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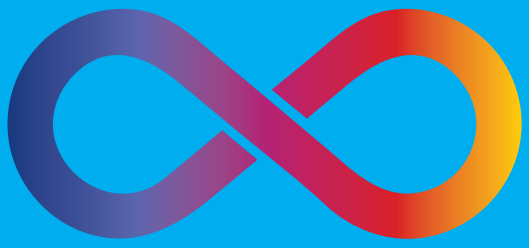


A Manager's Guide to **Nurturing Neurodivergent Talent** in an Inclusive Workplace

Glossary

Ableism: Discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that people without disabilities are superior, and that people with disabilities require "fixing" so they can be included in society.

Executive Function: The ability to plan, organise and follow through, as well as the ability to inhibit actions, delay responses, regulate emotions and reactions, make appropriate choices and shift attention.

Neurodiversity: A biological fact that there is a limitless variety in neurodevelopment across the lifespan, with many different neurotypes and individual differences. Neurodiversity as a concept refers to the full range of variations in human cognition, emotion, and perception.

Neurodiverse: A collective term for groups including mixed neurotypes (e.g. a group of dyspraxic, autistic and neurotypical people is a "neurodiverse" group). This term and the term diverse should not be applied to individuals.

Neurodevelopment: Neurodevelopment is the brain's growth and maturation process, shaping thinking, learning, movement, and social skills.

Neurodivergent: A person or people whose neurodevelopment diverges from the range conventionally viewed as typical or "normal" (e.g. a person with dyslexia or dyspraxia may refer to themselves as a person who is neurodivergent or a neurodivergent person; a group of people with ADHD may refer to themselves as a group of "neurodivergent" people).

Neuronormative: A set of ideals, actions, and functions seen as "normal" by prevailing cultural and societal standards and ruling out other ways of thinking as "abnormal" and/or "dysfunctional".

Neurotypical: A person or people whose neurodevelopment falls within the range conventionally seen as typical or "normal" by prevailing cultural standards and is enabled by their society for a given period.

Neuroaffirming/Neurodiversity-affirming: A manner of conducting oneself in which one prioritises valuing and respecting the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their cognitive differences.

Neurokindred/Neurokin: Refers to other people whose neurology is similar to one's own (thus, like one's "brain family").

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD): is an extreme emotional distress reaction due to perceived or real rejection, which can cause disproportionate emotional pain and the feeling of overwhelming criticism, disapproval and/or rejection that can significantly impact daily life.

Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DIPAS	UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
RSD	Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria
SLD	Specific Learning Disorder

Part One: Understanding Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Gain a clear, practical understanding of neurodivergence—what it means, how it presents, and why it matters in today's diverse workforce.

WHY WE CREATED THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to equip hiring managers, supervisors, People and Culture professionals, and all UNICEF employees with the insight and tools to:

- Advance understanding of neurodivergence and foster meaningful collaboration with colleagues who are neurodivergent.
- Champion inclusive leadership and cultivate workplace environments where neurodivergent talent can thrive.
- Strengthen UNICEF's ability to attract, retain, and empower employees who are neurodivergent through intentional, inclusive practices.

Structured for in-depth reading and quick reference, the guide consistently uses the term 'employees who are neurodivergent,' recognizing neurodivergence as an essential part of the broader conceptualization of disability.

WHAT INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOSTER INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES?

UNICEF's Whole of Diversity approach reflects our strategic commitment to building an inclusive, representative workplace aligned with our core values. A diverse workforce is not only a driver of innovation and agility—it strengthens our impact. By reflecting the diversity of the children and communities we serve, we enhance our effectiveness, elevate our programming, and advance our mission to champion children's rights worldwide.

UNICEF's Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) strengthens our commitment to a more inclusive workplace. With 3.34% of employees identifying as having disabilities (2024 Global Staff Survey), DIPAS sets a bold goal: 7% representation by 2030. Guided by a strong accountability framework, we're building a culture where all talent can thrive—and where people with disabilities see UNICEF as an employer of choice.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Neurodivergence: Refers to individuals whose cognitive processes and behaviours differ from what is typically expected. This may include conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and more.

Neurodiversity: The full spectrum of cognitive differences that naturally occur within the human population. Embracing neurodiversity supports innovation, problem-solving, and diversity.

Disability: A result of the interaction between a person's impairment and the attitudinal or environmental barriers that limit their full and equal participation in the workplace and society.

Visible Disabilities: Readily observable conditions, such as mobility or visual impairments, and some chronic health issues.

Invisible Disabilities: Non-immediately apparent conditions such as mental health disorders, learning disabilities, and certain chronic illnesses.

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERGENCE AND DISABILITY: INSIGHTS AND ACTION

In the evolving discourse on disability, there is growing recognition of the need to:

- Address unconscious bias, stereotypes, and tropes related to disability;
- Understand the distinction between visible and invisible disabilities;
- Recognize neurodiversity as a range of differences naturally occurring in the human population.
- Embrace neurodivergence as a valid dimension of disability.

Disability and neurodiversity movements call for a shift from deficit-based models to a human rights-based approach that values difference rather than demanding conformity. This reframing rejects the notion that individuals must adapt to fit societal norms and instead emphasizes inclusion, dignity, and equity.

As more employees disclose disabilities and neurodivergence, they are not asking to be "fixed"—they are asking to be understood, included, and supported through appropriate accommodations. They seek workplaces free from stigma, pressure to mask differences, and systemic exclusion.

Hiring managers, supervisors, People and Culture professionals, and all UNICEF employees play a pivotal role. By building inclusive practices, cultivating curiosity, and adopting solution-oriented mindsets, we unlock greater well-being, engagement, and performance across the organization. Significantly, strategies that support neurodivergent talent often enhance the experience for all employees.

By championing inclusion, we become leaders who foster respect, belonging, and high-impact results for every individual—and, ultimately, for the children we serve.

Disability inclusion starts with you, with me, with all of us!

"I'm incredibly grateful this guide exists. When my team member shared they had ADHD and were struggling at work, I didn't know how to support them—I felt overwhelmed and worried I was letting them down. This resource would have made a real difference for both of us."

— SUPERVISOR OF A NEURODIVERGENT EMPLOYEE (ANONYMOUS)

MUST-KNOW INCLUSIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

This guide outlines essential inclusive management practices that support colleagues who are neurodivergent and foster an equitable, high-performing workplace. From inclusive hiring and assistive technology to flexible performance management and empathetic communication, these strategies empower all team members to thrive through personalized support, mutual respect, and an inclusive growth mindset.

