

ADHD in the Workplace: Climbing the Corporate Mountain By Zoë Kessler, 2014

Most of us have seen the film or the stage adaptation of *The Sound of Music*. Maria's character displays classic ADHD traits, both the good and the not-so-good.

When it comes to workplace gaffes, I totally related to Maria von Trapp.

Like Maria's experience moving from nun to nanny, joining the workforce or getting a promotion can over-tax our ability to cope.

Here are a few tips on how to manage someone with ADHD traits to bring out their full potential.

How to solve a problem like Maria – or anyone who has ADHD

Let's start with three typical ADHD workplace challenges (these, by the way, are *not* a few of my favourite things).

Social Challenges

Having ADHD is like being a foreigner in a foreign land. This can make social relationships problematic.

We don't always know the social rules; and even if we do, sometimes we're so distracted we don't follow them. Having a short attention span, a racing mind, and low threshold for boredom -- even if we are interested in the conversation, it can look like we're not. Lacking self-awareness, we're often not aware of how we come across to others. This can sabotage our efforts at establishing alliances and positive relationships at work.

When you have ADHD, you communicate differently.

When describing Maria, a nun at the Abbey says, "When I'm with her I'm confused, out of focus and bemused."

It's no wonder she feels that way. My friend Dan once told me that having a conversation with me was like trying to follow a road map that's been torn up.

Sometimes we talk too much, and sometimes we talk too fast, coming across as manic instead of enthusiastic.

Sometimes we impulsively blurt whatever we're thinking. I call this being "blurtacious."

I once greeted my employer with, "Hey! Your hair looks great. I dye my hair too." I instantly regretted it. I'd accomplished the exact the opposite of what I'd intended. Instead of creating a bond between us, I'd alienated and possibly insulted her.

Maria said it best, "...I can't seem to stop saying things, everything and anything I think and feel." This soon becomes tedious for those around us, and definitely doesn't work in the workplace.

So, are we confusing and bemusing? We can be.

Still - you think *you're* confused?

When several people are talking at once it can be hard for us to follow the conversation. When we try to contribute, we end up interrupting or making inappropriate comments.

Sometimes we interrupt because we're afraid we'll forget what we wanted to say, poor memory being another hallmark of ADHD.

We make connections in non-linear ways. This can send us off on a completely different trajectory than the conversation started on, and we lose sight of what's being discussed.

When we're nervous or excited (or both) we have even more trouble focusing. Once at an interview for a position I coveted, I was so hyped up my eyes wandered everywhere. Instead of focusing on the interview, I noticed the photo of someone I knew on the interviewer's desk, and started talking about that instead.

I didn't get the job.

But having ADHD isn't all bad.

There are benefits that can be capitalized on if you can find the key to doing that. We'll talk about those keys in a moment. That is, if I don't lose them. I'm notorious for losing keys.

ADHD Energy

We can have an uncanny level of energy, especially for things we're passionate about. I call this "The ADHD Fountain of Youth."

Think of the scene in *The Sound of Music* where Maria and the von Trapp kids are hanging from the tree tops. It turns out that "excessive climbing" is used as a descriptor for childhood ADHD. Based on Maria, me, and many others, that description could easily apply to ADHD adults. I still swing on park swings.

With ADHD, even though we often have trouble focusing, when we find something we're excited about we can hyperfocus. I used my super-power of hyperfocus to write my first book.

I mentioned earlier that our non-linear minds can get us into trouble when communicating. The positive side of this is that we see connections that others don't. This is inherently creative thinking.

So how do managers and ADHD employees get ADHD to work for, and not against, them in the workplace?

When it comes to climbing the corporate mountain, an adult with ADHD needs a sharp manager, not a sherpa, to successfully summit.

The Solutions

Let's revisit those underdeveloped social skills.

When I was young, my mom often said, "I wish you could hear yourself." I had no idea what she meant until I learned that people with ADHD are notoriously poor self-observers.

And no wonder: until we've learned to manage our ADHD, our observations of anything is pretty hit and miss.

An astute manager will be able to explain or even show their ADHD employees how their behaviour affects others. For example, if they're fidgeting during a meeting, it's distracting to others and can be perceived as disinterest.

Instead of fidgeting, we can take notes. This helps us to channel that excess energy, stay focused and compensate for memory problems.

Giving someone with ADHD short evaluations after they've made presentations, spoken at a meeting, and so on, will be helpful initially until they've become fluent in the corporate culture, language and social rules.

Feedback for someone with ADHD should be frequent, brief, specific, and given both verbally and in writing. This helps an employee with ADHD develop self-awareness and self-monitoring down the road as they internalize the feedback.

Communication

Going back to the idea of a person with ADHD as a foreigner in a foreign land, like someone learning ESL, English as a Second Language, those of us with ADHD have to learn what I call "NSL" – Normal as a Second Language.

Workers with ADHD need to find a way to slow down and to express ourselves more fully, not skipping steps and leaving the listener in the dust. This is like learning a foreign tongue, but with regular coaching and feedback from a manager, or supportive co-worker, we can become fluent in both languages.

When communicating with us, if you say, "We need this soon," it will never get done. Be specific. We need the clarity of: "The deadline is Friday."

Similar to giving us feedback, give us assignments both verbally and in writing. That way we can refer back when we need to and keep ourselves on track. Specific short-term goals for long-term projects will help us (and you) to monitor our progress and keep us moving steadily forward.

Many of us have trouble prioritizing, so checking in with us that we've prioritized the day's tasks appropriately will also ensure that we're literally on the same page and that expectations are met. Frequent reminders (if welcomed) and a distraction-free location can help keep us productive.

Keeping track of time is tricky business when you're easily distracted or prone to hyperfocus. As an invited webinar speaker, I knew I'd have to put all my focus during the Q & A on what was being asked of me. If I risked looking at the clock, I might easily miss what was being said. I appreciated the 10 and 5-minute warnings the moderator gave before the webinar was over.

Those are some of the ways to address ADHD challenges.

You'll want to use our strengths to harness our potential.

Harness our Energy

Like Maria leading the children up the trees, around the town, and over the mountain, we can be great leaders.

We can be catalysts, stirring up the team and injecting new life into ongoing projects. We thrive in brainstorming sessions, and our enthusiasm is contagious.

Recognize our leadership potential and put it to work for you, but be aware of our tendency to become workaholics. If we take on too much, our contribution will be eroded. Weekly check-ins will help maintain a good balance and keep us from burnout. Tasks that we're not as good at should be delegated to others.

When you combine our energy and passion with our ability to hyperfocus, we're unstoppable.

Cash in on our Creativity

When Maria tears down the drapes in her bedroom to make play-clothes for her young charges, she's being resourceful and innovative. If you put someone with ADHD on a project with a limited budget, their non-linear thinking might come up with the perfect solution to achieve your goals in ways that wouldn't occur to others.

So, how *do* you solve a problem like Maria?

First, know that she is not a problem: she's an opportunity. Recognise and capitalise on her strengths. Work with her to overcome her challenges. And harness her intelligence, energy, hyperfocus, and creativity.

You may not be a sherpa, but with well-chosen management tools, you'll be able to guide your ADHD personnel into becoming sure-footed and able to climb – maybe not every mountain, but the ones that count.

