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A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a large, snow-capped mountain peak in the background under a dramatic, cloudy sky. In the foreground, a river flows through a rocky, brownish valley. The overall tone is moody and natural.

Can Boardroom Neurodiversity
Support Sustainable Leadership?

Contributors



Charlotte Valeur

Chair of Institute of Neurodiversity

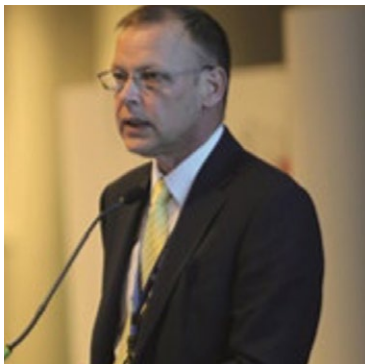
ION's vision is to be a significant part of developing a world where neurodivergent individuals are spotlighted for positive things as opposed to negative and to help create a world where neurodivergent individuals feel accepted, represented, included, empowered and heard.



Nanette Mellor

CEO of The Brain Charity

The Brain Charity's mission is to enable all those affected by neurological conditions to live longer, healthier, happier lives. We will fight together for an inclusive and just society: a world where stigma, hardship and isolation are replaced by compassion and understanding.



Tony Lloyd

CEO of ADHD Foundation

ADHD Foundation's goal is to social change by working in partnership with agencies across all sectors to remove the cultural and systemic inequalities for neurodiverse people in health, education, and employment.

Neurodiversity

The Oxford dictionary definition for neurodivergence is 'differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal; neurotypical'. People who think differently.

Most people are neurotypical, meaning that the brain functions and processes information in the way society expects. However, it is estimated that around 1 in 7 people (more than 15%) in the UK are neurodivergent, meaning that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently.

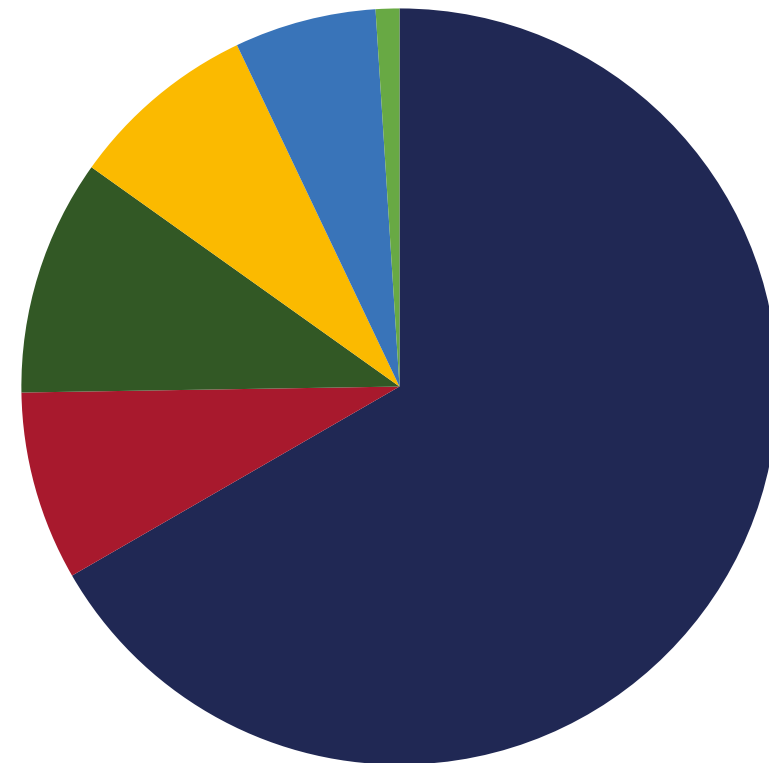
Information from Local Government Association

Although 1 in 7 people are known to be neurodivergent, this number is likely much greater in reality. With the following stats being from ADHD Aware, showing a closer to a third of the population is thought to be neurodiverse.

- **8% of people in the UK are thought to have ADHD**
- **10% of people in the UK are thought to have dyslexia**
- **8% of people in the UK are thought to have dyspraxia**
- **6% of people in the UK are thought to have dyscalculia**
- **1% of people in the UK are thought to have an autistic spectrum condition**

Information from ADHD Aware

Proposed Neurodiversity



- Neurotypical
- ADHD
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- ASD



Charlotte Valeur

Chair of Institute of Neurodiversity

How can neurodiversity impact sustainable leadership?

