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# A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Neurodiversity-inclusion in coach training

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**T**he brain does not discriminate; neurodiversity is a universal human phenomenon that crosses all racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic and/or religious boundaries.

While coaching conversations are informed by thoughts and feelings, clients' behaviors are also influenced by their brains' wiring. As diversity, equity and inclusion gain momentum in the coaching industry, neurodiversity mustn't be left behind.

What is neurodiversity? According to Jeff Copper, PCC, founder of Attention Talk Radio, "Everyone experiences and interacts with the world differently based on their brains. There's no one way to think, learn, or behave. Variations are not failings or deficits; they're just ... different."

Neurodiversity-inclusion in coaching invites coaches to dance with the brain's role in a client's self-concept and execution of behaviors. To meet all clients where they are, coach training must include information about how people process information differently so coaches can:

- help clients recognize and embrace neurodiversity;
- ethically assess whether they feel equipped to support neurodiverse clients;
- determine when to refer or collaborate with coaches and/or therapists with neurodiversity expertise.

#### NEURODIVERSITY IS A COACHING CHALLENGE

All coaches are likely to have clients and prospective clients with neuro-diversity, experienced themselves or by family members. With a mental health crisis, global pandemic, social movements for reversing systemic disenfranchisement, war violence, school shootings and more, the overlap of trauma, genetics and environmental factors suggest that neurodiversity has become commonplace.

When clients have neurodiverse brains – caused by medical conditions (e.g. ADHD, anxiety, autism, learning differences) or life experiences (e.g. trauma, brain injury) – change can get complicated. Because neurochemistry can alter how clients approach and execute goals, neurodiverse clients may require coaching modifications, such as:

- varying approaches to planning,
- processing information differently to hold the client's agenda,
- modifying approaches to 'fail forward,'
- flexibility with time management, onboarding, scheduling,
- insights on the client's impact in social dynamics.

Neurodiversity-informed coaching meets clients where they are and empowers them to overcome obstacles to achieve their goals ... based on how they process information. A coach's exploration of a client's relationship with planning or memory, for example, could yield more nuanced approaches to guide the client's execution and follow-through.

On the other hand, a coaching engagement not informed by neurodiversity understanding can cause distress, damage a client's self-esteem, and impede achievement of desired results. Sadly, I've had many neurodiverse clients arrive negatively impacted or suspicious from previous coaching experiences, wary of failing at yet another effort to create positive change.

In my original coach training, I experienced extreme distress in a class about strategies for planning with clients. For me, 'plan' is a four-letter word. I love coaching because it allows me to be fully present without having to rely on memory to serve clients. I felt abandoned in a training experience that didn't create a safe and inclusive space for my neurodiverse brain.

Knowing that I have challenges with executive function now allows me to approach planning with less stress. It would have been helpful to understand that then.

"Some coaches worldwide are currently ill-equipped to serve clients in the presence of a wide range of neurodiverse conditions," says Copper.

While not every coach needs to become an expert in neurodiversity, the basics must be included as a fundamental part of coach training. As neurodiversity-informed coaching becomes a core competency for coaching certification, coaches will learn to screen for and accommodate neurological differences to best serve their clients.

#### NEURODIVERSITY IS A COACHING OPPORTUNITY

I knew my coaching niche before I understood that coaching was a profession. Since neurodiversity tends to run (gallop) in families, I hired a neurodiversity-informed coach for help supporting my 'complex' kids (a simpler term than neurodiversity). After it improved how I showed up as a parent, I enrolled in coach training to support other parents who were struggling like me.

To the untrained eye, complex people are often judged, seen as lazy, unmotivated, disinterested, rude, disrespectful, or even slow. They face challenges making and keeping relationships, devising plans for achieving goals, holding themselves accountable, self-regulating in the face of disappointments and upsets, etc.

Typically, these challenges are compounded when the brain's executive function differences are not understood and/or managed by themselves or others. All of the following activities (and more) rely on the brain's executive functions and are typically delayed or compromised in people with neurodiversity:

- filtering, sequencing, prioritizing;
- remembering what's asked of them;
- regulating emotions and frustration;
- processing language;
- reading social cues;
- transitioning smoothly between activities;
- inhibiting/initiating actions (at appropriate time/place).

With executive function challenges, even the smartest people struggle to perform commensurate with their intelligence; life skills and social skills may lag behind peers. The world tends to see them for what they cannot do, instead of focusing on their extraordinary capacity. They are plagued by the message that they fail to live up to their potential.

“Neurodiversity-inclusion in coaching invites coaches to dance with the brain's role in a client's self-concept and execution of behaviors.”

Adults with neurodiversity have often experienced a lifetime of being corrected and redirected, of being told what they can't do, of being advised to live within their limitations – by people who were trying to be helpful and encouraging. They've learned to lower the bar for themselves, seeing themselves as broken.

That message has been reinforced in subtle ways by well-meaning friends, family, and even medical and therapeutic providers, including coaches.

In the workplace and home, neurodiversity causes adults to struggle to fulfill their “wild and precious life.” This often brings them to coaching. And that's exactly why neurodiversity-informed coach training is so important.

Coaching is an empowerment-based modality built on the foundational notion that people are not broken and in need of fixing; that people are creative, resourceful, and whole. As we hold the capacity of our clients' potential, we invite them to explore a vision of full expression of themselves.

For many, coaching offers a novel way to look at their present and their future, to see what's possible for themselves and their lives instead of what's not. Coaching can be profoundly impactful for neurodiverse clients.

And yet, there's a risk to neurodiverse clients when coaches are not well informed. A colleague realized recently – now that she's learning about neurodiversity – that clients who drove her crazy, who failed to follow through and hold themselves accountable, were likely neurodiverse.

She had interpreted their behaviors as lack of commitment to the coaching or their goals. She now realizes it's more likely that she wasn't supporting their needs in a way that worked for them.

Neurodiverse clients need coaches to help them recognize ineffective scripts and patterns that may be unique to their (atypical) brain-wiring, without judgment and shame. With that awareness, they can create new ones to serve powerfully.

## NEURODIVERSITY-INFORMED COACH TRAINING

For the coaching industry to create the safest and most effective space for all clients to realize their full potential, coaches must explore the following.

### 1. Learn how the executive functions of the brain influence behaviors like:

- frustration tolerance;
- communication styles;
- information processing;
- emotional regulation;
- planning, prioritizing, execution, follow-through;
- energy-regulation;
- memory.

### 2. Find out more about areas such as:

- motivation and its relationship to executive function;
- how to identify potential neurodiversity;
- variations in effective problem-solving;
- collaboration with trained coaches and/or helping professionals with neurodiversity expertise.

With education, coaches can ethically either serve and partner with neurodiverse clients or refer them to more specialized coaches.

Neurodiversity-informed training offers tools to better establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with neurodiverse clients – whether or not the client has formal diagnoses. In order to most effectively support clients with neurodiversity, all coaches should receive a general education to recognize, understand, and determine whether and how to ethically provide coaching for neurodiverse clients.

The importance of diversity, equity and inclusion is currently a rallying cry for corporate culture and Gen Zers alike. I'm taking a stand for neurodiversity inclusion in DEI. Neurodiversity-informed coaching can elevate our profession, guiding all clients to navigate life more effectively.

I invite all coaching colleagues to actively seek out and engage in education that will elevate your skills, better serve your coaching clients, and raise the professionalism of our industry. I look forward to continuing this conversation. •