

Unleashing the power of neurodiversity: giving voice in communication challenges for inclusive leadership – say what you mean and mean what you say

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Abstract

Purpose – With approximately 15–20% of people across the globe being Neurodivergent, leaders and academics must find ways to adapt communication to ensure inclusion. The aim of this research is to devise a framework for all to understand how to best communicate with each other that supports Neurodiversity inclusion.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on over 300 online questionnaire responses, the authors explored the communication challenges faced by Neurodivergent individuals, specifically with non-Neuroinclusive leaders.

Findings – Neurodivergent people are conscious that they are “a-typical” and function, learn and process information differently from the majority who are Neurotypical. In many instances, the issue of what was said does not match what was heard, resulting in a response that is not the detail being sought. A change in language and approach is needed.

Practical implications – Connecting the value of neurodiversity with communication strategies has the potential to support Neurodiversity inclusion as an organizational strength for increased business results. This can be applied in the development of support mechanisms for business school students as they develop their leadership skill set, or within an organization resulting in added competitive advantage.

Originality/value – This framework offers the ability to increase engagement by establishing a “way of working” between Neurodivergent and Neurotypical people, enabling the longevity and inclusion of Neurodiversity in the work environment. Thereby contributing to the Neurodiversity movement by offering an adaptable communication framework.

Keywords Neurodiversity, Leadership, Inclusion, Adapted communication, Hidden disability, Neuroinclusion

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

This research was instigated following an experienced and qualified Neurodivergent academic failing to provide the detail anticipated by an interview panel. The issue was that what the panel asked did not reflect the details being sought. With the cognitive diversity of Neurodivergent individuals being well documented (Rosqvist et al., 2020, p. 193), by providing the practicalities from an insider perspective, this research examined whether this and the associated challenges faced by Neurodivergent individuals is a common occurrence or whether this was a once-off situation. Welcome to the mindset of a Neurodivergent individual and the ever-present struggle this brings when there is either limited or no open communication to clarify understanding. Herein lies the challenge for leaders, providing our research question of – Do Neurodivergent individuals need to be encouraged to ask clarifying questions before answering? With the aim of contributing to the Neurodiversity movement by identifying whether, before answering, if Neurodivergent individuals can reconfirm their understanding of what is being asked and/or sought without being marginalised (April et al., 2023; Mitra-Kalita, 2023; Paul, Laird, & Tune, 2016).

Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, coined the term “neurodiversity”, which began drawing attention to the diversity of human minds in her 1997 Master’s thesis. Her chapter “Why Can’t You be Normal for Once in Your Life?” (Singer, 1999) has gone on to define an era of Neurodiversity-related research. As a result, the term has been appearing on a wider scale within literature (Bernard et al., 2023; LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Rosqvist et al., 2020; Singer, 2017), encompassing an increasing range of Neurodivergent conditions, under the umbrella term of “Neurodiversity” (Baeza-Velasco, 2021; Casanova et al., 2020). Where Neurodivergent people learn and process differently, using their cognitive diversity (Chapman, 2020; Doyle, 2024), “Neurotypical” are people who process information as society expects (Jurgens, 2020). Neurodiversity covers a wide range of diagnoses which includes: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and also includes “hidden disabilities” such as Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) (Casanova et al., 2020; Baeza-Velasco, 2021), where statistics identify that approximately 15–20% of people across the globe are Neurodivergent (Eagle et al., 2023; Branicki et al., 2024).

According to a report by MBTI[®], Neurodiversity is essential to enhancing innovation (MBTI, 2024). Although the report states that Neurodiversity as essential to innovation, broader research supports that inclusivity is a key barrier being faced by Neurodivergent individuals on being integrated within an organization (Holmes & Butcher, 2019; Martins, 2020; Szulc, 2024). A key element in the MBTI report is how organizations risk the legal consequences of mismanaging inclusion and failing to utilize an individual’s full potential (MBTI, 2024). This aligns with findings that “managers of neurodiverse employees have no choice but to manage these employees” (Krzeminska et al., 2019, p. 459) and where there are shadows of legal implications of managing people with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Tilmes, 2022). This is not to excuse but highlights the very real situation of organizations “avoiding the complication” through inadvertently blocking and hindering the progress of Neurodiversity inclusion within the workplace. This ratifies that Neurodivergent individuals face many challenges compared to those who are Neurotypical.

Therein lies the basis of this research, that is, enabling leaders to focus on what can be achieved where the fear and intimidation of the legal implications could be a factor hindering Neurodiversity engagement, both in the education system and workforce. It could be interpreted that managers and Human Resources avoid the risk of potential legal action by preferring Neurotypical employees rather than Neurodivergent. Whether conscious or not, by avoiding the recruitment of Neurodivergent people and/or those with hidden disabilities, organizations are avoiding the potential risk of legal action (Krzeminska et al., 2019; Wikström et al., 2011).

Literature review

Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership is defined by Roberson & Perry (2022, p. 755) as “showing a genuine interest in, and generating trust from others”. Knowing one Neurodiversity is not knowing all Neurodiversities, hence Neurodiversity is referred to as a spectrum, where people with the same condition have variabilities in both challenges and needs, particularly ADHD and Autism (Hours et al., 2022; Stenn et al., 2023). This variability means that interactions, support and communication need to be adaptive. In supporting adaptive, psychometric tools such as MBTI© offer an understanding of differences and how an individual can adapt to get the best from the other person, who in this context is the Neurodivergent person (Kou-Barrett, 2024). Furthermore, when considering the learning environment, available theories need to come to the fore again, such as Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which divides the learning process into a four-step learning cycle; and combining Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Universally Designed Synergistic Supervision (UDSS) as Stenn and Osterholt (2023) designed to develop an open, creative workplace. When we see that people have different starting points for learning, gaining information and different language based on psychometrics, the key is for all people, to be truly inclusive, to learn to adapt to get the best from others, whether Neurodiverse or not. In other words, we often have inclusive leadership tools available but are not using them effectively to bring more diversity, equality and inclusion in a workplace or educational environment.

Rosqvist et al. (2020), in their systematic review of 107 articles on inclusive leadership, found that the “Neurodiversity paradigm(s) can be seen as perspectives [...] and [as] an ethical stance” (p. 228). This links Neurodiversity and ethical considerations, where Rosqvist et al. (2020) further concluded that “[w]e don’t think that a tension is inevitable, rather that both can enable and inform each other” (p. 228), thereby increasing understanding in any environment. Building on this aspect, Veli Korkmaz et al. (2022) reviewed over 100 articles on inclusive leadership through multiple lenses and identified that there is a gap in research on the predictive value in terms of employee and organizational outcomes. A gap that this research seeks to reduce.

Neuroinclusive leadership

In recent literature, there are at least three main perspectives on Neuroinclusive leadership. Firstly, there is the generic need for leadership to be more inclusive (April et al., 2023), with policies and practices to help integration (Bewley & George, 2016), and all being underpinned through changes in organizational culture (Houdek, 2022). In addition, there is a distinct need for more inclusive research, specifically through proactive involvement of neurominorities (Szulc, 2024). In seeing Neurodiversity as a diversity (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Matuson, 2019); Neurodiversity is appearing as an area of discrimination in the workplace (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023), which can be overcome through embedding Neuroinclusive leadership as common practice (Roberson et al., 2021; Woodard & Hyatt, 2024). Indeed, all leaders should be adapting their leadership communication to have a positive impact on their teams, whether Neurodiverse or Neurotypical (Illingworth & Hiddlestone-Mumford, 2024; Randel et al., 2018), that is, embracing a Neuroinclusive leadership approach.