From my perspective, the paradigm of human diversity is in itself what makes leadership sustainable. Quite simply, it can't be sustainable without it. **We have a diverse and neurodiverse society but if you don't bring all of that to the table, then you can't expect to achieve sustainable leadership** because you can only see things from one point of view. So, my answer is that without neurodiversity, leadership is in itself unsustainable. The only way to have truly sustainable leadership is to have as many different sets of eyes and as many different ways of critically evaluating a boardroom challenge as possible.

What are the key skills that neurodivergent leaders can bring to an organisation?

There's a huge number of different skills because everyone has their own talent and their own special skills. In my own leadership career for example, I can see a pattern of very, very deep thinking on very specific subjects of interest and this is quite common of neurodivergent leaders. Rather than being generalists, leaders on the spectrum of neurodiversity can often be very proficient niche subject-matter-experts. This depth of thought and specialist knowledge can be really valuable in a board. I mean, it's good to know a lot about everything, but it's also super valuable to have expert level insights about one or two things.

Another example of a skill neurodivergent people demonstrate is their ability to think differently. Thinking differently can show up differently

in different situations. For example, say you have a board that is very wed to one way of doing something, something they've done for a long time without having really questioned it. **Neurodivergent leaders will often bring a different perspective and offer different solutions, solutions the board may not have considered before.** This agility of thought is in stark contrast with the common narrative about neurodivergence however. For example the common narrative is that neurodivergent people don't like change, but that's simply not true. We don't like illogical change or change that happens without notice and without the chance to prepare, but we're actually more agile in that they have probably thought about lots of different ways of doing things before it even actually needs to change.

I think that propensity for neurodivergent leaders to take a really deep interest in a specific subject or area is a key factor. **This ability to hyper focus on the issues that really matter is something a board can really benefit from and so can a society.** But again, you must provide the right kind of work environment to see the benefit.

Are neurodiverse boards more or less likely to think systemically when tackling the current climate challenges?

The likelihood in most cases would be for neurodiverse boards to do really well when it comes to systemic thinking. When you have neurodivergent leaders in a boardroom, or in a team making decisions, they naturally look for patterns and trends can be very effective at considering multidimensional outcomes when analysing a situation. For good or for bad, you always have different viewpoints around a board table, but when you have a team with high levels of neurodiversity, the general chances of thinking systemically as a collective increases significantly.



Nanette Mellor

CEO of The Brain Charity

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A good leadership team needs to have lots of different tools in its box and when I say tools, I mean lots of different types of thinking.

Effective boards need a really well-rounded group of individuals working together. And when we talk about leadership at The Brain Charity and we talk about neurodiversity, what we are describing really, is the importance of having individuals who see the world differently, rather than a standardised idea of what a strategic leader is: a white guy in a grey suit and we also have assumptions about how they think and how they act.

I remember as a young manager, picking up several books about being a manager and reading about how to be a manager and it was all nonsense! Leaders are all sorts of different people and they have all sorts of different passions and interests and quirks and talents. Different leaders bring different dimensions of value but I think for me, **when it comes to being an exceptional leader, what you're really talking about is a leader with a very unique brain and that is neurodiversity!** At The Brain Charity, the more we discover, the more we realise that successful neurodivergent leaders, become successful not despite their condition, but because of their condition (if we can call it a condition because I don't think it is a condition, at least not in the negative sense we think of people with 'conditions'). I actually think that it's a perfectly natural variation of the way that our brains work.

What are the key skills neurodivergent leaders can provide to an organisation?

If we look at ADHD for an example (attention deficit hyperactive disorder), the name is focused on the negative which is misleading. When you meet somebody with ADHD, you could be forgiven for thinking that they just can't concentrate and because they're not concentrating this is their 'fault'. But, it's not that they're bored with the one thing they're looking at. It's that they're excited by everything around them. This isn't a deficit of attention. It's an over-interest in everything. People with ADHD have many interests and are knowledgeable about many topics! They come up with ideas and are really outward looking individuals with an inner energy that drives them forward, to investigate, to find out and learn. They are individuals with an inherent quest to find knowledge, and to try new things. They love, experimentation, love risk taking.

