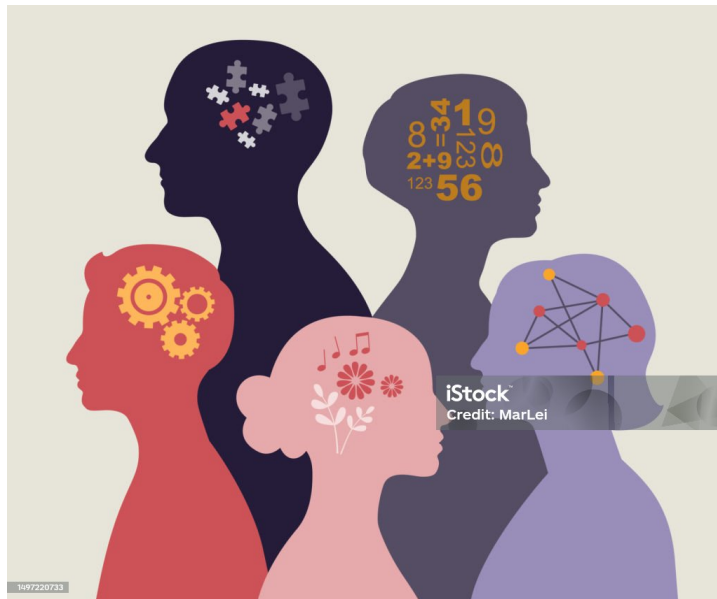


Empowering Neurodiversity: Fostering Inclusivity in Team Meetings

by Shalina Brady on November 26th, 2023



In the ever-evolving landscape of the modern workplace, diversity and inclusion have become more than just buzzwords; they are integral components of fostering innovative and efficient teams. Today, let's dive into one crucial aspect of an inclusive and diverse workspace— supporting neurodiverse individuals in team meetings. As we unlock the potential within our diverse teams, it's essential to address the unique challenges that neurodivergent folks face in the workplace.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Picture neurodiversity as a colorful kaleidoscope of diverse cognitive wiring, much like the complex biodiversity we find when looking outside. This mentality acknowledges that within a team, each member has a uniquely wired brain. The term "neurodivergent" helps distinguish those whose cognitive processes differ from the conventional "neurotypical" individuals. It's

based on the understanding that neurotypicality is a social construct, and these labels are tools we use to understand people's identities. Neurodivergence encompasses a spectrum, including conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia. A 2023 [survey](#) found that 51% of neurodivergent workers have quit or are willing to quit their jobs because they don't feel supported by their employers. As leaders, it's part of our mission to challenge biases about neurodiversity and foster environments that embrace diverse cognitive styles. Being neurodivergent doesn't hinder someone's intellect or ability to contribute, and when their strengths are recognized and leveraged, that person will thrive. Actually, [research](#) has found that teams with neurodivergent professionals in some roles can be 30% more productive than those without them. By breaking away from conventional workplace norms and thinking innovatively, we create workplaces where every staff member feels valued and included.

Challenges Faced by Neurodiverse Individuals in the Workplace

The professional experiences of neurodivergent social workers involve a troubling scarcity of awareness and support. A recent [pilot study](#) highlighted a lack of understanding regarding neurodiversity among managers and colleagues and how it adds to the many challenges neurodivergent social workers face. These include challenges like a lack of confidence, relentless anxiety, and an overarching sense of resignation. Adding to the struggle is the reaction of many neurotypical professionals who express disbelief at the idea of having neurodivergent colleagues. This stigma intensifies a neurodivergent's burden of self-doubt and pressure to conform.

More recently, researchers have started to find that neurodiverse workers spend extensive amounts of energy each day on simply just navigating their professional settings. All of that additional energy expenditure leads to an overall sense of

exhaustion and feeling 'lost' at work. Here are some examples of what neurodiverse individuals might do in the workplace that neurotypicals usually don't have to think about:

- **Scripting Conversations:** Some neurodiverse individuals create scripts or guidelines for common workplace conversations to help them navigate social interactions and ensure they respond appropriately in various situations.
- **Compensatory Strategies:** Neurodiverse professionals often have to develop compensatory strategies to manage challenges relating to executive functioning, organization, and time management. These typically involve using specific tools, apps, or techniques to stay organized and meet deadlines that go above and beyond what a neurotypical professional would need.
- **Concealing Stimming Behaviors:** Some neurodiverse individuals use stimming (self-stimulatory) behaviors to regulate their sensory needs. While at work, they are likely to consciously limit or conceal these behaviors to avoid drawing attention or potential misunderstanding from colleagues, contributing to sensory dysregulation.
- **Social Camouflaging (Masking):** Neurodiverse folks may expend significant energy in understanding and adhering to social norms, especially for these norms that do not come naturally to them. Examples of this include studying workplace culture and adjusting their behavior to appear neurotypical.
- **Learning Unwritten Rules:** Neurodiverse professionals may need to actively learn and decipher the unwritten rules of the workplace. Understanding social nuances, office politics, and unspoken expectations can take conscious effort and observation.

While neurodiverse professionals have resilience and creativity in adapting to workplace expectations, the negative effect of these challenges is undeniable and results in the utter depletion of mental and emotional resources. Creating a more inclusive and understanding workplace can help alleviate some of these challenges.

10 Strategies for Supporting Neurodiverse Team Members in Meetings

1. Clear Agendas and Pre-Communication:

- By providing clear agendas and materials ahead of time, neurodiverse folks will have time to prepare and process the information. This helps free up their brain power for more creativity and innovation rather than having to spend it all on processing.
- Sending out an email with a brief overview of the meeting's purpose, topics, and expectations before the meeting offers neurodiverse team members predictability, meaning they can know what to anticipate, easing anxiety.

