

NAVIGATING NEURODIVERSITY

A Manager's Guide to Executive Capacity & Communication Styles

1. THE CORE CONCEPT: EXECUTIVE CAPACITY

Neurodivergent employees (Autism, ADHD, AuDHD) often possess high intelligence and creative problem-solving skills but operate on a different "energy economy" than neurotypical employees.

To prevent burnout, we must shift from managing **time** to managing **Executive Capacity**.

What is Executive Capacity?

Think of this as the brain's battery for "Executive Function"—the ability to plan, initiate tasks, regulate emotions, and filter sensory input.

- **Neurotypical Model:** Energy depletes linearly with time worked. (8 hours work = 8 hours energy used).
- **Neurodivergent Model:** Energy depletes based on **Cognitive Load**. A 30-minute meeting with vague instructions may drain more capacity than 4 hours of complex coding.

The Goal: Optimize the environment so employees spend their capacity on *work*, not on *filtering noise or decoding vague instructions*.

2. THE "LITERAL MIND": OBSERVATION & ADAPTATION

Autistic individuals often utilize "Bottom-Up Processing," meaning they process facts and details before understanding the broader, abstract context. This can lead to communication breakdowns if language is relied upon to convey "implied" meanings.

Observation Checklist: Noticing the Literal Thinker

Use these signs to identify employees who need direct communication styles.

- [] **"Exact Instruction" Adherence:** They do exactly what is asked, but nothing more. (e.g., You asked for the data file, they sent it. You are surprised they didn't also send a summary, but you didn't explicitly ask for one.)
- [] **The "Idiom Pause":** Visible confusion or a pause when phrases like "hit the ground running," "blue sky thinking," or "low hanging fruit" are used.
- [] **Anxiety with Ambiguity:** Visible distress when given deadlines like "ASAP" or "whenever you can." They may ask repeatedly for a specific time.

- [] **Honesty Over Hierarchy:** They provide direct, factual feedback to senior leadership without the "sugar-coating" or social buffering usually expected in corporate hierarchy.
- [] **The "Yes/No" Response:** When asked a polite command phrased as a question (e.g., "Do you want to send that email?"), they answer "No" because they interpret it as a choice, not a directive.

Question Bank: Bridging the Gap

Use these questions to align your communication style with their processing needs.

- "I tend to use metaphors in meetings. Does that help clarify the vision for you, or does it create more noise? Would you prefer I stick to concrete data?"
- "When I give a deadline like 'end of day,' does that cause anxiety? Would you prefer a specific timestamp, like 'Thursday at 5:00 PM'?"
- "Do you prefer to receive the 'Why' (context) before the 'What' (task), or do you just want the specific action items?"
- "Am I providing enough written instructions, or do you prefer we talk through the task first?"
- "In meetings, would it help if I sent you the agenda 24 hours in advance so you have time to process the topics?"

3. PREVENTING BURNOUT: THE ENERGY AUDIT

Neurodivergent burnout is not just "being tired"; it is a systemic depletion of Executive Capacity. Use these professional observations to spot it early.

Observation Checklist: Signs of Capacity Depletion

- **The 3 PM Fade:** The employee is highly articulate in the morning but becomes slower to respond, monosyllabic, or "glazed over" by mid-afternoon.
- **Task Paralysis:** The employee stares at a screen or organizes files for long periods without starting the primary task. *Note: This is often a biological freeze response, not laziness.*
- **Camouflage Fatigue:** An employee who is usually "on" (smiling, eye contact) suddenly becomes flat, expressionless, or keeps their camera off during remote calls.
- **Skill Regression:** A highly competent employee suddenly struggles with a routine task they mastered months ago.

Actionable Questions: The "Energy Audit"

- "If you have 100% 'mental bandwidth' for the day, which single task is currently taking up 50% of it?"
- "Do you find that switching between tasks (context switching) drains you more than the work itself? Would 'blocking' your schedule help?"

- "Is the *volume* of the work the issue, or is it the *ambiguity* of the instructions that is draining your energy?"
- "On a scale of 1-10, how much effort are you spending just 'filtering out' the office lights and noise right now?"

4. QUICK STRATEGIES FOR LEADERS

| Instead of... | Try This... | Why? |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| "Let's touch base later." | "Let's meet at 2 PM for 15 mins to discuss X." | Reduces cognitive load spent on anticipating the "unknown." |
| "Get this to me ASAP." | "I need this by 4 PM today." | Removes anxiety-induced paralysis caused by undefined urgency. |
| "You need to improve your attitude." | "I noticed you are quieter in meetings. Is your energy depleted?" | Addresses the root cause (burnout) rather than the symptom (masking). |
| "Just pop by my desk whenever." | "I have office hours between 1-2 PM." | Prevents interruption anxiety and allows for deep work focus. |