

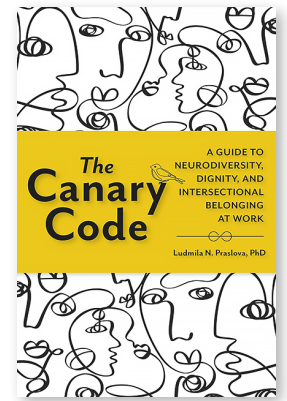


# Executive Book Summaries®

## The Canary Code

A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work

by **Ludmila N. Praslova**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Many workplaces still rely on rigid processes that marginalize people who think, communicate, or work differently, while ignoring early warning signs of bullying, broken workflows, and ethical drift. The result is disengagement, exclusion, and a steady drain on human potential.

*The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work* offers a practical framework for reversing this trend. Using the “canary in the coal mine” metaphor, the book shows how designing for those most impacted by dysfunctional systems ultimately improves work for everyone. It provides actionable guidance across hiring, onboarding, accommodations, performance management, culture, and leadership, helping organizations build fair, flexible, outcomes-focused environments where diverse minds can thrive.

Drawing on more than 25 years of research, consulting, and lived experience, Ludmila N. Praslova examines how organizations can build workplaces that support neurodiversity and intersectional belonging. A neurodivergent organizational psychologist and professor, Praslova combines research and case studies to show how intersectional neuroinclusion—spanning cognitive, emotional, social, and physical differences—can help organizations create healthier cultures, better support diverse talent, and develop more inclusive leadership practices.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Discover practical ways to identify and remove hiring and performance barriers for neurodivergent talent
- Understand how inclusion improves innovation, retention, and organizational health
- Apply outcome-focused, flexible talent practices across the entire employee lifecycle
- Build leadership that support intersectional belonging, not just surface diversity

## INTRODUCTION

**The Unincludable Talent**

Exclusion robs people of opportunities, and it robs organizations of talent. In the long run, exclusionary systems are lose-lose.

*The Canary Code* is a guide to building win-win organizational systems. It outlines specific steps for embedding inclusion across the entire talent cycle and creating fair, outcome-focused cultures in which everyone can participate and belong. The title stems from the metaphor of people particularly impacted by dysfunctional organizational environments and injustices as canaries in the coal mine.

Just like fresh air benefits all, work environments that welcome human cognitive and emotional differences, including the acute sensitivity to the world associated with many forms of neurodivergence, benefit all. Creating organizations where canaries can thrive, create, and innovate also means creating healthier, stronger organizations.

Modern employment practices keep 30–85% of neurominorities unemployed or underemployed, “digging ditches” rather than using their best strengths. And this is not for lack of business case evidence. There are findings from the autism hiring program at JP Morgan that autistic employees can be up to 140% more productive than the average employee.

Talent systems in most workplaces appear to be broken. There are access barriers that eliminate many talented people from hiring considerations. And those who are hired face success barriers because of poor work organization, understaffing, and various forms of bias.

Many talent systems seem to be working against talent: high performers are bullied and driven away, often faced with ever-increasing and unsustainable workloads until they break and burn out, and are required to work in inefficient ways because of institutional inertia.

Systemic problems like these require systemic solutions.

**Inclusion by Design**

The typical set of assumptions on “how to do inclusion” is limiting, and so are the systems based on these assumptions. As long as inclusion is thought of as something slowly doled out by the “born included” based on a limited set of characteristics they choose to include, some people will remain unincludable. Half-measures do not work. True inclusion is systemic inclusion. The *entire* organizational system must become inclusive—by design.

Optimizing the environment for neurodivergent people by providing flexible schedules, quieter workplaces, lower stress, clear communication, and training designed for a broader range of learning needs will create an environment where everyone can thrive.

The air quality that keeps canaries healthy will keep everyone healthy. And that is the essence of the Canary Code.

## CHAPTER 1

**Neurodiversity Primer**

Although some degree of neurodiversity is generally found in most organizations, people of some neurotypes experience more barriers to workplace access and success.

The movement for neuroinclusion in the workplace can be seen as a specific form of the neurodiversity movement and neurominority justice.

