

How to Be a Neuro-Inclusive Leader

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ABSTRACT

Neurodiversity is a fast-growing diversity category that we as an industry are just beginning to understand and incorporate into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) plans. Neuro-inclusion means implementing practices that consider the neurodiversity of your employees. Leaders of our industry have the hard task of keeping up with changes in language and understanding of neurodivergent employees. Topics of this paper include discussing terminology and its importance, how to support a neurodiverse team, and how to create an environment that brings out the best in everyone. I'll also discuss the benefits that come from being more neuro-inclusive in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of neurodiversity is acknowledging and making room for differently wired brains, different learning styles, different communication styles, different perspectives. Individuals who identify as autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, etc, would be considered "neurodivergent". Those without a condition falling under the neurodiversity umbrella would be considered "neurotypical". The movement is gaining momentum largely by the neurodivergent community themselves, advocating and pushing for more inclusive work environments.

This movement is an ever-shifting landscape and can be difficult to follow if you aren't actively keeping up with it. How will your leadership team keep up? Could your leadership style be unknowingly making work life more difficult for the neurodivergent? This paper will focus on some tangible ideas that encourage neuro-diversity without needing to know much about the movement itself. In other words, the purpose of this paper is not to teach neurodiversity or what it's like to be neurodivergent, but rather a connection between a general understanding and action.

NEURO-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Neuro-inclusive language describes how you phrase and refer to those with neurodivergent identities. We want our language to be respectful and accurate. Person-first language means you put the person before the condition and would say "a person with autism" for example. Identity-first language means you put the condition with the person as an identity, "an autistic person" for example.

While the neurodiversity movement has moved toward identity-first language it is also important to respect the way people refer to themselves. "Aspergers" for example has now been taken out of the DSM-5 and is no longer used at all but some who received this diagnosis early on feel a connection to it and may still refer to themselves as "Aspies".

Try not to correct someone's way they identify themselves. I don't use Aspergers for myself but I know someone who does so I have used that term in their presence because I know that is the term they prefer to use. The takeaway is: use identity first language by default but if an individual uses different terms then let them and respect their identification as is.

You'll also want to avoid using any language that refers to neurodivergent individuals as having super-powers or that they are inspirational. It may be true for some but it's harmful overall. Neurodivergent individuals don't need to carry a torch always showing themselves as pushing through their disabilities. We have an invisible disability that should be accommodated to and respected as opposed to a presenting a false image that we aren't impacted by our brain's unique wiring.

Avoid ableist language and microaggressions as they undermine a person's disability and experience living with it. Your choice of language can empower others or it can cut them down. A choice of words, a choice of perspective. For example, don't call your workload "crazy" when you really mean "challenging". Don't call yourself "so OCD" when what you really mean is you like to keep your self organized.

You will inevitably get it wrong from time to time as you address your own internal ableism to adjust your language. That is expected and is part of the process of learning. Making it a point to address your own ableist language is a great way to foster a neuro-inclusive approach across the whole team. And if you are corrected by someone else for certain words or phrases, listen without judgement and really try to understand why the language used was harmful to them.

PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

Think of your employees as humans not job roles.

Person-centered just means a focus on the individual; leading others through a flexible approach that is employee specific. You'll need to pay close attention to each individual and tailor praise and growth to them. Learn your employees' work preferences, career goals, strengths, interests, etc. Ask the questions that make you and your employees think: when I am most productive? Mornings or afternoons? The hour after first arriving? The hour after lunch? When do I feel most collaborative? Do I get more done working alongside others or on my own? Take the time to analyze and understand your own working style and those that report to you.

A true person-centered approach will end up creating a strength-based team. A strength-based team is exactly what it sounds like; focusing on our individual strengths and not so much always looking to improve weaknesses. Instead, we would spend more energy finding out how best the employee works and what types of tasks in their job function they are doing well at and giving them more of that.

You'll also want to spend time researching and finding content around psychological safety and try to incorporate methods of being a psychologically safe leader. Being a psychologically safe leader means you bring a presence that invokes a knowing feeling into others that they won't be shamed in some way for speaking up with questions, or ideas, or mistakes.

Being this kind of leader is not something you can fake, others around you will know if it is genuine or not. This will be a critical component of being a person-centered leader. If you are not a psychologically safe leader you'll have a much harder time understanding your direct reports. So long as your approach to is genuine there is no end to the rewards, you'll receive, professionally and personally, from bringing a safe energy.

