

People Management

Five tips to help you navigate conflict in neurodiverse teams

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In today's fast-changing workplace, diversity and inclusion have emerged as key drivers of organisational success. One facet of diversity that is gaining increasing attention is neurodiversity – the natural variations in human brain function and behavioural traits. However, misconceptions and/or a lack of awareness about neurodiversity pose challenges as they can cause conflict or enable existing conflict situations to remain unresolved. Here are five tips for navigating conflict in neurodiverse teams.

1. Embrace neurodiversity for business success

Different ways of thinking and alternative approaches to solving complex problems can enable organisations to innovate and thrive. In highly competitive environments, an injection of multiple perspectives may give companies an important competitive edge.

Neurodiversity celebrates the unique strengths that individuals with different thinking styles bring to their teams. Given this broad definition, it is estimated that typically around 10-15 per cent of people at work have some form of neurodiversity. From autism to ADHD, dyslexia to dyspraxia, each team member offers a distinct set of skills and perspectives. By understanding and embracing neurodiversity, we open doors to increased creativity and problem-solving potential.

2. Build neurodiversity awareness

Often, managers and leaders are unfamiliar with the needs of people who think and work differently. Recognising these and addressing them in a supportive way can minimise potential conflict and maximise team success.

Managers and leaders should consider how they can improve their understanding of neurodiverse team dynamics and how they can be proactive in minimising and resolving conflict situations that may occur.

3. Foster effective communication

Conflict is a natural part of any team dynamic. Establishing and developing effective team communication is a constructive way to minimise damaging or protracted conflict situations in any team. Encouraging open dialogue and active listening helps to create a space where every team member's voice is valued and understood, regardless of whether they are neurodiverse or not.

In neurodiverse teams, specific communication challenges may arise. These include different ways of interpreting social cues or differences in communication styles. While it is absolutely essential to avoid stereotypes, recognising the potential triggers for conflict will allow team leaders to nip issues in the bud and therefore address them informally. Managers and leaders can also help by

encouraging the use of clear and concise language and by helping and encouraging individuals to listen to and understand others' perspectives, which may be different to their own.

4. Don't make assumptions

In navigating conflict situations, we should always be sensitive to the fact that we may not be aware of someone's neurodivergence. Additionally, where we know an individual approaches work differently, we should avoid any preconceived ideas about their ability. Our focus should be on treating everyone with empathy and understanding. We can do this by asking gentle, open questions and, where necessary, adapting our approach and communication to various working styles. This in turn will help to promote a more inclusive environment for everyone.

5. Assign and manage work flexibly

Considering how tasks are managed also plays a pivotal role. Thought should be given to how tasks are distributed and managed to accommodate diverse thinking styles. For example, some neurodivergent individuals may excel with structured problem-solving techniques, while others may thrive in more intuitive settings. Managers should aim to find a balance that allows team members to perform at their best.

By being emotionally supportive and asking people how communication could be made clearer, managers will foster a safe and supportive environment for the whole team. This will help individuals to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts constructively.