

# NEURODIVERSITY @ WORK PLAYBOOK

Employee Engagement  
and Growth Series

ISSUE #2

## Neuroinclusive Organizational Change Management

“Change is the only constant.”

— Heraclitus of Ephesus (l. c. 500 BCE)

While organizational change such as layoffs, reorganization of divisions, manager change, and office moves can be challenging for all employees, the impact of change may be exacerbated for neurodivergent employees. Neurodivergent people, due to differences in sensory sensitivities, social interaction, information processing needs, cognitive load needs, and their experiences with discrimination and trauma due to these differences are impacted disproportionately in response to change. There are several reasons for this:

- For many neurodivergent employees who struggle to find and maintain employment, the threat of layoffs will create high levels of insecurity.
- For neurodivergent employees who may value consistency and clarity, the possibility of disruption will create high levels of anxiety and distractions from the work.
- For some neurodivergent employees who find it challenging to decode subtle messages around change, the experience may be alienating and counterproductive to the inclusion work already done.
- Neurodivergent employees often experience co-occurring conditions such as anxiety and depression. Uncertainty and the threat of losing employment have a substantially higher negative impact.

When change is not managed in a neuroinclusive way, organizations experience:

- Decreased productivity. Neurodivergent employees who are not accommodated or supported in a neuroinclusive way may experience stress, burnout, and difficulty focusing on their work.
- Higher turnover. Employees who feel excluded may choose to leave the organization.
- Increased conflict and tension. Managers who are not aware of or sensitive to the needs of neurodivergent individuals may unintentionally create conflict and tension among team members, which can harm team dynamics and result in decreased collaboration.

## MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE CHECKLIST

- ✓ Be transparent about change.
- ✓ Make expectations clear — what you expect as well as what the employee should expect.
- ✓ Address change (whether anticipated or not) swiftly by meeting with those impacted.
- ✓ Create a clear communication plan leveraging multiple channels and using multimedia.
- ✓ Respond to employee concerns empathetically.
- ✓ Empower managers as well as HR, accommodation, and Neurodiversity Hiring teams to lead change consistently and empathetically.
- ✓ Communicate clearly and often throughout the change process.
- ✓ Check in with impacted employees regularly throughout the change process and beyond.

## How to lead organizational change in neuroinclusive ways

No matter how contained or widespread the scale of change may be, leaders at every level of the organization must be intentional in their approach to communicating and executing the change. When considering the potential impact of change, leaders and managers must keep in mind that different employees, especially neurodivergent employees, may react differently based on their life experiences.

Below are key practices to minimize the negative impact of change contextualized for neurodivergent employees specifically. Note that these practices apply to all employees.

### 1. Be clear and explain why the change is necessary.

- Be honest and transparent about change as much as possible. This is an important opportunity to strengthen trust.
- Explain and be honest about the pros and cons of the change and its impact.
- Set a tone of respect and compassion.

### 2. Develop a holistic communication plan.

- Communication should be consistent, clear, thoughtful, and transparent across all levels of the organization and all channels of communication.
- Leaders must be visible and communicate change with compassion.
- Be clear and specific about expected impact and how the organization will support affected employees.
- Develop a tiered approach with tailored strategies specific to each impacted unit.
- Leverage multiple modes of communication and provide both push and pull information such as FAQs, resources, tutorials, or other materials necessary to understand the change and prepare for it.
- Use visuals and multimedia to support narratives when crafting your message.
- Provide safe spaces for employees to process information and ask questions leveraging ERGs and neurodiversity hiring programs.

Provide open communication channels between employees and their managers as well as executives to reinforce:

- ✓ The need for change
- ✓ Ways employees will be supported during change
- ✓ Next steps the organization is taking to implement change

### 3. Prepare and staff up Neurodiversity Hiring, HR, and accommodation teams to ensure that they are:

- Aware of changes and their potential impact.
- Clear on the role they play during change and ready to field questions and provide support.
- Proactively providing the supports needed by neurodivergent employees.
- Clear on whom they need to inform and partner with to support neurodivergent employees while maintaining individuals' privacy.
- Preserving the individual's agency in how they want to engage with their managers and services through the change.
- Trained to support transitions using the principles of Trauma-Informed Care.
- Prepared to reliably and systematically track Neurodiversity Hiring Program participants within the confines of privacy and neurodiversity principles in order to provide supports and track program outcomes.

### 4. Prepare managers to lead their teams through change.

- Make managers aware of the change in advance.
- Be clear about the role you expect the managers to play in communicating and facilitating change.
- Provide explicit and consistent messaging managers can leverage (e.g., provide talking points or scripts).
- Empower managers to be compassionate and authentic by providing them with the resources, training, and coaching they need.
- Enable managers to explain how the change will impact each individual, and how the change will be implemented and its timeline.
- Be clear about where employees can get support and provide feedback to the manager or confidentially to the ERG or Neurodiversity Hiring Program.

