



# **NEURODIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP**

Leadership Circle Debrief Coaching Support

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# WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

## Understanding and Identity

Inclusion, neurodiverse, neurodiversity, neurodivergent... You may have heard of these labels and coached people who identify as neurodivergent. These terms all refer to the idea that human beings have a naturally diverse range of thinking and experiencing the world, and that those who process the world outside the 'norm' are not deficient or dysfunctional. Professor of psychology, Nick Walker explains neurodiversity as "the diversity of human brains and minds – the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species".

This paper has been developed to support coaches to understand the possible impact of neurodiversity when interpreting the Leadership Circle Profile (LCP). It will provide some generalized issues to be aware of when doing a debrief with someone who identifies as being neurodivergent.

The neurodiversity paradigm is based on three principles:

- Brain diversity is valuable just like biodiversity.
- There is no normative or "correct" form of neurocognitive functioning.
- Social dynamics with neurodiversity are similar to other aspects of human diversity (e.g. gender, ethnicities, culture...). There are power inequalities with those on the 'margins' but also a huge source of potential when diversity is embraced and encouraged.

It is therefore important to note that whilst all brains are unique, and hence any group of people are likely to be neurodiverse, the term has been used typically to define those who would fulfil the criteria for a formal neurological psychiatric condition. The latter could be classified as Neurodiverse with a capital 'N', whereas those without such conditions could be classified as neurodiverse with a lowercase 'n', according to neurodiversity advocacy group DivergenThinking. The term 'neurotypical' is typically used to differentiate those who do not have a formal neurological condition.

Names and labels can often trip coaches up – and they change a lot. Judy Singer coined the word "neurodiversity" in her 1998 Honours Thesis with the term neurodivergent coming into play later.



Originally neurodiverse was a plural term and neurodivergent was singular. That is, whilst a group of people with differently wired brains would be neurodiverse, a person with say ADHD would be neurodivergent. In a group of people you may have an autistic brain, an ADHD brain, a gifted brain, a neurotypical brain and a dyslexic brain. This is a *neurodiverse* group.

A group of four people with ADHD brains would not technically be considered neurodiverse because they all have the same form of neurocognitive functioning, whilst all being neurodivergent. However, many people would now self-label as neurodiverse, as this has become a singular label too.

While initially embraced and promoted from within the autistic community, Neurodiverse is now being used to cover a range of 'labels' – a few of which are mentioned above. A gentle reminder here that it is *not our role as a coach to diagnose or give a label*. However, better understanding of Neurodiversity can help us be a better coach to those that recognize as being neurodivergent.

## LCP debrief aspects to be aware of

### Framing

For coaches, the easiest and most effective technique is to use the terminology that your client is using. We are here to support them – not to give a grammar lesson or discuss why a different term is being used.

In an LCP debrief this will usually be revealed when asking them about their leadership history. If they say “I am neurodiverse” or “I am autistic” or “I am gifted” etc., use those terms. A great follow up for these is *“how do you see this impacting positively or negatively on your leadership?”* Generally, neurodiverse clients will only list the negative traits that their cognitive difference brings – this is ingrained in them as often their brain does not excel in the “system” of the organisation and these can create Shadows from a young age.

An additional follow up question of *“how does this enhance your leadership?”* is a worthwhile tangent. This is generally followed by silence as many adults have never looked for the strength of their 'label'. And it is clear from research that many Neurodiverse people have particular strengths that can enhance their capabilities in certain areas above those usually classed as 'neurotypical'.

Over the past decade there has been a shift for 'identity first' language (particularly in the autism community) for those who identify as neurodiverse so it has gone from “a person with autism” to an “autistic person”. However, many of your clients will continue to use what they grew up with – e.g. *Asperger's* was what they were diagnosed with as a child so it is what they identify with. Even though the term *Asperger's* is no longer being used, if your client identifies with the term then we need to respect their terminology.



## Masking

This is where the neurodiverse learn, practice and perform certain behaviours and suppress their natural inclinations to be accepted by those around them. It is them changing who they are and how they behave in order to feel a small sense of “belonging”. Masking is now being seen as damaging to the long-term mental health of neurodivergent individuals and many of the adults we work with would have been taught to “mask” in their schooling years.

You may find that your coaching client “stims”. This is a form of self-regulation and can present in different ways. Most stereotypes, usually autistic, present stimming as “flapping” or walking on their toes. But stimming can look like anything – biting nails, chewing hair, tapping leg – anything that allows the neurodivergent person to self-regulate.

These stims may be commented on in the LCP as something that prevents them from “reaching their leadership potential”. As a coach, we are not there to teach them to stop stimming – this would fall under masking. Instead, we want to support them to understand why and when they stim and how they communicate to others about their stimming.

