WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Did you know that about 20% of the global population is considered neurodivergent? That means in a project team of 200 people, around 40 might have a neurodivergent trait. Let's start off by breaking down some key terms to understand neurodiversity better:

- **Neurodiversity (noun):** This means that differences in how our brains work are normal. It's the idea that brain differences shouldn't be stigmatized.
- **Neurodivergent (adjective):** This describes someone whose brain processes information differently, like those with Autism or ADHD.
- **Neurotypical (adjective):** This describes someone whose brain processes information in a typical way.

These definitions show that what society often stigmatizes are just normal variations in how our brains work. Neurodivergent individuals are just as valuable as neurotypical ones. As the Stanford Neurodiversity Project puts it, "Neurodiversity is about uncovering the strengths of neurodiverse individuals and utilizing their talents to increase innovation and productivity."

Experts like Dr. Lawrence Fung encourage us to see neurodiverse conditions like Autism and ADHD as variations in functioning, not disorders to be cured. This shift in perspective can help us maximize each team member's talents.

Neurodiversity and Work

Dr. Lawrence Fung gives a great example of how we can view neurodiverse contributions at work:

- **Strengths-based:** An autistic person might be very detail-oriented and persistent, developing deep expertise in a subject.
- **Deficit-based:** The same person might be seen as not seeing the big picture, focusing on things others don't care about, and missing out on their expertise.

How we approach these contributions can greatly impact our work environment. A strengths-based approach benefits the entire organization. So, it's crucial to understand neurodiversity in the workplace and how to harness its power.

SELF REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. How has your understanding of neurodiversity changed after learning these definition2

2. How can you adjust your mindset to better appreciate and utilize the unique strengths of your team

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What is something new you learned from this Toolbox Talk?

2. Think about a time when someone acknowledged your strengths versus a time when someone focused on your weaknesses. How did each approach make you feel, and how did it impact your work?

NEUROLOGICAL VARIATION & BELONGING

In our first Toolbox Talk, we learned that many people in our society and workplaces are neurodiverse. This means that for us to succeed as a team, it's crucial to build belonging for everyone in our organizations. We can improve the experience for neurodiverse individuals at both the system and personal levels. For this Toolbox Talk, we'll focus on how we interact with others.

Implications for Belonging

Our daily interactions at work can significantly impact our colleagues' experiences. What we do with what we learn can be either a belonging subtractor or a belonging booster.

A **Belonging Subtractor** is a comment or action that, even if unintentional, reveals a prejudiced attitude toward neurodiverse team members. They can include insults, slights, or excluding someone. Here are some examples:

- "I'm so OCD about my desk."
- "They're definitely on the spectrum."
- "You're so resilient; despite your disability, you've achieved something!"

> 🎯 **SCENARIO:** During a weekly meeting, Jane, a neurodivergent team member known for her attention to detail, presents her findings. Mark interrupts with, "You're so OCD about these numbers, Jane!" Though he means it as a compliment, it unintentionally highlights a prejudiced attitude. Their supervisor, Tom, steps in to reframe the conversation, praising Jane's precision and explaining how her strengths contribute to the team's success. This shows the importance of being mindful of how our comments can impact inclusivity.

A **Belonging Booster** is a small gesture of inclusion, caring, or kindness. This includes listening, providing support, practicing allyship, and valuing everyone's contributions. Here are some examples:

- **Treat differences from a strengths-based approach.**
- **Mirror the language someone uses to describe their identity.**
- **Notice when someone isn't participating and include them.**

> 🎯 **SCENARIO:** In a busy construction office, project manager Sarah notices an upcoming project that requires multitasking and problem-solving. She thinks of John, a project engineer with ADHD, known for his ability to juggle tasks and think quickly. Recognizing these traits as strengths, Sarah assigns John the project, explaining that his skills are perfect for it. She expresses confidence in him and provides support structures to ensure his success. John feels valued and motivated, knowing his ADHD is seen as an asset, leading him to tackle the project *with enthusiasm.*

SELF REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Think about a time when you approached a project differently than someone else on your team. If it caused tension, how could you handle it differently next time?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. How can the language we use at work impact the sense of belonging for neurodiverse individuals?

2. Share examples of both belonging subtractors and belonging boosters you've encountered and discuss ways to promote more inclusive language.

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NEURODIVERGENT ALLYSHIP

Building relationships is key in the construction industry. Some people are naturally good at networking, while others learn over time. For neurodivergent folks, it can be challenging.

It's important to note that the usual ways we build relationships are based on neurotypical behaviors. Amanda Kirby, CEO of Do-It Solutions, talks about biases in social interactions. Let's look at some of these biases and how we can address them:

- **Contact Bias:** Some neurodivergent people might avoid eye contact, which can be misunderstood as disinterest or dishonesty.

  ▶ **What can you do?** Focus on what they're saying, not whether they're looking you in the eye. Remember, eye contact varies by culture and individual.

- **Small Talk Bias:** Neurodivergent employees might find small talk tough, which can make them seem less social.

  ▶ **What can you do?** Look at how well they communicate about work-related topics, not just small talk.

- **Nonverbal Communication Bias:** Misreading nonverbal cues like facial expressions or body language can lead to wrong judgments about someone's enthusiasm or confidence.

  ▶ **What can you do?** Pay attention to what they say, not just how they say it. Understand that their nonverbal cues might be different from yours.

- **Time Pressure Bias:** Neurodivergent individuals might need more time to process questions or respond, which can be seen as slower thinking.

  ▶ **What can you do?** Give extra time in meetings for them to fully express their thoughts. Be ready to repeat information and check for understanding. Rephrasing questions can also help.

Practice Allyship

Allyship means actively supporting and advocating for the rights and inclusion of marginalized groups. It's important to keep practicing new ways to improve the experiences of everyone around us. Practicing allyship is a powerful tool in building belonging in the workplace. When everyone feels valued and understood, it leads to a more inclusive and supportive environment where all team members can thrive.

SELF REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Think about your experiences with building relationships. Have you ever misread someone's behavior, like avoiding eye contact or struggling with small talk? How can you focus more on what they're saying?

2. How do you handle conversations and meetings, especially with neurodivergent individuals? Do you give enough time for responses and ensure understanding? How can you be more inclusive?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Which bias stands out to you the most? Share with the group why and how you might use Amanda Kirby's tips.

2. What practical steps can we take to improve our communication in meetings? Share your experiences and ideas based on what we've talked about.