

Beyond Awareness: How to Co-Create Working Relationships Across Neurotypes



Awareness is a great first step but it's not the finish line.

A lot of organisations have made space for neurodiversity in the last few years. We've seen workshops, webinars, and employee stories shared. But many neurodivergent people are still quietly adapting, decoding, and masking as the organisation happily assumes **"we've already done the inclusion bit."**

The truth?

Awareness doesn't automatically change how we work together.

It just gives us the vocabulary.

If we want real inclusion, we need to go further.

We need to **co-create**.

Co-creation means:

- Moving from unspoken assumptions to shared expectations
- Flexing in *both* directions—not just asking ND folks to adapt
- Building working relationships *together*, not just slotting people into systems they didn't help design

I've written about how to do this practically, respectfully, and without adding more fluff to your calendar.

This is for you if:

- You're managing a neurodivergent team member (or wondering if you might be)
- You've been told you're "hard to read" or "too direct"
- You care about inclusion but feel unsure how to operationalise it
- You're tired of workshops with no follow-through

Let's move beyond awareness—and start building better ways of working, together.

#Neurodiversity #Leadership #Inclusion #CoCreation

#DoubleEmpathy #TeamCulture #NeurodivergentVoices

Inclusion isn't something we deliver *to* people—it's something we build *with* them.

This Co-Creation Checklist is designed to help teams move beyond awareness and start designing better ways of working, together.

Whether you're a manager, a teammate, or neurodivergent yourself, this tool helps you create working relationships that are grounded in clarity, trust, and mutual respect.

Too often, we assume that inclusion ends with a workshop or policy

update. But real inclusion lives in the daily details — how we give feedback, set expectations, and repair when something goes wrong. This checklist breaks that down into concrete, respectful steps you can use in 1:1s, retros, or onboarding sessions.

We’ve come a long way from asking “*What is neurodiversity?*” Awareness is rising. Teams are getting more comfortable naming different ways of thinking, processing, and communicating. But if you’re neurodivergent, you might recognise a common pattern: the workshop happens, the conversation starts... and then everything quietly stays the same.

You’re still masking to get through meetings.

You’re still decoding vague instructions.

You’re still having to constantly adapt while others don’t seem to shift at all.

This is where many organisations stall: at awareness. The Double Empathy Paradox reminds us that communication breakdowns between neurodivergent and neurotypical people aren’t one-sided, they’re mismatches. Bridging that gap takes more than goodwill. It takes **co-creation**.

Awareness Isn’t Enough

Awareness tells us *that* neurodivergent brains exist.

Co-creation asks: *How do we work together well, given that reality?*

A common trap is to view inclusion as something done *for* neurodivergent people, often through the lens of “accommodation.” While accommodations are essential, they can reinforce the idea that

one group is the default and the other is the deviation.

Co-creation flips that. It starts from the idea that **no one way of working fits everyone**, and that the best working relationships are designed, not assumed. Especially when neurotypes differ.

What Co-Creation Looks Like

Co-creation is the opposite of assumption. It's a shift from "Here's how we do things. Fit in" to "Let's figure out what works for both of us." At its core, co-creation means designing how we work *together*, rather than forcing one person to adapt to a system that wasn't built with them in mind.

It's not about lowering standards or avoiding discomfort, it's about recognising that mutual success comes from shared understanding, not silent struggle.

Let's unpack what that actually means in practice:

1. Shared Language: Defining the Invisible

So much workplace tension comes from two people using the same word to mean entirely different things. Neurodivergent and neurotypical brains often process tone, implication, and context differently. Without shared language, those differences can become friction.

Instead of:

"This task is urgent." [*Neurotypical manager means 'before end of week'; ND employee assumes 'drop everything immediately.'*]

Try co-creation:

“When I say urgent, I mean it needs to be done by Friday, can you tell me how that fits into your current workload?”

