**Creating Safe Spaces for Neurodivergence in the Workplace**

Why this starts with company culture!

I recently had the pleasure of sitting down with [Ken Blackwell for an episode of his Insight at Work podcast](https://insightatworkpodcast.com/episodes/22). It’s so exciting to me that more and more companies are tuning into the advantages of hiring divergent thinkers into their workforce. It’s even more inspiring that these leaders want to do things right for their neurodivergent employees.

In that podcast we talked a lot about how creating a truly diverse workplace requires a shift in mindset, both personally and on an institutional level. The way we manage employees, the way systems and structures are organized, and our personal day-to-day interactions all need to be re-examined to create a workplace that is genuinely inclusive for all workers.

As I walked away from that conversation, I kept thinking about the importance of company culture. I believe that it is the single most important factor for creating a safe space for neurodivergence in the workplace.

When I talk about “safe space” I am obviously talking about physical safety, but I am also referring to psychological safety. If you are like most people, you probably expect me to talk about anti-bullying tactics or diversity training. All of those subjects are fundamental when we talk about safe spaces, but I want you to dig a little deeper and think about safe spaces in a way that maybe you haven’t before.

I want to talk about a “safe space” as being a place where neurodivergent workers are safe to be themselves.

I think of my colleague Amanda, who I mentioned in the podcast. She was so thrilled when her manager recognized how her OCD need for perfection was interfering with her ability to meet deadlines. Instead of taking a punitive approach, this manager was creative. He worked with her to come up with a solution that allowed her to meet her goals, while giving her permission to lower her standards of absolute perfection.

This manager wasn’t hung up on labels. He wasn’t bound to a strict review process. He was simply conscientious and respectful. He wanted to help Amanda meet her goals while respecting her unique way of working. She was allowed and even encouraged, to be herself. She was supported in working the way that came naturally to her.

Having the right systems is a great place to start for any company that wants to support the divergent thinkers in their workplace. But creating a safe environment in the sense I am talking about requires taking an honest assessment of the culture of your organization.

“Company culture” is a hot topic these days. It seems more important than ever to create positive work environments that attract and retain top talent. Inclusion and diversity are on the top of every manager’s mind.

**Potential Roadblocks to a Safe Workspace:**

As I have worked with one organization after another, certain things have caught my eye that can create potential problems for divergent thinkers in the workplace.

**Labels**:

It almost seems like a fad to attach a label to ourselves these days, but for many divergent thinkers, a label can be a harsh reminder of the limits they’ve had imposed upon them their entire lives. Stigma has always accompanied certain diagnoses, and there is a good chance that your neurodivergent worker does not want to be distinguished by a label. They may even be actively trying to hide a diagnosis in an effort to not bring attention to themselves. My suggestion? Focus on the individual and what they need to thrive.

**Stereotypes and Assumptions:**

Avoid limiting your employees by assuming what they need based on what you observe from media or external perceptions. The best way to do this is to foster a company culture that values communication and flexibility. Ask instead of assuming what is needed.

**Gaps in support:**

It’s tempting to jump headfirst into intentionally bringing more divergent thinkers into your workforce, but please be aware of any gaps in the institutional supports those workers may need. They should not be put in a position to have to advocate for their own interests and accommodations. Create committees and teams to review systems and procedures to make sure they allow room for effortless inclusion. Invite participation and actively seek out feedback from your employees.

**Paving the Way to a Company Culture that Values Safety**

A real sense of safety is achieved when a company culture considers the real needs of its employees.

One way to create a safe space is to have clear anti-bullying initiatives. But an open door policy that values direct and honest communication combined with training that helps neurotypical workers understand alternative ways of thinking, will go a lot further. Combine all that with a culture that promotes asking for help and support when needed. Add active listening and communication skills, and you will create a safe space for all your workers, not just divergent thinkers.

**Real Safety is Being Able to Be**

When it comes to creating safe spaces in the workforce for neurodiversity, what it boils down to is creating a company culture that allows for people to be more human. When managers and executive-level employees set an example and encourage communication, creativity, and flexibility — divergent thinkers will feel free to be themselves. When that culture is backed up by systems that allow for meaningful accommodations, neurodivergent workers will thrive.

**Recommended Reading**

I’ve written a lot about the ideas discussed above. Be sure to check out the following articles to read a little deeper into these themes.

[How to Lay the Groundwork for Neurodiversity in the Workplace (If You Want It to Work)](https://medium.com/the-learning-strategist-iq/laying-the-groundwork-for-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace-if-you-want-it-to-work-a12732d94c49)

[How to Create a Company Culture that Embraces Different Thinkers in the Workplace](https://susanfitzell.com/how-to-create-a-company-culture-that-embraces-different-thinkers-in-the-workplace/)

[How Quarantine Accommodations Benefit Neurodivergent People](https://susanfitzell.com/how-quarantine-accommodations-benefit-neurodivergent-people/)

[Neurodiversity and New People Labels](https://susanfitzell.com/neurodiversity-and-new-people-labels/)

Definitions as Referenced in this Article:

The following definitions were created by Nick Walker, of neurocosmopolitanism.com.

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurotypical, often abbreviated as NT, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

[Neurominority, any group, such as people with autism\*, which differs from the majority of a population in terms of behavioral traits and brain function](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/neurominority)

\*preferred language … such as autistic people, which…