

Not Broken, Just Different: How to Lead Neurodivergent Teams



A conversation with a colleague today got me thinking.

When we talk about diversity, we often focus on what's visible and measurable. But in doing so, we sometimes miss equally important differences that are harder to see.

At work, diversity conversations often centre on gender, race, or background all of them critically important. However, there's another type of diversity that's just as vital and often overlooked: how people think, process information, communicate, and relate to the world.

Neurodivergence refers to natural differences in brain function and cognitive style. This includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, OCD, and more. These differences may present challenges, particularly in environments designed for one type of mind. They are

not deficits, flaws, or signs of being less capable, although they are sometimes treated that way.

This is difference, not deficiency and difference belongs in every successful team.

It's Often Not About Ability. It's About Fit.

The modern workplace tends to reward consistency, fluency, and adaptability, qualities that align closely with neurotypical norms. That might show up in how communication happens, how feedback is given, or how performance is measured. People who don't fit that model often face barriers, even when their skills and potential are undeniable.

It's common to hear concerns about "soft skills" or a lack of "presence." In many cases, though, the issue isn't a gap in capability. It's a mismatch between how someone works best and the systems they're expected to work within.

When a person's strengths aren't recognised, or their needs aren't supported, performance can suffer. Not because they can't do the work but because the environment gets in the way.

Neurodivergence Isn't a Limitation. It's a Variation.

Everyone brings a different cognitive profile to work. For some, those profiles have more extreme peaks and valleys, a trait often seen in neurodivergent individuals. Someone might struggle with task-switching or tight deadlines, but excel at pattern recognition, deep focus, or connecting seemingly unrelated ideas.

These traits aren't weaknesses, in fact, they're often exactly what teams need when facing complex challenges or stagnant thinking.

When workplaces are built to include (not just accommodate) that range of difference, the result is stronger collaboration, higher engagement, and genuinely innovative outcomes.

So How Do Inclusive Leaders Create Space for Difference?

If the goal is to empower people (not just include them) a few small intentional shifts in leadership can make all the difference:

- **Focus on flexibility, not sameness**

Rigid processes rarely bring out the best in everyone. Offer flexibility in how, when, and where people work. Asynchronous communication, fewer unnecessary meetings, and autonomy in task structure can lead to better results for all.

- **Communicate clearly and thoughtfully**

Neurodivergent individuals may experience challenges with ambiguous or informal communication. Clarity benefits everyone: define expectations, avoid assumptions, and give feedback that's specific and actionable.

- **Prioritise psychological safety**

People contribute more authentically when they don't feel pressure to mask or "perform" in neurotypical ways. Normalise different participation styles, accommodate sensory needs, and create space for honest conversation without fear of judgement.

- **Design for inclusion by default**

Not everyone feels comfortable disclosing a diagnosis and they shouldn't have to. Build inclusive design into everyday practices. From onboarding and communication norms to team rituals and physical spaces, small changes can have a big impact.

- **Rethink what you mean by 'professional'**

Too often, "professionalism" is code for conformity. Revisit how performance is assessed. Are you measuring the value someone adds or how well they align with an unwritten standard? That distinction matters.

This Is About Leadership, Not Labels

Supporting neurodivergent people at work isn't about special treatment. It's about creating teams where difference doesn't need to be explained

because it's expected.

Inclusive leadership means recognising that people engage, process, and contribute in different ways. These variations are a source of strength, not compromise.

This isn't about lowering the bar. It's about removing the barriers that prevent talented people from reaching it.

The most effective teams aren't made up of people who all work the same way. They're built by leaders who know how to make space for difference and who understand that neurodiversity isn't a problem to solve.

It's a strength to lead with.

Different isn't broken. It's where the best ideas often come from.

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