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# CHECK YOUR BRAIN AT THE DOOR!

## ARE WE PREPARED FOR UNBELIEVABLE BOREDOM ONCE AGAIN?

**N**ow that we have mastered these remote meetings, let's talk about on-site meetings. What? We know how to lead those; we will just return to how things ought to be! Or not? Do we go back to checking our brains at the door?

We experienced some setbacks in moving from on-site to virtual meetings, we also experienced advantages. Why would we go back to how things were when we have an opportunity to improve? We made meetings shorter, found ways to interest and engage people, and made the most of the technologies available.

Some people were able to thrive while remote working. How can we make our on-site meetings worth the effort to dress up and commute? Because that's the issue we are facing, most people know there is another way of doing things, and it worked for two years. If we are going back to the office, it must be better than sitting in yoga pants with our snacks within arm's reach and our pet as company.

There is a special group of people that benefitted especially by these newfound meeting strategies and the freedom to design their own workspace at home. They are called "*neurodivergent*". Why would they leave their safe space to put on a social mask again? They had been hiding for a while and some were miserable in this position.

**Who are neurodivergent people and why do they matter?**

"When I was growing up, we didn't know about this stuff. People were labeled as either normal, heart lazy, stupid, or weird. I always suspected there was a reason why people do what they do." – Ruth Stanley

Neurodivergent people are anyone whose brain functions in another way than what is expected from the majority. Neurodivergence is an umbrella that includes a vast range of variations from the norm. These variations can be co-occurring in the same person. The most common are high potential (gifted, high-IQ), ADHD (attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity), and autism. Lesser known variations include dyslexia, dyspraxia, hypersensitivity, etc. The list can be long and new cha-

racteristics are being discovered with the evolution of neuroscience.

These are hidden characteristics that affect the workplace. You can't tell by looking at people that they may function differently from the norm. A complicating factor is that adults, especially if they are employed, have learned to mask their challenges. This masking does take away from their thinking energy and may limit their capacity to fully participate in workplace events, meetings, or workshops.

While mostly unnoticed, a surprisingly large number of people are affected by neurodivergence. The estimates range from 1 in 4 to 1 in 7 persons, depending on the sources. As the science evolves, we know more about how the brain works, the detection criteria are refined, and the numbers grow as well.

Now that we suspect that neurodivergent people were able to more fully participate in virtual meetings, what else can we learn from their experience to make our onsite meetings as inclusive and welcoming? How can we save everyone from the boredom and frustration of the old-style meetings?

### **Is it hard to be inclusive? Not really!**

*"Now we know about these things and that there are easy ways to fix them to allow people to use their full talent, isn't it worth the effort?" – Julie Savage-Fournier*

Neurodivergent people operate at the higher or lower ends of the normal curves measuring cognitive functions, making it sometimes easier and sometimes more difficult for them to perform specific tasks. However, most strategies to help them reach their potential are useful for others as well.

Reducing distractions and allowing dedicated deep focus time is essential to someone with an attention deficit. It may also help

for most people. There is a subtle difference worth noting: knowing what our brain needs at its limits also informs us on how to make it work best within the norms as well. A showstopper for a neurodivergent person is often a point of friction for many others.

Being flexible and accommodating in our ways of working reduces the mental effort and increases

the comfort for everyone. Accepting different behaviors and requests with an open mind relieves everyone of

*“Many Lean practices and principles are friendly to neurodivergent people.”*

the pressure to look and behave like everyone else. Can you see where this is going? Psychological safety, creativity, engagement, and ultimately respect for people are essential requirements for everyone.

Oh, but that looks like anarchy! We can't accommodate everyone all the time, that creates chaos! What about the standards? The procedures? – This is where it gets interesting! Many Lean practices and principles are friendly to neurodivergent people. This knowledge can become a selling argument for your next event. Isn't it great?

Clear processes and expectations, visual process management, coherence and purpose (hoshin kanri), ergonomic workstations, they all make your workspace and your interactions more brain-friendly and inclusive.

### **Meeting with benefits: the checklist**

With a little more preparation and thinking through your meetings, you can enable different ways of absorbing and processing information. We had to be creative for the last two years, find new ways to meet; and learn a lot about engagement and inclusion. Let's not go back to static meetings where one person speaks and everyone else zones out in their

chair or answers their emails on their mobile device.

Here are some suggestions for your next event.

- **Visual focus:** In videoconferences, visual stimulation is high, speakers can be seen in close-up and the screen can be shared. These elements maintain the strong link between vision and attention. For in-person sessions, consider writing the meeting agenda on a whiteboard, and using Kanban boards for structuring meeting discussions. Visual facilitation and sketch noting are also great tools.
- **Closed caption:** Subtitles focus the attention, unload the working memory, and enable people to avoid missing things from listening alone. Why not retain these subtitles in on-site presentations? Powerpoint has this feature now!
- **Chat:** The chat function helps with impulsivity. Being able to write down ideas at will maintains the flow of the discussion and releases the social pressure related to speaking in front of the group. In person, using post-its/brain writing, flipcharts and whiteboards allow everyone to participate in real time.
- **Motion:** Fidgeting, walking around, doodling, taking notes all use a different part of the brain than listening. Some people need that part of their brain to be busy so they can direct their attention to listening. Wouldn't it be nice if we let people move around in the office space in a way that works for them?

### **The last words**

This article was written building on the complementary strengths of two neurodivergent persons, mothers to neurodivergent kids and Lean practitioners who see the links between Lean and neuroinclusion that might not be as obvious to everyone. We, Julie Savage-Fournier and Ruth Stanley, hope that our suggestions launch your new and improved in-person meetings. We are sure that you will find many more ways to make your events lean, lively, purposeful and engaging for everyone! ■