Of course, if we're talking about business, we're talking often about being a disrupter, coming up with new ideas being creative. People with ADHD have that in abundance.

What we often see in an individual with ADHD, getting thrown out of school, because the way that they are isn't suited to the way that the educational environment has been created. Getting in trouble with the law often ending up in prison. But then they come out and then they become really successful entrepreneurs. And that's actually a really common thing to happen.

So, **ADHD, energy, enthusiasm for life quest for knowledge, ideas, impulsivity and risk taking. They are all traits that you see in great leaders.**

People with autism can have extremely high levels of focus and attention, far beyond the capability of most of people. If you look at science and technology as an industry, full of highly technically able individuals, autistic people are often drawn to these industries and disciplines because of their inherent abilities to focus relentlessly on complex tasks. Their obsessive focus enables them to become experts in a complex niche area.

Lastly dyslexia and I have to be a little bit careful as I have dyslexia so can sound like I'm blowing my own trumpet. I don't know whether it is because a dyslexic persons brain can't go from A to B very easily or whether they intuitively don't want to, but they often take a different route to most. I know that in personal experience my brain doesn't go from problem to solution in the fastest way. It does not go the direct route. My brain kind of goes around all the houses and then comes to a conclusion.

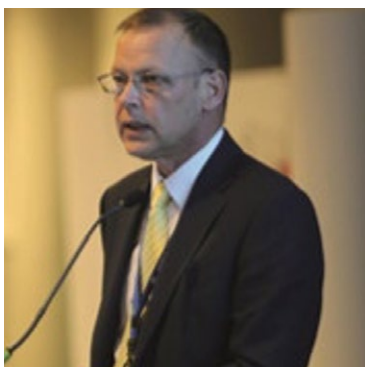
If you think about it, in terms of a journey, a person might want to go out and get some food. They'll go to the nearest supermarket, get their food and come home. Whereas when I want to get some food, I might get in my car and just drive around looking through the village and I'll find lots of different places to eat. I'll pick up my meat from one place and my veg from another, and the meal that I make in the end will be full of components from different places. So, if a dyslexic persons brain, rather than making a straight connection, goes all around the houses and it picks up loads of different ideas and it links things that people without dyslexia wouldn't necessarily be able to link. This naturally lends itself to creativity and big picture thinking.

Are neurodiverse boards more or less likely to think systemically when tackling the current climate challenges?

Earlier, I used an analogy about tools in the box. If you've got a broader set of tools at your disposal, i.e.: creativity and an enquiring mind, then you're going to come up with a better answer when tackling a complex problem. This is relevant for any industry sector or organisation. Personally, I strive for this at The Brain Charity by surrounding myself with detailed and technical thinkers, who see the projects through to completion. I've got other traits that are better placed at the beginning of the process, around creativity and the idea conceptualisation. Using this example, I think having a neurodiverse board is essential.

Having more different ways of thinking about a problem and seeing the problem from different angles means you're more equipped to find the best answer.

A common traditional leadership trait is to hire in your own light, i.e.: hiring people that are similar to you, because they're the candidates that you feel comfortable with. They're the people you converse most easily with and on your level. But what you really need to do is take the time to understand what you're missing and try and find that in others, even if they are people that you don't connect with on a social level. If you can fill your own deficits and replace your own skills gaps, you will succeed.



Tony Lloyd

CEO of ADHD Foundation

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Many large organisations have people who are obviously very successful, who are pioneers, visionaries, and thought leaders, but often they don't speak each other's language. They often don't understand each other's frame of reference, not just from a professional or a geopolitical context, but also in terms of the way they think.

Recent research from Stanford University suggests that over **30% of business leaders and entrepreneurs are neurodivergent** and they're actually just hiding in plain sight. If you look at our historical leaders from inventors to scientists, Christopher Wren, Leonardo da Vinci, Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, these have been brilliant people who've thought in a very different way to most, but who have gone on to make a significant impact to the world in a variety of different ways in their individual fields of expertise.