Key practices include:

1. Champion an Inclusive Growth Mindset: View all individuals, including colleagues who are neurodivergent, as capable of growth. Focus on potential, not limitations, and foster a culture of empathy, learning, and support.
2. Inclusive Hiring Practices: Design recruitment to be accessible to all. Offer accommodations proactively, provide interview materials in advance, allow flexible response formats, and assess based on relevant skills and potential—not on neurotypical communication expectations.
3. Normalize Reasonable Accommodation: Treat accommodations as standard practice, not exceptions. Provide flexible working arrangements, quiet workspaces, task structuring, or assistive technology to support individual needs. Be aware of the centralized Reasonable Accommodation Fund.
4. Enable Assistive Technology: Support requests for tools that enhance productivity—such as noise-cancelling headphones, text-to-speech software, or visual planners—as valid and valuable reasonable accommodations.
5. Uphold Confidentiality: Respect privacy. Never share an employee's neurodivergent status without their explicit consent.
6. Flexible Performance Management: Adapt expectations and processes to align with diverse working styles. Flexibility, mutual understanding, and strength-based delegation are key to inclusive performance and team success.
7. Communicate with Clarity: Adapt to preferred communication styles. Be direct and clear, and use multimodal formats. Encourage open dialogue and deliver constructive, actionable, and non-judgmental feedback.
8. Offer Consistent Support and Feedback: Schedule regular check-ins that blend encouragement with constructive guidance. Be mindful of sensitivity to feedback and prioritize clarity, positivity, and respect.
9. Recognize and Leverage Strengths: Celebrate unique capabilities such as creativity, analytical thinking, hyperfocus, and pattern recognition. These talents enrich team innovation and performance.
10. Build Awareness and Capacity: Invest in learning and mindset shifts. Promote the belief that success comes from personalized support, not uniformity—cultivating fairness, empathy, and a deep sense of belonging.

"I'm often seen as confrontational when I speak up about issues that everyone recognizes, but no one wants to address. I'm not trying to create conflict—I just want to solve the problem instead of endlessly avoiding the elephant in the room. When I stay silent, I feel deeply misunderstood and unappreciated. It makes me uncomfortable and anxious as if I'm betraying my moral compass and not living up to the CRITAS values."

— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)

Part Two:
Applying Inclusive Practices

Learn actionable strategies to create inclusive environments that support employees who are neurodivergent, from recruitment to daily interactions.

INCLUSIVE HIRING

Strategic, inclusive hiring encourages candidates who are neurodivergent to pursue roles where they can contribute meaningfully, confident they will be respected, supported, and valued within a diverse workforce. To foster inclusivity from the outset, consider the following inclusive hiring practices:

Affirm Your Commitment: Communicate your commitment to inclusion, representation, and belonging in vacancy announcements—highlighting neurodiversity and disability inclusion. Note the availability of reasonable accommodation and the accessibility of your office premises.

Broaden Shortlists: When qualified candidates disclose neurodivergence or disability, expand to a comprehensive shortlist review to ensure greater diversity and inclusion.

Adjust Timelines: Offer additional assessment time to support candidates using assistive technologies or requiring extended cognitive processing periods.

Support Preparation: Share interview formats and questions in advance, allow note-taking, and accept responses in alternative formats (e.g., written or video). These practices benefit all candidates by reducing anxiety and enhancing cognition.

Enable Flexible Formats: Offer various interview and assessment options—such as video, written, or audio recorded formats. Always ask, never assume, about individual accommodation needs.

Challenge Assumptions: Be aware of unconscious biases toward different communication or social interaction styles. Reflect critically on your first impressions.

Prioritize Skills and Values: Assess candidates based on qualifications, experience, values, and role-specific competencies, and not on social norms conformity.

Respect Neurodivergent Expressions: Understand that avoiding eye contact or turning off the camera may be coping strategies, not indicators of disengagement or disrespect.

Foster Psychological Safety: Inform all candidates about available reasonable accommodations and clearly define what disability inclusion means for UNICEF, encouraging open dialogue and support.

Apply Policy and Guidance: Utilize resources such as the Disability Inclusive HR Management Procedure, Staff Selection Procedure, Inclusive Employment Guide, DEI in Recruitment Processes Guidance, and AI-powered UNifyHR Policy and UNIBOT Chatbots.

SAMPLE INCLUSION STATEMENT FOR VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENTS

UNICEF is committed to fostering an inclusive, representative, and welcoming workforce. We encourage applications from all qualified candidates, regardless of gender, nationality, religious or ethnic backgrounds, and from people with disabilities, including neurodivergence. UNICEF provides reasonable accommodation throughout the recruitment process. If you require any accommodation, you may indicate your needs in the self-disclosure section of the application form. Should you be shortlisted, please get in touch with the recruiter directly to share further details, enabling us to make the necessary arrangements in advance.

Key Resources

- Procedure on Disability Inclusive Human Resources Management SharePoint page
- Procedure on Staff Selection
- Staff Selection Guidance
- Inclusive Employment Guide: Disability and its Intersections
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Recruitment Processes Guidance
- Digital Tools for People: AI-powered Candidate Assessment Tool (iMocha) SharePoint page
- Digital Tools for People: UNifyHR: AI-powered HR Policy Chatbot page

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION: FAIR, PREFERENTIAL, OR SPECIAL TREATMENT?

Supervisors, hiring managers, and People & Culture professionals may sometimes feel uncertain about how to respond to reasonable accommodation requests from candidates or employees who are neurodivergent. It's natural to have questions—but it's important to understand that reasonable accommodations are not preferential treatment. They are a legal and ethical requirement grounded in the principles of inclusion and equity.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reasonable accommodations are necessary and appropriate adjustments that do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden (Article 2). Denying them is considered discrimination.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Supervisors, hiring managers, and People and Culture professionals are often the first point of contact for these requests. Each request should be assessed individually, with a mindset of respect, inclusion, and possibility. How leaders respond sets the tone for others and shapes an inclusive workplace culture.

If you're unsure whether a request is reasonable or feasible, consult the Reasonable Accommodation Team for guidance and support.

