



Ombudsing with Neurodiversity in Mind

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ABSTRACT

The Ombuds office is intended to be supportive and safe for all who enter, and yet what's often considered an inclusive space, fails to take into consideration those with invisible disabilities and those who are neurodiverse. Without recognition of differences in how others process information and understand the world around them, the Ombuds is missing a critical component for creating a truly inclusive space, and in guiding organizations to do the same. This article addresses the different ways information can be shared and processed to best support neurodiverse visitors and ways to encourage employers to embrace neurodiverse employees. The author presents an actionable framework to achieve both with the idea that what's contained in this article is by no means exhaustive and should continue to evolve as brain science and understanding of neurodiversity evolves.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, Neurodiversity, Conflict, Inclusion, Diversity, Disability



When I started teaching college in 2012, I warned my first 40 students that I had never taught a college course before (I had more than a decade's worth of experience leading week-long trainings and workshops but not a full semester course) before giving them a 50-question mid-term exam. When I asked how they felt about it afterwards, some students burst into tears. The reason? Some explained they "weren't list-learners" and others shared that my slides had "too much information" or were "too noisy" for them to retain. I'd been a mediator trained in and working across racial, cultural, gender and socioeconomic differences for more than a dozen years and I recognized that each individual saw their world, their experience, their conflicts, through their very individual lens. But neurodiversity - the different ways in which human brains and cognition function that include ways of learning, social preferences, communication methods and ways of perceiving and interacting with one's environment - was completely new to me. (And in case you're worried about the students, we collaborated to create a learning model that worked for everyone and I've been teaching that way ever since.)

"Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits." - (Baumer and Frueh, 2021)

In her 1998 Honors Thesis, sociologist Judy Singer, who described herself as autistic, coined the term neurodiversity as part of a social movement to promote acceptance and inclusion of "neurological minorities" like herself and those with conditions like autism spectrum disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other neurological differences (Singer, 2017). According to a 2021 Harvard Medical School piece, while the neurodiversity movement "is primarily a social justice movement, neurodiversity research and education is increasingly important in how clinicians view and address certain disabilities and neurological conditions." (Baumer and Frueh, 2021)

Because of my work, I had encountered many people who engaged and communicated in different ways because of culture, race, language, gender identity, etc. But it wasn't until I began my work as Ombuds for The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in 2022, that I was able to see different interactions that were identity-based as distinct from those based in differences in neuroprocessing. And when differences in identity and neuroprocessing were both present in the same visitor, well let's just say my learning curve to try to quickly (30 minutes initially) connect with, build trust and support (via Zoom no less) was both steep and imperative. More importantly, if I was going to provide a truly inclusive safe space for all visitors (especially those whose scientific work I couldn't begin to understand), I needed to learn to recognize and support not only those who were different from me - and each other - in obvious ways, but also those who were different in less obvious ways.

One important note: I am not an expert in brain function or neurodiversity. I shared what I've learned at IOA's Annual Meeting in 2023 and at a retreat for Ombuds of Small, Liberal Arts Colleges (OSLAC) and both groups found it useful and asked that I share it more widely, hence this article. Also, what I'm sharing is by no means exhaustive and I think as the work around neurodiversity continues to evolve, so should our methods of creating inclusive spaces and supporting our visitors.

HOW PEOPLE LEARN AND PROCESS INFORMATION

There are 4 most commonly identified kinds of learners: visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic. ("The Science of Learning", 2023). Based on what my students shared with me, I recognized that I am what's known as a "list-learner" (also, I condensed 3 years of law school and Bar Exam prep into shorter and shorter lists until, the day before my exam I had only 7 words on a page that would prompt me to remember everything I needed to know so I probably should



have recognized that sooner). List-learners, sometimes referred to as read/write learners, understand and retain information by reading it and taking notes. (Vark**, 2024). When working with visitors that are list-learners, encouraging them to take or ask for notes or written summaries - from you or others they work with - can be useful, as can recommending that they preface important meetings with an email or written message, which can help them organize their thoughts. (Ferlazzo, 2020). They don't necessarily need to share what they've written, but if they do, it can also give the recipient time to process what they'll hear later, which is helpful in the event that the receiver is also a read/write learner.

The most common kind of learner, outside of folks with visual disabilities, is a visual learner. (Bradford, 2012). Visual learners process information best when it's in the form of charts, graphs, visual imagery etc. Information that can appear "noisy" or over-stimulating for some - because of spatial arrangements, patterns or colors - is exactly what others need to understand and respond to it, and it's important to note that even among visual learners, there are individual variations. For visual learners, offering imagery as descriptors to help them share thoughts or express feelings can be useful. For example, where naming anger or fear might be challenging, asking a visitor to describe how they picture the situation might lead them to share the image of a small boat being tossed at sea, pushing a boulder up a steep hill, or a raging fire. Having props available such photographs, miniatures of real objects, or a white board can provide additional support. (National Autistic Society, 2020). It also works well for non-native English speakers, having worked with many over the years and being one myself.