2. Structured Meeting Formats:

- Using tools like defined agendas and clear timelines for meetings helps support predictability and routine, which reduces anxiety.
- When it's time for your team to have a larger and longer meeting, breaking it down into smaller, focused segments with breaks in between helps accommodate varying attention spans and can help prevent sensory overload.

3. Visual Supports:

- Utilizing things like charts, diagrams, and slides during presentations enhances understanding for neurodiverse individuals who find it easier to process visual information than strictly verbal or auditory information.
- Creating a routine of sending out the utilized visual supports after each meeting helps take the burden off of neurodiverse team members in their efforts to accurately document and catalog new information within their memory-aid systems.

4. Alternative Communication Channels:

- Written summaries or follow-up emails help reinforce spoken information and provide neurodiverse staff members with materials they can easily refer back to in the future.
- By encouraging your team to reach out to you via email or your organization's collaboration platform (i.e. Slack or Microsoft Teams), you accommodate those who have different communication preferences and allow space for them to contribute their ideas and feedback.

5. Flexible Participation Options:

- Be open to different participation options, like joining via video or contributing in writing, acknowledging that not everyone thrives in face-to-face settings. This inclusivity ensures that everyone can engage in a way that suits their strengths.
- With the recent rise in workplaces holding virtual meetings, many neurodiverse folks are finding that having their camera

on reduces their ability to focus and causes them to feel exhausted faster. This can be connected to the increased pressure to self-monitor for social appropriateness when on camera. In person, we can know who is watching us by quickly glancing around the room, which allows neurodiverse individuals to take micro-breaks from their social camouflaging when no one is looking. This isn't the case in virtual meetings, so those micro-breaks are less of an option.

6. Sensory Considerations:

- Show consideration for your team's sensory needs by creating a space that is familiar, comfortable, and has low sensory input. Start by setting up the space in an organized and uncluttered way. It may be surprising how seemingly insignificant things like crooked desks, too many chairs at a table, and the chaotic use of extension cords can make a room feel overwhelming. Implementing sensory considerations acknowledges the diverse sensory experiences of team members and promotes comfort and well-being within a workspace.

7. Encourage Social Scripts:

- This idea might sound strange to those of us who think of scripts as tools specific to movies and theatrical plays, but social scripts are all around us. Think about the last time you passed someone in a hallway and asked how they were doing or started a Monday morning email with 'I hope you had a great weekend.' Those are both examples of social scripts and we use them because they help guide behavior and communication, making everyone's interactions with each other feel more smooth and comfortable. For your neurodiverse team members, the use of social scripts alleviates pressure felt when navigating unfamiliar social dynamics and can empower confident engagement.

8. Speak Clearly and Authentically:

- Prioritizing clear and authentic communication in team meetings can ensure messages are accurately conveyed, reducing ambiguity and fostering an environment built on trust and predictability.
- For neurodiverse team members, explicit and transparent communication is especially crucial, as it minimizes anxiety, supports their preference for structured environments, and promotes inclusivity. All of this creates a workspace where they can thrive and contribute effectively.

9. Peer Support Networks:

- By providing opportunities for peer connection, you can create a supportive community where neurodiverse team members can exchange coping strategies and experiences, knowing they are not alone in their experiences. Fostering a collaborative and empathetic environment helps everyone to feel understood and supported.

10. Regular Check-Ins:

- Regularly checking in with neurodiverse team members offers a confidential and supportive space to discuss their unique needs and preferences. This is a proactive measure that shows your support and understanding for them is ongoing.
- Building this routine also creates a predictable and comfortable space for neurodiverse team members to receive feedback and engage in continuous collaboration and growth.

Benefits of Empowering Neurodiverse Team Members

Empowering neurodiversity in team meetings has multifaceted benefits. By embracing diverse cognitive styles, these meetings become a nurturing ground for creativity and innovation. Neurodiverse individuals can offer unique perspectives that challenge conventional thinking and spark novel ideas and solutions. This diversity extends to problem-solving, where a range of cognitive approaches contributes to more thorough and effective strategies. Accommodating neurodiverse workers' needs and preferences not only ensures inclusivity but also enhances a team's success overall. Through fostering an inclusive culture, you can promote morale, boost team dynamics, and strengthen decision-making. Researchers have even [found](#) that over a three-year time period, inclusive workplaces are as much as 8x as likely to be innovative and have 2.3x the cash flow per employee as non-inclusive workplaces.

As you go on to explore the strategies and benefits of empowering neurodiversity, consider this [quote](#):

“Neurodiverse people shouldn’t need to self-identify and ask for support in order for an organization to build systems that work for them. Rather, companies should build systems with those specific needs already in mind. A neurodiverse person, then, would not have to ask for support because the tools and resources they need would already be in place. And when you design for neurodiversity—and the structures and practices established to support neurodiverse talent—you build something that works for everyone.”

Resources and Tools

- ★ [The Neurodivergent Social Worker](#): “the first social work platform to publish the lived experiences of neurodivergent social workers”
- ★ [Neurodiversity MythBusters](#), Institute of Neurodiversity
- ★ [Neurodivergent Accommodations Guide - For the Employee](#), created by actually autistic creator and professional, Alex Pearson
- ★ [Neurodivergent Accommodations Guide - For the Employer](#), created by actually autistic creator and professional, Alex Pearson
- ★ [Autistic Perspectives on Neurodiversity at Work](#), Part 3 of a video series, United Nations World Autism Day 2023
- ★ [Neurodiversity Resources](#), UNC-Chapel Hill, School of Social Work, 2023