Legislation requires organizations to make reasonable adjustments to support employees with disabilities; this includes employees that are Neurodivergent being classed as someone who has a “hidden disability” (Fung & Doyle, 2021; Doyle, 2020). Adjustments that may benefit all employees, and not Neurodiverse alone, include clearer communication, quiet concentration spaces, and individual needs consideration by management (April et al., 2023; Morgan, 2018; Turner & Andrew, 2018). Yet alarmingly, research indicates that over half of leaders and managers mistakenly assume incapability, indicating they would not employ

someone with a Neurodivergent condition (ILM, 2020a; ILM, 2020b; ILM, 2020c). Additionally, of the 1,156 Neurotypical and Neurodiversity respondents of an Institute of Leadership and Managers (ILM) survey undertaken in 2019, most indicated that their organization neither includes Neurodiversity within policies and procedures nor provides training on inclusion (ILM, 2020a; ILM, 2020b; ILM, 2020c). As stated by LeFevre-Levy et al. (2023, p. 1) “the neuroatypical population has a history of under-[employment] and unemployment, their inclusion in the modern workplace [...] (is) an important dimension of organizational diversity.” This under-inclusion leaves people who are Neurodivergent as an underutilized and untapped talent, and are often discriminated against through unconscious bias and misinformation (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Rosqvist et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2022). In turn, these assumptions can cause offence and create impressions of someone not being valued or respected. An area people who are Neurodivergent too often feel the brunt of.

Neurodiversity and human resources

Within a work environment, for all employees there are two key focal points of authority and advice, right from the beginning of the recruitment process through to integration into the organization, these being the line manager and Human Resources. When this is considered in the context of the Human Resource Business Partner Model (Ulrich, 2009) which is becoming increasingly adopted, where Human Resources transforms to being an internal consultant approach to support line managers with the devolution of Human Resource responsibilities (Tamayo-Verleene et al., 2018). This provides a direct link between Human Resources and the line manager as a key contact for new employees, which may account for the hesitation or lack of confidence toward including atypical, Neurodiverse candidates in the interview rounds. Human Resources itself features in research that identifies employee performance as a direct link to employee integrity (Andayani & Lanin, 2022; Konadu et al., 2023; Rosmi & Syamsir, 2020), where Neurodiversity was explored as a competitive advantage by Austin and Pisano (2017). It appears, however, that the focus of unleashing performance and engaging employees is yet to be fully explored in relation to Neurodivergent individuals and those with hidden disability in the workforce in the context of leadership responsibility and even the obligation considering that managers are taking on Human Resource responsibilities. So too, this would present an opportunity for all business schools to integrate awareness and support within programs such as MBA, BBA and MA HRM to enable positive change in leadership and Human Resource views of Neurodiversity in the workplace.

Hennekam and Follmer (2024) and Negt and Haunschild (2024), have published practice-based reviews, finding that some organizations have policies and practices in place to include Neurodivergent individuals. However, Negt and Haunschild (2024) study supported Human Resources policy rather than Neurodivergent individuals as a standard practice in implementing the policy. Negt and Haunschild (2024) published a systematic literature review on the gap between Human Resource research and practice, identifying that literature tends to either critique Human Resource practitioners or be conceptually driven. This research will take the angle of raising the deficiencies in literature from a Neurodiverse individual perspective in the context of Neuroinclusive leadership development to unleash the full capabilities of Neurodivergent team members.

In aligning the context of Human Resources as an added line manager responsibility, whilst being held accountable for meeting operational objectives, it would be safe to consider the intense pressures on line managers of “getting it right”, especially in the context of Neurodiversity and hidden disabilities (Blayney et al., 2020; Bos-Nehles et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020). When considering the overwhelming range of hidden disabilities, of which Neurodiversity is included, the organizational pressures on managers/leaders in the

workplace, along with negative perceptions of disability inclusion, whether visible or hidden, is an area that requires urgent attention and support through Neurodiversity awareness training. The negative perception of atypical people in conjunction with disability discrimination laws/acts has fostered fear within many organizations, where disability is perceived as a deficit (Ali et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2020). These laws are designed, in theory, to protect a person with a disability from discrimination. With challenges in succeeding the recruitment process, it is understandable that many with disabilities fear losing their jobs should they disclose their condition or ask for workplace adjustments (Norstedt, 2019; ILM, 2020a). Of 1,156 Neurotypical and Neurodiverse staff surveyed in 2019, only half of the Neurodiverse respondents indicated that employers actively sought out whether they needed workplace adjustments compared to 74% of Neurotypical who assumed employers asked (ILM, 2020b; ILM, 2020c). An issue also highlighted in Davies et al.'s (2022) findings, where the views of 181 autistic adults around requesting and receiving workplace adjustments were analyzed, noting that although considered important, few received needed workplace adjustments, impacting their ongoing employment. Autistic individuals were researched by Hipólito et al. (2020), highlighting the cognitive diversity rather than a theoretical deficit.

In many cases, the accommodations and challenges are manageable, and the potential returns are great; but, to realize the benefits, most organizations would have to “adjust their recruitment, selection, and career development policies to reflect a broader definition of talent” (Austin & Pisano, 2017, p. 97). So too, Palipana (2022, p. 165) notes that “(d)isability (doesn’t) mean inability”. Not all Neurodivergent individuals consider themselves to be disabled, many consider they are able and have a great deal to offer but just need some accommodation to deliver their best.

It is important that Human Resources support line managers, that managers and leaders have the pragmatic understanding of adapting their communication style whilst being conscious of the reality of a perceived threat of legal action if they happen to “get it wrong” (Syahri, 2020). So too, from the employee perspective, the fear of retribution relates to Neurodiverse individuals raising issues or requests. Whilst for leaders, the fear of legal action as retribution by an employee is a very real fear, where comments such as “slamming someone in court” for doing something wrong present as the only communication method in a non-inclusive environment, rather than an open dialogue to solve and rectify issues before reaching the point of taking legal action. Inclusion should be considered in the context of a proactive event rather than a reactive legal obligation.

Neuroinclusive communication during recruitment

Omadeke (2022) determined that the best leaders aren’t afraid to be vulnerable, such as being open to considering alternate approaches that still deliver results. Unfortunately, it is not common to find a leader willing to be flexible, as this can be perceived as a vulnerability and a loss of power. In the context of this research, it can be interpreted that any inclusion requires some level of flexibility, such as rephrasing interview questions. In the lead-up to this research, one of the authors presented the table of communication/Neurodiversity misinterpretation (Table 1) on behalf of an unsuccessful applicant to a leading academic organization, requesting an opportunity to re-present based on having a clearer understanding of what was expected but not specified.

