

Autism & Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Inclusive Management & Supervisory Best-Practice

Managers who aren't autistic can have a hard time understanding some autistic traits, which can lead to miscommunications, mismanaged expectations, and a lack of accessibility¹ to Autistic workers.

Based on what Autistic & Neurodivergent workers have indicated, here are some tips on inclusive management & supervisory best-practice:

1. Take Autistic & Neurodivergent workers seriously

In the article, "Infantilizing Autism", it was mentioned "When members of the public envision the disability of autism, they most likely envision a child, rather than an adult."²

This response from non-Autistic individuals is often a result of implicit bias and harmful societal stereotyping that equates "disability" with "incapable". This belief is not factual and erodes the employer-employee relationship, comes across as condescending, and disempowers Autistic workers.

Inclusive Best-Practice

- Relationship is the key. Get to know your employees, what their strengths are, and what excites and inspires them. Then use that knowledge to work with them on meeting shared goals. This can also inform the job carving process and increase productivity and motivation within workers.
- Understand that Autistic & Neurodivergent workers are qualified and capable, can be trusted to work independently when they are ready, and will ask for help if the environment is psychologically safe to do so.
- Honor that Autistic people are the experts in what they need and how to provide adjustments that are right for them, so listen to them.

2. Clear, Effective, and Respectful Communication

Often times, the style of communication from non-Autistic people is indirect and can be very confusing to Autistic & Neurodivergent workers.

Inclusive Best-Practice

Many workers benefit from explicit, how-to instructions regarding process-based tasks. Consider the following strategies:

- Written how-to guides, with screen shots that can be stored and used by any employee as needed, used for orientation and training, etc.
- Plan directions ahead of time
- Consider the following shifts in common communication behaviours in the This, Not That table below³:

Strategy	This	Not That
Be politely direct, which is to say exactly what you mean and identify exactly what you want.	“Please meet us in the staff room at 12:00pm if you would like to eat lunch with us.”	“Let’s get lunch later”
Avoid indirect speech patterns, clichés, implied meanings, and idioms.	“This next project is going to present you with a challenge”	“This next project is going to give you a run for your money!”
Minimize non-verbal communication use clear, verbal directions	Glancing at watch to try to cue to someone that the meeting has gone over 5 minutes.	“I have to go to another meeting now, but please send me an email with any further questions about what we discussed”
Provide explicit details in communication	“Please send me your completed first draft by 1pm tomorrow, electronically by email.”	“Please get me your first draft once it’s done”
Avoid making assumptions, check for understanding	“Now that you have the written instructions for the task, what will you work on first?”	“Any questions?”
Provide clear expectations around how you would like your employee to communicate with you	“Send me an email with your questions, and I will be able to answer them in our team meeting tomorrow at 1:00pm”	“We can talk about the project later”
Provide feedback that is based on observed actions.	“I noticed in this draft that there were several spelling errors...”	“This report is sloppy...”

3. Create a safe space for Autistic Workers to not need to “mask” their Neurodivergent qualities.

Masking is when an Autistic or Neurodivergent worker will pretend that they are not Autistic or Neurodivergent. This is often done when they feel that openly displaying their Autistic & Neurodivergent traits will result in ridicule, exclusion, or even harm their chances to advance in their careers despite being qualified.

Autistic workers’ words:

“Adhering to traditional manners and social norms can be hard for us, whether it’s struggling to regulate our facial emotions, making eye contact, or staying still.”

“Many autistic people have probably been asked “What’s wrong?” at work because they aren’t smiling, or told they seem inattentive for fidgeting and looking down.”

Inclusive Best-Practice

- Model as the manager or supervisor your appreciation for authentic interaction and that you will provide safety to not need to mask at the workplace.
 - o Include in training materials, onboarding, workplace wellness resources, examples of stimming as acceptable ways to regulate while at work.
 - o Tell the Autistic worker that they do not need to mask around you, if they feel comfortable enough to drop their mask.
 - o If you encounter another employee commenting on unmasked Autistic traits, have a private conversation with them to explain that you actually value those traits in workers on your team too, if that is who they are. Explain that you really appreciate these unmasked traits, because they actually indicate a lot of professional self-regulation and help some people have deep focus and concentration at work. Normalizing that this is just a difference, not an issue, will mitigate misunderstandings.

*This also goes for understanding “blunt” behaviors, like regularly asking for clarification or reassurance, asking a lot of questions during meetings, or using a monotone tone of voice. It’s not impoliteness and interpreting it as such is not factual, and breaks down the employer-employee relationship.

4. Offer lateral, in-house mentorship

A very common request from Autistic & Neurodivergent workers is to have access to lateral mentorship. This is a way that support for Autistic & Neurodivergent workers can be layered within the organization, provide leadership opportunities for mentors, and be a relationship that Autistic & Neurodivergent workers know is where they can ask questions and collaborate within for idea sharing, clarity, and innovation.

Inclusive Best-Practice

- It is important to note, that the type of mentorship that is most beneficial in this case is one that is:
 - o not formally structured around what topics to talk about, but has a structure around frequency of meetings, how to communicate (email, in-person, hybrid), what a mentor is and is not, as well as who the mentor goes to for support.
 - o It will also include some mentor-specific training.
- See additional resource documents for more information around mentorship.

Resources

1. Sheppard, B. (2022, December 20). 10 ways to better support autistic employees - autistic adults. AutismBC. Retrieved January 15, 2023, from <https://www.autismbc.ca/blog/autistic-adults/10-ways-to-better-support-autistic-employees/>
2. Stevenson, J. L., Harp, B., & Gernsbacher, M. A. (2011). Infantilizing Autism. *Disability studies quarterly*, 31(3), dsq-sds.org/article/view/1675/1596.
<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v31i3.1675>
3. Rowe, J., & Ackles, L. (n.d.). Employer Guide to Supervising Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Retrieved January 15, 2023, from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a88ab00f43b552a84c3b7c9/t/5d451979cde4480001ef8358/1564809605069/Employer+guide+to+supervising+individuals+on+the+autism+spectrum+2019.pdf>