Ensuring fair opportunities for those who have been excluded from and disadvantaged in traditional work environments can be accomplished by creating more flexible organizational systems that include and support a wider range of talent and productivity styles.

Workplace improvements associated with neuroinclusion benefit individuals of many different neurotypes, including those who are neurotypical.

A more accurate measurement of skills and work outcomes, along with increased flexibility and transparency, not only creates truly neurodiverse workplaces but also improves the overall work environment and strengthens organizations.

**Flaw or Flow?**

Deficit labeling is so powerful that people and organizations would pay to obtain certain neurodivergent advantages for themselves while simultaneously trying to cure neurodivergent people of the same characteristics.

For example, there are leadership programs that help leaders be more honest. But would the same organizations that wish to increase honesty hire autistic people and promote them to leadership positions?

Considering autistic unemployment rates and the thorny paths of autistic leaders, this does not seem to be the case.

If we want to live in a more just world and if we want more trust, less corruption, and higher productivity, we must over-

# Exclusion robs people of opportunities, and it robs organizations of talent.



ride fear of difference and challenge negative assumptions. And that is the point of the neurodiversity movement.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Holistic Inclusion

We are whole people. Our work experience, too, involves the whole person—and whole people require a holistic approach to inclusion. We can't experience belonging at work when our bodies do not feel safe. We need holistic belonging to flourish fully.

This means a deep respect for differences in how our thinking, emotions, bodies, and relationships work best. In practice, holistic inclusion operates across several interconnected dimensions such as social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and sensory.

#### Social (Neuro)Inclusion

The social inclusion of neurodivergent people in the workplace requires rethinking traditional neuronormative expectations of workplace socialization. Inclusion efforts must aim to create environments where people wired to need different levels and forms of social interaction feel accepted and valued.

#### Cognitive (Neuro)Inclusion

Cognitive diversity enhances team performance and helps build more innovative, productive, and successful organizations. But fully realizing these rewards takes some work. To unlock productivity that comes from the diversity of thinking, working, and decision-making styles, organizations must change some prevalent practices to ensure cognitive (neuro) inclusion.

#### Emotional (Neuro)Inclusion

Neurodiversity inclusion requires emotional inclusion. Human well-being, in general, requires emotional inclusion. Yet, few organizations practice emotional inclusion by normalizing authentic emotional expression at work.

#### Physical and Sensory (Neuro)Inclusion, Accessibility, and Sensory Safety

In the most general sense, physical inclusion means removing barriers to work for people whose bodies function differently

from the typical. These barriers can be associated with employees' physical injuries and conditions. They might also be associated with psychological differences, as well as with brain-body relationships (epilepsy, tremors, dyspraxia, or effects of brain injuries).

Workplaces that support physical aspects of neuroinclusion are accessible, safe, and supportive of diverse sensory needs.

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## CHAPTER 3

### The Canary Code

Like canaries in the coal mine, neurodivergent people are the first to feel the mistreatment and effects of poorly designed systems, whether at school or work.

A systemic approach to improvement is essential because fixing just one negative workplace factor—be it the inaccessible, stress-inducing design of physical work environments or a lack of flexibility—will not be enough. But fixing all these factors will make a difference not just for neurodivergent people but for many others.

The Canary Code model is focused on six key principles for organizational practice that can help remove barriers to neuroinclusion, improve the well-being of all employees, and support organizational outcomes:

#### 1. Participation

Meaningfully involving employees, specifically marginalized employees, in decisions that influence their work distinguishes the Canary Code approach from traditional interventions that “benevolent includers” design on behalf of those “to be included.” The participation principle addresses the important and often overlooked drawbacks of design methods that call for empathy toward the marginalized but not participation of the marginalized.

#### 2. Focus on outcomes

Focusing work on outcomes gives all of the employees a much-desired sense of autonomy and empowerment and supports inclusion, higher performance, and morale. Focus on outcomes deals with supporting people in contributing to collective results in ways that maximize their strengths and evaluating outcomes without bias.