COMMUNICATION

How are you communicating with your direct employees? Perhaps you have a mix of team meetings, 1x1 meetings, project meetings, emails, IMs, etc. You'll use the most appropriate method of communicating based on what it is you are communicating. Something urgent might not go into an email, it might go into an IM, for example. Giving difficult feedback to an employee you'd do verbally in a 1x1 and not a team meeting as another example.

There is another aspect of communication, not just what you are communicating but HOW you are communicating it. Be it email, IM, verbal, or pigeon carrier, try to keep the following things in mind every single time you communicate:

- Avoid using any slang, metaphors, or euphemisms.
- Avoid using sarcasm.
- Phrase any questions as closed questions instead of open where possible.
- If you need an acknowledgement of your communication state that.
- If you have a deadline for responding to your communication, clearly state that.
- Utilize visual aids, tables, etc. to make the message clearer.
- Keep it short and simple.

FORMATTING

Specific to written communication you'll want to be considerate of your formatting.

Break up text into a more digestible format. Many neurodivergent individuals see a large paragraph of text and immediately will feel overwhelmed. You can avoid this by using headers, bullets, and blank lines between chunks of text. Breaking your text into smaller pieces will help your reader stay focused and engaged. I have organized this paper with this chunking in mind as an example.

Use readable fonts. Generally sans-serif fonts (Arial, Verdana, etc.) are easier to read than Times New Roman which is a serif font.

Don't use color backgrounds or patterned backgrounds. Avoid reds and greens and try to be at least 12pt font.

If we don't work towards improving our communication to be more neuro-inclusive, then all we are doing is passing the burden of thought over to your employees. The burden is there regardless. Neurodivergent employees have to work harder in many different areas and communication is a big part of that.

Take a step towards neuro-inclusive communication and you will help lessen the burden on your employees. Do it enough times consistently and before you know it you won't even need to think about it, it will just be how you communicate!

FEEDBACK

Autistic and other neurodivergent individuals may be sensitive to communication feedback as they have been subjected to it their whole lives, and usually the feedback wasn't given very kindly. There is not much you can do if your neurodivergent employee is very sensitive to criticism on communication but do not be afraid to give criticism!

If you have a person-centered approach to managing, then how your direct report takes criticism and correction from you should be something you pay attention to and adjust for. A neuro-inclusive approach is to do it immediately after catching it and always in a more "let's reflect" tone not a "you shouldn't have said that" tone.

For example, at a prior company of mine, I told a customer in a meeting that we missed something in the budget. This was true and I didn't see anything wrong with communicating that. My manager, who was also on the call with me, did not correct me on the call but rather reached out after. She started by complimenting me on several things I did well first. Then she mentioned the comment I made and explained how the customer might take that negatively and how I could have phrased it instead, such as "It's likely when the budget was created we did not assume at that time we would be taking on that task."

It's okay to correct other's communication, neurodivergent or not, but do so in a manner that shows with grace why it could have been taken wrong and how to communicate something like that better. Your tone will go a long way and always do it privately with them.

LEARNING AND TRAINING

For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on what you as a manager will likely have control over therefore I am not speaking to the content of the training although it is just as important an area to inject some neuro-inclusivity and there is much content online about just that. I am speaking more to the support and organization around the onboarding program your employee will be going through.

Likely you have an initial onboarding training program for new employees and also ongoing training through various modes of peer to peer, trainer, SOPs, etc. When it comes to the onboarding training program for new employees, remember that you won't know much about your new employee. You won't know their learning styles and what supports they may or may not need but chances are you send them down the same training path you put all new employees, right?

You'll need to keep an eye on your employee to make sure they are not overwhelmed, they are taking consistent breaks, and they are not struggling with the material.

One way you can do this is by clearly communicating deadlines of your onboarding training. A general "as soon as possible" is vague and is not neuro-inclusive. Your employees need a clear date so they know they have time to schedule their breaks and downtime to digest. They know if they get stuck somewhere it won't be an issue so long as they get it done by a certain date.

Also know that many neurodivergent employees are hot and cold workers, meaning they may burn through work quickly at a high rate of speed but then swing the other way and be rather slow, methodical, and more in their heads. This is a natural way of working for many neurodivergent. Be sure to give enough time to allow for that ebb and flow in any onboarding program.

If you are in a position such that you can add additional support to round out the onboarding program this could go far with neurodivergent employees. Take a look at your set of onboarding trainings and identify those that are long, those that are video, those that are documents, those that are group training, etc. Categorize each and in each category try to provide support for each one you found.