This principle also applies to emotional states. Many neurodivergent people may appear “fine” while internally overwhelmed. Others might use language literally or differently than expected. Co-creation invites us to slow down, check in, and define terms together.

Prompts that help:

- “How do you usually show when you’re stressed or overloaded?”
- “Are there words or phrases you’d like me to avoid or clarify?”
- “How do you prefer to give or receive feedback?”

2. Explicit Expectations: Clarity Over Convention

Many neurodivergent people don’t pick up on implicit workplace norms because those norms are often built on a shared social shorthand that not everyone speaks.

This is where projects can quietly derail. Instructions that are “obvious” to one person may be incomplete or ambiguous to another.

Instead of:

“Just let me know when it’s ready.”

[no deadline, no success criteria, and no agreement on what ‘ready’ looks like.]

Try co-creation:

“Let’s agree on what the finished version should include and set a time to check in midweek so we’re on the same page.”

Being explicit isn’t about over-explaining, it’s about making the invisible visible, so nobody is set up to fail.

Tips:

- Agree on definitions of “done,” “priority,” and “review.”
- Write down timelines, expectations, and next steps even if they seem simple.
- Check: “Does this feel clear to you? Anything you’d want clarified if you were working on it alone?”

3. Mutual Adaptation: Flexing in Both Directions

Traditional inclusion puts the onus on neurodivergent people to adapt, to mask, translate, or “improve communication skills.” When communication styles differ, the burden shouldn’t rest on one person.

Co-creation asks both sides to stretch.

Examples of mutual adaptation:

- A team switches to written standups in Slack to accommodate both verbal and non-verbal processors.
- A neurotypical colleague uses bullet points in their updates after noticing their ND teammate prefers structured input.
- A neurodivergent employee chooses when to use camera on/off during Zoom based on sensory load and the team normalises that flexibility.

Mutual adaptation isn’t about compromise it’s about creativity.

It’s a way of saying: *We’re not stuck with how things have always been. Let’s experiment together.*

Questions to try:

- “Is there a way we could make this more comfortable or accessible for both of us?”
- “If this format doesn’t work, what might work better next time?”
- “Is there anything I could adjust to help you show up more fully?”

4. Repair and Reset: Building Trust After Rupture

Even with the best intentions, miscommunications happen. Neurotypes clash. Emotions spike. Silence creeps in. What matters is how we *repair*.

Too often, workplace culture treats mistakes as failures rather than signals. In co-creative environments, we treat them as *data* evidence that something needs to be realigned.

Instead of:

Avoiding awkwardness and moving on silently.

Try co-creation:



“I think I misunderstood you earlier, can we pause and reset?”

“I noticed a shift in energy after that comment. Did something land wrong?”

Repair isn’t about assigning blame. It’s about returning to shared intent: to work well together, even when it’s messy.

Co-creation embraces rupture as part of relationship not a threat to it.

What Co-Creation is (and isn’t)

 Co-Creation is	 Co-Creation isn't
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A burden placed on ND employees
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An active, ongoing process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A one-off conversation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focused on <i>both</i> parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focused on “fixing” the outlier
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A mix of empathy and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just “being nice” or “accommodating”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Built through curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Built on assumptions

The Manager’s Role: Facilitator, Not Fixer

Managers are uniquely positioned to set the tone. Not as therapists or problem-solvers but as facilitators of good working relationships.

That means:

- Creating structures for co-creation (1:1s, working agreements, team charters)
- Encouraging direct dialogue instead of interpreting on behalf of others
- Modelling curiosity over certainty: *“Help me understand how that shows up for you.”*

Good managers don’t have all the answers. They ask better questions.

The Future Is Mutual

The Double Empathy Paradox showed us that the problem isn’t broken people it’s broken assumptions.

Co-creation invites us to stop relying on empathy as passive understanding and start using it as a tool for active collaboration.

This isn’t just a neurodiversity strategy it’s a human one.

The best teams aren’t the ones who communicate perfectly.

They’re the ones who keep building the bridge, together.

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