



Leaders as Role Models for Workplace Inclusion?

Strengthening Workplace Inclusion by Using the Potential of the Role Model-Process between Managers and Followers with Disabilities

**Vorbildlich
in Führung gehen!**
Mit Role Models
Inklusion in Arbeit stärken

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BACKGROUND

Persons with disabilities and chronic health conditions have lower employment rates than persons without disabilities (Lecerf, 2020) and are less likely to hold leadership positions (Fulda & Stettes, 2024). **Companies** on the other hand face challenges in recruiting and promoting people with disabilities. Previous research suggests that marginalized groups may particularly benefit from **role models in the workplace** who share similar characteristics and with whom they can identify (Lockwood, 2006). Managers with disabilities as role models may demonstrate, for example, that career advancement is achievable and provide guidance for individuals with disabilities pursuing their own careers. By being visible and actively shaping organizational culture, managers with disabilities as role models can signal to potential applicants and current employees with disabilities that individuals "like them" are welcome and supported within the company.

Thus, in our project "**Leading by Example! Strengthening Workplace Inclusion with Role Models**" we focus on managers with disabilities as role models for their followers.

"And, yes, what often helps is knowing that I'm not alone with my problem. Just having someone to talk to, where I can exchange thoughts and simply feel understood."

THE PROJECT

Research and Practice – Hand in Hand: 2 project partners - Chair of Labour and Vocational Rehabilitation, University of Cologne (1), Fortbildungsakademie der Wirtschaft, an advanced training academy for people and businesses (2)

Practice-oriented Aims: Development of a **practice-oriented toolbox** for companies to identify and support managers with disabilities as role models, and to implement strategies tailored to the specific company to create more inclusive workplaces.

Research-oriented Aims: Development of a **scientific framework** based on literature review, focus groups (employees, applicants and leaders with disabilities, company stakeholders ($N=38$)),

Formative evaluation of tool-development, pilot-phase and -implementation: expert panel of employees, applicants and leaders with disabilities, D&I-stakeholders, representatives of employees with severe disabilities ($N=11$), pilot implementation in five model companies of various sizes and industries

Implementation: Following the pilot-phase, the tools will be finalized and made available to multipliers and companies free of charge.

KEY INSIGHTS from the Scientific Framework: Disability and the Role Model-Process

"And what motivates me about that person is simply that he also has a very severe physical disability like I do and he achieves the things he sets out to do. You don't achieve everything in life, but I believe there's a difference when someone with a healthy body sets a goal and achieves it, versus when I, with my disabled body, set the same goal."

To become a role model, a manager with disability needs to be identified and recognized as a role model. We refer to this as the "**Role Model-Process**". The Role Model-Process is at the core of our scientific framework.

We propose three preconditions for the Role Model-Process to develop between leaders with disabilities and their followers:

»» To be recognized as a role model, **visibility as a manager with disability** is essential. However, most disabilities are not visible. Moreover, disability is often viewed as a stigma, while managerial positions are traditionally associated with status and strength. Therefore disability and leadership are stereotypically perceived as being incompatible (Ghin, 2019). As a result, managers with disabilities are often hesitant to disclose their disability and hence reluctant to become visible as a person with a disability.

"Being a role model also means making your own needs and boundaries visible. For example, not scheduling a meeting for 8 AM if you need two hours in the morning to get started. But instead clearly saying: 'Due to my disability, I can only start at this time.' Just stating it clearly. So, being a role model means taking action but also setting boundaries."

»» The key to becoming impactful as a role model is a **shared social identity** between managers with disabilities and their potential followers (Steffens, Munt, van Knippenberg, Platow, & Haslam, 2021). However, disability and lived experiences of disability are diverse and intertwined with other identity aspects that shape how followers perceive role models.

»» To be recognized as a role model and not just a symbolic representation of disability, the **congruency of story and experience** is crucial. Corporate role models are supposed to represent a positive image of disability inclusion at their company. However, if that image is not aligned with the everyday experience of employees and applicants with disabilities perceiving barriers and exclusion, a corporate role model may risk being perceived as rather hypocritical than empowering (Cho, Laine, Roberts, & Rodrigue, 2015).



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