

# Having sensitive conversations with neurodiverse employees.

## Creating a culture of openness and trust.

An organisation's culture is created by the people who work there. The actions of senior leaders are important because they set the tone, and others follow where they lead. But, as a people manager, you too are a leader. How you behave creates the culture for your team and the organisation in which you work.

“People make choices and choices create culture.”

If you are going to create a culture of trust and openness, you must prioritise getting to know your team members. There are different ways of doing this such as through team social events and one-to-one conversations. Demonstrating that you are fair and respect confidentiality will help build trust. If your team members know and trust you, they will be more likely to talk to you about problems they might have at work. It should also make it easier for you to have a sensitive conversation.

## Spotting the signs that someone may be struggling.

There are signs you can look out for that might indicate that someone who works for you needs adjustments because of a disability. These could be how a person behaves, or a change in their behaviour or physical appearance.

None of these behaviours on their own indicate that someone might have a disability. However, if someone's performance or behaviour is a cause for concern, they may have a disability and need adjustments before you move towards any disciplinary or performance improvement procedures. The better you know your individual team members the earlier you can spot any changes in their performance and behaviour.

It can be more difficult to notice that someone is struggling at work if you do not work in close proximity – if you work remotely from each other, wither permanently or in a hybrid manner. In these cases, it is all the more important to have regular catch-ups and to get to know the people you work with – wherever you and they are based. It may also take longer to build up a good working relationship than it would otherwise.

## Behaviours that might indicate that someone may be neurodivergent and needs adjustments.

If you see some of the following behaviours at work – and they're affecting the individual's performance – consider whether the person may be neurodiverse and needs adjustments:

- Not getting things done – for example, missing deadlines or forgetting tasks.
- Erratic or unpredictable behaviour – may be due to overwhelm and anxiety.
- Emotional responses such as irritability, aggression or tearfulness.
- Complaining that they are not getting enough management support.
- Appearing inconsistent in their work and learning.
- Wanting to follow routines, structures, procedures and processes strictly.
- Being abrupt, blunt or direct to the point of rudeness.
- Taking things very literally.
- Complaining about not coping with their workload.
- Being withdrawn from colleagues and not participating in conversations or out of work activities.
- Avoiding events such as small talk and networking with clients – such as at conferences.
- Hyperfocusing on some tasks.
- Having difficulty staying focused on some tasks.
- Prone to being easily distracted.
- Having difficulty remembering things.
- Displaying a loss of confidence.
- Being indecisive.
- Making mistakes in written work, such as spelling or numerical errors.
- Having difficulty writing down phone numbers, email addresses, or messages.
- Being persistently late or forgetting meetings.
- Struggling to take notes in meetings or training sessions due to speed of note taking or handwriting.
- Being quick to use grievance procedures.
- Increased errors and/or accidents.

Or alternatively:

- Taking on too much work and volunteering for every new project.
- Being adamant that they are right and what is the right way to do things.
- Working too many hours – for example, being the first in and the last to leave, and sending emails late at night and on days off.
- Producing over-detailed reports or overloading others with too much information.

Also look out for physical/ psychological signs such as:

- Being tired all the time.
- Taking time off sick, especially if there is a pattern such as missing key meetings or events.
- Being run down and getting frequent minor illnesses.
- Having frequent headaches or migraines.
- Reduced reaction times – for example, when driving or operating machinery or responding to questions.
- Complaining of difficulty sleeping.

## How to have sensitive conversations.

If you have noticed any of the above, you need to talk to the person as soon as possible. This can seem daunting and you might worry that you will make things worse. Don't worry – you won't, as long as you prepare for the conversation.

Remember, though, that it is not your job to diagnose a condition. Suggesting that the person you are talking to might be dyslexic or autistic or any other neurodiverse condition may not be well received.

If they raise this possibility, you might need to arrange an assessment, or they might already have an assessment from school, college, university or a previous employer that they haven't shared with you yet. An educational assessment is unlikely to be helpful in a work context, so you will probably need to arrange a workplace assessment. A person who has had an assessment for dyslexia at school may need a new full adult dyslexia assessment from a specialist assessor. A previous full assessment as an adult should not need to be repeated.

## Before the conversation.

Do your homework and find out:

- What your organisation's reasonable adjustment policies say. If the person needs an adjustment, what is the process you need to follow and can someone help you with it?
- What do you have the authority to do yourself? For example, can you authorise working from home or order equipment and software up to a certain value such as noise-cancelling headphones?
- What support does your organisation have to offer such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)?
- Make a list of all the things that have concerned you with dates and times. If you are concerned about timekeeping, such as being late, missed deadlines, or a particular behaviour, know the dates and times and reasons given by the person by way of

explanation. If you want to refer to written work, make sure you have a copy you can refer to at the meeting.