This academic institution, purporting to have “high emotional intelligence” and MBTI qualified, failed to consider a compromise, where allowing the Neurodiverse applicant to re-present in a more Neurotypical way could have delivered the desired results. Instead, the request was rejected, contrary to their purported public persona. When considering the time

Table 1. Table of communication – Neurodiverse interpretation and understanding, based on interview feedback provided

Asked / said	Heard	Answered / actioned	What was sought
I work in an approachable way and my team can approach me about anything Asking me to re change management experience	When you work here, you can ask me anything Interest in business credibility	Noted if successful That the business school wanted that link of business and academia of value Thank you, I would like to know about your experience and your research	Approached pre-interview for feedback and guidance This was a hint on what I want you to present
These sessions (1–4) are an opportunity to ask anything and get to know the team and environment Tell me about a most challenging and a most rewarding situation	We want you to be part of this but it isn't an easy culture What could be asked could be more precise As an overall, what has been your most challenging and rewarding situations? This to be an overall and not sector specific	The most intensive work-based experience which underpins theories of discretionary behaviour, organizational merger and culture change theories	Seeks detailed and 'non-emotive' connection from an academic and theoretical context Academic related example/s linked to theory

Source(s): Authors' own work

and resource funding for interviewing, why would an interviewer not ensure candidates shortlisted for interview have all the information needed to deliver their best? Szulc (2023) and Scheiner and Bogden (2021) support that with awareness, the interview process can be adapted to be more inclusive. The table was not considered constructive; instead, rather than demonstrate Neuroinclusive leadership to cater for cognitive diversity of applicants, it appeared to be a Neurotypical person reinforcing non-inclusion (Cage et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2017).

Workplace adjustments

Considering the complexity of succeeding in the interview process, there remains yet further challenges ahead. This then raises the question of what do leaders need to do to make the workplace Neurodiverse inclusive and begin building the communication and trust relationship? So too, it would be safe to consider that psychological pressure exists for Neurodivergent individuals, especially in relation to asking for, or, even losing workplace adjustments (Samosh, 2021).

Casanova et al. (2020) found a relationship between Ehlers-Danlos Syndromes (EDS) and Autism, confirming these as Neurodiverse conditions. Furthermore, Baeza-Velasco (2021) specifically explored Neurodiversity in the context of hypermobility spectrum disorders and EDS. With so many Neurodiverse conditions, it is unreasonable to expect leaders to know all of their intricacies and needs. Taking an empathic leadership approach with a non-judgmental view will help identify the needs a Neurodiverse team member may have. This is supported by the Equity and Human Rights Commission (2020), where the UK Equity Act 2010 states “you must not be discriminated against because: you have a disability, someone thinks you have a disability, and/or you are connected to someone with a disability”. Most organizations across the globe have a “Disability Discrimination Policy” and/or “Equal Opportunity Policy”, supported by Employment Laws. There is concern that “(a)ttitudes [...] are the biggest barriers to achieving things” (Palipana, 2022, p. 138) and that the attitudes of “different is difficult” could be hindering inclusive environments, particularly for those who are Neurodivergent.

Leadership communication and fear

These perspectives around fear and inclusion support the context that there is logic if both leaders and Neurodiverse individuals are afraid, then negative and reactive energy to any interaction (i.e. defensive behavior) can escalate if not managed with empathy and integrity, and may or may not result in legal action against the leader (Kirkham, 2023). Furthermore, it is the leaders who influence employee behavior, thus the need for inclusive leadership behavior (Lebel, 2016; Woodard & Hyatt, 2024). According to Kish-Gephart et al. (2009), although employees can speak up, they often remain silent out of fear of negative consequences. Fear is “a powerful and pervasive emotion, [that] influences human perception, cognition, and behaviour” (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009, p. 185). Milliken et al. (2003) reinforce this view by considering that employees fear their manager will react negatively if they speak up, which can be applicable to asking for reasonable adjustments. Detert and Burris (2007) further this in viewing that “subordinate perceptions” influence whether they speak up or not, so we see fear can be a hurdle in the communication process.

Prabowo et al. (2018) found that employees can be more productive without fearing a reprimand by superiors, particularly when disclosing their Neurodiversity or raising the discussion around reasonable adjustments. So too, we can consider that fear creates barriers to performance, through fear of disclosing their condition, fear of negative judgement, each overshadowing their skillset. Fear, and fear-based thinking, can paralyze people, creating a

psychological barrier that prevents them from moving out of their comfort zone and using a social mask as protection (Cook et al., 2024; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Leyshon & Hiddlestone-Mumford, 2023). Although it may be daunting for the leader, it is clearly more so for the employee deciding on whether to risk raising awareness or asking for modification such as reasonable adjustments to enable them to operate at their most efficient in the workplace.

So, what is it that Neurodiverse employees are wanting from their line manager? How can we empower Neurodiverse and those with hidden disabilities to trust that it is safe to speak up? Can we even allay the fear of speaking up? and, How can the organizations support increased adaptability for all individuals? These are areas of increasing interest to this research, where organizations can harness the best of all employees in a safe and supportive environment.

Developing trust in the workplace

Adding to the complexity of being a leader, trust is found to act as an important buffer against negative workplace experiences (Bligh, 2017). Legood et al. (2021) examined the relationship between leadership styles and trust with a focus on trust-building performance levels. While Khattak et al. (2020) determined that trust in the leader mediates efforts of continuous improvement. According to Lewis (2022):

[...] a [...] high-trust organization is one in which employees feel safe to take risks, express themselves freely, and innovate [...] where trust is defined as a belief in the abilities [...] and character of another person.

This perspective of trust appears in recent research, where trust is the foundation of most successful organizations (Frei & Morriss, 2020).

Murray et al. (2023) examined autism through self-experience, and noted that “intervention practice” required further research and that there is a common basic need for trust and reliability in interactions. This offers the context of incorporating this research of Neurodiversity in the workplace in connection to the relationship between an employee and their line manager, an area where communication is a foundation for trust. ILM (2020b) highlighted that only 28% of respondents to their survey knew of having Neurodiverse colleagues, with a further 35% believing they had undisclosed Neurodiverse colleagues. This supports the concerns and fear of disclosure, and ILM’s (2020b) finding of half of those surveyed indicating they would not employ a Neurodiverse person; and that only 30% of organizations have policies and procedures on inclusion/diversity. With 15%-20% of people in the world being Neurodivergent, there is a clear gap and need in understanding inclusive leadership.

Leadership from a neurodiverse perspective

As a starting point, understanding what Neurodivergent employees need and want from their line manager is an area that requires investigation. According to Roberson et al. (2021, p. 399) “management scholars have yet to develop theories and models that are inclusive of neurodiversity.” Using the critical disability theory as a lens for reframing assumptions about leadership behavior as described in existing theory and research, we postulate that neurodiversity may serve as a cognitive strength from which leadership derives, whether as a leader with Neurodiversity or a leader of Neurodiverse team members. Where “critical theoretical frameworks [are] any lens that takes an anti-deficit approach while conducting research which centers the experiences of non-dominant populations” (Andrews & Boklage, 2024, p. 789). The task of critical disability theory is to analyze disability as a cultural,

historical, relative, social and political phenomenon. Some call this work “critical disability studies” or CDS (Hall, 2019, p. 1). As with Hall’s (2019) study that explored the lived experiences of students with invisible disabilities in the field of higher education under the framework of critical disability, this study explores Neurodiversity as a workplace issue as much as a community issue.