Key Resources

- Reasonable Accommodation SharePoint page
- Guide on submitting Reasonable Accommodation Requests via Service Gateway
- Reasonable Accommodation Team: ReasonableAccommodation@unicef.org

WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS

Creating an inclusive, productive environment for employees who are neurodivergent requires tailored adjustments that minimize distractions, reduce sensory overload, and support individual working styles. Common accommodations include:

Quiet, clutter-free workspaces to support focus.
Adjustable lighting (e.g., desk lamps, dimmed or natural light).
Noise control (e.g., noise-cancelling headphones).
Ergonomic and flexible seating options—standing desks, floor seating, stability balls—for sensory and movement needs.
Private offices or quiet zones to mitigate overstimulation from light, sound, or smell.
Strategically located desks, away from kitchens or high-traffic areas.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Open, ongoing dialogue with employees who are neurodivergent is essential to ensure reasonable accommodations are adequate and aligned with individual needs.

WORK PRACTICE ACCOMMODATIONS

Adapting work practices to support neurodivergent employees fosters inclusion, improves productivity, and enhances team cohesion. Key accommodations include:

Flexible Work Locations & Schedules: Allow remote work and flexible hours within policy guidelines to align with individual focus patterns and energy levels.

Culture of Flexibility: Promote a team-wide mindset that values diverse work styles and adaptive approaches.

Task Structuring: Break down large projects into smaller, time-bound tasks to maintain focus and motivation.

Organizational tools: Use planners, color-coded systems, and digital reminders to streamline task management.

Meeting Support: Provide recordings or transcriptions to support memory and clarity of assignments.

Clear, Multimodal Communication: Pair verbal instructions with written guidance to meet varied processing preferences.

Routine and Predictability: Offer mentoring and advanced notice of changes to maintain stability.

Targeted Training: Provide tailored coaching and mentorship to build planning, communication, and decision-making skills.

Regular Check-ins: Use frequent feedback sessions to clarify expectations, adapt strategies, and reinforce support.

Strategic accommodations meet individual needs and strengthen team performance and organizational resilience.

Key Resources

- Procedure on Flexible Working Arrangements

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Assistive technology includes tools and systems that enhance cognitive, sensory, and communication functioning—supporting inclusion, well-being, and productivity. For employees who are neurodivergent, such tools can reduce sensory overload and strengthen executive functioning, focus, and processing. Common examples include:

Digital Tools for Productivity & Organization

- **Task Management & Planning:** Digital task managers, workflow software, planners, reminders, calendars (See JAN resource: Organizing, Planning, Prioritizing)
- **AI Assistants:** Large Language Models (LLMs) like Microsoft Copilot **Assistive Technology for Reading & Writing**
- **Reading Support:** Screen readers (text-to-speech), screen magnifiers, tints, and reading rulers (See JAN resource: Reading)
- **Writing Support:** Dictation software (voice-to-text) (See JAN resource: Writing & Spelling)

Sensory & Focus Aids

- **Auditory Focus:** Active noise-cancelling earbuds/headphones (See JAN resource: Attentiveness & Concentration)
- **Noise Sensitivity:** Ear plugs or ear loops (See JAN resource: Noise Sensitivity)
- **Light Sensitivity:** Sensory lamps or daylight lamps (See JAN resource: Photosensitivity)

By strategically integrating assistive technologies, UNICEF can foster a more inclusive and empowering workplace where employees who are neurodivergent are equipped to thrive and contribute at their highest potential.

Key Resources

- Job Accommodation Network (JAN) website
- JAN A to Z Directory of Disabilities and Accommodations
- Artificial Intelligence at UNICEF SharePoint page
- Learn About Copilot, Your AI Companion
- Reasonable Accommodation SharePoint page
- Guide on submitting Reasonable Accommodation Requests via Service Gateway
- Reasonable Accommodation Team: ReasonableAccommodation@unicef.org

"When I requested a screen reader and noise-cancelling headphones to help me focus and work more effectively, my manager responded immediately and supportively: 'Of course—let's submit a request to the reasonable accommodation fund.' There was no frustration, no hesitation—just a willingness to help. I went home and cried. The anxiety and fear I'd carried from past experiences melted away in the face of such simple, solution-focused support."

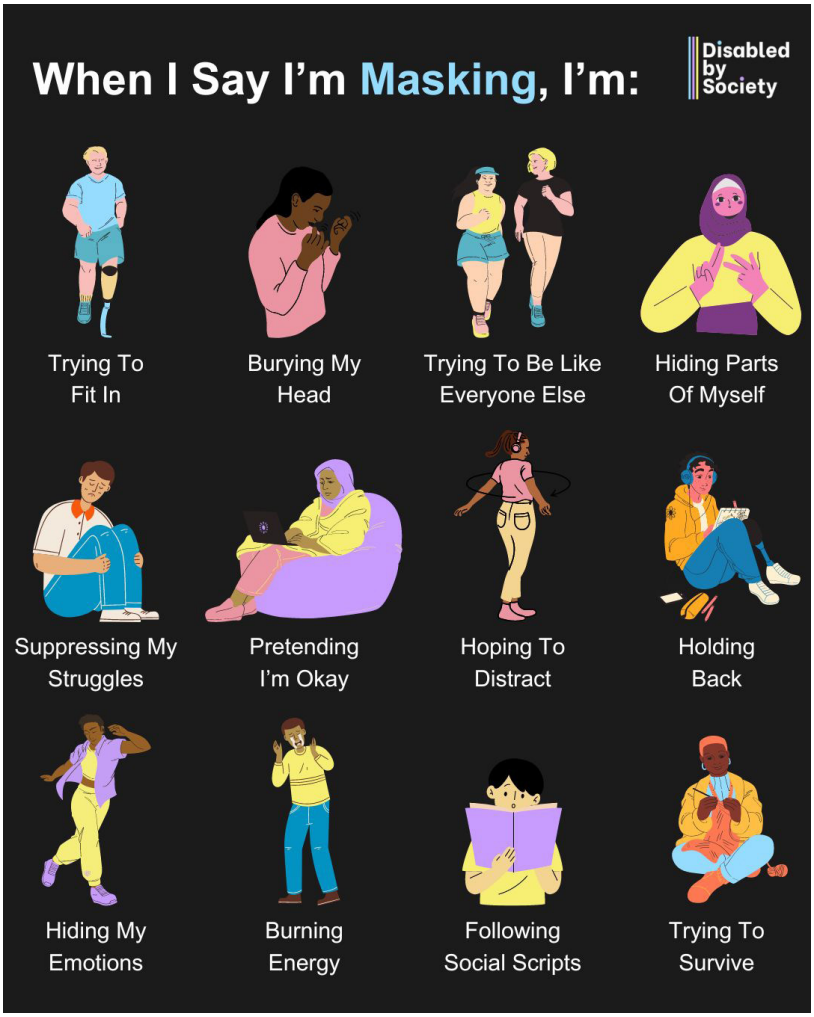
— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)

