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The Archetypes of the Workplace and Neurodiversity

“WHAT DO YOU think?” It’s a common question. We are social creatures, and concern for the inner thoughts of those who we are close to are held with the highest regard. Our societies rise and fall from the differing neural patterns of humans. Wars are declared, peace is made, and organizations are assembled and dismantled because people have a way of thinking and then acting on those internal thoughts.

In the broadest definition, neurodiversity is the variance in those thoughts. It is the different ways of thinking, learning, socializing, and experiencing the world. Yet, we can only be truly familiar with how we ourselves think on a topic on an individual level, or how we learn a new topic or talk about another. This is the inherent difficulty that sparks the beginning of any bias: since we experience only our own way of thinking, learning, socializing, and being, we tend to have a preference for that being the “correct way.” We can try to understand each other through words and actions, but still, we are only fully aware (ideally) of what we ourselves think. This is both the challenge of our species and also one of the most entertaining features. If ever we instantly understood the inner voices and perspectives of everyone we ran into, life would become dreadfully dull.

People in modern society understand, on a basic level, that we all think differently and to make up for that, to make it easier to process, often attempt to classify each other to make it easier to organize in their heads. What is your Myers-Briggs type? Are you an INFJ? Are you a Leo? Are you a psychology major or a math person? These classifications are all very normal to experience but often fail to accurately summarize the full human experience. This is why things like friendship, companionship, and soulmates are not just established instantly; they take time to build as you uncover each new layer and dynamic of the person with whom you are interacting. Yet, this need to classify, the natural tendency to find a heuristic that helps us make decisions more quickly, is very natural, because we don't really get the opportunity to interact that deeply with everyone we come across. This need to define, characterize, or group people into specific categories is the beginning of the need for neuroinclusion.

Think of the famous 1971 scene from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, where Wonka appears for the first time to fans at the factory gate. He walks out slowly, with a cane, allowing the onlookers and viewers to watch on in silence and build out their own imagination of him based on the little they know about him, namely, that he owns a chocolate factory and that he walks slowly with a cane—perhaps he has a disability, perhaps he is quite old? Then as he gets closer, he looks as if he is going to fall over and does a forward somersault while leaving the cane behind, showing that he was just playing off their imaginations and maybe signaling he was not what he appeared to be.¹

People who have immediately obvious differences between the beholder and themselves have the hardest time with these assumptions that are formed. These snap judgments are the building blocks of racism, xenophobia, and destructive versions of nationalism. Obviously, beyond the differences from person to person, some groups who are viewed as outsiders in a place can have a challenging time assimilating.

At work, these classifications happen a lot, and it is almost always detrimental to think of a person based on your first impressions of them. This natural human tendency to make these assumptions can lead to some discrimination for the “others” who are not in your “in” group. This othering at work, besides being wrong, is also highly unproductive. We work best when we understand that everyone thinks and

works a little bit differently, that new ideas generated by people who are thinking differently are literally the definition of innovation.

The Origin

The term *neurodiversity* was likely crafted collectively in the mid-90s in online neurodivergent-focused message boards and was later written about in sociological contexts.² The original creation was likely devised to account for the need to create an identity that was wider than an individual diagnosis, or label. This was especially important when diagnosis and disability and the medicalized context with which those labels are viewed were not always an accurate way to describe the neurodivergent person's experience. Logically, this makes sense, as many medical diagnoses may not be the most helpful labels to be used in everyday life. You wouldn't call yourself a high-blood pressure-haver, as it likely wouldn't be relevant in too many scenarios, unless maybe someone was offering you a salty snack that violated your dietary restrictions. Yet for some medical terms, like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and dyslexia, the terms were more consistently present in someone's experience. Those terms were about your thought patterns and your social communication tendencies. For many people, getting an actual diagnosis of one of those terms did not necessarily shift their identities too greatly, because they always thought in that way. It instead gave them a map to view where they've been, but not necessarily where they are or where they are headed. I think this is why the term gained steam. It took the label out of the medical field and into an identity people wanted to be able to use. This identity gave people a social way to classify themselves in the world and allowed them to have the vocabulary for a common experience that wasn't the norm or "neurotypical."