Szulc et al. (2023) considered Neurodiverse individuals felt vulnerable, where “lack of understanding by others were found to be particularly burdensome to neurodivergent individuals” (p. 1678), with their research focusing on “enabling HR professionals to learn more about supporting neurodiversity at work” (p. 1684). Hartman et al. (2023) considered the benefit of employing Neurodiverse individuals and the positive impact on organizational culture, where “autistic employees may foster opportunities to improve organizational performance, leading to the development of a more adaptive, high performing, and ethical culture” (p. 1989). Despite the unique strengths of Neurodiverse employees, unemployment rates for those with autism are alarmingly high, reaching up to 90% (Gamulin, 2023, discussing the research of Hartman et al., 2023).

Considering performance through communication as imperative for organizational success, Judd and McKinnon (2021) explored the role of communication for inclusion and participation. They, along with Silver et al. (2023) and Volpone et al. (2022), entwined the value of Neurodiversity with communication strategies as an organizational strength for increased business results. Thereby, making Neurodiversity a mechanism for competitive advantage, applicable to all organizations (Ott et al., 2022).

Although MBTI[®] appears predominantly a recruitment selection tool (Malik et al., 2023), there appears to be a connection between Neurodiversity and MBTI as a communication relationship (Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2022; Saif, 2022; Wiggleton-Little & Callender, 2023). Within literature, a link is shown between the need to adapt communication techniques to engage Neurodivergent individuals through Neurodiversity-focused resources (Pahl, 2022; Taylor, 2023; Taylor et al., 2022). For example, Seitz and Smith (2016) highlight the need for organizations to accommodate autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through direct communication, greater flexibility and understanding.

This builds on Roberson et al.’s (2021) research on leaders who are neurodivergent and offered a conceptual model (Figure 1) that articulates how cognitive characteristics associated with Neurodiversity may lead to task-based leadership behaviour, and traced the influence of such behaviours on leader and follower outcomes.

Roberson et al.’s (2021) research is supported by the research of Seitz (2022), who examined whether traditional leadership theories function from a Neurodiversity context. While Seitz (2022) offers practical concepts aimed at assisting a leader in managing Neurodiversity within a team. This is also applicable to the Neurodivergent leaders themselves in understanding how to adapt and function (in a positivist context) in an environment that is predominantly “neurotypical”, without the need to mask. Masking in the context of Neurodiversity, is defined as the changing of natural behaviour patterns to try to integrate as a Neurotypical person (Evans et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2021; Radulski, 2022).

Design/methodology

The design of this research was a questionnaire to have a wide reach of respondents who are either formally or informally diagnosed as having a Neurodiversity. A selection of organizations that support both Neurodivergent people and Neurodiversity inclusion were consulted and involved in the questionnaire development and distribution. The organizations included Autism CRC, Autism Australia, ASPIRE, along with EDS & Comorbidities Support Australasia, to validate the questions used, language and terminology as being

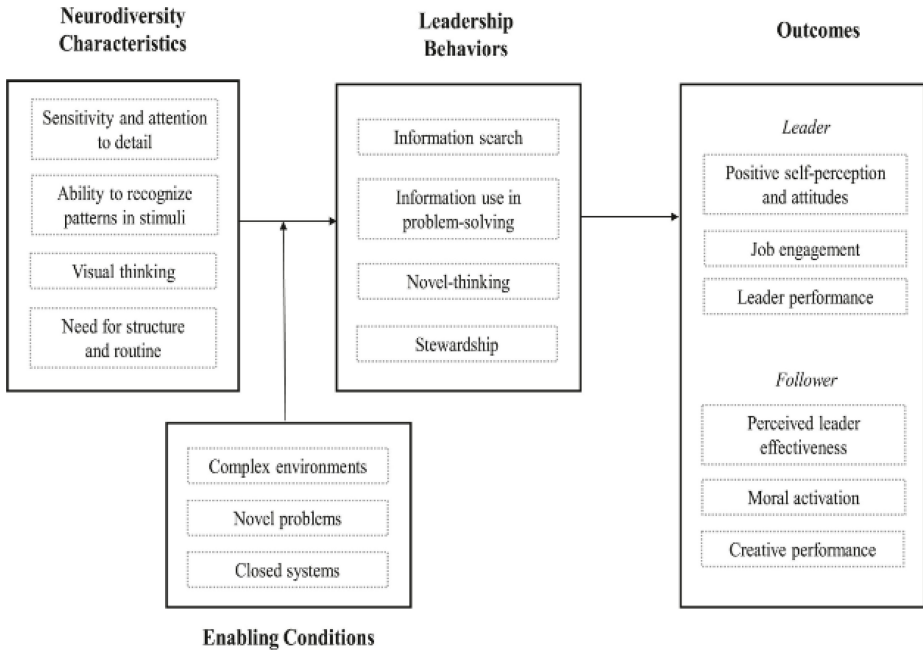


Figure 1. Conceptual model of neurodiversity characteristics, leader behaviours and outcomes
Source: Roberson et al. (2021, p. 149)

suitable for a wide range of Neurodivergent interpretations, allowing for consistency and validity. This then resulted in agreement to not only participate, but share within their networks, resulting in over 300 usable responses. The questionnaire format enabled a snowball technique for sharing amongst wider Neurodiverse networks and support groups (Carey et al., 2024), without specifically targeting one country, organization or business sector. The purpose of this approach was to ensure the focus was on the detail produced by the findings and develop useful insights for leaders to better understand how to operate an environment that is Neuroinclusive and supportive.

When looking to do research that involves Neurodiversity, Le Cunff et al. (2023) advocates for an inclusive approach to research that involves Neurodiverse people in meaningful roles as a “requirement of excellence”. This research looks to expose the contribution that a Neurodiverse workforce can bring, with some adaptations by management to enable open discussions to unleash the full potential of the whole team, with a focus on ensuring a Neuroinclusive environment. So too, this research’s lead author functions as a diagnosed multi-Neurodiverse person with six diagnosed hidden disabilities, including Crohn’s and EDS, demonstrating the ability to make a meaningful contribution through lived experience, where functioning as a Neurodiverse person means delivering performance results, keeping that as the focus and the Neurodiversity as an enhancement to the level of effort contributed to achieving the end result. This research, therefore, addresses the call for doing research with and by Neurodivergent individuals rather than on Neurodivergent individuals (Gowen et al., 2019; Szulc, 2023), with a balanced perspective offered by the Neurotypical co-author.

Questions directly related as a personal connection to the topic being explored, catered for additional written responses. As such, it was decided to use Qualtrics to analyze relationship data on selected themes and develop the online questionnaire, where the draft questions were reviewed from a number of different Neurodiversity views and process approaches (Azevedo et al., 2022; Dwyer, 2022; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021; Jenson et al., 2023). This included those acknowledged at the end of this article for their valued feedback and distribution of the questionnaire through their networks. All feedback was actioned to ensure the questionnaire was not over-stimulating, nor resulting in disengagement.