## Eye contact

For many people who identify as autistic, eye contact is uncomfortable and distracting. Many adults “mask” and maintain eye contact but this will limit their cognitive processing as their effort will be going into the masking. Ask your client if they would like to maintain eye contact and if they don't, then talk looking down or to the side. You could ask your client if they would like to sit on the traditional  $\frac{3}{4}$  debrief angle or would prefer to sit side by side. Lack of eye contact should not be interpreted as lack of confidence or aloofness.

## Processing time

Many people who identify as neurodiverse have faster or slower processing time than someone who identifies as neurotypical. This means providing at least double the wait time after asking a coaching question for those where it is slower. Sometimes you may need to revisit questions in a different session to give them more time. This may also show up in the LCP as being a reactive feature when it is a natural response from the neurodivergent individual. For those with faster processing, it may be you need to ask quick fire questions to keep up with their brain.

## Encourage self-reflection and awareness around the label and focus on strengths

For many adults, they have not learnt about the strengths of their label. As their coach, invite them to do this and to see how the label has helped in their leadership journey. Invite them to research people in the public eye who have the same label or to read books by those that identify as the same form of neurodivergence as them.

## Manage rather than fix

Identify specific strategies to manage “problems” (e.g. time-management for ADHD; social skills for autism; tact for giftedness etc.). Do not focus on “fixing these” as this would be “masking”.

Setting up strategies using technology, structure or system adaptations are more useful and allow them to manage challenges that they may find frustrating. For example, an ADHD leader, who never “gets around” to checking their voice mail, changes their voicemail message asking for an email or a text message and states that voice messages will not be followed up. If they do not wish to manage these, then the coaching conversation needs to be around how to they explain to those that lead them that this is a natural part of them and not a “flaw”.

## NEURODIVERSITY IN A LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

While each ‘label’ comes with its own characteristics, there is a social conception that these labels indicate a “deficit in communication and social behaviour” (Robertson, Quigley, Vickers & Bruck 2021, p.400). Yet, in the public eye the rise of neurodivergent leaders is increasing – Richard Branson, Greta Thunberg, Trevor Noah, Lisa Ling, Justin Timberlake, Emma Watson, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, etc. It may be helpful to consider how the unique cognitive function of the neurodivergent person can reach and influence some employees that the neurotypical leader has not been able to.

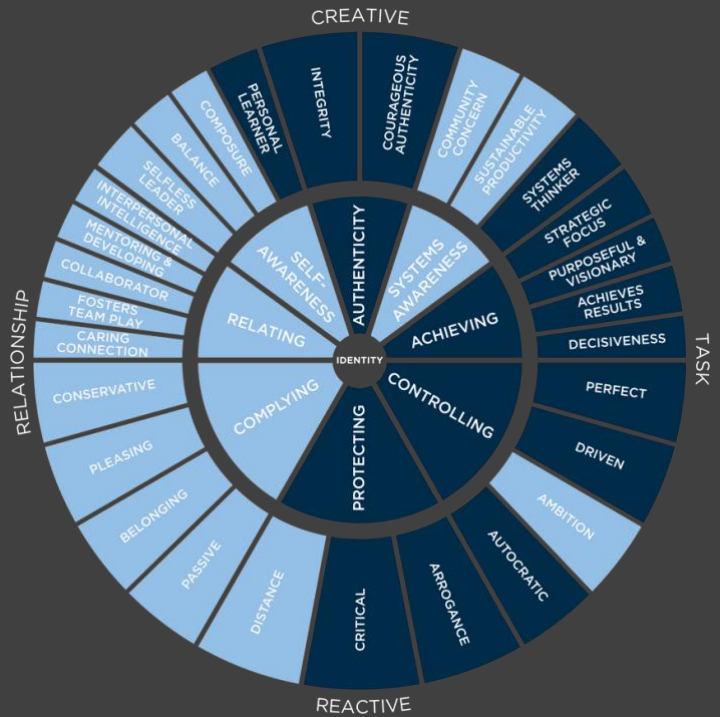
Robertson et al. (2021) ask that we reconceptualise leadership from a neurodiverse perspective and have derived propositions using the disability model from the critical disability theory (Powers, et. al., 2002). They articulate the following points regarding the strengths of neurodivergent leaders which can be aligned to the identified sections of the Leadership Circle Profile.

In the following diagrams, the relevant dimension of the LCP are **highlighted dark blue**. All quotes come from Robertson et al. (2021), with the corresponding page number.

