Talking purple

How do you talk about disability at work?
Kate Nash

You may have noticed how the colour purple has become associated with the disability movement in the way that pink was once adopted by the LGBT community. I'm adding to the symbolism with the first in a new column, 'Talking purple', – fresh conversations about disability in the workplace. It stems from my work creating the UK's only leadership development and networking hub, 'PurpleSpace', and my commitment to stimulating real conversations about disability at work.

More than a quarter of the 28 million workers in the UK manage a long-term health condition or impairment,[1] and in any workplace between 11–12.9 per cent of all employees are disabled employees.[2] Disability and long-term illness, including mental ill health, are a fact of life – when and how individuals share personal information is in part determined by how far they have assimilated that information, how they feel about it and their perception about how others will react.

I was diagnosed with a type of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis aged 15 and, like many others, I have experienced first-hand the challenge of overcoming simple physical barriers when trying to succeed at work. I've also experienced the soft bigotry of low expectations from work colleagues and loved ones, in deciding whether I would get offered employment and progress at work. I hear from disabled employees that this is an all too common experience and that building and maintaining the personal resilience to manage the reactions of others takes a lot of work.

In 2013 I set about writing *Secrets & Big News – Enabling people to be themselves at work*,[3] to help employers and employees to understand more about the complexities of declaring and disclosing a disability at work. The book explores why people can find it hard to share information and highlights how getting it right or wrong has a significant impact on an individual's ability to flourish. The research, based on the views of 55 employers and 2,511 disabled people, shows that it largely boils down to company culture and the language and processes used to discuss and manage disability or illness. Those employers who proactively raise awareness of workplace adjustments processes, are transparent about the benefits of sharing personal information about disability, encourage colleagues to share personal stories of managing disability or illness at work, or who promote peer support networks are those more likely to employ talented disabled people.

Employers and employees made the following recommendations about what helps to foster better conversations:

Help your people to manage their journey
Deciding to share information about a disability or ill-health is often related to individuals making sense of it for themselves and then mapping that experience against the employer's known track record. The ease with which their employer provides information about workplace adjustments, or the skill with which their employer celebrates human difference, and specifically disabled talent, will support the employee with the process.

Run disability awareness raising campaigns
During the research for *Secrets & Big News*, employers shared some of the successful awareness-raising campaigns they'd run in order to capture data about the numbers of people with a disability that they employed. Campaigns were designed to support employees to feel more comfortable in sharing information about disability, and were typically delivered by the diversity and inclusion teams in conjunction with communications and marketing teams. The campaigns helped signpost employees towards workplace adjustment support and invested in improving the process by which people with a disability could share experiences about how to get ahead at work.

Find and learn from your story-tellers
A disabled employee is often best placed to provide continual support and occasional challenge that will help another disabled worker on their own journey. Spot the story-tellers inside your organisation: they can often change hearts and minds. For example, Andrew McDonald was one of the most senior disabled civil servants in Whitehall and has made numerous speeches about the process of making sense of disability (Parkinson's disease and cancer), and the length of time it takes to adjust to new identities.

For employees living with a disability or mental health condition, talking to others who understand and have lived this truth is one of the most liberating ways to build resilience at work. Networking enables people to gain tips and advice about managing an impairment or illness while delivering the day job. Doing so with other disabled employees, irrespective of the type or severity of their impairment or how long they have had it, can yield really useful advice about how to get ahead at work and sometimes push you to think more positively – and even differently – about your career prospects. It can be one of the most powerful things you do.

References
1   Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2012. [Online.] www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-market-statistics/march-2012.html (accessed 2 March 2016).
2   The disability and health strategy. Department for Work and Pensions, 2013.
3   Nash K. Secrets & big news – enabling people to be themselves at work. Kate Nash Associates; 2014.

Kate Nash OBE created PurpleSpace, the UK's only leadership development and networking hub for disabled employee network leaders and employees. Kate has helped over 300 organisations learn how to stimulate real conversations about disability at work through the power of employee networks, and PurpleSpace continues this work.
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