As someone with ADHD, this makes sense to me; I view it as very much a part of how I interact with everyone and everything. Sometimes I might hyper-focus on what you are saying, sometimes I might not be able to begin a task, yet I value the ability to be able to describe that it is not the typical experience of most people (even though it is relatively common). In the workplace, this label, or identity, has become very valuable because it starts to break the mode, the assumption, the

standard, which is proliferated in many organizations, that there is only one ideal way to work. Over the past decade I've worked for many different companies advising them on exactly the opposite, that there are many ways to work. That neuroinclusion as a practice in their talent and strategy makes them more productive because you can access so much more talent if you make some minor tweaks to your culture and practices. Alongside some brilliant and motivated people, my peers and I helped companies to do this by first beginning to purposefully include neurodivergent job seekers. Second, we then tried to take the lessons learned in the changes needed for those job seekers and apply them to the systemic barriers that existed that prevented people from being able to access those companies on their own and how those strategies can make so many systems better for all the members (both neurodivergent and neurotypical). We did this work through a non-profit group called, fittingly, Neurodiversity in the Workplace.

Besides some lucky happenstance with the first few engagements, we started with the biggest companies we could find who were interested. I and my team helped these massive Fortune 10, Fortune 50, and Fortune 100 companies understand the topic, and the goal was to then utilize the interest by these well-known brands to get them to spark a trend or standard in the workplace that this (neuroinclusion) was an important or, more appropriately, critical lens through which we should start to positively view the future of work.

However, after 10+ years, I have come to realize two important lessons. The first is that this was an extremely lofty and idealistic mission—corporate America especially loves to segment, label, and separate people, so this was always going to be an uphill battle. The second is that in the community that emerged surrounding this topic, with the combined efforts of both those working directly on the challenge and the millions of people who identified as neurodivergent, we actually could and did effect change in how systems worked—slow and not at all sustained—but movement in a positive direction was possible, especially when people worked together. Over the course of the chapters of this book, I aim to showcase those possibilities, including the justifications for doing neuroinclusion work and the outcomes that can be achieved by engaging. I'm going to start wide with the landscape, the systems, and the natural barriers that exist; then narrow in

from government, to institutions, to firms, to teams; and round out with individual actions that can be taken. But first, I want to focus on the current ways we view the workplace and the categories that proliferate how we classify our roles in it.

Archetypes at Work

I've seen that the corporate politics that starts to emerge in every organization tends to encourage members in the organization to classify people into different archetypes depending on their role, background, style, etc. These categories that are unofficially assigned can cause a lot of stigma and false expectations of behavior and responses. As an example, while obviously this isn't official, there are a couple of categories that people tend to archetype each other into:

The leader: This is a classic category. There are countless books and discussions on what it means to be a leader. The term transcends positional hierarchy and is more of a qualifier, a way of behaving.

The do-er: This is the person behind the scenes assembling the actual work on the topic, the individual contributor who gets things done.

The new guy/girl: The person not yet in the in-crowd.

Or sometimes these archetypes can be more types than positions: *the thought leader*, *the fixer*.

Like I mentioned, part of this need to create archetypes is not at all sinister and can be helpful. It is again our natural need to organize our thoughts to provide frameworks or scaffolding for how we view the world. Yet when self-reflecting, especially on the "leader" archetype, a common picture starts to emerge in our heads. That picture sometimes changes over time but is aligned and affected by popular culture, politics, world events and more across organizations.

In the 60s, the leader archetype presents to you as this *Mad Men*-esque vibe where the white middle-aged man wears a jacket and tie, has a secretary, and drinks whiskey at work. The vision shifted over the years but still remains the white male persona.

Note: This archetype tends to be frustratingly accurate or maybe a self-fulfilling prophecy as women run just 11% of Fortune 500 firms despite being 50% of the population.³ Black leaders only helm a staggeringly low roughly 1.6% of Fortune 500 firms (8 out of 500) in 2024.⁴ The vast majority are middle-aged white men.

So, it's no wonder that we think of a white man in a blazer as the archetype of a leader. In our minds we also define not just what that person looks like but how they behave. The leader is typically a strong silent type who is calm and cool under pressure. They are able to wax eloquently on a number of different topics, with basically no notice. They can be stoic or flamboyant in some way or in some cases but always are expected to behave with a large amount of confidence. These can be helpful things for leadership; they are not necessarily bad qualities. A leader in any type of organization, as part of their responsibilities, is often the face of the organization, the chief strategist, etc. However, because of these mental pictures of what a leader should be, the archetype, the systems that get created with this pattern of thinking, become what I call a *hidden curriculum*. It is a set of never spoken but clearly present guidelines for how we are expected to behave in the workplace. This set of hidden curricula relies on the archetypes, and it relies on everyone thinking about those archetypes in the "standard" way. This can unfortunately limit helpful progression and change and prevent many would-be excellent "leaders" from ever getting the chance to lead, because they don't fit the mold.