### Attention to detail

“Sensitivity and attention to detail may be positively related to information search behaviour [how people seek and retrieve information] for neurodiverse individuals.” (p.410)

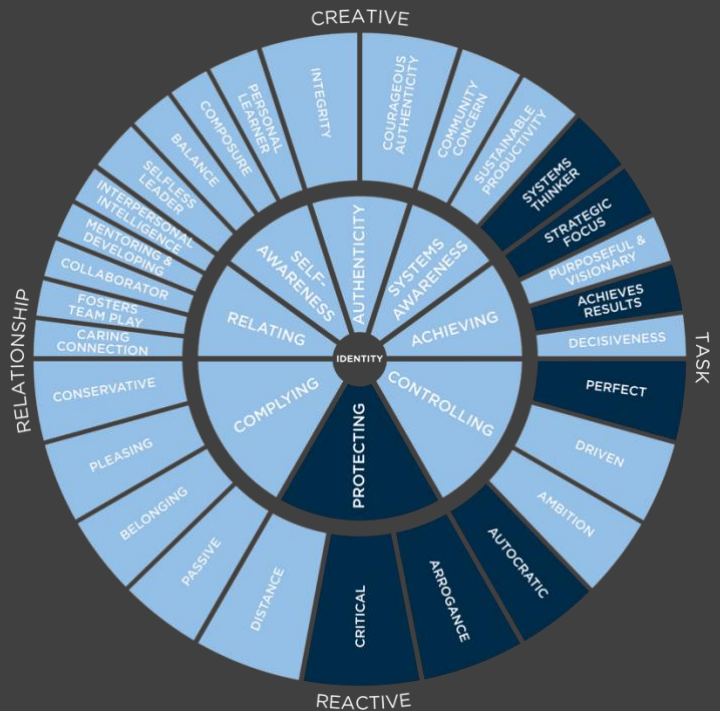
ND leaders may have a natural aptitude for seeing the minute, and how these details fit into overall strategy.



### Pattern recognition

“The ability to recognize patterns in stimuli may be positively related to information search behaviour for neurodiverse individuals” (p.410)

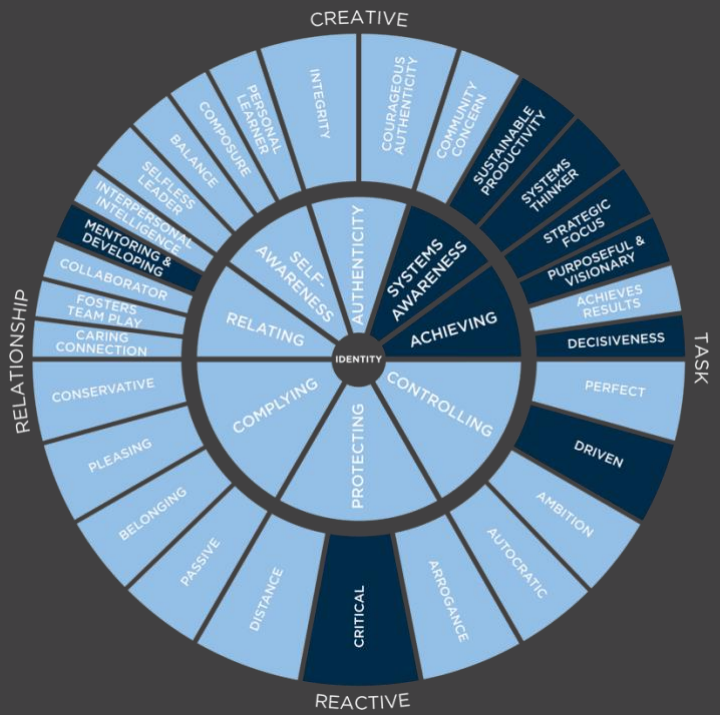
Leaders can examine data and context in minute ways to grasp facts and interpretations of a problem or situation. They can identify the performance demands of the situation through points of divergence.



## Novel thinking

“The ability to think differently, particularly with respect to visual or spatial thinking may be positively related to novel thinking for neurodiverse individuals.” (p.411)

