

Towards a neuro-inclusive theory of leadership

The aim of this project is to better understand the nature of leadership that is neurodiversity inclusive. Neurodiversity refers to the idea that there is a natural variation in how people's brains work and how they experience, understand, and interact with the world. People whose development „deviates” from the typical are referred to as neurominorities or neurodivergent individuals. They include, amongst others, people with autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or dyspraxia. Recent statistics imply that over 20% of the workforce may be neurodivergent. This means that every fifth employee may have atypical neurological predispositions.

We now observe an increasing number of employers (such as Google, Microsoft, SAP) who are actively recruiting neurodivergent individuals in an effort to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals. This is because neurominorities often possess unique abilities akin to human ‘superpowers’ that are likely to make them excel in professional settings and reward organizations with increased innovation and productivity. There is, however, another side of the story here. Neurodivergent employees, frequently experience isolation, stigmatization, and biases in the workplace context as a result of the difficulties they regularly experience with interpersonal communication, social interactions, managing stress, or sensory hypersensitivity – all associated with the different ways in which their brain functions.

Due to these difficulties, neurodivergent employees have atypical needs and preferences that may require not only a set of workplace accommodations (such as a quiet office environment) but also distinctive leadership approaches. Whilst leadership is a well-researched area in the field of management, traditional leadership theories have generally been developed and tested in neurotypical environments (i.e., among those whose neurological functioning is described as standard or normal). Thus, we cannot assume that they are applicable to neurodivergent employees.

Consistent with the above, in this research, I question whether traditional leadership theories apply in neurodiverse work contexts and I consequently aim to construct a novel, neuro-inclusive theory of leadership. The research will employ a rich qualitative mode of inquiry based on the constructivist grounded theory approach and the use of 20 open-ended qualitative questionnaires, 20 semi-structured interviews, and one focus group designed to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) What do leaders and neurodivergent employees understand by neuro-inclusive leadership?;
- 2) What characteristics and behaviors of leaders make them neuro-inclusive?;
- 3) What barriers are faced by leaders to being neuro-inclusive?;
- 4) What can be done to facilitate neuro-inclusive leadership?

The results from this study are likely to make several important contributions to the development of the scientific field of diversity management and leadership. Practically, the findings from this research will support the Polish government in meeting its commitment to providing people with disabilities opportunities for active participation in all aspects of social life including employment, and will further address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals centered around promoting inclusion and decent work for all.