# **Helping Workers Manage their own Cognitive Differences in the Workplace**

Strategies to Help Neurodivergent Workers Help Themselves

# Now, more than ever before, businesses are embracing innovation and flexibility when it comes to meeting the needs of their workforce. If the COVID pandemic taught us anything, it’s that with a little creativity, solutions can be found for even the most insurmountable obstacles. Since early 2020, nearly every single business has had to make accommodations for their workforce of one kind or another to keep their “doors open” and ride out the instability and uncertainty that defined this last year and a half.

As we approach the light at the end of the tunnel of this pandemic, there is an interesting conversation taking place in the world of human resources (HR). We are at a historic moment where ‘business as usual’ is being reexamined. Recruitment and hiring practices, onboarding, and even the way workers are evaluated are under the microscope. There is a sudden collective questioning of *How can we do things better?* across the entire business community.

When it comes to the neurodivergent community in the workforce, there has never been a more opportune moment to make the case for meaningful accommodations. Managers and executives are more receptive than ever to implementing the changes necessary to both meet their worker’s needs and increase productivity.

When it comes to helping workers manage their cognitive differences in the workplace, what it boils down to is the ability to listen to each individual, provide reasonable accommodations and empower neurodivergent workers to help themselves.

I recently did an interview with Ken Blackwell on his [Insight at Work podcast](https://insightatworkpodcast.com/episodes/22), and in that conversation, we touched a lot on this very subject. Ken said something that really stuck with me that day. He said that we need to *give managers and leaders permission to not have all the answers and expect them to know everything when giving direction*. This is one of the truest statements I have ever heard, especially as it relates to creating workplace accommodations for workers with cognitive differences.

So what can the leaders in the workplace do to support the neurodivergent thinkers on their teams?

**Promote communication and active listening in the neurodiverse workplace.**

The single most important factor when it comes to helping your neurodivergent workers help themselves is to have a workplace culture that values open communication with leaders that are skilled in active listening. This way, when you see a worker who is tripped up by OCD, dyslexia, or some other cognitive difference, you can have productive conversations that lead to collaborative solutions.

Ask the right questions. What, exactly, are the obstacles the worker perceives in the workplace? Are they overwhelmed by the physical environment and sensory stimulation? Do they struggle with irregular schedules or strict deadlines? What possible solutions do *they* suggest? The best person to provide suggestions for viable solutions is the employee who is struggling!

Several years ago I was consulting at a middle school to support teachers working with neurodivergent learners. Most of these “different learners,” also called “students with learning disabilities,” were struggling to be successful with traditional teaching practices. At the time, in addition to training and coaching, I offered my clients the option of having me work one-on-one with a student in order to do a full assessment and then make recommendations. That full assessment not only included going through their school records from kindergarten through the present day, but also interviewing all their teachers, and the student himself. The particular student I evaluated was struggling in all his classes. In his frustration, he acted out, disrupting the learning process for everyone in the room.

In the one-on-one interview with this kid, I asked him to tell me what he would do differently if *he* was the teacher. What he said left me gobsmacked. He said, “I would draw pictures on the board.”

I responded, “What kind of pictures?”

He went on to explain, “I love science. In class yesterday Mrs. Smith was teaching about water systems. She was talking about the hydrosphere and saltwater and oceans and all that. But she was just talking and writing notes on the board for us to take down in our notebooks. If I were teaching it I would draw pictures. When I see pictures about what the teacher is teaching, I remember it better.”

Jimmy’s response was so simple.

Nowadays, every teacher has learned the importance of using visuals when teaching lessons in the classroom. But sadly, most publishing companies don’t include enough visuals in grade 8 curriculums and teacher lesson plans. Even if they do, some teachers teach according to their learning preference. If they learn best with linear notes and verbal lectures, they might not even consider that students need diagrams, flowcharts, or visuals.

I shared what Jimmy told me with his team. It was an aha moment for everyone in the room. Again, this student’s behaviors were so disruptive the team was at a loss of what to do to engage him in learning.

One month later I returned to sit with the team. When I asked how Jimmy was doing, every teacher shared that his behavior had improved 100%. They said it was like he wasn’t even the same kid. I asked what they thought changed? Every one of them explained that they started including diagrams and visuals with their lectures and that’s all that was needed.