Ethical considerations

Guidance was determined from extant literature to ensure ethical inclusion of autistic adults (Bernard et al., 2023; Gowen et al., 2019; Nicolaidis et al., 2019) with specific consideration in the use of an online questionnaire that offered the authors access to a wide range of specific Neurodiverse potential respondents within Neurodiversity forums, thereby offering a greater representation in the data collected (Garton et al., 1999; Wellman, 1997; Wright, 2005). This approach is further supported by Ritzman and Subramanian (2024), who found that Neurodiverse participants enjoyed using computer communication technology, which was integrated through the use of an online questionnaire. Ethical review board clearance was also obtained prior to commencement of data collection.

The data collection had a clear introduction, with anonymity through non-identifying questions, and stating the intended purpose and use of the information gathered. Respondents could opt out at any point prior to reaching the final submission of their response at the end of the questionnaire. Anticipated to reach over 2,000 potential respondents via a range of Neurodiversity online forums and professional networks, where prior approval of the online forum group mediators was gained. The anticipated level of completed responses was expected to exceed 300, providing the basis for meaningful analysis. A total of 346 completed responses were received, of which 302 were considered usable for further analysis.

Respondents have access to the researchers via email and/or Research Gate to follow the results and any publications generated from their responses. The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics, which offers the ability to analyze relationship data on selected themes. Anonymity was ensured through selecting that all results are anonymous with no identifying questions nor recording of IP address used for the questionnaire, which was a feature of deciding to use Qualtrics.

Findings and discussion

Although Neurodiversity initially referred to Autism, it has expanded to encompass many neurological disorders (Chapman, 2020; Doyle, 2024). These Neurodivergent conditions include ADHD, ASD, EDS, Dyscalculia, Bipolar Disorder, Developmental Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Tourette Syndrome and other neurological disorders, to name a few (Casanova et al., 2020; Fenton & Krahn, 2007; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012).

Findings from the questionnaire responses show that 43.1% of Neurodiverse employees would like their line managers to have an awareness or basic understanding of Neurodiversity. However, of those, 18.8% did not expect their line manager to have a full-lived experience or in-depth knowledge of all Neurodiversities, where open responses indicated some communication adaptations, and openness to work together would be supportive. Findings also show that Neurodivergent employees tend to leave a job when bored, so line manager's must keep an open, non-judgmental discourse if a Neurodivergent employee says "point blank" that they are bored. Line managers are encouraged to ask and work with

Neurodivergent employees to find ways to keep them engaged in the organization, not to assume solutions. Our findings endorse that Neurodivergent employees have the capacity to stay in an organization for over five years. However, the pressure is on line managers to maximize the energy and capability of their Neurodivergent team members, keeping them engaged and feeling included. A selection of comments provided in the free text section of “*What top 2 suggestions would you give to help a leader to be more Neurodiverse inclusive?*” (Q24) were:

- Check-in in a genuinely supportive way.
- Encourage and offer support. If someone is struggling, support by checking in with someone and allowing them to be honest.
- Support by asking the person what will help, they will come up with a solution-based option and sense you’re being genuine.
- Understand that our health can fluctuate, but with some support, we can do a lot better and do incredible work.
- It would be stimulating and interesting, leadership that encourages me to be myself yet provides me with regular check ins and reassurance, and clear directions without micromanaging.

One respondent eloquently wrote:

Be vocally offering common accommodations so that benefits all staff see it and feel safe to negotiate for the accommodations they need. e.g., we’ve been at this meeting for a while, anyone need a stretch break or a fidget toy? Tuesdays are a low-stim day in the office, please use your headphones and keep the lights lowered.

So too, this applies in contra-sense of a Neurodivergent leader who may be struggling to manage a team. Particularly if there are a majority of Neurotypical team members, in ensuring a mutual approach and respect for the effort both sides are putting in to make the working relationship effective through keeping the focus on understanding how to work best together to deliver maximum results. Tensions could build up as a Neurodivergent employee tends to find it “extremely uncomfortable” to ask for needed adjustments in the workplace. [ILM’s \(2020a\)](#) research explored from a practical Neurotypical-driven approach, in which they asked whether reasonable adjustments were made for Neurodivergent employees, with 14% to 25% of Neurotypical employees agreeing. These findings were reinforced in [Davies et al.’s \(2022\)](#) research on workplace adjustments for autistic employees.

Of the question “*How comfortable is it for you to discuss and/or ask for the adjustments you need in the workplace?*” (Q25) ([Figure 2](#)), 45.8% were extremely uncomfortable, and a further 26.5% somewhat uncomfortable in discussing adjustments needed, as opposed to only 4.2% being extremely comfortable, and 13.6% somewhat comfortable. This comfort level aligns with the [ILM \(2020a\)](#) and [ILM \(2020b\)](#) findings and [Davies et al. \(2022\)](#) of reasonable adjustments being made. These findings support the need for line managers and Human Resources to encourage open discussion. From the survey, one respondent noted:

Our staff complain a lot about gender diversity, Neurodiversity students and essentially anything slightly outside of the “norm”. I do not want to be another thing for them to complain about as I really just want to be able to do my job without having to deal with horrible people’s judgements.

What is clear from the data collected is that Neurodiverse employees desire a long and positive workplace experience, with the fear of talking to Human Resources, which is showing in being the lowest figure of whom Neurodivergent employees speak to in the

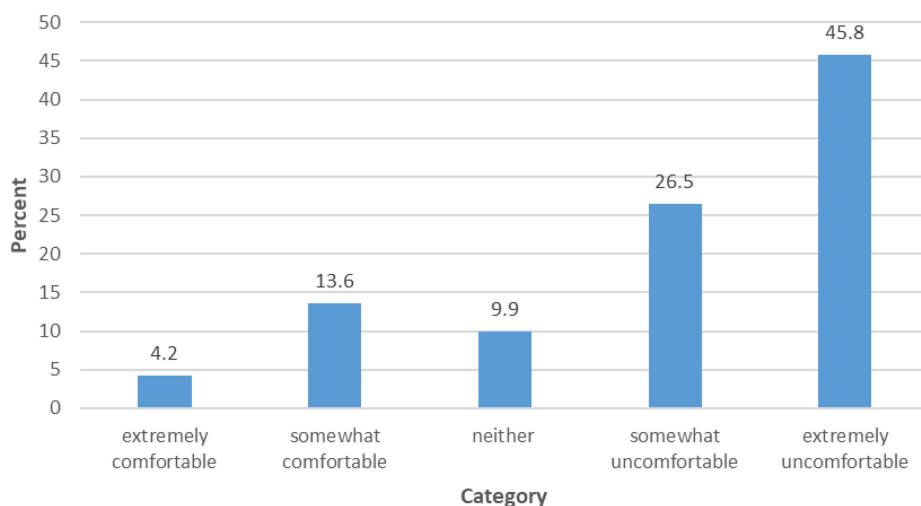


Figure 2. Comfort in discussing or asking for adjustments needed in the workplace

Source: Authors' own work

workplace when responding to “who”; with the majority telling either no-one or a colleague they trust to keep it confidential. Of the results (Figure 3), only 15.7% felt comfortable telling their line manager, and only 3.9% felt comfortable telling Human Resources about their Neurodiversity requirements. The trust factor was stated in relation to confidentiality and discretion which was further supported in free text comments in the questionnaire.