### 3. Flexibility

Rigid requirements based on time, place, and style of work rather than outcomes can exclude neurodivergent and marginalized talent. Conversely, expanding flexibility even more, including aligning jobs with people's unique strengths, can make seemingly impossible levels of employee thriving and organizational performance possible.

### 4. Focus on organizational justice

Justice in hiring, pay, benefits, promotion, and the entire talent cycle is a foundation of strong cultures that retain talent. Fair treatment and equitable processes build confidence in organizational leadership. Across cultural contexts, organizational justice increases collaboration and productivity.

### 5. Transparency and clear communication

The lack of clear communication in modern workplaces often excludes neurodivergent people. Transparency, in contrast, supports psychological safety, trust, and organizational performance. In addition, it can help restore trust eroded by previous injustices and nurture a sense of belonging.

### 6. Valid tools for decision-making

Selection and promotion practices based on a subjectively defined "fit" often exclude neurodivergent and marginalized talent and limit organizational talent pools. Valid decision-making instruments are based on a thorough job analysis and require ensuring that the job analysis process itself is inclusive.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Hiring Process

Hiring is a form of matchmaking. We even use the language of "applicant attraction" and "making yourself an attractive candidate." But matchmaking only works if both parties are honest and know what is actually important to them, and in hiring, that rarely seems to be the case.

There are many signs that something is seriously wrong with organizational matchmaking. Instead of true matches, organizations end up with false positives (hires who don't live up to expectations) and false negatives (rejecting talented people who would have been outstanding). Both errors have financial, morale, and ethical costs. A wrong hire costs *at least* 30% of the hire's annual salary in the form of lost productivity, potential need to rehire, and other expenses.

The Canary Code principles of transparency, focus on outcomes, and valid measurement are crucial in creating hiring systems that work for both employees and employers.

## Applicant Attraction

Exclusion starts long before the selection process—it begins with job descriptions and position announcements. Making the content of job descriptions inclusive is crucially important for attracting and hiring neurodivergent job seekers.

Unfortunately, job descriptions are often based on generic templates and may include skills or personal characteristics of little or no relevance to specific positions.

To improve job descriptions and overall job design, organizations should follow established best practices:

1. Conduct a thorough job analysis to ensure that the job description accurately reflects the position's actual requirements involved.
2. Clearly separate required qualifications essential for performing the job from desirable qualifications such as specific experiences.
3. Evaluate job descriptions for unnecessary, generic, and cut-and-paste requirements.
4. Avoid references to personality or possible neurodivergent and mental health differences.
5. Avoid biased language like the ageist "digital native" and masculine-coded "hard-charging."
6. Avoid asking for anything that is not indeed required but may limit the applicant pool.

In addition, neuroinclusive job advertisements must use plain language, avoid jargon, and provide clear and precise information about the job content.

Where and how jobs are advertised also matter for all types of diversity: ethnic, class, cultural, or neurodiversity. For example, recruiting from local community colleges, Ivy League universities, and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) will result in different demographic profiles of applicants. Organizations aiming to appeal to neurodivergent candidates also often use targeted recruitment strategies.

## Applicant Screening and Selection

In most organizations, receipt of the candidate's application signifies the move to the next stage of the hiring process: candidate screening. Screening typically refers to the initial round of "selecting out" applicants who are the least qualified or not qualified. Regardless of the specific screening approach, checking for biases—human or algorithmic—is essential.

For many job seekers, interviews have become tools of exclusion and social disablement. These effects are particularly

When rewards are based on “looking productive,” people will do whatever it takes to look productive. ”

drastic for autistic job seekers. Neuronormative small talk expectations in interviews subject autistic applicants to “style over substance” judgments. Evaluators often make these negative judgments quickly and largely outside their awareness, later justifying them with statements about “poor fit.”

We can eliminate interviews and rely on skills tests instead. Many other companies have tried modifying interviews for neurodivergent people by providing questions in advance and making the situation as comfortable as possible. Others have done away with interviews altogether. The latter approach is well aligned with the growing trend toward skills-based hiring.

## CHAPTER 5

### Starting Off Right

Onboarding is the process of integrating a new employee into an organization. It is much more than a new employee orientation. The process can present additional challenges for employees who come from different cultures, marginalized demographic groups, or stigmatized populations like disabled or neurodivergent employees.