The third kind of learners are auditory learners who process information by discussing it or simply listening. Auditory learners are sometimes mistaken for having given their agreement to an issue or course of action by engaging in conversation with others who take their engagement as "being on the same page". They can also be viewed as "disengaged" or "uncaring" when they are simply listening to process the information that's being shared with them. Sometimes they're described as disengaged or uncaring due to their lack of responsiveness because they need to hear things, often more than once, and process before responding. Sometimes that response takes a few minutes, sometimes it takes a few days. Either way, it's important to understand and help visitors share with you and others that they might not be immediately responsive or for you to engage in conversation, as hypothetical, to set expectations for, from and about them. Making room for both silence and discussion is important for these visitors, as is being extra mindful of tone, inflection, and clarity of messaging.

Finally, the fourth kind of learner is applied or kinesthetic learners who learn and process by doing what's being discussed. For visitors who lean toward this kind of learning, sharing stories, anecdotes and real-life examples can be useful for them to process the information that's being shared with them. Role playing as well, can help them engage with more understanding and confidence, particularly in interactions they find more challenging and/or interactions where there is a difference in power or positionality.

I share at the outset of meetings and mediations that I process best through notes that I destroy, and I invite others to share with me if they have a preferred way of processing so that I can offer them pen and paper or communicate in ways that might work best for them. Some readily take that opening while others shrug and just start talking. None of these kinds of learning and processing are necessarily exclusive, meaning that some learn in more than one way, and that learning styles can change or evolve over time, or because of necessity (e.g. if someone loses their sight or hearing). There is no one "right" way to learn, process or engage, which is the very reason why it's important to recognize neurodiversity. When you find the way that works best for someone, you'll notice the connection. It may be subtle, I've noticed visitors whose shoulders relax, their verbal pacing slows down or they make eye contact for the first time, that's connection.



RECOGNIZING, COACHING AND ADVISING EMPLOYERS ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY

RECOGNIZING:

The World Health Organization reports that 1.3 billion people globally are disabled (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023), and that 70-80% of disabled people world-wide have invisible or non-obvious disabilities (Wagner, 2021). And the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 1 in 4 Americans - 61 million people - are disabled and that cognitive disabilities are the most prevalent kinds of disability. (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2023).

Some visitors will immediately and directly share their diagnosis or that they are neurodiverse, while others provide subtle clues by sharing for example, that they have trouble regulating emotions and/or difficulty reading social cues. Recognizing neurodiversity importantly doesn't mean diagnosing it and it's important to not make assumptions about ability based only on what's visible and obvious to - or directly shared with - us. If we're able to recognize neurodiversity, we're better able to connect and communicate with visitors in ways that feel supportive to them and help them consider options in ways they find useful.

While generalizations can sometimes be inaccurate, some clues to look for in a visitor can include a lack of eye contact (Kaufman, 2019) and/or particularly closed body language, but note that these are cultural norms for some, and they can also simply be indicators of a visitor's stress, discomfort or anxiety. Other clues can include limited attention and focus to the conversation or a particular question, or conversely, hyper-focus and attention on the same. A feeling of disconnect from a visitor, oftentimes for a reason that's not obvious, can be a clue that the method of communicating with them should be done differently.

Making visitors more comfortable to engage necessitates consideration of environmental and sensory factors as well, as they can be distracting or create discomfort. (Neff, 2024). Lighting, for example, can impact neurodiverse individuals with more harshness or glare which is why I offer the option of switching off overhead lights in favor of small lamps placed around my office. I also offer different types of seating and let the visitor select their seat first as texture, structure and spacing can be important. (Rodgers, 2019).

And noises, particularly ones that are high pitched or persistent, can distract some visitors to the point of ending a meeting. (Perry, 2021). Depending upon the visitor's preference, either turning on a white noise machine to drown out other sounds (which also ensures confidentiality and can enhance the feeling of safety), or turning it off to create quiet, can increase their ability to be present and share their concerns.

COACHING:

Effective coaching for neurodiverse visitors includes more intensive active listening, asking more informal, conversational questions to gain full understanding, checking in more frequently to ensure mutual understanding, and not making assumptions, even about things that might seem obvious.

Asking specifically how their neurodiversity impacts them at work, school, or in their day-to-day engagement with others and gaining clarity about details like timing, environment, methods and modes of communication, helps the ombuds understand how to offer effective support and enables the visitor and the ombuds to work together in identifying practical and realistic ways to address concerns. Recognize that common "best practices" will work with some and not with others and, as with all visitors, no two neurodivergent visitors are the same. Remain mindful that processing and language disconnects not only impede our ability to effectively coach



neurodiverse visitors, but they can also sometimes create friction in our interactions with them. Take time to ensure shared understanding and meaning, avoid sarcasm and double entendre, and choose concrete words unless you've learned that metaphor or visuals are more useful for that visitor. Regardless of who seeks coaching, transparency and clarity are key.

