Good Advice on Leadership and Neurodiversity

By SDU's Gender & Equality Team. June 2026.

What does it mean to be neurodivergent or neurotypical?

People who are predominantly neurotypical are those of us whose brains or neurology function in line with typical societal expectations.

People who are predominantly neurodivergent are those of us whose brains function differently from typical societal expectations. Some people who identify as neurodivergent have a diagnosis, whereas others do not. It often makes sense to think of 'neurotypical' and 'neurodivergent' as a spectrum rather than as distinct categories. The term 'neurodivergent' typically refers to people with diagnoses or characteristics associated with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), dyslexia (difficulty with reading and spelling) or dyscalculia (difficulty with mathematics).

Neurodiversity refers to the diversity in the ways in which all brains function.

Why neurodiversity-aware leadership?

There are many reasons to focus on neurodiversity-aware leadership.

Firstly, some of the talented researchers and staff who can contribute important research identify as neurodivergent. As a workplace, the University must create an environment in which all talents can flourish.

Secondly, SDU must be an inclusive workplace that creates a positive working environment for everyone.

Thirdly, the measures that help neurodivergent people in the workplace will almost always create safety and stability for all other employees as well. For instance, employees who are neurodivergent are often particularly vulnerable to a disruptive work environment, unexpected tasks or unclear expectations. Employees who are neurotypical also thrive with a degree of predictability and clear expectations. There is therefore much to be gained by making the workplace more suitable for employees who are neurodivergent.

There is great diversity in the ways in which people who are neurodivergent function and experience the world, even among those with the same diagnosis. We cannot know in advance what kind of working environment an employee will thrive in. The following are suggestions based on common tendencies among people who are neurodivergent. However, a dialogue on needs and frameworks should take precedence over rules and principles. Often you and the employee(s) will have to try different approaches, and good dialogue between manager and employee is a prerequisite for finding the best solutions.

1. Clear communication

- **Be explicit:** Communicate clearly and directly. Avoid ambiguous instructions and too many implicit assumptions.
- **Use written communication:** Follow up verbal instructions with written ones to ensure clarity.
- **Give constructive feedback:** Be specific, constructive, friendly and action-oriented when giving feedback. This increases the likelihood of avoiding misunderstandings.
- **Use the principles of Universal Design for Learning:** Read the guidelines on how to make PowerPoint presentations more accessible. For example, cream is a better background colour than white: https://teach.cbs.dk/resources/accessibility/

2. Structured routines and clear expectations

- **Set clear goals and expectations:** Set clear, achievable goals and deadlines. This makes it easier to organise the work.
- **Ensure that routines are consistent:** Have predictable schedules and structured routines. This creates a sense of security.
- **Ensure that regular breaks are taken during work:** Establish a healthy break culture. Some people forget to take much-needed breaks when focusing on a task.
- **Provide breaks during meetings:** At the beginning of the meeting, let people know when there will be a break and when the meeting ends, and stick to the times. This may also be important for employees with hidden physical disabilities.

4. Flexible working environment

- **Offer flexible working hours and locations:** Offer flexibility in terms of working hours or the option to work from home. This will create a better environment for concentration and deep focus.

5. Interior design and sensory environment

- **Offer workstation partitioning:** Provide the option of visually partitioned workstations and make noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs available to employees. Shutting out visual and auditory stimuli can help to keep people's energy levels stable and high. Technical Services can help assess whether rooms are sufficiently soundproofed to comply with health and safety legislation.
- **Create quiet areas:** Designate a room or area as a quiet zone. It helps people to concentrate better or to recover their energy.
- **Be mindful of light:** Pay attention to light and colours. Reduce bright light and use soft colours.
- **Be mindful of smells:** Reduce strong smells from perfume, the coffee machine or printer ink.
- **Respect physical movements and individual stress-reduction strategies:** Contribute to a culture that respects people's need to relieve stress by moving their hands, feet or whole body. Also respect the fact that staff may fiddle or play with tactile objects during meetings.

6. Social environment and awareness

- **Support and insights from colleagues:** Consider engaging in dialogue with employees who are neurodivergent about whether there is anything colleagues should be mindful of.
- **Offer education and training:** If all employees have knowledge about neurodiversity, this will help reduce stigma and promote an understanding of the different needs and strengths of people who are neurodivergent. GET is happy to offer a presentation or workshop.
- **Highlight the strength of diversity:** Highlight the value of diversity and how neurodiversity in teams contributes to innovation and success.
- **Accept different social needs:** Ensure that opting out of the Friday bar, staff parties or conversations over lunch is acceptable and that important work-related information is not shared during these occasions.

7. Openness, recognition and support

- **Create awareness and language:** Consider saying in a meeting that you appreciate the increased societal focus on neurodiversity and that you encourage openness about it – to an extent that individual employees are comfortable with. Take the lead in talking about neurodiversity in a positive, respectful and sensitive way.
- **Create a safe space:** Be respectful and sensitive if you want to ask about any experiences employees may have of being neurodivergent. Listen carefully when someone is talking about their personal experience. Keep in mind that for many people, being neurodivergent is both the cause of exceptional qualities, e.g. in terms of systematics or creativity, and also experiences of stigmatisation and exclusion.
- **Facilitate groups for employees:** Create or support groups for employees who are neurodivergent to share experiences and support each other. SDU's Gender & Equality Team is happy to support.

8. Inclusive recruitment practices

- **Revise job descriptions:** Make sure that job descriptions focus on the essential skills required for the role.
- **Allow time to deliver:** Allow ample time for responses during interviews and give candidates the opportunity to showcase their skills in non-traditional ways, such as through the use of cases.

9. Further reading

- Brown, N. and Leigh, J. eds. (2020): *Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education*. London: UCL Press
- Brown, N. (2021). *Lived experiences of ableism in academia: Strategies for inclusion in higher education*. Policy Press
- Bruyère, Susanne M. & Colella, Adrienne (eds.) (2022). *Neurodiversity in the Workplace. Interests, Issues, and Opportunities*. Routledge
- Krzeminska, Anna; Austin, Robert D.; Bruyère, Susanne M. & Hedley, Darren (eds.) (2019). *Journal of Management and Organization*. Volume 25. Special Issue 4: Neurodiversity