At the moment, this paradigm shift that is taking place around the neurodiversity debate, around the need to think differently is really on point when it comes to geopolitics, climate change, a technology driven economy, workplace and culture. I think that human evolution, however adept we've been at adapting ourselves to our environment and however competent we've been at adapting our environment to work for us as a species, the fact remains, that **there's an evolutionary reason why one in ten people have dyslexia, one in sixty have autism,**

one in twenty have ADHD or dyscalculia. That diversity of human neurocognitive capabilities is built into our universal design.

Also, because of our educational paradigm, because of our rather outdated understanding of it, leaders have thrived within that paradigm because it was quite often very exclusive and those power structures limited the possibilities for neurodivergent leaders. For example, we know that until very recently most boardrooms were made up of exclusively white, middle aged men who went to certain schools and universities. That is changing quite significantly. The visibility of difference is far greater now than it ever was.

In essence, we like to be around people of like mind, who share our values and our vision as it's very self-affirming and very validating for our worldview. But the reality is, **we live in a complex, rapidly changing technology driven world and we need diversity of thought and diversity of minds** if we're going to find the solutions that we need to solve the challenges and harness the opportunities that the 21st century is presenting us.

What are the key skills neurodivergent leaders can provide to an organisation?

These people have always been there, but we don't always see them. Historically, we've failed to recognise their value as leaders because we don't often associate leadership with those people who we've traditionally labelled with 'learning difficulties'.

That deficit-based lens that we view people with is still shaping children in our schools today, where if you've got dyslexia or dyspraxia for example, then you're probably in the bottom set due to 'low ability'. That is still going on. We are conflating intelligence with intellect.

Our universities and research institutions are now beginning to look at the world through the lens of neurodiversity and recognising that in every university certain faculties are full of certain neuro types.

It is almost an awakening, it is a paradigm shift, that **at least 20% of the human race that we have been enculturated into thinking is less intelligent and less employable, premised on a very narrow concept of intelligence and capability in terms of human cognitive potential, actually hold huge value for our businesses and our societies.**

Then I think, in terms of leadership, we must have people who think differently because we need very different solutions to tackle the very different challenges that the 21st century is throwing at us. We need to have a representation of humankind around the decision making table, not just one dimension of humankind, if we're going to solve such complex challenges. We have to include those who think differently, as opposed to relying on one-dimensional group thinking that has been at the nexus of many of our current issues.

Context is everything. If we don't adapt to the context of today, to proactively facilitate a contribution that we absolutely need from people who think differently and see the world from a different perspective, then we're not necessarily going to come up with the solutions that we need. I think if you look at the major growth companies of the 21st century, in sectors like bioscience, bioengineering, and technology, you will find a plethora of neurodivergent thinking in those industries. It's interesting that they're often the ones that seem to be driving things forward.

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The exercise of trying to formulate solutions and understanding both the challenge and the solution, coming from the frame of reference of somebody who processes information differently, who processes environmental stimulus differently, is in itself an exercise in systemic thinking.

We now live in a global community. We are all acutely aware of our geopolitical, cultural, and economic interdependence. We are aware of it and yet we are struggling to find common ground. The ability, the willingness, and the mechanisms to better understand everybody else's position and viewpoint is essential if we're going to solve this.

I think, the reason that we have this diversity of human neurocognitive capacity is because in the 21st century, we are finally waking up to the fact that more than ever before in human history, we need neurodiverse thinking in vital decision making on a global scale. You have to hope, that the evolutionary purpose of diversity of mind, if I can be philosophical for a moment, is for this very reason.

Conclusion

When we consider the great challenges of our generation, they are simply so great to expect for just one group of leaders or leadership demographic to be equipped with the breadth of skills and values required for change. The scale and complexity of twenty first century challenges require boards and leadership teams with multi-dimensional perspective and thinking that bucks the trend of traditional leadership and this means inclusion of all neuropsychological perspectives.

To include and to play each boardroom actor to their own individual strengths is to give ourselves the best possible chance of tackling such dynamic, ever-changing, and wicked problems. This means consciously

and conscientiously changing the narrative about neurodiversity, changing the concept of thinking differently from being a negative disadvantage to instead being a boardroom superpower and one which when complimented with an open and inclusive neurotypical senior leadership team, can be a powerful formula for finding solutions against a backdrop of spiralling complexity.

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