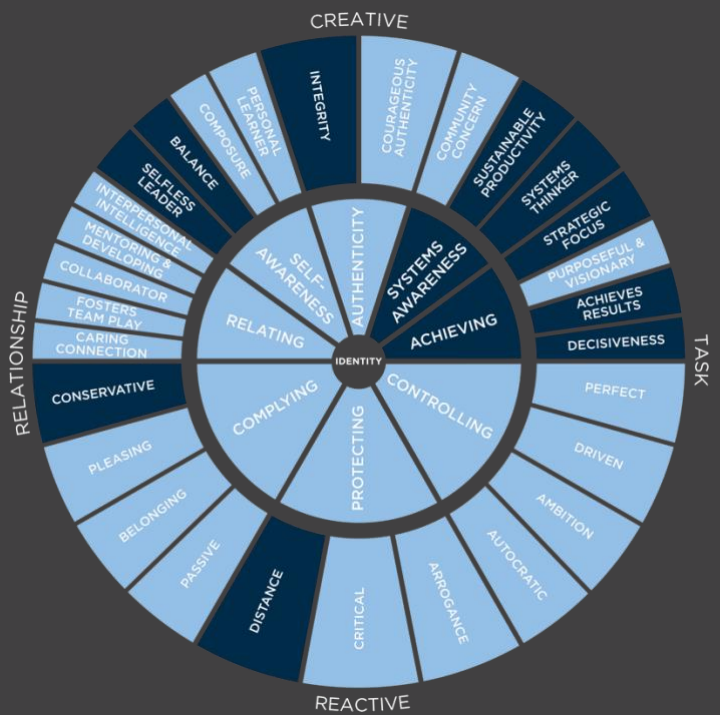
Divergent and novel thinking that allow for the creation of new knowledge or innovative ways of applying new knowledge. Seeing the big picture overview and how everything interconnects.



## Structure and routine

“The need for structure and routine may be positively related to stewardship for neurodiverse individuals.” (p.412)

Strong attention to obligations and routines that create a sense of psychological safety for employees. Attention to structure and predictability can lead to better stewardship.

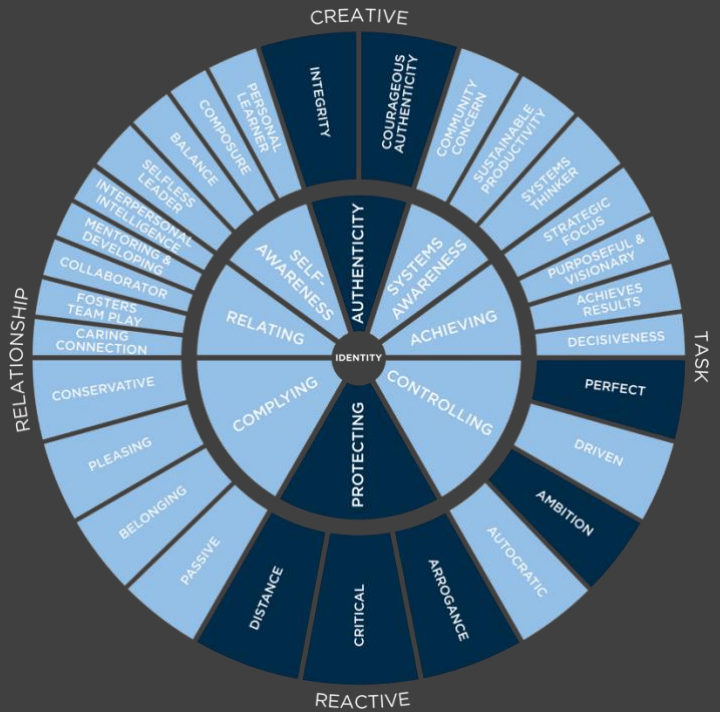




## Self-perception through enacting behaviours

“Enacting leadership behaviours may be positively related to leaders’ self-perception, efficacy, motivation to lead, job attitudes, job engagement, and/or performance for neurodiverse individuals.” (p.413)

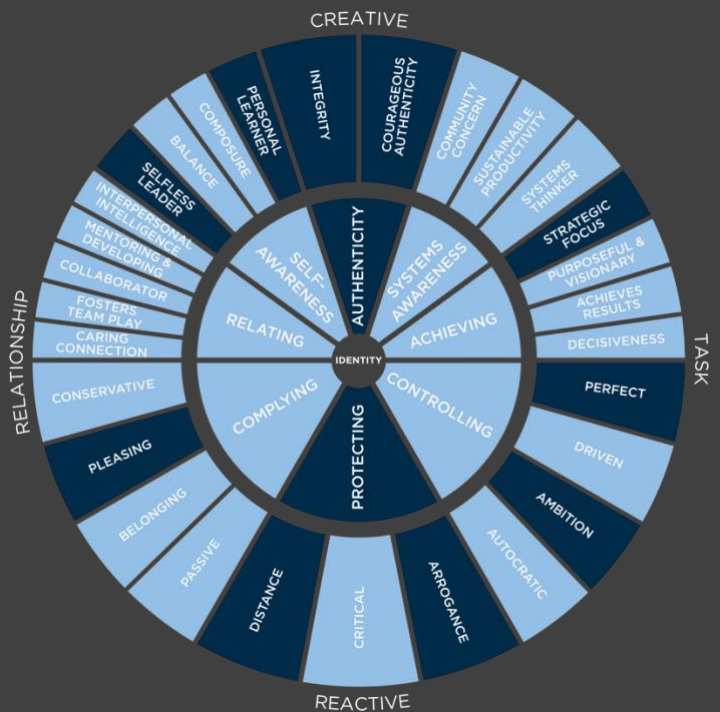
Neurodivergent leadership self-efficacy is directly related to their experiences of when they have been seen as a “leader” or been exposed to neurodivergent role models.