UNDERSTANDING MASKING IN THE WORKPLACE

Masking and related adaptive behaviours—such as mimicking, compensating, and camouflaging—are strategies individuals who are neurodivergent may use to suppress or conceal traits, symptoms, or discomforts to align with neurotypical norms. These behaviours, often developed over time or taught through therapeutic interventions, can be either deliberate or unconscious responses to environments that demand conventional social interaction.

- **Masking** involves hiding neurodivergent traits to avoid stigma or social exclusion.
- **Mimicking** is the imitation of neurotypical social cues—such as gestures, facial expressions, or speech patterns—to blend in.
- **Compensating** refers to using rehearsed scripts or practiced conversations to manage social exchanges.
- **Camouflaging** is an overarching term encompassing mimicking and compensating, used to create the appearance of "fitting in."

While these behaviours may help individuals navigate social expectations and reduce the risk of stigma, discrimination and exclusion, they often come at a high cost—leading to emotional and physical fatigue, anxiety, diminished self-awareness, and a loss of authenticity and self-efficacy. In the workplace, the long-term impact of masking can affect well-being, interpersonal relationships, and overall effectiveness.



Creating inclusive environments that recognize and respect neurodivergent experiences reduces the need for masking and fosters genuine engagement, psychological safety, and sustained performance.

"As a neurodivergent employee at UNICEF, I rely on asking questions to gain clarity—it's essential for me to do my job well and meet expectations accurately. However, managers often perceive my requests for clarification as challenges to their authority. Colleagues have even advised me to keep my head down and remain silent to avoid provoking a negative response. This has left me feeling anxious, confused, and unsure of how to contribute effectively without compromising my psychological safety."

— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)

As supervisors, hiring managers, People and Culture professionals, and colleagues, we have a pivotal role in creating inclusive, psychologically safe workplaces. Embracing neurodivergent traits fosters a sense of belonging and empowers individuals to be authentic—boosting self-esteem, resilience, and trust. This, in turn, encourages disclosure, supports reasonable accommodations, and reduces the mental health impacts of masking. When we recognize and harness the unique strengths of employees who are neurodivergent, we unlock their full potential—driving performance, innovation, and results for children without requiring them to mask or conform.

MANAGING DISCLOSURE, PRIVACY, AND CONFIDENTIALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Disclosing a neurodivergent condition or disability is a personal and courageous choice. Many individuals hesitate due to concerns about stigma, bias, or potential impacts on career progression—particularly when neurodivergence intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation or others. Leaders play a vital role in fostering a culture of psychological safety, where disclosure is supported—not expected—and privacy is protected. Key principles include:

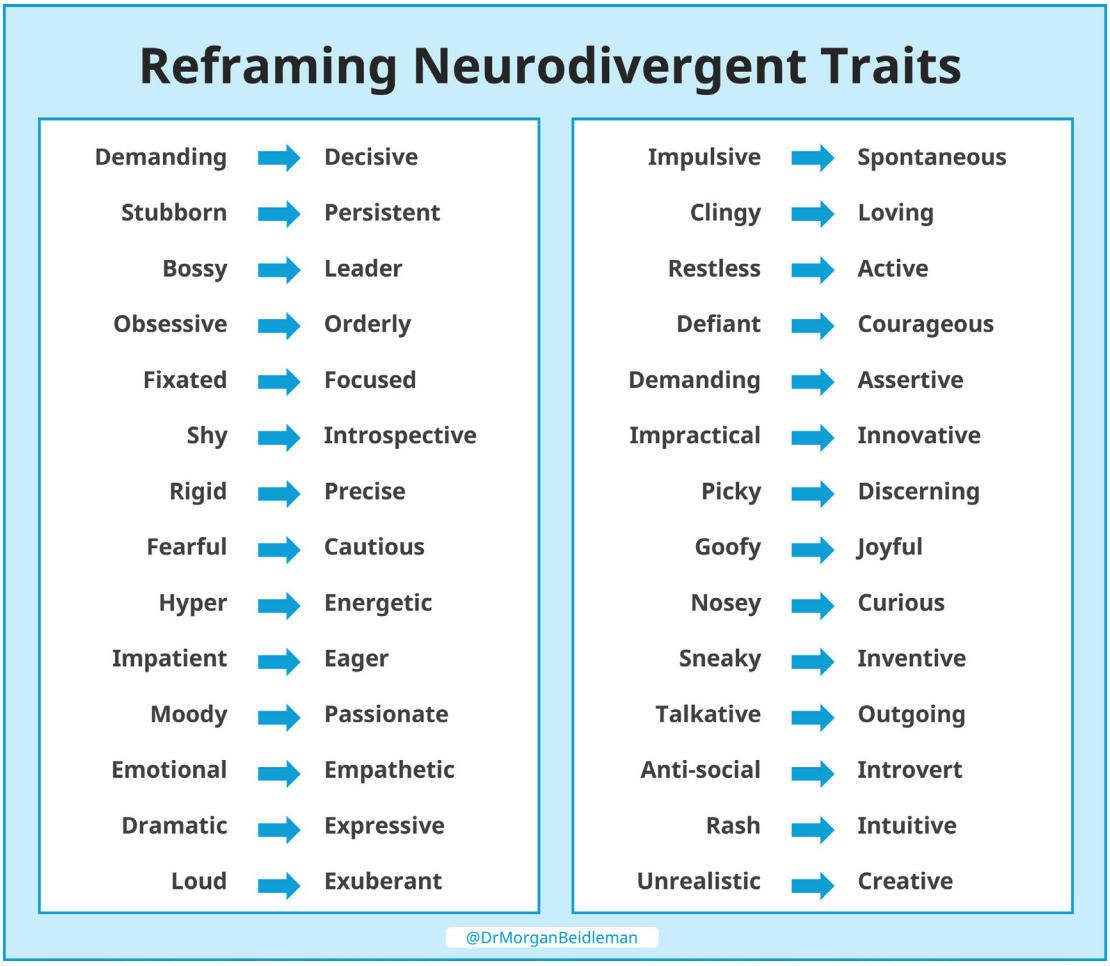
- **Respect Confidentiality:** Never discuss an employee's condition without their explicit consent.
- **Maintain Privacy:** Avoid conversations in public or shared settings, including circulating emails or discussions in open office areas.
- **Secure Information:** Store medical records, reasonable accommodations, and related details securely and accessibly only to those authorized.
- **Seek Consent:** Always confirm with the employee who may access or be informed about their condition or reasonable accommodations.