Now, the pictures clearly helped Jimmy. But another piece of this solution might be that *someone finally asked him what he needed*, listened to what he said, and then took action to make sure his needs were respected and met.

This concept is no different in the workplace: If an employee is struggling, ask them what their perception of the issue is and what can be done to support them. I’ve learned throughout my career that there’s very little difference between what a kindergartener needs to learn from what a tenth grader needs to learn from what an adult needs to learn.

When it comes to accommodating cognitive differences, there is no one-size-fits-all template. This is true even when it comes to accommodating workers who have specific diagnoses such as ADHD or Dyslexia. Most neurodivergent adults have learned, through life experience, what they need to accomplish their goals and get their jobs done.

Managers and leaders will benefit from training that promotes active listening skills and positive communication techniques. This will allow true collaboration between management and workers to design individualized solutions.

**Dedicate the time necessary to design effective accommodations for divergent thinkers.**

Even though solutions should be tailored to the individual, a lot of time and productivity can be lost if you simply improvise accommodations for each neurodivergent employee. If you want to allow your worker to manage their own cognitive differences, your organization needs to take the time to design structural accommodations that support neurodiversity in the workplace *in general*. The beauty of this is that those same accommodations benefit all employees. Having these in place will save managers a lot of time and energy. The ROI is increased productivity, innovation, and problem-solving.

If you have one worker who is overstimulated by excessive noise, for example, you could allow that person to use noise-canceling headphones judgement-free! That is certainly a great start. If it is within the realm of possibility, you could also designate an area of the workspace that is “noise-free.” If finances allow, make noise-canceling headphones freely available for any worker that may need them. You may be surprised at how many employees take advantage of simple accommodations made available to all. Again, the ROI is increased productivity, innovation, and problem-solving.

Forward-thinking organizations need to invest the time necessary to design meaningful accommodations for the divergent thinkers in their workplace. The payoff is verified by research on companies making this investment.

***Remember to ask, How can we support everybody on the team?***

This approach will save you a lot of extra work in the long run while benefiting every member of a neurodiverse workforce.

Trust in the neurodivergent worker’s capabilities.

Your neurodivergent employee got their job for a reason. I’m willing to bet that they are good at what they were hired to do. The reality is that they often get into trouble for things they were not hired to do or are not good at!

When it becomes obvious that a worker’s cognitive difference is interfering with their ability to do their job, the team leader might proactively engage the employee using positive communication and active listening strategies. Approach the conversation with a gifts mindset as opposed to a deficit mindset. A hard-line, critical, authoritarian approach is likely to provoke a negative response. Criticism, put downs, and perceived failure is the story of a neurodivergent’s life. It’s a lose-lose approach.

When the appropriate accommodations have been identified and implemented, it’s time to step back and leave that person alone. Let them do their job.

When divergent thinkers in a neurodiverse workplace can count on empathetic management and supportive accommodations, they will impress you with a dramatically improved performance. The idea is to give support and then back away. Eventually, your employees will adapt to the different processes designed for their benefit, allowing them independence and autonomy to get their job done.

Creating a Culture of Inclusivity in a Neurodiverse Workplace

When you help workers with cognitive differences help themselves through personalized strategies and accommodations, you are taking the first fundamental steps in creating a workplace with a culture of inclusivity.

***What it boils down to is management’s need to be human.***

To be flexible. To take the time to build relationships, ask the right questions, and set your assumptions aside. As a manager, you don’t have to have all the answers. As Ken said in that [Insight at Work](https://insightatworkpodcast.com/episodes/22) interview, it really is as simple as listening to your employees and finding solutions from a place of co-creation.

When workers feel seen and heard, they do their job better.

**References and Recommended Reading:**

[Accommodation and Compliance: Autism Spectrum](https://askjan.org/disabilities/Autism-Spectrum.cfm) By the Job Accommodation Network

[How to Create A Workplace Where Employees Can Ask for Help When They Need It](https://susanfitzell.com/how-to-create-a-workplace-where-employees-can-ask-for-help-when-they-need-it/)

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

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