

**Tip Sheet**

Reframing Common Workplace Behaviours

Through a Neurodivergent-Affirming Lens

Workplace behaviours can sometimes be misunderstood, particularly when they differ from common workplace expectations or social 'norms'. Managers may notice behaviours such as direct communication, difficulty reading unspoken social cues, speaking more loudly or quietly than expected, or challenges navigating workplace etiquette.

It can be easy to make assumptions about why a behaviour is occurring. However, behaviours are often influenced by a range of factors, including communication differences, sensory experiences, workplace environments, individual preferences, past experiences, and support needs. For some neurodivergent employees, these factors may contribute to behaviours that others find unexpected or difficult to understand. Managers should avoid assuming the cause of a behaviour and instead seek to understand the employee's perspective through respectful and open conversation.

This resource explores common workplace behaviours that may be misinterpreted or misunderstood and provides practical, neurodivergent-affirming strategies for responding constructively. The aim is not to excuse behaviours that have an impact on others, but to encourage understanding, clear communication and collaborative problem solving that supports both the employee and the workplace.

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Before taking action, consider:

- Is this behaviour creating a workplace issue, or is it simply different from what I am used to?
- Have workplace expectations been clearly communicated, or am I relying on unwritten social norms?
- Am I focusing on the impact of the behaviour rather than making assumptions about intent?
- Have I sought to understand the employee's perspective?



Common workplace behaviours and helpful reframes

What managers may notice	Common assumptions	A helpful reframes
Direct communication, interrupting others or difficulty reading social cues.	The employee is rude, disrespectful or lacks awareness of others.	The employee may communicate more directly or find conversational cues difficult to interpret.
Providing extensive detail or returning to preferred topics.	The employee is dominating conversations.	The employee may value accuracy, completeness and sharing knowledge.
Difficulty recognising personal space or workplace social boundaries.	The employee is behaving inappropriately.	The employee may not recognise unwritten social expectations.
Using sensory supports, seeking quiet spaces or taking time alone after meetings.	The employee is disengaged or not a team player.	The employee may be managing sensory input, concentration or energy levels.
Difficulty understanding workplace norms and expectations.	The employee lacks professionalism or common sense.	The employee may need expectations to be communicated explicitly
Frustration when plans change unexpectedly or a strong preference for routine.	The employee is resistant to change.	The employee may benefit from predictability, clarity and processing time.

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Navigating unwritten expectations

Many workplace expectations are never formally explained. Expectations about communication, workplace etiquette, meeting participation, and professional interactions are often learned through observation rather than direct instruction.

For example, employees may be expected to know:

- Who should be copied into emails.
- When to contribute during meetings.
- How frequently to provide updates.
- Which communication channels are appropriate for different situations.
- When informal conversations are appropriate in the workplace.

Some neurodivergent employees may be less likely to pick up on implied expectations or unwritten rules and may benefit from clearer guidance about workplace norms and practices.

Helpful approaches:

- Make workplace expectations explicit.
- Explain not only what is expected, but why it is important.
- Provide examples of preferred practices and behaviours.
- Encourage questions and clarification.
- Check for shared understanding rather than assuming expectations are clear.

Communication style and social cues

Some neurodivergent employees communicate in a more direct, literal, or factual way and may place a high value on clarity and honesty. Others may find unspoken social rules, implied messages or subtle conversational cues more difficult to interpret.

Communication differences do not necessarily indicate a lack of professionalism, empathy, or respect. In many cases, colleagues simply have different communication styles and expectations.

Helpful approaches:

- Provide clear and specific feedback using examples.
- Explicitly explain communication expectations.
- Clarify how communication may be received by others.
- Encourage discussion about communication preferences.
- Recognise strengths such as honesty, clarity and accuracy.

Detailed communication and preferred topics

Some neurodivergent employees place a high value on accuracy, completeness and shared understanding. Providing detailed information may be an attempt to ensure others have the context needed to make informed decisions or avoid misunderstandings.

Strong interests and areas of expertise can also bring significant value through deep subject matter knowledge, problem solving and attention to detail.

In some situations, colleagues may need a brief summary rather than a detailed explanation. Supporting employees to recognise these situations can help improve communication while still valuing the expertise and knowledge they bring.

Helpful approaches:

- Be clear about the level of detail needed for different situations.
- Help employees identify key messages when communicating with others.
- Explain when a summary is sufficient and when more detail is required.
- Value expertise and attention to detail.
- Create opportunities for employees to share specialist knowledge.

Personal space and workplace social boundaries

Many workplace social expectations are unwritten and learned over time. Expectations around personal space, workplace etiquette, social interactions, and information sharing can vary between workplaces, cultures and individuals.

Some neurodivergent employees may not always recognise these expectations or may be unaware that their behaviour is being interpreted differently by others.

Helpful approaches:

- Clearly explain workplace expectations.
- Use specific examples when discussing workplace etiquette.
- Provide respectful feedback about the impact of behaviours.
- Avoid vague feedback such as "use common sense" or "be more professional".
- Create opportunities for clarification and discussion.

Sensory and self-regulation differences

Many neurodivergent people experience the workplace differently from their colleagues. Noise, lighting, movement, competing conversations, and other sensory input can require significant effort to process.

Seeking quieter environments, using sensory supports or taking time away from stimulation can be effective strategies for maintaining wellbeing, concentration, and productivity.

Helpful approaches:

- Explore whether environmental factors may be contributing to distraction or fatigue.
- Support reasonable sensory accommodations where appropriate.
- Provide access to quieter workspaces where possible.
- Recognise that meetings and social interactions may require significant energy.
- Encourage discussion about strategies that help the employee work effectively.

Responding to change and routine

Change often involves uncertainty. Some neurodivergent employees may rely on routine, structure, and predictability to support organisation, concentration and confidence at work.

Examples may include changes to priorities, reporting lines, work locations, rostering arrangements, technology systems, or established ways of working.

A preference for routine does not mean a person cannot adapt. It may simply indicate that they benefit from clear communication, advance notice and time to process change.

Helpful approaches:

- Provide advance notice of changes wherever possible.
- Explain what is changing, why it is changing and any expected impacts.
- Break significant changes into manageable steps.
- Allow time for questions and clarification.
- Provide written information to support understanding and recall.
- Focus on what stays the same

Key takeaways

- ▶ Workplace behaviours may have a range of contributing factors. Taking time to understand the behaviour and its impact can help managers respond more effectively.
- ▶ Many workplace expectations are unwritten. Clearly communicating expectations and reducing ambiguity can help employees understand what is expected and succeed at work.
- ▶ Communication styles, social interactions and ways of working vary across individuals. What may initially appear rude, disengaged, resistant or inappropriate may have a different explanation than assumed.
- ▶ A neurodivergent affirming approach does not mean ignoring workplace concerns. It means addressing concerns clearly and respectfully while working with employees to identify practical supports and strategies.



Scan QR code for more resources from the Neurodiversity Works toolkit, designed to create inclusive workplaces.

**Autism Queensland is here to help—
get in touch to learn more:**



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