In contrast, an inclusively designed onboarding process can set the tone for a welcoming and fair environment and contribute to the process of continuous organizational improvement and nurturing a positive culture.

#### Preboarding

One way to improve onboarding is to design a quality preboarding experience. Preboarding refers to the period between the job offer and the first day at work. It is often focused on filling out forms, which can allow onboarding to focus on the social and cultural experience.

Here are a few ways in which leaders in organizations can enhance preboarding and support a smooth employee transition:

- Understand individual needs
- Ease the paperwork burden
- Provide clear information
- Maintain ongoing communication
- Offer a mentor or buddy system early

- Offer a workplace preview before the first day
- Provide accommodations
- Develop a support network

By designing a thoughtful preboarding process, organizations can cultivate a supportive environment that is likely to translate into better retention and morale. Robust and flexible preboarding supports a culture of inclusion and a sense of belonging.

#### Socialization and Relationship Building

Effective training and onboarding for neurodivergent employees should go beyond simply providing information about the job role. The onboarding period should be a supportive and welcoming introduction to the organization’s culture and social environment.

Tailored support that considers individual social needs and comfort levels can make or break the onboarding experience. Considerate and respectful socialization provides opportunities for every new hire, regardless of their neurotype, to feel a welcomed part of the organizational culture.

#### Continuous Feedback

Regular feedback is crucial during the onboarding process. It helps neurodivergent employees understand their performance, areas for improvement, and progress toward goals. When implemented correctly, it should also give them the opportunity to voice concerns or request additional support.

Providing quality feedback for the successful onboarding of neurodivergent employees requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach. Here are some crucial considerations to keep in mind:

- Invite participation
- Offer choices on how feedback is delivered
- Create a safe environment
- Focus on specific behaviors and goals
- Be clear and specific
- Focus on growth
- Avoid overload
- Follow up

## Neuroinclusion Training

Traditional methods of integrating neurodivergent employees (with most research focused on autistic employees) into the workplace have often been rooted in the medical model, primarily focusing on teaching individuals to adapt to neurotypical standards. But as research has consistently shown, this approach falls short.

Instead of trying to force neurodivergent individuals to fit a rigid neuronormative “box,” organizations need to develop neuroinclusive environments and provide all employees with effective neuroinclusion training, helping them embrace neurodiversity.

Such a shift in the focus from correction to connection requires training that would cover at least the following:

- Recognizing individual uniqueness
- Addressing both the denial of abilities and the denial of difficulties
- Understanding accommodations

Effective training—whether in-person, virtual, or hybrid—should involve ample opportunities to ask questions, both openly and anonymously, and clarify misconceptions.

Ideally, training should include multiple perspectives of individuals with lived experiences to illustrate the breadth of the neurodiversity umbrella.

## CHAPTER 6

### Work Environment

Planning physical spaces for inclusion and flexibility is, undeniably, a challenge. How do we balance the needs of people with low vision or who are hard of hearing, those who are sensory sensitive and experience incapacitating sensory overload, and those who seek extra stimulation?

The Canary Code principles of participation and flexibility suggest an answer. Developing spaces that can support many different people can only be accomplished with the participation and engagement of many different people.

Holistic belonging applied to the work environment means understanding that our performance, health, and well-being are significantly influenced by workspaces.

In some cases, inaccessible or sensorily unwelcoming physical work environments by design or oversight exclude certain groups of individuals altogether.

## CHAPTER 7

### Work Organization

Many companies still focus on the number of hours worked, bodies in seats, faces seen, and words typed. Many systems still reward productivity theater in the form of meetings called, colleagues interrupted with pretend urgent communications, and much-trumpeted short-term wins that come at the expense of long-term losses.

Rewards based on “looking productive” encourage doing whatever it takes to “look productive.”

The illusion of productivity often hurts true productivity, which is inseparable from a long-term focus on quality and requires creating well-designed systems that support employees to do their best and take pride in their work.