- What support might long trainings need? Can I break this up into two or three smaller chunks?
- What support might video trainings need? Can I provide a transcript as support? Can I ask it be re-recorded with captions on?
- What support might a document training need? Can I pair a visual aid to demonstrate the content better?
- What support might group trainings from peers need? Could I offer either group training or direct 1 on 1 training?

Lastly, if you can include a post-onboarding survey as the last step in the training program it could be a tool to help you see where the gaps are and what you can be doing better. Use this survey to help continue to learn how to improve your training program.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Like I said above, neurodivergent can be hot and cold type of workers. Having different environments for those two mindsets can be extremely beneficial. Allowing your employees flexibility areas for working is a way to show your support.

Do you have an area that has lower traffic you can designate an empty office or two you can change into quiet rooms? You can make this area calming with adjustable lighting, comfortable furniture, maybe a puzzle or other quiet activities for a break.

Do you have another higher traffic space you could turn into a busy energy area that encourages more of a collaboration? Bounce ball chairs, whiteboards and tools to encourage group think. Having diverse spaces will help your diverse workers.

Make sure you use the spaces too! Show them this isn't for a subset of people with neurological differences, it's for everyone!

Beyond the ups and downs of workflow, neurodivergent individuals often have sensory processing disorders. If your employees are in office here is a great checklist (for everyone!) provided by Neurodiversity advocate, Lyric Rivera:

- Are you comfortable? If not, is there anything I can do or provide to increase your comfort level?
- Is there anything you need or is there anything that I can do for you?
- Is this lighting okay?
- Can I turn the lights up or down for you?
- Is it too loud or busy here for you?
- Are you able to concentrate with the current amount of background noise?
- Is the temperature okay for you?
- Would you like to move someplace calmer?

I also recommend to learn all the different types of assistive technology you have at your disposal and communicate them via demonstration for the whole team.

If you have Teams, show them how to turn captions on, show them how to have camera on without them having to see their own face. Do you have ability to do speech to text in writing documents or emails? If so, show them. You don't need IT or HR to show you these things, play around, research, find them for yourself then bring them to your team!

BENEFITS OF A NEURO-INCLUSIVE APPROACH

None of these suggestions are going to help you find neurodivergent talent for your team and none of these suggestions will help you hire neurodivergent talent for your team. These suggestions are to encourage a workplace that maintains the neurodivergent staff you have. But they are linked!

If your company has a successful program to look for and hire neurodivergent talent but your leadership team is unaware how to actually support that kind of staff, all that effort is, in a sense, wasted. We need both sides of the coin.

Keeping this talent will be an individual effort, not a procedure to follow or a training. It is hard work. It is the journey of an individual digging deep and trying again and again every day to be intentionally neuro-inclusive. It's not easy.

With your team feeling supported by their manager, you can tap into the diverse strengths of your team. Like I said before, we aren't always talking superpowers here, but neurodivergent individuals do bring unique strengths to the workplace. A quick list of skills as provided by Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion:

- Innovation and creativity
- Technical, design, and creative strengths
- New ways to solve problems
- High levels of concentration
- Keen accuracy and ability to detect errors
- Strong recall of information and detailed factual knowledge
- Reliability and persistence
- Ability to excel at work that is routine or repetitive in nature

Let's say for example, you have someone on your team that always seems to be coming up with great ideas but doesn't have the executive functioning to initiate those ideas into execution. Can you pair them with someone who loves new challenges but isn't an "ideas" person?

When you can build this type of neuro-inclusive environment you will get the best out of everyone. The more your diverse team is engaged and pulling mostly from their strengths, the more measurable the impact culturally as well as financial. And while seeing real benefit from adopting a neuro-inclusive approach will likely not be immediate, hold tight in the knowledge that you are sowing the seeds to a better culture and future.

CONCLUSION

Being a neuro-inclusive leader will make your team stronger. We need all types of people to get work done and we can't exclude our friends the neurodivergent because they don't conform to a stereotypical way of working. If you don't move towards having a more neuro-inclusive approach to leadership, your employees may leave for a place that does.

But it's not simply about retention of neurodivergent talent. Don't just aspire to keep them on staff, aspire to cultivate a workplace where they can have upward mobility as well. Neurodivergent staff, who tends to be overlooked often, have a lot to offer in the right framework, you can be a part of building a framework that helps an individual reach their full potential within your company.

Neurodiversity will never fully succeed unless managers include it as part of their own career journey. Don't just stop here, there is plenty of content out there (and advocates to help point you to it) that will support you through your personal growth in this topic.

Being neuro-inclusive can be very nuanced and can feel quite elusive. There is no process to follow, there is no guideline. You just have to care enough to change a little for the benefit of others.

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