience inside ourselves and our clients is an important aspect of navigating our collective roles in supporting our client's journey."

For individuals with disabilities, resilience, especially in the workplace, takes on additional layers of significance. Dr. Chantrise Sims Holliman, an advocate and expert in resilience training, explores resilience in the workplace, focusing on how both case managers and disability management specialists can support and empower clients with disabilities.

She has deep expertise, but she brings more than that to the subject. Sims Holliman brings personal understanding. She became a partial paraplegic and bilateral amputee at age 45. Her journey gives her a unique and profound perspective.

"So how can case managers help their clients? Well, one way is to encourage employees with disabilities to recognize their strengths, limitations, and the unique challenges they face in the workplace." To do that, she says, you have to reach out, "because there are people who have

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disabilities who are like me, who aren't very good at asking for help."

The Seven Principles of Resilience

To foster resilience in the workplace, one must understand what resilience looks like in practice. Dr. Sims Holliman offers the following guidance:

1 Practice self-awareness: This means understanding and embracing who we are, what we value and what we believe, and being honest about our strengths and weaknesses. "Being self-aware means knowing and understanding what our triggers are, what are the things that are going to make us want to leap off a cliff?" By knowing that, we can manage it.

Application: Encourage employees with disabilities to understand their own capabilities and limitations—and to seek assistance when needed. This fosters an environment of growth and adaptability.

2 Maintain a positive attitude: Embrace failure, practice gratitude, and surround yourself with supportive people. A positive attitude is vital in overcoming workplace challenges.

Application: Celebrate both big and small achievements to boost morale and maintain a positive outlook. This practice is especially important for employees with disabilities, who may face additional hurdles; celebrating their achievements helps reinforce their valuable contributions to the team.

3 Prioritize self-care: Self-care recharges your batteries. It includes healthy eating, spending time outside, and occasionally indulging yourself. "Self-care fosters resilience

and improves overall health," she says. "And when employees are mentally and physically healthy, they are more productive and they're actually happier."

Application: Encourage practices that support flexible scheduling, mental health days, or access to wellness resources. Allow for remote and hybrid work. Encourage employees to use their paid time off and sick days to prevent burnout. Don't profess admiration for employees who work incessantly. Other ways to support self-care include improved cafeteria menus, exercise options during work hours, and accessible green spaces for relaxation and meditation.

4 Cultivate a supportive inner circle: Fostering a supportive network within the workplace is critical. "Build your resilience dream team," she says. "Push out anyone who doesn't have your best interest at heart. Not everyone who is with you is for you."

Application: Encourage the formation of peer support networks where employees with disabilities can share experiences, advice, and encouragement.

5 Expand your outer circle: This includes finding allies and joining organizations for support. "An ally is someone who offers you backing, assistance, advice, information, or protection. These are the people who have your back within your organization and with whom you share similar goals or concerns."

Application: Build partnerships with external organizations, therapists, and vocational rehabilitation services that can offer additional support and

resources to employees with disabilities. Make mental support available. This helps employees manage stress and personal challenges effectively, preventing work-related burnout and improving overall job performance.

6 Overcome fear: Fear can be healthy, but when fear keeps us from living our best lives, we must face it, she says. Turning “what if” into “why not” is a powerful resilience strategy. So, too, is reframing: Instead of worrying about what might happen, we can ask “What’s the worst that could happen?” This allows us to filter through all those worst-case scenarios. Another way to reframe situations is to ask, “What’s the best that could happen?”

Application: Offer training and support that address common fears and anxieties related to disability and employment. Providing tools and strategies to manage these fears can empower employees, helping them to focus on their abilities and contributions.

7 Emulate resilient role models: “Whether in our personal or professional lives, we need the reassurance of seeing someone else accomplish great things to inspire and encourage us to do the same,” she says. It works both ways: You can be inspired by a role model, and you can be that role model.

Application: Encourage the formation of peer support networks within the organization where employees with disabilities can share experiences, advice, and encouragement. In addition, you can use your challenges to lead by example. By showing how you are navigating these spaces, you can help the employees that you’re working with navigate their spaces.

Elements of Effective Communication

Effective communication is vital in supporting employees with disabilities, says Sims Holliman. She’s identified ten key elements:



Active listening

This involves fully concentrating on the speaker, understanding their message, and responding thoughtfully.



Empathy

In this context, empathy involves understanding the experiences and challenges of employees with disabilities. They must feel heard and understood, which starts with genuine empathetic listening from their colleagues and supervisors.



Clear, accessible communication

What’s clear may vary by individual and by disability. It includes using simple, jargon-free language and making written materials accessible to everyone, including those with visual impairments and learning disabilities.



Open, honest dialogue

Transparency about processes, decisions, and policies affecting employees with disabilities fosters trust and reduces uncertainty and anxiety.



Feedback mechanisms

Implementing feedback mechanisms allows employees with disabilities to express their needs and make suggestions for improvements. Listening to and acting on this feedback demonstrates respect and shows that you value their input.



Cultural competence

Understanding cultural perceptions of disability is essential to clear communication. This includes recognizing the unique experiences of each employee with disabilities, respecting their individuality, and addressing their specific needs.