#### One Size Fits None

If the goal of work organization is maximizing human talent, and unlocking people’s full potential then one-size-fits-all is a counterproductive approach. Uniformity for the sake of uniformity sacrifices productivity.

It makes far more sense to make work fit people.

Ellen Ernst Kossek, a leading researcher of flexibility in the workplace, and her colleagues describe schedule, workload, and continuity as ways to make work more flexible.

These three forms of flexibility help organizations adapt work to employees’ needs rather than forcing people to adapt to rigid work structures:

- **Schedule flexibility:** Adjusting work hours to fit an employee’s needs is a major facilitator of inclusion. Schedule flexibility can make working possible for some employees and greatly support productivity for others.
- **Workload flexibility:** Many employees value workload flexibility options, such as working full-time, part-time, or sharing a job with another part-time employee. With planning, workload flexibility is possible across all types of occupations.
- **Continuity flexibility:** This allows employees to take a leave of absence without losing their jobs and, in many cases, while retaining all or most of their salary. Besides paid maternity or paternity leave, other valuable types of leave that support inclusion and employee well-being include family, sick, mental health, education, sabbaticals, and adult gap years.

Inclusive leadership requires getting to know people and enabling them to work their best, even when their needs are very different from ours.

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## CHAPTER 8

### Psychological Work Environment

A study of more than 1.3 million employee reviews on Glassdoor revealed the five attributes of toxic cultures:

- noninclusive
- disrespectful
- unethical
- cutthroat
- abusive

These attributes play a major role in employee turnover and can perpetuate neuroexclusion.

Extensive research shows that how leaders behave, the social norms they establish through behavior they reward and tolerate, and the work design they mandate can create or clean up toxic cultures. Organizational systems, procedures, and expectations typically determine whether bullying is permissible, cutthroat behavior is encouraged, and ethical violations are overlooked.

#### Making Environments Inclusive

Every Canary Code principle is vital to building inclusive workplaces. Organizational justice, however, is a particularly powerful lever for making systems more inclusive.

Ensuring transparency and developing systems for procedural justice can help support equity and inclusion on the organizational level, even if unconscious or conscious biases are present to some extent on the individual level.

A classic example of transforming the culture of a major company from being infamously brutal, hostile, and backstabbing into one much more respectful and inclusive is Satya Nadella's work with Microsoft. After taking over in 2014, Nadella focused on developing empathy and compassion by encouraging the leadership team to practice nonviolent communication (NVC).

In the context of neuroinclusion, alternatives to NVC that focus more on facts than on feelings might be more considerate of people with alexithymia, a difficulty in labeling feelings. In addition to considerate communication, all principles of the Canary Code are relevant to building respect.

### Ensuring Ethical Behavior

Unethical organizational practices result in one of the most insidious types of workplace harm: moral injury. Moral injury is caused by a threat to one's morality, such as harming others or failing to prevent harm, and observing leadership's betrayal in high-stakes situations.

The elevated sense of justice that often occurs among neurominorities, along with a history of trauma, could make these employees particularly vulnerable to moral injury and even exclude them from some jobs. The best way to prevent moral injury is to ensure transparent and ethical organizational operations.

## CHAPTER 9

### I Just Want to Be Myself

A study of career aspirations of autistic women in Australia showed that one of the key desires of study participants was to just be themselves. Yes, they wanted professional growth, meaningful work, and stable income, like most people. Yet their heart's cry was the desire to be their authentic selves.

Yet many managers still make this difficult for neurodivergent employees. Leaders who want to unlock the talents of neurodivergent people—and people in general—will do best by supporting everyone as one-of-a-kind human beings who want to be themselves.

#### Focus on Fairness

Bias enters into the process of performance management in many ways. Neurodivergent personality traits, where someone was born, and what someone looks like can all influence how people perceive and evaluate human behavior and performance. These characteristics are not related to performance, yet they still shape evaluations by people and by AI trained on the patterns and decisions of those people.

Managers and HR professionals can greatly improve the effectiveness of performance management and employee well-being by applying the principles of the Canary Code.

Using de-biased tools is crucial to supporting equity and countering bias. Additional safeguards for ensuring ob-

jectivity include checking evaluations of all employees for consistency and statistically comparing evaluation averages for different groups of employees.