Neurodivergence can enrich team dynamics when understood and supported. Managers should engage openly—with consent—on how much an employee wishes to share. Senior leaders who are neurodivergent may consider the positive impact of voluntary disclosure to normalize and empower others, helping reduce stigma and increase understanding.

Ultimately, every employee's right to privacy and choice around disclosure must be respected. With an ongoing commitment to inclusion and psychological safety, trust and openness will grow. Until then, the disclosure must never be coerced, debated, or met with judgment or discriminatory behaviour.

"At work, I often want to explain my impulsiveness, but I struggle to find the right words. It's a part of my ADHD—some days I can't switch off or sleep, even though I'm not on medication. I worry my manager might see it as an excuse or judge me negatively. Will they be understanding? If I disclose, will I need to prove it with a doctor's note or diagnosis report just to be believed? These questions loop endlessly in my mind and leave me exhausted. So I mask—I don't feel safe to be my true self without fear of judgment. All I want is understanding."

— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)



Part Three:
Managing Neurodivergent Talent in Practice

Develop the skills to confidently manage, support, and empower neurodivergent talent—fostering performance, engagement, and growth.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

As a supervisor, your role is to empower your team to perform at their best by managing performance in a way that promotes clear communication, shared understanding, and strong results—all in support of our outcomes for children.

Employees who are neurodivergent may face unique challenges in meeting conventional performance expectations, especially if they are masking traits, avoiding disclosure, or lacking reasonable accommodations. Be aware of unconscious bias and avoid assumptions such as laziness, disorganization, or incompetence when encountering behaviours like lateness, difficulty with prioritization, frequent questions, or unconventional thinking.

Instead, adopt an open, supportive, and solutions-oriented inclusive growth mindset. Explore adjustments that enhance clarity, reduce anxiety, and foster productivity—such as flexible working arrangements, more frequent check-ins, or alternative meeting formats. Collaboratively identify tools and strategies to support task initiation and deadline management.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYEES WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT

To strengthen your approach, consider the following:

Goal Setting: Align goals with individual strengths, ensuring they are clear, achievable, and time-bound.

Thoughtful Preparation: Performance discussions can be stressful—especially for employees who are neurodivergent. Choose a time and setting that suit the individual and consider involving a trusted support person such as a coach, mentor, peer support volunteer or staff counsellor.

Clarify Expectations: Communicate expectations using multiple formats—written, verbal, and visual—to improve understanding and task execution.

Constructive Conversations: Hold regular, structured performance discussions focused on both strengths and areas for growth. Use concise, objective language and invite two-way feedback. Be mindful of heightened sensitivity to criticism (e.g., Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria) and frame feedback with empathy and clarity.

Adapt and Reflect: If a conversation is unproductive, follow up with a debrief to identify adjustments for future interactions.

Support with Prioritization: Assist with planning and time management, recognizing potential challenges with executive functioning. Offer practical, non-judgmental support.

Leverage Strengths: Identify unique capabilities—creativity, problem-solving, or thriving in dynamic environments—and align tasks accordingly.

Foster Open Communication: Encourage transparency and open dialogue. Your tone and responsiveness shape psychological safety and openness across the team.

Promote Breaks: Support regular breaks to maintain focus, manage energy, and enhance productivity.

Use the Socratic Method: Encourage critical thinking through open-ended questions that promote exploration, collaboration, and innovation.

Applying these strategies fosters a more inclusive, adaptive environment that empowers employees who are neurodivergent to thrive and contribute at their best.

Key Resources

- Performance Management Resources SharePoint page
- Guide to Ongoing Performance Conversations / Check-ins
- Guidance on How to Capture The Growth Conversations
- Performance Coaching Examples & 10 Steps for Success

"I am a person—not a personnel number, a statistic, or a case study in a policy.
I simply want to be treated as a human being by a manager who seeks to understand me
and support me in reaching my full potential."

— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)

MAKING SENSE OF NEURODIVERGENCE AT WORK

This section provides an overview of common neurodivergent conditions, terminology, and workplace considerations, including accommodations and adjustments. The information is illustrative—not diagnostic—and aims to build awareness among supervisors, hiring managers, and People & Culture professionals.

Individuals who are neurodivergent are diverse, often presenting unique combinations of neurodivergent traits, co-occurring neurodivergent conditions, comorbidities (such as other mental health conditions) and intersecting identities that go beyond the scope of this guide.

The following table highlights both commonly recognized and less widely known neurodivergent conditions for your reference.

Examples of Neurodivergent Conditions

MORE COMMONLY ASSOCIATED	LESS COMMONLY ASSOCIATED
• Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) • Specific learning disorders (SLD) such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia	• Tourette syndrome • Tic Disorders • Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) • Intellectual Development Disorders • Developmental Disorders

This section examines three common neurodivergent conditions and their workplace implications: Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and Specific Learning Disorders (SLD).

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

ADHD presents uniquely across individuals, influenced by factors such as gender, age, co-occurring conditions, and access to treatment. In the workplace, it brings both challenges and strengths. Positive traits often include:

- Hyperfocus on areas of interest
- Risk-taking and adaptability
- High energy, spontaneity, and flexibility
- Strong crisis performance
- Creative, unconventional thinking
- Optimism and enthusiasm
- Motivation under pressure and tight deadlines

ADHD symptoms typically fall into three categories: **inattention**, **hyperactivity**, and **impulsivity**.

- **Inattention** may appear as disorganisation, difficulty sustaining focus, and frequent mistakes due to overlooked details.
- **Hyperactivity** includes restlessness, fidgeting, and difficulty staying still.
- **Impulsivity** involves acting without forethought, interrupting others, and taking uncalculated risks.