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Elements of Effective Communication

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Continuous education

Staying informed about developments in disability rights, accommodations, and communication practices ensures that the workplace remains inclusive and supportive.



Personalization

Recognizing and respecting the unique needs, preferences, and situations of each employee with disabilities knits the employee to the work community. Tailoring communication and support strategies to fit their unique needs, preferences, and situations builds a productive community where participants feel seen and respected.



Patience and flexibility

Building trust and openness is a process; it takes time. Be patient and flexible in finding solutions that accommodate the needs of employees with disabilities.



Conflict resolution

Misunderstandings and frustrations can arise when you're working with employees with disabilities, especially if before they became disabled, they worked in the same workplace. They may be frustrated because they can't do what they used to do. And the people that they work with might also become frustrated with that change. Finding ways to address and defuse these conflicts is critical—and the communications strategies outlined above can help organizations do this thoughtfully and constructively.

Keep in mind that many disabilities are invisible, and many employees with disabilities don't disclose them to their employers. "It's easier to assume that most people have some type of disability than it is to assume that they don't," Sims Holliman says. "The disability community is the only community anyone can join."

"No one thinks to involve them because there is a preconceived notion that they don't have any interest in knowing what's going on or ...that they're not capable of making decisions for themselves. If there's a decision being made, make sure that you loop them in. If you're going to loop in every employee, make sure you loop in every employee."

— Dr. Chantrise Sims Holliman, EdD
Author, Speaker, Resilience Coach

The Secret Sauce for Engagement? Engage

The most effective strategy for involving employees with disabilities in decision making is to involve people with disabilities in decisions. "I know that just sounds like it should be more complicated," Sims Holliman says.

People with disabilities are often overlooked. "No one thinks to involve them because there is a preconceived notion that they don't have any interest in knowing what's going on or ... that they're not capable of making decisions for themselves," she says. "If there's a decision being made, make sure that you loop them in. If you're going to loop in every employee, make sure you loop in every employee."

It can be as simple as a conversation, she says. "Hey, here are some changes that are going to be happening within the organization. Just want to share them with you and kind of get your feedback."

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It comes back to the basics, she says. “We make it way more complicated than it needs to be.”

Dr. Sims Holliman shares some tools for effective communication that will help employers, case managers and disability management specialists better engage all workers, including those with disabilities.

The Power of Inclusion

Including people with disabilities fully in the workplace and helping them cultivate resilience is better for them and better for the whole organization.

“Diversity isn't just about race, gender, or age. It's also about embracing the unique skills and

perspectives that people with disabilities bring to the table. Inclusion is not just a buzzword, it's a pathway to unlocking untapped potential and fostering innovation,” Quick says.

Action, Not Lip Service

People listen to what you do, not what you say. Create a supportive environment that fosters well-being, rather than just verbally promoting it, Sims Holliman counsels.

The importance of resilience within the workplace, especially for employees with disabilities, cannot be overstated. It is crucial not merely to speak of support but to actively participate in creating a workplace environment that enhances well-being and empowerment.

When case managers prioritize these steps, they can not only unlock the potential of the employees they support, but also cultivate a truly resilient culture within their organizations.

By taking the actions outlined above and involving and supporting employees with disabilities, we unlock their potential and contribute to a genuinely inclusive and robust workforce, Sims Holliman says. “It's important we get this right.” ■

About the Experts



Ed Quick, MA, MBA, CDMS,
CCMC Board of Commissioners

Ed Quick brings over 25 years of professional disability and case management insight and experience as a CCMC Commissioner.

He is currently a global senior leader in the integrated leave, disability, and time away space for a large technology company. He was also the Executive Director of Disability Management Services for JP Morgan Chase in Chicago, Illinois, and the Global Leader, Employee Health and Productivity, for General Electric.

Ed earned a Masters in Vocational Rehabilitation from the University of Cincinnati and a Master of Business Administration in Human Resource Management from American University, Washington DC. He is currently pursuing a Certificate in DE&I for Human Resources from Cornell University's e-Learning program.

Ed is a long-time volunteer for the certified case and disability management community, holding various committee and leadership roles for the Certified Disability Management Specialist Commission.



Dr. Chantrise Sims Holliman,
EdD
Author, Speaker, Resilience Coach

Dr. Chantrise Sims Holliman is an award-winning former educator with nearly 20 years of experience working collaboratively with students, teachers, and parents, as well as a sought-after speaker in areas of resilience, creativity, and flexible thinking. Three months after her 45th birthday, Dr. Holliman survived a widow-maker heart attack, which left her partially paralyzed and a bilateral lower limb amputee. This event marked a shift in how she saw her life's plan and purpose.

She is an accomplished speaker who has delivered speakers and trainings in person and virtually across the country including a TEDx talk that currently has nearly 30,000 views. She also raises her voice on the challenges and triumphs disabled individuals, including herself, encounter daily, reminding us that disability isn't a negative word and disabled people are just that—people.

Her most recent achievement is being named part of the Go Red for Women 2024 Class of Survivors for the American Heart Association. She is also a featured guest speaker in the Commission's Push Pause video series.



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