Don't worry if you are asked something you don't know during the conversation. Just say that you don't know but you will find out. Make sure you do so and update the person as soon as possible.

## Choosing the time and place.

Time and place are very important:

- Choose a time when you know both of you can speak without distractions. If one of you needs to rush off to another meeting or pick up the kids, then you won't be able to give this conversation your full attention.
- Mute or turn off your phone and have it in a bag or pocket where it will not distract you. If you are using a laptop, you should ensure you will not be distracted by notifications from incoming emails or phone calls.
- Try to make the meeting face-to-face if possible, and somewhere quiet where you will not be overheard or seen. Some people may get upset.
- Try not to cause any alarm by making the meeting seem out of the ordinary. Don't send the meeting request with 'high importance' or suggest that you have something urgent that you need to talk about, but don't delay having the conversation either. A casual "let's have a catch-up" and then fixing a time and place is best.
- Don't choose a time just before a non-working period for either of you. This will avoid or reduce any worry they may have especially if you need to come back to them with information.

## At the meeting.

- If you are meeting face-to-face, try to sit so that you are at right angles to each other rather than facing each other across a table interview style. Allow them to sit nearest the door, as this will help them feel they have an exit if needed.
- Shop floor or private space? Think about your relationship with the individual and don't be afraid to move the meeting off-site if that would be more appropriate. Remember that if in a public area, others may overhear your conversation, and this may affect how comfortable the person may feel and the outcome of the conversation.
- Some people find it easier to talk when they aren't looking directly at another person. If so, suggest a walking and talking meeting if you think it would be more effective.
- Try and use several open questions and always start with one. For example, "How are you?". Be prepared for the reply "I'm fine". Be ready to say, "I'm concerned that you are not fine because..." and then have your examples ready – for example:

“You’ve missed several deadlines recently / you were angry with X at the meeting yesterday / you’ve complained about having headaches several times in the last month.” Be prepared to give concrete examples.

## Be prepared for the response.

- Some people might respond defensively, and so you must reassure them that this is not a disciplinary meeting. Tell them that you want to help if you can.
- Others might get upset and cry. If they do, let them and tell them it is okay to do so. Sitting quietly while someone cries can be difficult, but try to resist the temptation to rush out and get water, tissues or assistance. Give the person time to collect themselves and ask gently if you can carry on. If they say no, then say you’ll fix another time in their diary to carry on with the conversation.
- The person may get angry. If so, try to remain calm and reassure them that this is not a disciplinary meeting, and that you are just concerned and want to help.
- Some people may be bewildered because they hadn’t realised anything was wrong or that their work or behaviour was a cause for concern.
- Remember that in many cases the person might know that their work or behaviour has caused concern or has been deemed ‘not good enough’ but have no idea why or how to improve it. They could be frightened and bewildered. They may also be relieved that you have started this conversation.
- In other cases, the person might tell you that they think that they might have a disability such as dyslexia and / or that they would like to have an assessment.
- Try to identify what it is that the person finds difficult. Is it writing or time management for example?
- Remember, you don’t need to have all the answers. It is okay to say that you will find out what you can do and get back to the person.
- If you need to, talk to someone else in the organisation – for example, HR. Let the individual know that you would like to speak to someone else and ask them how much you can share with that person.
- It may be necessary to arrange an assessment for a person, and your HR department should be able to help you arrange this. Also, your reasonable adjustment policy might specify the process you must follow to arrange an assessment.
- Most importantly, keep the person updated as soon as you can. Not knowing can be very stressful.
- If you want to arrange another meeting with them, or to update them about something, put a date in their diary as quickly as possible so that they will know when you will talk to them again.
- Try not to leave them waiting over a weekend, and try not to cancel your next scheduled meeting with them. If you do have to cancel or postpone, give them your reasons and reassure them with a new date and time.

## Absence.

Neurodiversity is often closely linked to some health conditions.

These linked conditions may result in increased absences from work on their own or as a result of a flare-up directly linked to neurodiversity. For example, there is a known increased incidence of anxiety and depression within neurodiverse populations. One can exacerbate the other and finding the original trigger(s) is not always easy but implementing appropriate adjustments and support is likely to help both conditions, in most cases.

Absence levels are likely to be higher in the following situations:

- Neurodiversity has not been identified and the person is struggling at work.
- The person may be being treated for one condition and not both. For example, a person with depression receives treatment for that, but not for their ADHD, which may be unrecognised. This will affect their recovery.
- Appropriate adjustments or support are not in place.
- There are changes at work or home – for example, a new manager with an incompatible management style, or a new IT system and processes have been introduced.
- Workplace culture is unhealthy for example, poor communication, workload, or bullying.

Occupational Health cannot diagnose neurodiversity and may know little about it. However, if someone is neurodivergent or suspects they may be, it is important to include this information in a referral.