Understanding these traits enables better support, productivity, and inclusion in the workplace.

Scenario

ADHD in the Workplace

After years in emergency contexts, John transitioned to a Section Manager role in a regional office located in a family duty station, seeking a more stable environment to support his decision to start a family. While he expected a calmer environment to be a positive change, he now feels overwhelmed, disorganized, and unable to prioritize his time. He shared with his supervisor that he has ADHD and stopped taking his medication after starting the new role. He requested that this information remain confidential.
John is used to fast-paced environments and managing large teams. He struggles with anxiety and doubts about his performance in his new setting—mainly working from the office and managing smaller teams and partners.

QUESTION: How should John's supervisor support him while balancing team effectiveness and organisational goals?

A. Work closely with John to help him appear more typical to avoid misunderstandings.
B. Provide structured support—e.g., clear workflows, prioritization tools, and training in small-team management—while respecting his privacy.
C. Reassign him to a fast-paced emergency role where he previously excelled.
D. Ask John to disclose his ADHD to the team so they can accommodate his needs.

Recommended Actions: B.

Offer practical accommodations and skill-building while maintaining confidentiality. Reassigning him or forcing disclosure would disregard his personal choices and potentially increase stress. This approach aligns with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 4) Enabling Assistive Technology, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, and 7) Communicate with Clarity.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Greater awareness and research have led to increased ASD diagnoses and self-identification. Presentation varies widely based on diagnosis, age, gender, co-occurring conditions, and access to therapies. Workplace support needs differ accordingly.

Many individuals with ASD bring exceptional strengths, including:

- Deep focus on areas of interest
- Expertise in specialized topics
- Exceptional attention to detail and pattern recognition
- Strong memory and creativity
- Integrity, high work ethic, and fact-based decision-making
- A strong sense of social justice

ASD traits may also include differences in social communication, repetitive behaviours, intense interests, and sensory sensitivities. These can pose challenges in workplace inclusion—particularly in interpersonal interactions, communication, and self-awareness—requiring thoughtful, tailored support.

Scenario

ASD in the Workplace

Prerna was recommended for a Finance Manager role at UNICEF by a trusted colleague who disclosed her autism diagnosis to the hiring manager. She performed well in the written test and online interview despite visible anxiety. Hired for her strong financial skills and references, Prerna soon expressed discomfort working with the logistics team. Her direct communication style—perceived by colleagues as overly blunt—caused tension within the team.
Her supervisor begins drafting an action plan to support her integration and address team concerns.

Supervisor's Key Steps in the Action Plan

A. Provide office-wide training on neurodiversity to foster understanding of different communication styles.
B. Pair Prerna with a mentor or buddy to support her in navigate social and professional interactions.
C. Expect Prerna to fully conform to existing norms without considering her neurodivergent needs.
D. Establish clear, structured workflows and expectations to reduce ambiguity in her tasks.
E. Facilitate open, mediated dialogue with the team in a psychologically safe space to address misunderstandings.
F. Reassign Prerna to a low-interaction role, avoiding the need to address current team dynamics.
G. Offer environmental adjustments, such as a quiet workspace or prep time before meetings.
H. Recognise and value Prerna's strong attention to detail in her work.

Recommended Actions A, B, D, E, G and H (excluding C and F)

Offer a thoughtful, inclusive approach to supporting Prerna. These steps include office-wide neurodiversity training, assigning a mentor, establishing clear workflows, creating space for open dialogue, offering flexible work arrangements, and recognising her attention to detail. Together, they provide a well-rounded foundation for evaluating and implementing solutions that support Prerna's integration into the team.
A thoughtful, inclusive approach ensures Prerna is supported while strengthening team cohesion and performance. These approaches align with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 2) Inclusive Hiring, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, 7) Communicate with Clarity, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths, and 10) Building Awareness and Capacity.

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDERS (SLD)

Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) impact how individuals process information, resulting in challenges with particular skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, coordination, memory, and executive functioning. These difficulties typically emerge in school-age years, when academic performance significantly diverges from peers despite average or above-average intelligence.

SLDs include a range of conditions, each with unique challenges and strengths:

- Dyslexia: Difficulty with reading and writing, stemming from challenges in processing language and decoding text. Often associated with strong pattern recognition, conceptual thinking, and verbal reasoning.
- Dysgraphia: Difficulty expressing ideas in writing due to motor skills and spatial organization

issues. Individuals often excel in listening, memorization, and interpersonal skills.

- Dyscalculia: Difficulty processing and manipulating numbers. Common strengths include strategic thinking, problem-solving, and verbal communication.
- Dyspraxia: Difficulty planning and executing motor tasks, affecting coordination and movement. Frequently paired with strengths in creativity, empathy, verbal expression, and active listening.

Scenario

SLD Workplace Considerations

Mariana and Carlos, national staff members, jointly disclosed their diagnoses of dyslexia and dyspraxia after both were assessed at a neurodevelopmental clinic they visited for their children. With support from their supervisor and People & Culture officer, they requested workplace adjustments through the reasonable accommodation fund. They learned that assistive technologies could help manage their specific learning difficulties and boost their performance.

Question: What workplace adjustments could enhance Mariana and Carlos' productivity?

A. Flexible work arrangements and quiet spaces
Allowing flexible hours (within policy) enables them to work when most focused, reducing fatigue. Quiet spaces minimize distractions, supporting tasks that require high concentration, such as reading, writing, and data entry.

B. Screen magnification tools
These tools help navigate complex documents and visual layouts, reducing cognitive overload and improving comprehension.

C. Text-to-speech and speech-to-text software
Text-to-speech aids in reading comprehension and proofreading. Speech-to-text allows efficient dictation, easing the physical demands of writing.

Recommended Actions: All (A, B, and C)

Each adjustment addresses key SLD-related challenges and contributes to a more inclusive, productive work environment for Mariana and Carlos. These approaches align with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 4) Enabling Assistive Technology, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths

Conclusion

As managers, supervisors, People and Culture professionals, and UNICEF employees, we each have a vital role in fostering an inclusive workplace for employees who are neurodivergent. This requires ongoing learning, empathy, and adaptability.

