## **Neurodiversity and Psychological Safety at Work**

## **Workplace bullying exists**

Although there are laws in place to protect employees, the dark side of human nature often prevails. Unfortunately, workplace bullying may go unreported out of fear of retaliation. When it comes to neurodiversity and protecting a person’s psychological safety at work, a proactive approach is required.

## **Workplace bullying: It can happen anywhere**

One of the most profound experiences I’ve had with work-based bullying occurred at a local hospital. I was presenting training for nursing staff on the topic and there were approximately 30 people in attendance.

About an hour into the training, a nurse came up to me and apologized that she had to leave. A doctor called her out of the session, demanding that she return to work. The organizer of the training later confided in me that the doctor who called that nurse back to work did so because he was bullying her.

It was because of him that she was in the session.

That same client later suggested that I change the name of my workshop. She explained that the title “Workplace Bullying” was too much of a red flag. If a nurse attended the session, people wondered who was bullying him or her. Attending was simply put, a risk for someone whose psychological safety at work was being compromised. She felt a title that did not include the word “bullying” would have better attendance.

## **Fostering psychological safety for neurodivergent workers**

Now consider this: if the general population experiences bullying in the workplace, what do neurodivergent workers experience? Neurodivergent employees include gifted people in the autism spectrum and those who have dyslexia, ADHD, or other unique cognitive differences.

Jane Gross, in her New York Times article, [*As Autistic Children Grow, So Does Social Gap*,](https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/26/health/as-autistic-children-grow-so-does-social-gap.html) states how the widening social gap affects people with autism as they grow older. New problems arise as neurodivergent adults start the next chapter of their lives.

Given the challenges and social stigma they experience growing up, it can be difficult for neurodivergent adults to become adept in social skills in the workplace. This is why employers must make the effort to create a harmonious, safe, and ultimately more productive workplace environment by fostering a culture that supports neurodiversity.

## **Supporting neurodiversity in the workplace**

To gain the maximum benefit of all employee talent and foster a workplace that nurtures neurodiversity, keep the following considerations in mind.

### **Understand, don’t judge**

The first step that companies can take to support neurodiversity in their workplace is to gain an understanding of neurodivergent individuals. Each individual has unique abilities.

Neurodivergent workers are far more capable than their labels, often assigned in childhood, lead us to believe. Sadly, these capabilities are often obscured by the fact that socially, neurodivergent people behave differently than the status quo.

It is also important to note that not all neurodivergent workers agree that they have a disability. (GMB union, 2018).

Why is this important?

Labels can be a trigger for a host of negative emotions that build up through childhood. Labels may provoke defensiveness or feelings of insecurity on the job. On the contrary, a workplace culture that embraces divergent thinking and personalities without labeling creates an environment for all employees to thrive.

The reality is, we all are unique individuals and bring our individual strengths to the job. Fostering a space where neurodivergent talent is well understood without judgment will create a safe space for all employees to open up and share their expertise.

### **Education and training**

One of the major underlying causes of abuse and bullying in the workplace is a simple lack of understanding of people who are different. Although some people are intentionally mean, the most common cause of bullying or microaggression in the workplace is ignorance.

Without an understanding of neurodiversity, many employees think of their neurodivergent coworkers as peculiar and strange. Most often, people think that these coworkers have mental health issues (GMB union, 2018). This misconception can lead to conflict which can then lead to misguided solutions that do nothing to foster a productive working environment.

Conducting seminars and educating employees on how neuro- cognition is different in neurodivergent people supports the understanding and appreciation of divergent thinkers and their unique talents and abilities.

Instead of focusing on what appears to be a social deficit, focus on individual employee strengths and talents. This is the difference between a workplace culture of a deficit mindset and a workplace culture that has a gifts mindset. A company culture that values a gifts mindset understands how each individual contributes to the company’s bottom line while simultaneously protecting their workers’ psychological safety at work.

Investing in the creation of a workplace culture that supports neurodiversity will result in a greater advantage in the competitive market. Creating a harmonious workplace where all employees thrive also boosts productivity, innovation, efficiency, and problem-solving.

**Set up a support team**

It is important that each workplace have a non-judgmental support team for individuals to make it easier for them to address issues of concern, particularly microaggressions, verbal assaults, and harassment.

Confidential, private sessions are necessary to provide opportunities for individuals to voice their concerns. Follow-up processes need to be fair and equitable. A thorough and justifiable system should be in place for investigating situations. Incident reports should be evaluated in a manner that is reasonable and comprehensive. Having a support team will create a safe environment where neurodivergent employees feel heard and protected.

Employees need to know that this support system exists, and most importantly, how to access it.

### **Implement rules and expectations**

Company culture is defined by action or inaction, not policy.

Though rules and policies may be set on paper, implementation is sometimes lacking. Without proper implementation and the periodic reevaluation of anti-bullying policies, all your efforts will be in vain. All employees need to know what the company’s values are and what behaviors are expected from them.

It is crucial that there be consistency in enforcing these policies. The consequences of breaking anti-bullying rules should be clearly stated so that employees know exactly what will happen if they should engage in bullying acts.

## **Don’t close doors: Give neurodiversity a chance in a safe workplace**

[The Institute of Leadership & Management](https://www.institutelm.com/resourceLibrary/workplace-neurodiversity-the-power-of-difference.html) states, “New research, in partnership with Infinite Autism, Autistic Nottingham, and Tourettes Action, reveals a significant lack of understanding and awareness of neurodivergence in the workplace despite an estimated one in seven people being neurodivergent.”

Suzanne Dobson, CEO of Tourettes Action (leading support and research charity for people with Tourette’s syndrome and their families) states, “When we are trying to restart our economy we cannot afford to marginalize so many creative and intelligent people. People living with Tourette Syndrome are especially marginalized as people mistakenly believe everyone with TS has the swearing tic, coprolalia, whereas only 10–15% do.”

And yet, those making recruitment decisions, sift people with Tourette’s syndrome out very quickly — swiftly followed by other neurodivergent candidates.

Oftentimes, neurodivergent job applicants simply do not get hired because of the general stigma associated with their condition. Their skillset and qualifications are dismissed based on the stereotypes that exist amongst those doing the hiring.

If and when they are contracted, the stigma often remains. Neurodivergent employees may be on edge in the workplace; continually worrying about saying or doing the wrong thing and fearful of losing their job. Consequently, they may find it difficult to unleash their optimal productive capacity. They are frequently judged, even before they start.

Allow time for neurodivergent employees to showcase their talents. Create a psychologically safe workplace that allows them to do so. Be patient. Neurodivergent employees excel in their chosen fields when company culture provides the safe and welcoming environment necessary for them to flourish.

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## **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…

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