This is supported by the free text entries (Table 2) in Q19 of the questionnaire examining: “*In relation to disclosing your neurodiversity at work, who do you feel most comfortable telling?*”

When asking “*At your most recent (or current) workplace, who knows of your neurodiversity?*” (Q22), according to the data, Human Resources are the least approached by the Neurodivergent employee (Figure 4).

When we revert back to the trigger for this research in the context of a Neurodivergent person needing to be able to ask clarifying questions, (Q17), results show that the over 35 age group reported seeking further clarification whilst 53.8% of all respondents would “give up trying and leave the job”. This can be considered that the Neurodiverse person would rather leave than risk a breach of confidentiality or negative judgements being unfairly made. According to one respondent:

When a worker devises a more efficient way of achieving an equivalent or superior outcome, please be open and supportive in considering of implementing this.

What Neurodiverse employees require is the capability to seek further clarification – bearing in mind that people who are Neurodivergent have had their lifetime experience of being misunderstood, yet they continue to persevere and endeavor to “get it right” in their interactions with others. So too, Neurodiverse people need line managers to not only be Neuroinclusive but to allow them a second chance if they have “got it wrong”. That is, once they understand what is being sought but they have not delivered. This forms the basis of the recommended framework to open those discussions and learn how to achieve the desired result together. When considering the Communication Table (Table 1), in relation to the

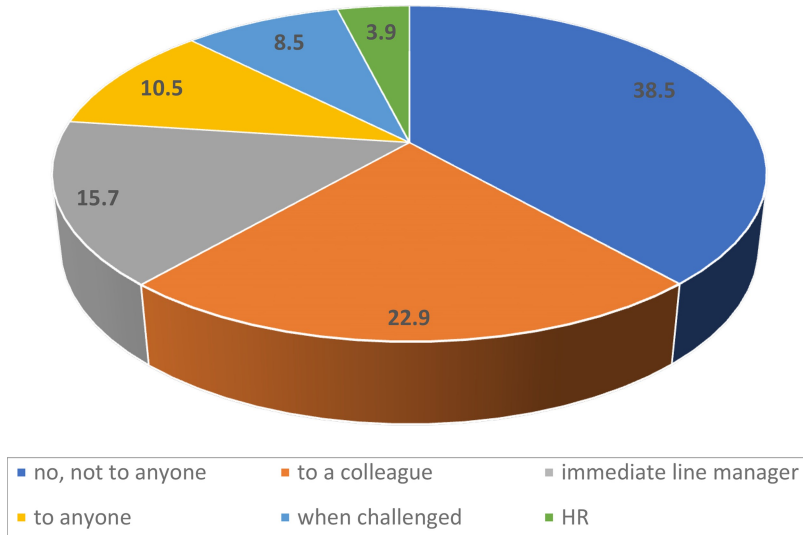


Figure 3. Comfort in disclosing Neurodiversity
Source: Authors' own work

Table 2. Disclosing neurodiversity at work

Sector	Respondent comment
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm not able to let HR know. I've been told that the DfE have taken some "ND authority to teach" when they were honest about their diagnosis's I provided a letter to HR and they blasted down the chain so now everyone knows and they have harassing me...I didn't want them to know and they told everyone I have disclosed to my line manager as I had no choice when accessing work place adjustments but only after feeling out their attitude towards ND. I have not disclosed to HR or to my colleagues, including ones I trust When Occ Health Doctor confirmed that I had a 'hidden disability' – within 2 months I was managed out of the School and apparently blacklisted as being 'trouble'. This was only because I needed to use disabled facilities onsite and large team meetings were torture so having 1 earplug in was rude apparently!
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I currently have disclosed to my line manager but not HR I shared with HR and other management because I felt like I had no choice I was a Senior lawyer in State Govt prior to being forced to medically retire, 55, due to chronic illnesses/issues arising from EDS, forced due to being off work too often
Corporate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I avoid telling HR, as it I haven't needed assistance from HR. I would like to keep it off my record, as I feel they might misuse it

Source(s): Authors' own work

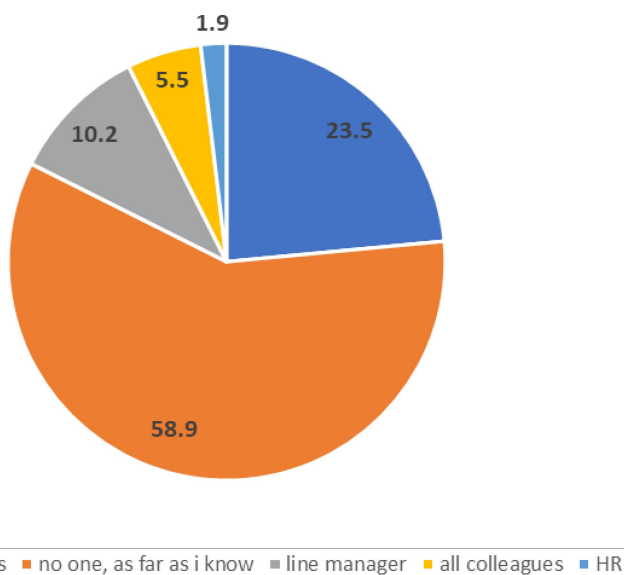


Figure 4. Knowledge of Neurodiversity
Source: Authors' own work

findings in [Figure 5](#) below, where 69.2% of respondents desire, need, want line managers to allow them to probe with further questions to be able to process and clearly understand the requirements/task. This then enables Neurodiverse employees the possibility to process the intended meaning and thus adjust their response with a clearer understanding and deliver the desired results or information.

Of that, 69.2%, when split demographically, 66% of women, 100% of non-binary, 54.2% of males and 100% of those who prefer not to say wanted line managers to allow them to probe further ([Figure 6](#)).

When considering age split, 100% of 18–24 years, 77.8% of 25–34 years, 71.4% of 35–44 years, 66.7% of 45–54 years and 45% of 55–64 years all wanted the opportunity to probe line managers further ([Figure 7](#)). One respondent reflected from a perspective of creating a more inclusive team in an adapted communication style:

Be willing to shift each or shuffle employees around at their request [...] in order to get the best person doing job [...] for mentoring, don't just keep making the poor performer "improve" that job, just switch them to where their strength lies. Almost no bosses do this really, but it is such an overlooked way to maximize your human resources.

Evidenced in the data is an age trend, where younger employees (18–24 years old) do not feel comfortable discussing with Human Resources nor their line manager, where the most likely age-group to discuss their Neurodiversity with either line manager and/or Human Resources are those in the 35–44 year old age group. This is worth further research to gain a deeper understanding.

