

WHAT DOES AUTISTIC LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE IN 2020?

Rachel Worsley | 02/06/2020

Autistic leaders don't get the support that they need because of stigma. Rachel Worsley shares the latest research and her personal story of leadership.

In 2020, conversations around neurodiversity are still largely focused on employing and retaining autistic talent. But we don't hear much about the other end of the spectrum: the autistic leaders.

In July this year, UK board director Charlotte Valuer spoke out publicly about her autism diagnosis that she received three years ago and argued that company boards needed to prioritise neurodiversity. She had spoken out despite knowing that "I will not be able to go on certain boards because they know I'm autistic".

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need for great leadership to get through difficult times. But are we doing enough to support autistic leaders?

It's Tough to Be an Autistic Leader

A recent Dutch study provides a starting point for talking about autistic leadership. The researchers interviewed the autistic leaders and employees of a self-advocacy organisation known as Persons on the Autism Spectrum in the Netherlands, known as PAS, to discover their views about their role in society and in the workplace.

One of the key themes they examined was the topic of autistic leadership, and how that is perceived by autistic adults. "Adults with autism do not only want to be seen as persons with limitations and who need support but also as powerful persons who are capable of taking initiative, including setting up and managing an entire organization."

Given that PAS is run and led entirely by autistic people, there appears to be no barrier of potential discrimination by others who don't appreciate autistic strengths.

But the researchers actually found that autistic leaders and employees were very critical of each other's perceived leadership skills. For example, one person mentioned that some autistic leaders "either do not have emotional room for it or lack those skills". Another person said that it's harder for most autistic people to organise peer contact and displaying leadership in this space.

These are comments from autistic people about autistic people, not neurotypical people. So what is with the implied internalised ableism?

Everyone Struggles with Leadership Skills. Why Single Out Autism?

Autistic people can be good or bad leaders, just like we have good and bad neurotypical leaders. According to the researchers, autistic people are far more likely to miss out on opportunities to develop leadership skills early in life. We don't always put our hand up to be the school captain or to be the president of a university club. By the time we progress to leadership, it's unsurprising that we may not always find the right supports or enjoy the rewards of such leadership.

Interviewees who call themselves as "high-functioning" also grapple with the personal responsibility to act as a visible role model for other autistic people. They felt compelled to make autism visible instead of camouflaging or concealing the condition, to tackle negative stigma that autistic people are not capable of leadership.

Neurotypical leaders tend to reach a leadership function around the age of 40 following a traditional career path. But many autistic adults may want a leadership role at a different point in time because they need more time to develop those skills.

However, the corporate world often punishes such tardiness. By the time autistic adults consider taking on a leadership position, they are often excluded for being too old. If standard discrimination is bad enough, now you have to deal with the ageism on top of it.

What's the solution? The magic "E" word: education. Specifically, educational programs for employees, such as courses or personal development programs, that are flexible enough for autistic employees to develop leadership skills at their own pace.

How about that 'S' word - Support?

Because of a lack of education and understanding, many autistic leaders can struggle in leadership positions. It's even harder if you're a woman. I can speak from experience, as the founder and CEO of Neurodiversity Media.

Autistic people like me often struggle to ask for help. I've had negative experiences asking for help only to be dismissed, gaslit or invalidated because of communication misunderstandings. It is exhausting to learn how to ask for help the "neurotypical" way, so I would rather shut down and suffer alone.

If I do reach out, I would have progressed to such a terrible state of overwhelm that verbal communication is all but impossible and I can go into a meltdown that affects people around me. It is not great to look yourself in the mirror and feel ashamed that you might have an anger management problem.

Men, especially in tech startup land, often get away with violent outbursts or they are downplayed in the context of their perceived genius. Steve Jobs is a famous example. Women don't get the same leeway.

It's not just neurotypical judgement. Just like how the Dutch study highlighted leadership criticism between autistic people, I have not been immune from criticism from the neurodivergent community that I seek to help.

Like my recent efforts with managing burnout, I've had to step back, reflect and develop new strategies and systems to manage the day-to-day challenges of leadership in my work.

Good Leadership Begets Good Leadership

I've been incredibly blessed with two great leaders (in a mid-sized company and a small business) in my professional career who have been my role models for my leadership at Neurodiversity Media. Both of them did not know about my autism and ADHD at the time of working for them.

But they took an active interest in my professional development and gave me opportunities that helped me develop key skills to allow me to thrive in entrepreneurship. They always made sure they had time for one-on-one discussions about my work performance or anxieties, despite their busy schedules. They championed my strengths and were relatively forgiving of my weaknesses in my undiagnosed state at the time.

Would knowing about autism and ADHD have helped them manage me better? Knowledge empowers, after all. But my experience shows that both big and small workplaces can help neurodivergent professionals like myself succeed at work through the practice of good leadership skills.

At the time of managing me, both leaders had at least 20+ years of experience managing

people in relatively stable workplaces. I've had less than two years in small business and startup, and I haven't even turned 30 years old. Despite having perfect role models of leadership, sadly I've had to make my own mistakes in my leadership journey.

True to the storytelling ethos of this business, however, I take comfort in the stories from other entrepreneurs in similar positions. So for all autistic leaders out there, let's figure out better ways to get the support and understanding we need to thrive as leaders. You are not alone.

Autism Leadership Workplace Culture Manager
Employee Text

Vind ik leuk De f t p r



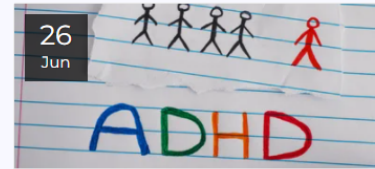
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"If we don't talk about ADHD diagnosis,
that stigmatisation and nonsense will..."