## CHAPTER 10

## Leading for Inclusion: The Why

The business case for inclusion has produced much rhetoric that, at first glance, may sound well-intended but is, in fact, misguided and potentially harmful. It is highly problematic to promote disability or difference as an opportunity for other people to take advantage of.

This messaging happens, for example, when the autistic tendency to work without breaks (and to complete exhaustion) is promoted as part of the “business case” for hiring autistic professionals or when autistic loyalty is touted as something that makes retention efforts unnecessary.

More generally, the widespread practice of having to make a case for hiring people from marginalized groups, be it neurominorities or any other group, continues othering these people and perpetuates the power imbalance. Forcing the less privileged to keep justifying their existence to the more privileged is not a path to a fairer society. The best case for diversity might be just valuing humans.

### The Why of Inclusion

The human case for inclusion reflects moral and ethical arguments for creating diverse and inclusive environments. It emphasizes human dignity, equity, social justice, and the right of every individual to participate fully and meaningfully in an organization.

The business case for inclusion focuses on the tangible benefits to the organization, such as attracting diverse talent, increasing creativity, facilitating better decision-making, improving reputation, and greater profitability.

Zero-sum thinking with mutually exclusive human and business cases is rooted in a fragmented understanding of how diversity and inclusion influence complex systems. By recognizing the interconnectedness of humans and organizational systems, we can let go of false dichotomies.

When employees are diverse and thrive, organizations and economies thrive. This integrated approach, which I call *inclusive thriving*, upholds the inherent dignity and human value of employees while also recognizing that inclusion is a smart long-term organizational strategy.

## CHAPTER 11

## Leading for Inclusion: The How

Even with a strong *why*, the *how* of neuroinclusion can be intimidating. Managers face many challenges and are not always prepared to deal with them. People are complex, and there is always more to learn about solving unique problems and creating better systems.

Inclusive leadership requires getting to know people and enabling them to work their best, even when their needs are very different from ours. Treating others as they need to be treated is not easy, intuitive, or automatic. However, studies indicate that, with practice, people can develop a habit of perspective-taking.

Some steps for integrating perspective-taking into organizational habits include the following:

1. Dedicate time for problem solving
2. Focus on understanding diverse experiences and viewpoints
3. Promote data and evidence sharing to better understand different perspectives
4. Foster a multilevel perspective

### The How of Caring Smarter

Being a considerate leader doesn't necessarily mean doing more. It may mean doing things differently and, rather than just adding new practices, discontinuing some old ones.

Proactively supporting people can also help prevent time-consuming interpersonal or performance problems that may otherwise arise in the long run. Here are some principles for caring smarter:

1. **Mindset shift:** Considerate leadership is more about a shift in mindset than adding to our to-do lists. It involves seeing our team members as individuals with unique strengths and needs.
2. **Quality matters:** Being a considerate leader is not about working longer hours. It's about focusing on key experiences and being thoughtful in interactions.
3. **Listening over talking:** Encouraging open, constructive communication helps prevent the gradual build-up of pent-up frustration.
4. **Empowerment over control:** This often means stepping back and allowing others to step up and develop self-leadership, a characteristic particularly important for hybrid and remote work.

Instead of forcing people to fit work,  
it makes far more sense to make work fit people.

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5. **Establishing systems for a considerate climate:**  
Systems can be as simple as asking people how they work best and acting on it.

## CHAPTER 12

### Leadership Practices

In reality, there are more neurodivergent leaders than most people realize. Many are “in the closet” for a good reason. Neuroexclusion is no joke. Those who brave disclosure often pay the price—pulled promotions, reduced pay, and bullying.

Still other neurodivergent leaders could not disclose if they wanted to because they were not aware of their neurodivergence until much later in life.

They just work, lead, do their best, and offer fascinating leadership lessons that just might help improve all our organizations.

If there is more than one way to be a leader, then why do most organizations have only one leadership pathway? Why are people with great strategic minds told they are not “leadership material” just because they find small talk draining?