## Perception and contextual environment

“Contextual features (i.e., environmental complexity, problem novelty, and the degree to which the system is closed) may moderate the relationship between neurodiversity characteristics and the extent to which leadership behaviours are enacted.” (p.415)

The context will determine how well the leader is accepted in their neurodivergence and how much they are needing to mask who they are – which will be limiting their leadership effectiveness. Leadership training that honours, celebrates and utilizes their neurological differences rather than teaching them strategies about how to “mask” these differences.



## Reactive gifts for neurodiverse leaders

### Complying

LCP Dimension	Claiming your true gift	ND Balancing Qualities and Skills
<b>Conservative</b>	Loyalty and fidelity to the organisation's purpose. Champion of values and preserver of heritage.	Using your skill of "big picture" thinking to see the unsought opportunities for growth that aligns with the organisation's vision.
<b>Pleasing</b>	Love for self and others. Willingness to give of oneself in service to others' needs	Recognising when you have celebrated the differences that you bring and using this to continue to bring a different way of thinking.
<b>Belonging</b>	Builder of community and organisation, committed purpose.	Learning about your label and the strengths that you bring. Dropping the "mask".
<b>Passive</b>	Mastery through self-selected goals. Non-attached, vision directed self-mastery.	Align your personal values with the vision of the organisation. Consider what active role you play in helping achieve that vision.

### Protecting

LCP Dimension	Claiming your true gift	ND Balancing Qualities and Skills
<b>Distance</b>	Wisdom through detachment, care and reflection.	Consider the different lens that you bring and how that can benefit and support key stakeholders in the organisation – both from within and without.
<b>Critical</b>	Wisdom through detachment, care and reflection.	Recognise that your brain is literally working differently to those who are neurotypical. Consider what they are seeing that you may not.

<b>Arrogance</b>	Strength of character without the need for credit. Mentoring others into their own “bigness.”	Learning about your own label and how you view the world differently.
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## Controlling

LCP Dimension	Claiming your true gift	ND Balancing Qualities and Skills
<b>Perfect</b>	Constant pursuit of continuous improvement balanced with acceptance for things/people as they are. Desire to create outstanding results.	<p>Reflect on the process and not the outcome.</p> <p>“Done is better than perfect”</p> <p>Use, and ask for, exemplars to seek clarity as to what is expected of tasks.</p>
<b>Driven</b>	Willingness to work and risk for what you love. Doing whatever it takes to realise your deepest longings.	Identify how your label shows up for you and drives you in different ways (e.g. hyperfocus). How can you dial this up or down depending on yours and the organisation’s needs?
<b>Ambition</b>	Desire to create outstanding results. Personal energy to pursue worthy results.	Identify others in the organisation who are neurodivergent. See how you can be a positive role model for them.
<b>Autocratic</b>	Service through personal strength, persistence, and influence. The integrity to do what is needed even if it is controversial.	Share knowledge about your label and how it allows you to view the world. Explain the differences and what support you need from others.

## FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

### Recommended books:

- Neurodiversity at Work: Drive Innovation, Performance and Productivity with a Neurodiverse Workforce *by Amanda Kirby*
- The Neurodiverse Workplace *by Victoria Honeybourne*
- Thrive with Neurodivergent Colleagues: A Workbook for Innovative Organisations *by Suzanne Whang*
- Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You *by Jenara Nerenberg*
- The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain *by Thomas Armstrong*

### Something to watch:

- [Rosie King - Autism](#)
- [This is dyslexia – Asma Elbadawi](#)
- [Dyspraxia in the workplace](#)

### Something to read:

- [ADHD in the workplace](#)
- [Diversity Works NZ](#)
- [Neurodiversity in the Workplace - Forbes](#)

### Reference:

- Robertson, Q., Quigley, N.R., Vickers, K. & Bruck, I. (2021). Reconceptualizing Leadership From a Neurodiverse Perspective. *Group and Organisational Management*, Vol. 46(2), 399-423.