

Talking with Employers

by Steven Peer, MS

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU WONDERED, Should I tell my employer I have ADHD? While there is no simple answer, here is one more important consideration. If you decide to have such a conversation with your employer, what does he or she hear? What does your message mean to your employer? When you consider your audience, the message can be made more targeted, more concise, more effective. Perhaps my experience will give you some insight on how you can choose to conceal, reveal, or really reveal your ADHD to an employer.

Years back I was asked to make a presentation on ADHD to a group of human resource managers at their monthly roundtable. I was so impressed with their curiosity and proactive approach that I did whatever I had to in order to accept the invitation. I was also curious as to what they knew about ADHD (never mind that, even

at our monthly CHADD chapter meetings, we could rarely gain consensus on practical definitions of ADHD).

Once at the meeting, I was not disappointed. I opened with a “dog and pony” overview of the who, what, where, when, how, and why of ADHD. The HR managers learned much about ADHD and I learned much about the state of corporate knowledge about ADHD. The lunch-hour roundtable format lent itself to a casual meeting that, combined with the participants’ honesty, allowed me to better understand and reframe who they are, what to expect from them, and how best to approach them. Here’s what I learned.

1. They knew little to nothing about ADHD (at least prior to my presentation). How can they possibly be up to speed with each and every disorder and disability? Don’t demonize them for ignorance; keep

in mind that there are plenty of family doctors who also know little about ADHD.

2. The idea of employees coming to them and declaring, “I have ADHD,” scares them. This is especially true to the degree that they are uninformed about the disorder. I liken their experience to how I handled (or mishandled) my first time conversing with someone who’d just lost an arm. I was scared and didn’t know what to say. Bring materials to educate them as to what ADHD is and how it is successfully managed.

3. They do not know what you need. You’ll need to be explicit about what you need. And unless you’ve done your homework, you probably don’t know what you need. Be prepared to answer the question you want them to ask, “What do you want from us?” (Read on for an exercise to help with this).

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4. The company may have no budget for accommodations. If you are meeting with your employer, come prepared with a variety of options, including at least one low- or no-cost solution. For instance, instead of suggesting they move you to an office with a door for the express purpose of limiting distracting noises, could you simply request permission to wear noise-cancelling headphones?

5. They expect you to be proactive in letting them know what you need long before you find yourself in trouble. Announcing you have ADHD as a response to being put on probation is not only bad timing, but shows up as defensive, reactive, or excusatory.

6. Notice that these same steps would be effective outside of the workplace. You can use them with spouses, significant others, teachers, and so forth.

We're often blind to what we need either because we think we're doing well or because we're unaware of the variety of tools available. While an ADHD coach may be a good resource in shedding light on any blind spots, here is another simple, albeit crude method for drilling down to what you need. I call it a "so-what" conversation. It consists of a dialogue with yourself where you keep responding "so what" until you get to tangible, useful, affordable requests you can make of your employer.

"I have ADHD."

"So *what*."

"So, that makes me unique."

"So *what*."

"So, I don't do things quite the same as others."

"So *what*."

"So, I can bring important things to an organization."

"So *what*."

"So, to do that, I can't be so distracted."

"So *what*."

"So I need to turn my desk away from the door."

This exercise allows you to replace the confusing declaration "I have ADHD" with the concrete request to have your desk turned. Which do you think would be more effective? 

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