Encourage visitors to also be transparent and concrete - with you and, if possible, with others - about their needs and how they best process information. Particularly in workplace settings, normalizing these kinds of direct communications can create a culture of belonging that helps everyone succeed. Implementing a "Human User Manual" enables individual communication preferences and other information to be shared in a way that creates understanding and safety and helps everyone better understand norms and expectations. (Brill-Cass, 2022).

Additionally, creating structure and clarity around "unwritten rules" can be useful. Offering at the outset of a meeting or mediation, for example, that visitors are welcome to take a break whenever they want or need one can create safety. What would seem to most of us like a surprising number of neurodiverse visitors have said that they avoid buildings where directions to bathrooms aren't clearly posted or attending meetings where breaks aren't clearly built into the agenda and one shared with me that they'd "rather die" than tell someone they have that kind of need. Consider checking in at some point during the process in a way that makes that safe for them, perhaps by saying that you yourself are considering taking a short break and asking if they'd like to do that or if they'd prefer to keep going.

Finally, rather than coaching in a way that might be helpful to most visitors, or that follows your coaching structure, be flexible in the delivery method and offer to provide coaching in different ways, visual or kinesthetic perhaps, to suit visitors' particular needs.

ADVISING EMPLOYERS:

Genuine inclusion requires employers to not simply respond to workplace needs, but to work to recognize them, anticipate them, and to put in place things that meet those needs without being asked. Making workplaces accessible and inclusive for neurodiverse employees ideally includes not relying on requests for accommodations, but (at a minimum) being open to flexibility, understanding that there's no "one size fits all" and being proactive and vocal about easing the stigma, stress and bureaucracy related to requesting accommodations.

Active inclusion of neurodiverse employees begins with hiring. Leaders should insist on diverse pools of candidates that include more than one "representative" from each underrepresented group as research shows that the odds of hiring a woman, for example, are 79 times as great if at least two women are in the finalist pool and the odds of hiring a non-white candidate are 194 times as great with at least two finalist BIPOC applicants. (Williams and Mihaylo, 2019). Reframe differences and help employers see differences as strengths. Share with employers that people with ADHD often have high empathy and spontaneity (Johnson, Heckman and Chan, 2016), that autistic employees have a tendency to pay attention to details (Rogers and Kaylin, 2022), and have excellent memories (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009), and that people with dyslexia commonly have exceptional spatial reasoning and strong memories for stories (Petrova, 2024).

Encourage employers to both create opportunities and to re-create roles for neurodiverse employees to perform to their strengths, rather than sticking to rigid job descriptions or working around perceived weaknesses. Adding flexibility in terms of where, when, and how work happens rather than trying to find someone to "fit" a job description and prescribed way of doing things creates opportunities to include different types of employees and difference is strength.



Advise employers to ask what employees need to be successful in their roles. For some it's as simple as altering uniforms to remove tags or to fit all body types, providing them with "quiet zones" or noise-canceling headphones, or putting up restroom location signs and clocks where they're visible and easy to find. Inform all employees about workplace norms and common social etiquette at the outset in case some don't intuitively recognize them and give benefit of the doubt to employees who might break rules or norms that they're not doing so deliberately.

Insist on clear communications, in multiple formats (written, verbal, visual) around expectations, performance goals, advancement, instructions, etc. from everyone within an organization, particularly from supervisors and managers and advise them to break down big tasks into smaller steps if an employee isn't performing as hoped, as that's particularly helpful for neurodiverse employees. Advise supervisors and managers to provide advance notice of schedule or routine changes and provide context for the change whenever possible. Finally, emphasize the importance of regular check-ins to see if communication methods are working for everyone or if they need to be changed.

CONCLUSION

Self-described "ADHD'er" and TedX Speaker, Ellie Middleton shares this "friendly reminder" via LinkedIn: (Middleton, 2022) *"...[a]cknowledging that someone is autistic and actually altering your behaviour to accommodate them as a disabled person are two different things. If you are still: expecting someone to read between the lines, communicating in an unclear way, not sharing plans and agendas ahead of meetings, considering someone to be 'rude' when they communicate in an upfront way, getting annoyed at people asking 'unnecessary questions', not giving people time to process what you have asked of them before saying 'yes', then you are not doing enough. Accommodation requires ACTION."* (Middleton, 2022). As ombuds, there's perhaps nothing more important than we ourselves, and - with our encouragement - the organizations we serve, take action and do the work.



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