



UNLOCKING NEURODIVERSITY INCLUSION AT WORK



Neurodiversity is touted as the next frontier in discussions around diversity at work. However, the term itself is not widely understood, nor are the implications for those who wish to lead and work in a more inclusive way. In this article, we propose a few principles that can guide leaders to engage with neurodiversity at work in an informed and sensitive manner. But first, let's explore some key definitions as well as a couple of reasons why we should all pay attention.

- **Neurodiversity** is the naturally-occurring, broad spectrum of human cognition; we all have different ways of thinking, processing information and interacting.
- **Neuroatypicality** is a term that describes people with differences in developmental, intellectual and cognitive abilities such as dyslexia and ADHD as well as autism spectrum disorders. Neurotypical is also used to describe those without such differences.
- **Neurodivergent** is often used interchangeably with neuroatypicality but is a broader term that describes people who function in a different way to the norm.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING NEURODIVERSITY AT WORK

Neurodivergence is prevalent. It is estimated that close to two in ten of the global population are neurodivergent.¹ Given these statistics, it is very likely that leaders work with neurodivergent colleagues, team members, clients, or are neurodivergent themselves. Yet for many organizations, neurodiversity is an afterthought - or does not even feature - in their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategy.

Not building practices that are inclusive of neurodivergent styles is a missed opportunity on the journey towards creating more equitable, inclusive and diverse workplaces. For leaders, it is a lens through which to better understand their people and create psychologically safe places where employees are empowered to work in ways that make the most of their unique strengths, ways of thinking and processing.

HOW LEADERS CAN SPEARHEAD ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Like any aspect of DEI, neurodiversity inclusion is nuanced. It requires awareness, curiosity and organizational cultural shifts. There is also the added complexity given neurodivergence is often an 'invisible' difference; you cannot necessarily tell someone is neurodivergent by looking at them. Also, many neurodivergent people may not disclose this (whether because they don't have a formal diagnosis, they don't identify with the language or label, don't feel safe to do so, or it simply doesn't feel relevant). In view of these nuances, we offer five principles for leaders to better engage with neurodiversity at work.

1 Think difference, not deficit

In recent years there have been moves to reclaim the language and mental models we use around disability. Neurodiversity is no exception. Diagnoses can be validating and allow neurodivergent people access to support. However, the medical model focuses on the individual and the challenges they face which can be stigmatizing. The social model of disability - that people are disabled by structures that don't account for difference - puts the onus back onto the systems in our societies and workplaces.

This debate about language and models is important in practice because the medical model often shapes our own perceptions about the abilities of neurodivergent people and their potential at work. The neurodiversity movement acknowledges that there is no 'normal'; we are all different.

Leaders need to think differently about their own perceptions of what success look like and how best to harness people's strengths. Everyone is unique and current defaults in processes and systems - from accessing virtual meetings to the way we assess leaders - can and must be improved to enhance accessibility for all.

2 Adjust to the system

Impactful DEI transformation requires systemic change. Often, the responsibility to fit in has been placed on neurodivergent individuals, but we also need to change organizational systems to make our workplaces and practices inclusive of neurodiversity.

Inclusion is not about expecting individuals to fit into traditional cultures or ways of working that have been designed for, and typically by, neurotypical

¹ Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. British Medical Bulletin, Vol 135 (Issue 1), 108-125.

people. It requires a willingness to take a critical look at social norms and how they disadvantage people who think or process differently to neurotypicals. For example, if a neurodivergent person needs a quieter space to work in, and is less present in an office type setting, does this impact their ability to be 'seen' and get ahead?

Importantly, it also requires collaboration with people with lived experience to identify barriers and shift the status quo. While the onus shouldn't be on neurodivergent colleagues alone to make this shift, any organisational change on neurodiversity will be more sustainable and effective if it's informed by neurodivergent viewpoints from the outset. Ultimately, inclusion is about designing for difference not enforcing assimilation.

3 Go beyond the business case

Designing for difference enables innovation and productivity, and is essential for organizations to be future-fit and successful. While organizations undoubtedly benefit, focusing purely on the business outcomes of neurodiversity inclusion to drive action is limiting. Creating equitable and inclusive workplaces cannot be solely motivated by the financial bottom line. It should be part of an organization's responsibility to people and society. This requires leaders to build more personal connections with their team members to understand how best to enable their success, and if appropriate share their own lived experience of neurodiversity.

4 Ask, don't assume

There is no one way that neurodivergence manifests inside or outside of work. While diagnostic labels and criteria can guide us, or facilitate access to support for individuals, leaders need to take a person-centered approach. They need to be sensitive and curious about what helps their people to thrive, as well as what structural or accessibility issues create blockers or have impacted a neurodivergent person's career or confidence thus far.

There is also a risk that well-intentioned programs to welcome neurodivergent people into work assume what sort of role is suitable based on stereotypes. This poses a danger that people are pigeonholed into certain types of roles which limits career experiences and ultimately progression. Leaders need to question actions that rely on such generalizations or stereotypes, and factor in flexibility by asking, not assuming, what is needed.

5 Unlock individual experience through intersectionality

We all have multiple facets to our identity and we need to look at the intersection between neurodiversity and other demographics like gender, age, socioeconomic

background, etc. Historically, some types of neurodivergence, especially autism and ADHD, have assumed to be more prevalent among boys and men. Autism has even been called "the extreme male brain".²

However, contemporary research, and listening to the lived experiences of female and non-binary people, highlights that ADHD and autism are underdiagnosed in women and that traits may even show up differently. Women may have been socialised to 'mask' or cover their traits to fit into societal expectations. This highlights why it is so important not to assume how neurodivergence manifests and to take a closer look at how different structural barriers intersect to either enable or disable a specific individuals' development.

IN SUMMARY

Neurodiversity is often invisible but is undoubtedly present in our organizations; we all process information and interact with others in different ways. In DEI, there is always a paradox between being person-centered and avoiding labels and stereotypes, while recognising the real, systemic barriers that face entire demographic groups. As well as recognising neurodiversity as natural variation in human cognition, we also need to focus on creating enabling spaces for neurodivergent people.

For leaders, this presents an opportunity to redesign work processes to be accessible and create psychologically safe spaces where neurodivergent people thrive. Doing so benefits those who identify as neurodivergent but also creates room in organizations for different ways of thinking and interacting which is vital for innovation and change.

²Baron-Cohen., S (2002) The extreme male brain theory of autism. Trends in Cognitive Science. Volume 6(6), pp.248-254.

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