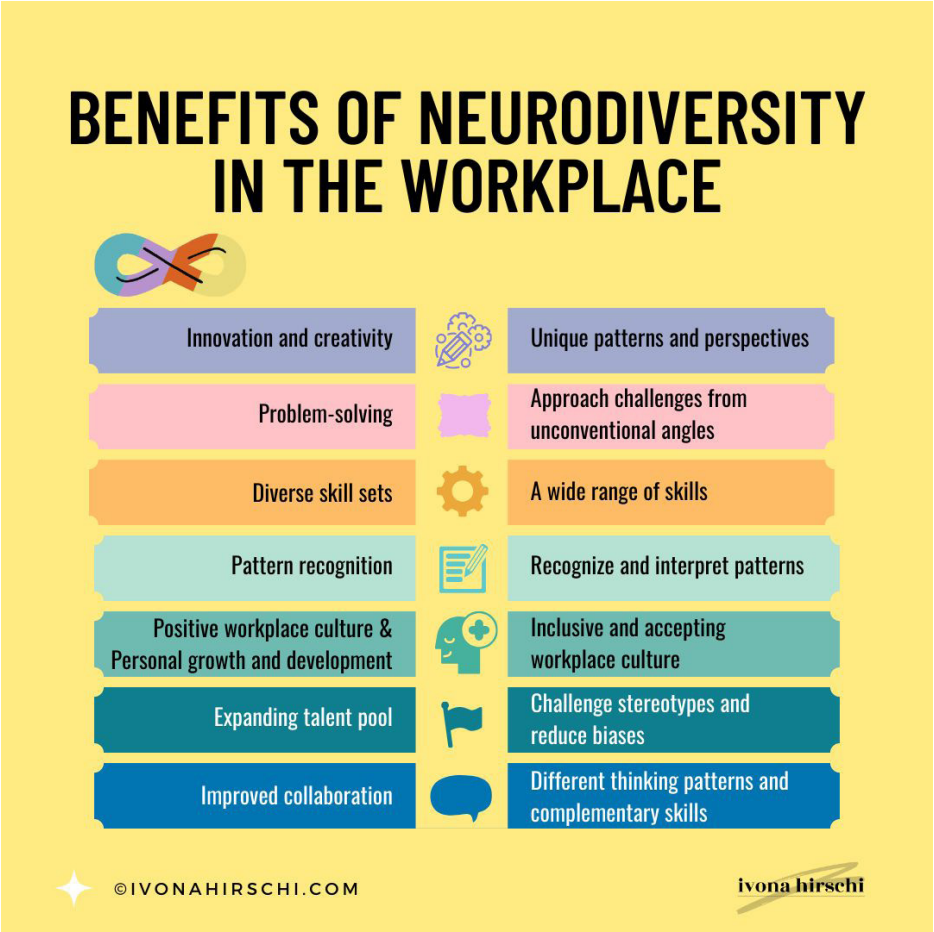
By embracing inclusive hiring, providing reasonable accommodations, leveraging assistive technologies, and cultivating psychological safety and respect, we enhance not only the well-being and performance of employees who are neurodivergent—but of all.

This commitment reflects UNICEF's values and our dedication to representation, inclusion, and belonging—ensuring we mirror the communities we serve and deliver greater impact for children. Let's lead by example and champion the unique strengths of our neurodivergent talent.

Disability inclusion starts with you, with me, with all of us!

"Such a welcome guide—huge thanks to all involved!"

— EMPLOYEE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT (ANONYMOUS)



Annexes

Additional Learning Scenarios
The following case studies support awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts.

Scenario 1

Emanuel's Workplace Scenario: Performance Feedback and Neurodiversity

Emanuel was hired to lead financial projects at a family duty station. He is highly skilled in financial management and disclosed during the interview that he has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). He often finds workplace communication challenging and frequently requests to work from home.
Ahead of a performance discussion, Emanuel's supervisor is unsure how to provide constructive feedback. While wanting to avoid discomfort, the supervisor feels it's crucial that Emanuel understands colleagues' concerns. Though his financial work is strong, teammates find his communication style blunt, his reactions to interruptions intense, and they prefers errors be raised privately—not in group settings like CMT meetings.

Question 1: What is the best approach for the supervisor?

A. Use only general feedback to avoid confrontation.
B. Focus on Emanuel's strengths and skip the communication concerns.
C. Share specific examples with constructive suggestions, explain how changes could improve team dynamics, highlight Emanuel's strengths, and invite his feedback.
D. Use a firm tone to stress the need for better teamwork.
E. Present feedback vaguely and reassure him it won't have consequences

Recommended Actions: C.

Use clear, specific feedback with practical suggestions while affirming Emanuel's strengths. This approach fosters understanding, supports team integration, and maintains a respectful, inclusive environment. Co-developing team communication norms could further align expectations. These approaches align with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 7) Communicate with Clarity, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths.

Question 2: How should the manager address team concerns about Emanuel's perceived isolation?

A. Explain that Emanuel's behaviour is part of his condition and should be overlooked to avoid discrimination.
B. Facilitate team-building activities focused on shared challenges and building an inclusive culture.
C. Offer Emanuel mentoring or coaching to reflect on interpersonal dynamics and his preference for solitude.
D. Provide private workspaces accessible to all and promote flexible working styles, both in-person and remote.
E. Ask Emanuel to join more team activities and encourage him to trust colleagues more.
F. Assign a team buddy to support engagement without pressure.
G. Ignore the issue to avoid making Emanuel feel awkward.

Recommended Actions: B, C, and D.

These steps promote inclusion, respect individual preferences, and foster team cohesion without pressuring Emanuel to conform to social norms. Managers should leverage available resources—such as staff counsellors, peer support, employee resource groups (e.g., DISABILITY CONNECT), and mentoring programmes—to encourage healthy dialogue around social interaction. Maintaining confidentiality and psychological safety is essential. These approaches align with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, 7) Communicate with Clarity, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths, and 10) Building Awareness and Capacity.

Scenario 2
Supporting a New Team Member with ADHD

Joanna was recently hired at UNICEF and recognized for her strong partnership and interpersonal skills shown during her UN Volunteer tenure. Friendly and well-liked, she brings positive energy to the team. However, Joanna often misses deadlines, overlooks key information in emails, and becomes overly apologetic when this is pointed out.
In her first performance discussion, Joanna disclosed she has ADHD and is struggling with task organization, maintaining focus, and following up with partners.