Interpretation of [Figures 8](#) and [9](#) is that Neurodivergent employees are not comfortable in raising their Neurodiversity "needs" with either their line manager or Human Resources. This shows that there is a need for leaders to have empathy to enable Neurodiverse employees to approach them to discuss the best ways of working, including reasonable

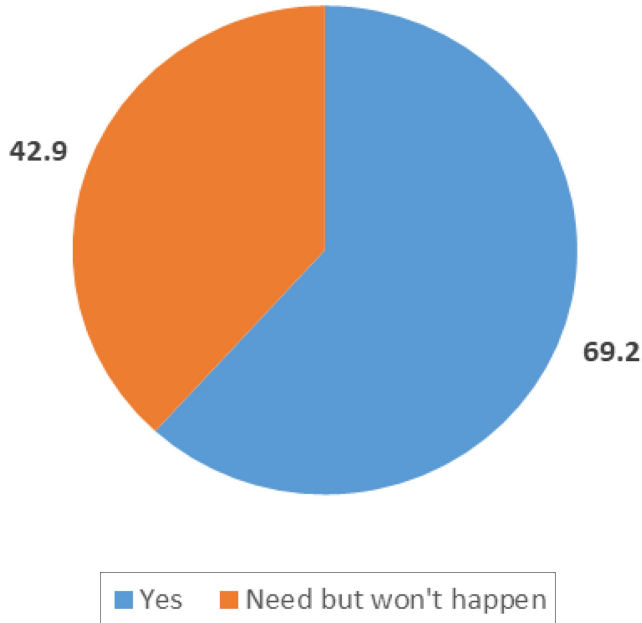


Figure 5. Allowing an employee who is Neurodiverse to ask for clarification
Source: Authors' own work

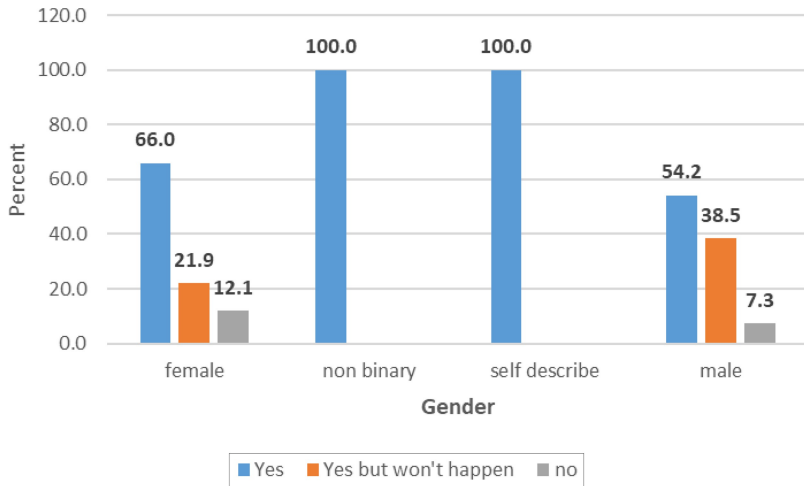


Figure 6. Allowing an employee who is Neurodiverse to ask for clarification by self-describing gender
Source: Authors' own work

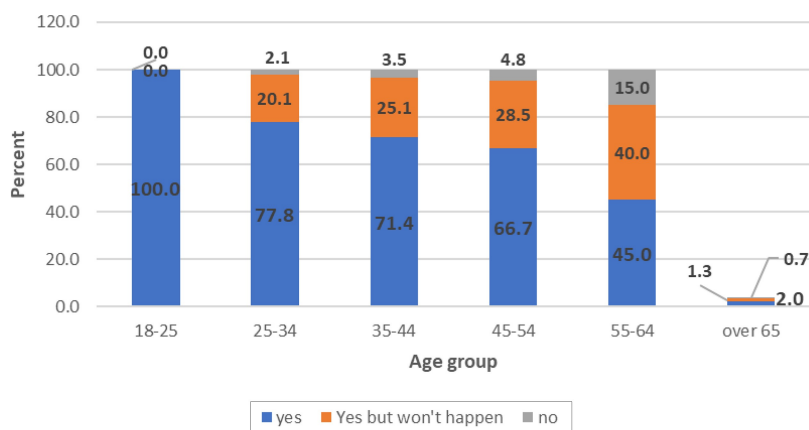


Figure 7. Allowing an employee who is Neurodiverse to ask for clarification by age group
Source: Authors' own work

adjustments, as the issue is not shown to have an age or gender differential. For Human Resources, the results identify a lack of trust in sharing a Neurodiversity status and any required adjustments. Whether a policy is in place or not, these findings support that inclusion is more tangible through actions to support leaders being inclusive and consciously taking a Neuroinclusive approach within their teams.

So too, gender appeared to reflect Human Resources as the lowest rating for Neurodiverse employees to approach in comparison to those who raised their Neurodiversity with their line manager (Figure 9).

From these two questions, respondents provided open text, furthering their views on the reaction to disclosure to Human Resources and line managers:

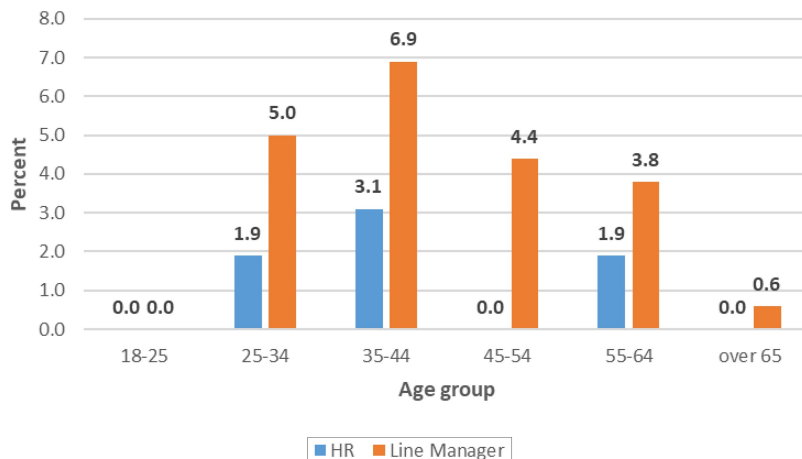


Figure 8. Comfort in raising Neurodiversity with line manager and Human Resources by age group
Source: Authors' own work

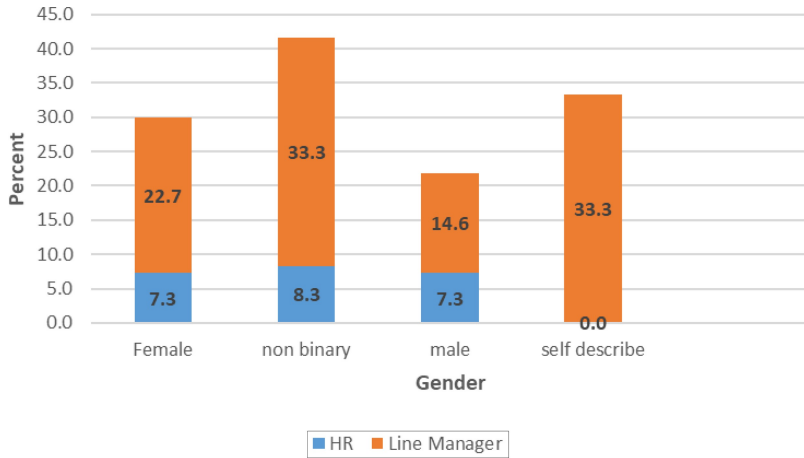


Figure 9. Comfort in raising Neurodiversity with line manager and Human Resources by gender
Source: Authors' own work

- The job itself was okay but very underappreciated for the value added outside of my contracted responsibilities.
- Don't change how you interact with us after you find out we're ND. As in, don't suddenly talk down to us or speak slower or like we're children. But do be more patient and understand that most of us work really hard to be successful.
- Managers must be willing to learn and adapt and try to be kind and understanding about it. If they don't know or care and don't want to know how they can support you best then that is awful and they should not be a manager.
- I think Managers should understand the benefits of Neurodiversity and be empowered to support Neurodiversity people so they and the business can thrive.