## What role should managers play in supporting neurodivergent employees through change?

Neurodivergent employees may be especially vulnerable to stress and anxiety when faced with the potential for change. A trusted and compassionate manager, mentor, or colleague may play a critical role in reducing uncertainty induced by organizational change. In addition to the organizational practices suggested above, it is important that managers pay particular attention and devise their own strategy to support their team members through change. Managers should consider the practices below to minimize the negative impacts of change.

**1** Time is of the essence when it comes to communicating change and being available to field questions around announcements of change. Anticipate the announcement and have a team meeting scheduled in advance and in close proximity to the announcement if possible. In cases where change is suggested, meet immediately with the team.

**2** Be transparent and honest about what you know and what you do not. Let them know when you might be more certain about specifics. It is better to say you do not know than speculate wrongly. If you were wrong, the individual and team may lose trust in you.

**3** Help employees understand what will be impacting them, how, when, and why.

**4** Schedule a follow-up meeting to process the information and answer questions.

**5** Provide sufficient time for the person to process announcements of change.

**6** Check in regularly with the team using simple signals such as thumbs up or down. Follow up privately with employees who are not doing well. Consider providing anonymous feedback for general team-level assessment through general HR practices as well.

**7** Reiterate why the change is taking place. Be consistent in your messaging.

**8** Be specific about how the change may impact the individual and their team. The ability to understand what will be impacting the individual, how, and why is important for many neurodivergent employees during the transition.

**9** Communicate in multiple ways. Meet with the employee and/or team, but also follow up with an email with the specifics you discussed.

**10** Facilitate a team-level discussion to empower the team to contribute to the plan to address the changes impacting them when possible.

**11** Be attentive to the chatter in the team and surrounding your team. Address misinformation and rumors right away. Set the tone to focus on facts, stay positive while recognizing the risk and its impact, and show empathy and compassion at all times.

**12** Be compassionate and communicate and listen with empathy. Do not dismiss concerns or minimize a person's worry or anxiety. Consider their experience, not yours, or how you would respond.

## Manager action plan for unanticipated change

Managers are not always made aware of change before it is announced. In such cases, managers should consider the following:

- ✓ Communicate change ASAP.
- ✓ Maintain calm and dispel rumors and speculation.
- ✓ Meet with the team. Field initial questions and hear concerns; remain consistent and stick to the facts; highlight the next steps in the process for change; and follow the meeting with an email acknowledging concerns with empathy and summarizing the change, impact, and next steps.
- ✓ Allow the team to process the news and schedule a follow-up team meeting.
- ✓ Meet with team members one-on-one.
- ✓ Share support options and resources, along with ways to provide anonymous feedback if available.
- ✓ Check in with the team and individuals throughout the process.
- ✓ Communicate in multiple modes.

## Neuroinclusive change management

- Be deliberate and transparent about change.
- Timeliness is critical when communicating change.
- Set a tone of respect and compassion.
- Provide clear, discoverable resources to facilitate change.
- Respect individual rights to privacy during transitions.
- Empower neurodivergent employees by providing accessible resources and best practices related to their rights around disclosure and requests for accommodations.
- Be clear about and provide explicit guidance to support the role of managers during change.
- Create community for neurodivergent employees and managers focused on navigating change.
- Provide space for employees to process change and ask questions in multiple formats to support different learners (e.g., written and oral, synchronous and asynchronous, in-person and virtual, anonymous and identifiable) — best done through managers.

## Resources

This brief only touches the surface related to best practices to support neurodivergent employees through organizational and team-level change. Below are some additional resources that will help you dive deeper into the topic.

- This blog by Emma Fox provides very helpful insights from a neurodivergent advocate's perspective: <https://theautisphere.com/why-autistic-people-find-change-difficult/>
- This guest blog by Auticon also provides actionable insights for supporting neurodivergent employees during change: <https://www.texthelp.com/resources/blog/supporting-autistic-employees-during-change/>
- Much of the writing on change management has been done from the perspective of autistic employees. This video from Jessica McCabe provides insights related to change management from an ADHDer's perspective: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xLv1aQnjXI>
- This HBR article provides best practices about ways to best communicate changes: <https://hbr.org/2022/11/layoffs-are-painful-but-you-can-communicate-them-compassionately>

## About this series

The Neurodiversity @ Work Playbook: Employee Engagement and Growth Series is the product of a series of focus groups led by Dr. Hala Annabi, an associate professor at the University of Washington Information School. Dr. Annabi facilitated discussion in five focus groups, including participants from the Neurodiversity at Work Employer Roundtable, addressing best practices related to five key areas of opportunity represented in these briefs. The facilitators distilled best practices and developed these guides for other organizations to use to continue to advance neurodiversity employment with input from focus group participants.

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