Question 1: How should the supervisor respond to Joanna's disclosure?

A. Reassure Joanna her diagnosis will remain confidential, then avoid discussing ADHD further.
B. Express empathy, ask how the workplace can better support her, explore accommodations, and mention the reasonable accommodation fund.
C. Stress the need for independent time management.
D. Recommend Joanna gets external help and avoid discussing workplace accommodations.
E. Say her condition is irrelevant and reiterate deadlines.

Recommended Actions: B.

This approach shows empathy and a willingness to collaborate on providing tailored support. It allows Joanna to share her needs and informs her about resources like the reasonable accommodation fund. This approach aligns with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths.

Question 2: What's the best strategy to help Joanna manage tasks and meet deadlines?

A. Assign fewer tasks to ease the pressure.
B. Send daily task reminders via email.
C. Introduce a task prioritization system with clear deadlines, regular check-ins, and a buddy system for support.
D. Share information on the reasonable accommodation fund, including assistive tools for focus and email management.
E. Let Joanna find her own system and simply remind her of accountability.
F. Pair her with a colleague to take over her organizational tasks.

Recommended Actions: C and D.

These strategies combine structure, support, and autonomy. A prioritization system, regular supervisor check-ins, and optional peer support can help Joanna stay on track. The accommodation fund can provide tools like screen readers or noise-cancelling headphones to reduce distractions and improve focus. These approaches align with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 4) Enabling Assistive Technology, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, 7) Communicate with Clarity, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths.

Scenario 3
Supporting a Team Member Facing Anxiety and Hidden Challenges

Terri, a long-standing and trusted member of the planning, monitoring, and evaluation team, is known for their consistently accurate and respected financial monitoring reports. Recently, the team assigned them to write a narrative report detailing activities, deliverables, and results based on team input. Terri appeared anxious about the assignment and ultimately took stress-related sick leave.

Question 1: How should the supervisor approach Terri's stress-related sick leave and incomplete report?

A. Emphasize the need to complete tasks under pressure for team success.
B. Permanently reassign Terri's responsibilities to avoid future issues.
C. Focus on their strengths in financial reporting and overlook the incident.
D. Inquire about the causes of Terri's stress and explore how leadership and the team can provide better support.
E. Recommend external counselling or medical help for stress management.

Recommended Actions: D.

This response demonstrates empathy and a commitment to understanding Terri's challenges. It opens the door for meaningful support, such as exploring underlying issues like dyslexia and offering reasonable accommodations. It also fosters psychological safety, including connecting Terri to staff counselling and developing strategies to signal when they need more time or support. This approach aligns with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 4) Enabling Assistive Technology, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, and 8) Consistent Support and Feedback.

Question 2: What steps can the supervisor take to support Terri better in future projects?

A. Avoid assigning narrative writing tasks altogether.
B. Provide writing tools or software and offer additional time if needed.
C. Reassign all writing duties to others to minimize their stress.
D. Encourage them to take on similar tasks independently to build resilience.
E. Permanently limit their workload to financial reporting only.

Recommended Actions: B.

Offering tools and time supports Terri in managing challenges like dyslexia while ensuring they remain an active contributor to team efforts. This approach aligns with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, 3) Normalizing Reasonable Accommodation, 4) Enabling Assistive Technology, 5) Upholding Confidentiality, 6) Flexible Performance Management, 7) Communicate with Clarity, 8) Consistent Support and Feedback, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths.

Scenario 4
Leading a Rapid Response Team in a Flood Emergency

You are leading a UNICEF humanitarian rapid response team deployed after severe floods have displaced thousands, including many women and children. Your team is tasked with:

- Conducting a Rapid Needs Assessment, including focus group discussions and key informant interviews with community leaders, religious figures, NGOs (local and international), women- and girl-led groups, organizations of persons with disabilities, and other UN Cluster leads.
- Identifying local and international partners with the capacity to distribute humanitarian supplies and establishing initial partnership agreements.
- Selecting locations for UNICEF's child protection, education, nutrition, and WASH services and formalizing agreements with relevant authorities.

You've consulted previous supervisors to understand your team's strengths better:

- **Sam** is highly analytical and excels in logistics and planning, particularly in assessing supply needs and optimizing distribution. He struggles with fast-paced verbal communication and unexpected changes.
- **LiNa** is an empathetic communicator who builds trust easily, particularly with women and children. They are skilled in psychological first aid and gathering urgent needs from the field but finds task prioritization and administrative duties challenging.
- **Jamal** is structured and energetic, with a talent for organizing under pressure. He has ADHD, which makes him thrive in high-stimulus environments. He engages well with children and families but can lose focus on long-term planning without clear, short-term goals.

Question: How should you assign roles to leverage each person's strengths and meet objectives effectively and on time??

A. Assign Jamal to lead overall, with Sam and LiNa supporting as needed under his direction.
B. Assign LiNa to Objective 2 (logistics and admin), Jamal to Objective 3 (strategy development), and Sam to Objective 1 (community outreach).
C. Assign Sam to objectives 2 and 3 (logistics and planning), and LiNa and Jamal to objective 1 (community engagement and field assessment).
D. Divide all tasks equally among the three for fairness and skill development.

Recommended Actions: C.

This approach plays to each team member's strengths:

- Sam handles logistics and planning without pressure from verbal or social demands.
- LiNa focuses on community engagement and trust-building, avoiding administrative burdens.
- Jamal supports needs assessments with his energy, structure, rapport with families, and staying focused with clear, short-term tasks.

This approach aligns with "Must Know Inclusive Management Practices": 1) Inclusive Growth Mindset, and 9) Recognising and Leveraging Strengths.

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UNICEF

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- Digital Tools for People: AI-powered Candidate Assessment Tool (iMocha) SharePoint page
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- Procedure on Disability Inclusive Human Resources Management
- Procedure on Disability-Inclusive Communications and Advocacy
- Procedure on Staff Selection and Staff Selection Guidance
- Physical and Digital Accessibility Helpdesks
- Reasonable Accommodation SharePoint page
- Guide to Reasonable Accommodation Requests
- Reasonable Accommodation Team: ReasonableAccommodation@unicef.org
- Support Group for Employees with Children with Disabilities
- Toolkit Organising Accessible Events and Meetings
- Whole of Diversity Approach

External

- A to Z Directory of Disabilities and Accommodations on the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) website
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