When asked what the respondent wanted their manager to know, concerns were indicated around:

- Masking to change perception as Neurotypical when Neurodiversity.
- They would not understand how challenging it is to mask and appear like a Neurotypical. They just wouldn't understand.
- My neurodivergent belief that giving 100% is a literal expectation.

Discussion of findings

To give perspective, not endorsement, it would be understandable that from a leader or manager's perspective, it can be overwhelming for a team member stating "I have Autism" for example, or "I am neurodivergent" etc. through to others requiring adjustments due to a hidden disability such as EDS, could potentially make the leader feel intimidated as to what is expected of them, both as a leader and legally.

The research reassures leaders that they are not expected to have a full and thorough understanding of every health condition that surrounds neurodiverse conditions. However, what

is clear is that people who are Neurodivergent desire to succeed in the workplace and to be able to communicate with their leader to ensure understanding, reducing any miscommunication taking place. To achieve a way of working together, mutual understanding is needed. Additional text responses from the questionnaire offer the following suggestions and insights to leaders and managers:

- Be vocally offering common accommodations so that all staff see it and feel safe to negotiate for the accommodations they need e.g., we've been at this meeting for a while, anyone need a stretch break or a fidget toy?
- Ask the person what they need. Everyone is different.
- Topic introduced prior to the discussion (e.g., meeting set with topic outlined and ideally an agenda/discussion points), the question posed with ability to ask clarifying questions, ideally seeing the question in writing. For some, the preference might be a recording I guess. Also – not being required to answer in front of everyone - particularly without preparation.
- Clarify individual needs and don't expect a person with x diagnosis requires the same supports as others with the same diagnosis.
- I have had to disclose to get the adjustments I need on occasions. Give choice - most things that make life better for an Neurodiversity also do for a Neurotypical.
- Be curious and open to learn, the person can teach you how to get the best out of them. No different to any other employee.

Based on these results, [Figure 10](#) below is proposed as a framework for all team members to understand how best to communicate with each other, resulting in increased employee engagement and longevity of a Neuroinclusive workforce.

Framework to guide open neuroinclusive communication

Developed as an outcome of the literature and the findings, it is clear that all parties want to have an effective working relationship in the workplace. To have a communication framework as a guide to keep the focus on the areas of miscommunication between Neurotypical and Neurodiversity, rather than it being an issue on a personal level, is proposed in the [Figure 10](#) framework above. The framework establishes the basis for discussion, aiding the participants to open the communication channel by exploring an understanding of what was asked or said, what was heard, what was answered in response to what was heard, and what was actually being sought by the line manager/other person to overcome Neurodiversity communication barriers. Through greater understanding, an improved and more productive work environment is achievable, harnessing the benefits of Neurodivergent employees.

What was asked/ said	What was heard	What was answered	What was being sought

Figure 10. Talking it through: Understanding and overcoming neuroinclusive communication barriers framework

Source: Authors' own work

The authors of this paper have used this framework in having a non-emotive discussion to clarify what and how communication was being misunderstood and overcome the hurdles. This helps the leader/manager as it is person-specific communication, developing a way of working as best practice of keeping the focus on working together rather than emotive individual conflict.

Conclusion

Results of this research show that Neurodiverse respondents are not expecting leaders to have detailed knowledge of all Neurodivergent functionalities nor all forms of hidden disabilities. Interpreting these results of Neurodiverse employee expectations in relation to desiring an awareness of Neurodiversity complexities show that Neurodiverse employees want managers, leaders and Human Resources to have open conversations, to work together in developing an inclusive work environment where Neurodiversity can flourish and deliver business results.

Though this is progress, the challenges of inclusion, whether disability, hidden disability and/or Neurodiversity, increases the pressure on leaders who may become daunted and intimidated by the laws in place should they get it wrong. Considering the low ranking of Human Resources being aware or advised of a person's Neurodivergence and/or hidden disability requirements, this leaves leaders in a vulnerable situation where many feel that they have no option other than to avoid the problem through non-employment/non-inclusion of Neurodiverse team members/employees.

Where we find leaders who are Neurodivergent, the complexities continue. However, it appeared that Neurotypical team members did not understand the level of effort put in by the Neurodiverse leader nor understand the impact Neurodiversity has on the leader's communication efforts. This is not to say that being Neurodiverse will make one a better leader. It does, however, highlight the importance of engaging employees in having confidence in leadership integrity when dealing with discussions surrounding complexities faced by Neurodiverse employees.

What this research has found to support managers is that the success and integration of Neurodiverse employees relies upon managers to adapt their approach to allow the Neurodiverse to positively contribute, communicate, resulting in a sense of purpose and belonging.

What Neurodiverse people desire and need from line managers/leaders, as found in this research, includes:

- leaders do not need to know the fine details of each condition – but be open to finding a way to work together;
- be clear in the output detail required, ensuring the communication context is understood;
- keep the discussion open, allowing questions to be asked; and
- view Neurodiversity in the team as a strength, an opportunity for new perspectives.

Many leaders are unaware that non-inclusion may be a breach of the equality legislation and, therefore, disability discrimination in many countries. By changing communication approaches to better enable active participation and wider engagement, employees who are Neurodivergent have the opportunity to demonstrate the value they bring to an organization as a result of Neuroinclusive leadership.

Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to knowledge both academically and for practitioners in reducing the apprehension managers face when managing a team member who is Neurodiverse. As the increase in awareness of Neurodiversity results in increased diagnoses, it is understandable

that the topic of managing Neurodiversity in the workplace can be daunting, even for the most experienced manager.

This research offers a framework for a Neurodiverse individual to open the discussion and seek to establish an understanding of communication complexity with others to thrive. An intended result of this research is that Neurodivergent leaders and employees remain in the workforce and have a positive and supportive experience in doing so.

This research focused on offering supportive and constructive insights for leaders, whether as someone who is Neurodivergent or has team member/s who are Neurodivergent.

Future research

This research identified some unexpected results that are worthy of further investigation and research, most particularly from a Human Resource perspective.

As Neurodivergence is becoming more openly discussed, it is worthy of future research to examine the results of inclusion initiatives and the results this brings. So too, examining the impact of shaping future leaders during their academic studies in enabling sustainable inclusive leadership skills.

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Further reading

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