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Promoting Neurodiversity

From a conversation between Daniel Maskit and Dr. Marianna Murin
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2. Transcript

MM: Great. Daniel thank you so much for kindly agreeing to help us with this training that we are running. And I hear you have done some exciting work on promoting neurodiversity in your workplace, so I would be really grateful if you would share any of your insights or experiences from this process.

DM: Thank you for asking me Marianna. I am honoured to be here. I think, one of the things which I find myself thinking about a lot is all the times in my life when someone has said to me "well, we can't have one set of rules for you, and a different set of rules for everybody else." And when you're younger you just sort of accept these things and you think "oh well, I guess that's right that we can't have that" and now as an adult I realise no. No no no. That's exactly what I want. And that's exactly what you need to do. Because we have this fallacy in our culture that fairness means treating everybody the same way. And that's actually wrong because that assumes that everybody is the same. And when you're different, and when you're really different, then treating me the way you treat everybody else is actually really unfair. And it's really hard to get this across to people because everybody likes to think "oh, I'm fair, I'm doing the right thing." And I think the biggest barrier to get people past is the idea of people are individuals and it's really okay to treat some individuals differently from others. And that doesn't mean that I'm asking for special treatment. It's not that. It's not that I want to do less work and get the same compensation as somebody else. It's that my work is different. And getting that understood is such a powerful thing to do. And everybody kinda likes to look at sort of outcomes, and what gets lost in that is that the way those outcomes are judged, and the way sort of the idea of what work should look like is built, is all built on a neurotypical model. So one of the examples I like to use, this goes back to when I was a kid in school, there were always, you have to write an essay, and then all of this coaching on 'this is the way you write an essay.' And I never understood any of that coaching. And they always were saying "well, don't leave it to the last minute, you should be writing all along." And, and, I was like "but that's not how I work." And so teachers were always like "well why

are you always procrastinating." Because well, the thing is done, and you haven't done anything. And I was like, "well, I'm thinking about it. I'm working out…" And they're like "but that thinking isn't doing" And I was like "well, actually, here's the thing, with autistic people, thinking is doing. And I've literally just had this very conversation with my manager at work, because, I'm a software engineer, he gave me a project, I was two or three weeks into what was supposed to be a five or six week project, and he was really concerned because I hadn't written any code yet. And he was like "you're an engineer, you should be writing code." And I'm like "well, but I'm talking to people; I'm reading other people's code; I'm understanding the context; I'm sorting out what this should be. Like, how can I write code when I don't know what the code is going to be yet?" And he was worried, and he was worried, and he was worried, and then… I wrote all the code in a week. And he said "Oh! You wrote that really quickly." And I said, "Well, yeah, of course, `cause I knew what I was doing by the time I wrote it. I've got it all in my head and I just had to put it in, put it into the computer. And, and I could see how shocked he was.

MM: Absolutely

DM: At this, because, because everybody is taught as a manager that you should see steady progress. And that just isn't the way my brain works. Or there is steady progress, but it's not visible. And that poses a real challenge. It poses a challenge in schools. It poses a challenge at work. And I think it's just a great example of how different our minds are. And how expecting us, expecting work to look the same way when we do it is really problematic.

MM: Yeah, and how education performance, or work performance in your case, is being measured against exactly the same criteria. So I completely, that's a very powerful point and thank you so much.

DM: Yeah, and another piece of that is, is that, and probably less so in schools, although I think this does, although this does play out in schools as well, but a lot of work places they, they feature getting peer reviews as part of the whole performance process. And also your manager is reviewing in the same way a teacher does. And often, nobody around you has any training in dealing with the way that you're different. And so, y'know I'm turning fifty-six soon, and I don't have to go back very far to find a performance review at work where I was given essentially the same feedback I was given when I was six. Basically "Does Not Play Well With Others." Because my communication is so different, and I work really hard, I'm probably, I've been told for an autistic person I'm exceptionally good at social communication. But I still get it wrong, pretty much all the time. And there's this curious thing about that, and this is especially really important with young people is, my whole life everybody's solution to my communicating differently has been to coach me "how to communicate better."

MM: A brilliant point.

DM: Which is just, just crazy. Because I don't even understand how, how non-autistic people communicate. I mean, to, to an autistic person, non-autistic people spend so much of their time on things that are just irrelevant. When we ask questions we get really vague answers. And people then get upset at us if we can't act on them giving us really vague answers. And somehow that's our fault. Somehow everything is always our fault.

MM: No I hear you, and we did discuss it before, the irony of it, that actually when you're majority leans to, that people we don't expect to have difficulties in social communication, and yet it should be the neurodiverse population working on social communication skills, rather than kind of working as a society, as a team and really working on each other's strengths and playing on each other's strengths.

DM: Yeah, and I'm really encouraged right now that my current manager at work we're having a lot of really great conversations, and we've been developing a new model for how work should happen. Which we don't know if it is going to be the right model because it's new, and we really feel like we're pioneering something new, but we're having these conversations around the idea of this should be symbiosis. That, while there's a lot that I can bring into the process, it doesn't work without somebody else, and my manager is stepping in and saying that he will do this, to help me with the communication part. Because, because it's one thing to have the big ideas, and to see 'this is where we should go,' but when the job involves persuading others that those are the right ideas, well, I'm probably not the best person to be carrying the torch, even for my own ideas.

MM: Yeah

DM: And I think that it's taken me a really really long time to, to find peace with this, and I think that, like, the feedback I got during my assessment process was really powerful in the sense of my starting to realise that, that there's things that I'm just not as good at as a lot of the people around me. And I should stop trying to be really good at everything, and I should try to just be really good at the things I'm really good at. And figure out how to partner with other people to help me with the things which I'm less good at.

MM: Well it's apparent to me a lot of the conversations we've had before, where actually, as we move, as we grow older, we increasingly tend to work more in the areas of our strengths because that's really how, y'know what, kind of ensures the progress in a society if everybody kind of contributes in areas of their strengths and that's what makes great, great teams in many ways. And, I think, Daniel there was one, a fascinating point you made about,

there's a lot of talk about diversity in general, and it would be really helpful I think for people to hear about your thinking about fundamental principles. How we go about diversity, and what would be helpful fundamental shifts in paradigms how to go about it.

DM: Yeah, and I think, I think this is something which I think goes way beyond neurodiversity. I mean, I've been having these conversations with people who are very involved in working around gender, people who are working in race, people who are working on a lot of different things. And I think that we have this idea that diversity means being accepting of other people being different. But that's not what diversity is. Diversity is figuring out how to incorporate that otherness so that everybody can actually be the best version of themselves. And we just have this idea, sort of that being a white male is normative, and everything else is judged against that standard, and ultimately found, found deficient. I mean even as a white male, because I am neurodiverse I'm still considered deficient, and everybody wants to coach me on how I can be more like a proper white male. But true diversity is the people who are in the majority learning to appreciate what makes me special. And what I bring to the people which they can't bring to the table.

MM: That is a very, very, very powerful point. Thank you so much. You've really been very inspiring. Thank you Daniel.

DM: Thank you.