To build a diverse, strengths-focused workplace and leadership, we must first discard several highly damaging myths:

1. **The “ideal leader” myth:**  
The idea that there is an ideal type of leader endowed with the right set of characteristics.
2. **The “pipeline” myth:**  
The idea that there is a linear career path or pipeline that all aspiring leaders should follow.
3. **The “culture-fit” myth:**  
The idea that all employees need to fit into a company’s culture to contribute and succeed.

### Supporting the Strengths

As organizations confront increasingly complex problems, a one-size-fits-all approach to career development that leads to homogeneity in leadership is becoming ineffective.

Here are a few examples of how organizations can implement multiple leadership pathways:

- **People leadership focus:** Employees whose strengths lie in interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and coaching may be drawn to people management and development roles.
- **Systems leadership focus:** Employees who excel in data analysis, systems thinking, and process design may thrive in roles focused on systems and processes.
- **Strategy leadership focus:** Those who are strong at monitoring external trends and mapping an organization’s long-term direction may be well suited for strategy-focused roles.
- **Expert leadership focus:** Employees who enjoy developing deep expertise in specialized fields—such as legal, medical, engineering, or research—may prefer expert roles.
- **Thought leadership focus:** This pathway may suit employees who enjoy generating ideas and solving complex problems beyond the organization.
- **Global leadership focus:** Employees who enjoy working across cultures, languages, and borders may be drawn to global leadership roles.
- **Creative leadership focus:** Roles centered on creativity, innovation, and design thinking may appeal to employees with strong ideation skills.

### Leading Through Influence

Leadership may look like a mysterious art, but it is also a craft with a toolbox of approaches, and some of these tools might be particularly effective when we are imperfect and authentic in practice.

We could also benefit from reframing our leadership by separating it from positions of management and formal authority, even when we are in positions of formal authority in our organizations. Often, we can lead as if we were leading without formal authority.

Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven described five bases of interpersonal power, or the ability to effect change. They disagreed on the sixth: informational power. French believed that information produced influence but not power. Raven, in contrast, argued that informational influence *is* power.

Here is the six-element version of the framework:

1. Legitimate power is positional power. A supervisor's job title signals the legitimate authority to be in charge.
2. Reward power is based on the ability to award bonuses, raises, promotions, and privileges.
3. Coercive power is supported by the ability to punish via demotion, undesirable scheduling, inferior workspace, or termination.
4. Referent power stems from our identification with leaders and the intrinsic desire to follow their example.
5. Expert power stems from our belief that the leader has a deeper understanding of relevant topics and therefore "knows best."
6. Informational influence/power goes beyond expert power by adding an element of learning. Not only does the leader know best but the follower is also developing an advanced understanding of why something is "best." As a result, followers experience a change of mind and know the reason for action.

Positional leaders still can, and sometimes need to, use legitimate, reward, and even coercive power. But as work becomes increasingly cognitive and emotional, the importance of referent, expert, and informational leadership powers will continue to grow, while the power of managerial levers will likely diminish.

Stigma and prejudice have forced many neurodivergent leaders to accomplish their work with little to no positional power. Although this is taxing, it may also result in developing the skill of using influence without coercion or rewards—an invaluable skill for leading in remote and hybrid situations and for leading social action.

## Conclusion

An opportunity to go further and make meaningful contributions is something that many neurodivergent people, all over the world, long for. And the larger society needs the contributions of neurodivergent people, even if it is not quite aware of it. This raises an important question: how can we all make a difference?

Much more change is needed. Addressing the unemployment gaps faced by neurodivergent people requires a comprehensive approach—a 360-degree approach to inclusion—with governments, CEOs, HR professionals, managers, and everyday humans all playing essential roles.

Systemic and lasting change involves changing nation-level structures and legislation, organizational structures and processes, as well as social norms and individual attitudes. This means that many people, with and without the power of the office, can play significant roles in facilitating the change. The cycle of change can start from any point.

We influence the world every day, whether we know it or not, whether we expect it or not. You might inspire your neighbor, your boss, a colleague, or someone on the other side of the world.

In a 360-degree interconnected world, every act of kindness and honoring human dignity can have a far-reaching ripple effect across organizations and communities.



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