The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities has been developed as both a “diversity” and “sameness” training tool. Its goal is to make us more sensitive and respectful of people with varying disabilities, while recognizing that all of us (no matter how different we may appear to each other at first) share many of the same values, interests, hopes, and dreams.

In the workplace, it is these commonalities that often serve as the first bridges between employees with disabilities and their co-workers. Building on this inherent “sameness” results in stronger working relationships and contributes to the kind of teamwork organizations need to achieve their larger goals.

Sameness training is about instilling principles of conduct that are the same for everyone, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or disability. And it’s about building strategies of support to help people overcome barriers arising from perceived differences.

With the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), this kind of training has become more important than ever, as thousands of employers have made the commitment to hire people with disabilities. Though many companies have discovered this decision has been a good one for their bottom line, thousands of others have yet to learn the valuable lessons of diversifying their workforce.

Many employers have unfounded fears about the efficiency of workers with disabilities. Studies show, however, that workers with disabilities rate just as high in job performance and on-the-job safety as those without disabilities. Others fear the cost of workplace accommodations, though many can be made for free, and research has confirmed the majority cost $500 or less.

Still, the 49 million Americans with disabilities remain among the most overlooked of all minorities now guaranteed equal employment opportunities by law. They are the single largest untapped pool of employable persons in the nation, with the highest unemployment rate of any major demographic group of working-age Americans. Although two-thirds seek jobs, only one-third have been able to find even part-time employment.

Today, America needs diversity in the workplace. First, because it is right and just, and second, because it is economically sound. In an era of predicted labor shortages and increasing global competition, this country cannot afford to ignore the skills and talents of any segment of qualified workers.

Sameness training is about instilling principles of conduct that are the same for everyone, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or disability.

Now is the time to renew our commitment to include people with disabilities into the diverse mix that is the American workforce, and to affirm once and for all their right to the same opportunities as all other Americans.