These archetypes extend beyond the role of a leader to the other members of a team. The "doers" are the scientists, the strategists, or whatever the other archetypes are; they tend to have similar unspoken expectations and interplay. The concept of hidden curriculum extends past the archetypes of who we are and into the idea of how we behave. There are general rules that apply to everyone about what topics are safe in the workplace, what topics we "hype," and which topics we downplay. (For example, at the time of me writing this, the unspoken rules are telling people to downplay diversity, equity, and inclusion

(DEI); hype artificial intelligence; and surpass key performance indicators.)

Fun Fact

One of the most common workplace archetype frameworks was developed by Katherine Briggs, an enterprising Michigan mother who was a huge fan of noted psychologist Carl Jung and theories on personality types (she even corresponded with him, sending songs and poetry). Despite no formal psychology training, she began in her home what she called a “cosmic laboratory of baby training.”⁵ Here she conducted personality assessments on and with her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers. Out of this in-home laboratory, the pair eventually developed what would become the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is perhaps one of the most widely used personality classification (archetypes) tools in existence, despite poor scientific reliability. This easy tool, while not likely very accurate, has ushered an age of self-help and, despite its flaws, can perhaps lead to self-betterment for the millions of people who use it annually.

These archetypes turn into standards, and the standards turn into practices that end up shaping so much of the working world. The environment starts to mirror the archetypes that exist and can create harmful practices that affect products and services outside the company. A terrible example of this comes from the automobile industry, where physical products are built off of archetypes.

Reports from the *Journal of Traffic Injury Prevention* state that in past decades females wearing seatbelts had “73% greater odds of being seriously injured in a frontal car crash” than males.⁶ This was because, since the 70s, safety standards and crash testing research was universally done with crash test dummies who were modeled after the 50th-percentile male body type, roughly 171 pounds and 5-foot 9, because that is who the (mostly male) safety engineers likely pictured

as the rider archetype for their vehicles, an average of themselves. This led to designs of seatbelts, dashboards, and seating that would perform better in crashes for some but not for all. A report from *Consumer Reports* stated that it wasn't "until 2003. . .[that safety engineers]. . .put [a different type of dummy] in the car. Even then, it was just a scaled-down version of a male dummy."⁶

These hidden expectations formed off archetypes when applied to behavior can be especially difficult for people who think and learn differently. The expectations start to form around so many mundane activities, and there become expectations for so many aspects of our behavior that dictate things like how you should email someone else considering their position and your position in the conversation. It can even get to be confusing. The "neurotypical way" is filled with these subtle expectations placed on people, so for us neurodivergent professionals, sometimes we are left having to pick up the patterns to learn where and when XYZ is appropriate. This was a lot of the early mission of the work we started doing at Neurodiversity in the Workplace, specifically, taking this one population and trying to help them succeed at work through a sort of translation of this curriculum. However, we found that there were a lot of barriers to hurdle systemically.

One of the easiest barriers to recognize was that there is a very high unemployment rate for autistic job seekers (the only category of numbers that we had). This was likely due to a variety of factors, from bias in the interview to failures of support mechanisms to neurodivergent operating standards falling outside the standard archetypal expectations, especially around early talent. It could also be likely that people with autism, ADHD, or dyslexia often struggle to pick up those curriculum requirements in early work experiences. This could lead to missed opportunities because early in our careers, in our first jobs, is the part of the career journey where assumptions are formed, and the curriculum is for people, neurodivergent or not, to start to fall into the archetypes that have been established. For many new employees, this expectation has been to be an eager and productive member of the team, who is a "self-starter," who is loyal, and who takes feedback well. Also, in many more competitive environments of corporate America, it is expected that you come already fully trained, ready to deliver for your new employer, and if you aren't, you should just figure it out.

Now, a certain amount of this is always necessary. We all have stories of when we figure it out and something important clicks, but for people who struggle with social communication (like many autistic job seekers report) those learning curves can be unnecessarily steep. We discovered that some really simple changes to how teams interview could drastically improve their ability to bring autistic and neurodivergent talent through their talent acquisition machines. We also learned that some of the best ways of helping people proceed were some of the most simple, like fully explaining what to expect in a scenario. This is especially true in onboarding for newly hired talent. So we took the time to write out expectations. Nearly one-third of employees find the onboarding experience confusing, according to a study by HR services firm Paychex,⁷ and there are countless anecdotes that we all have of embarrassing situations that happened when we were first starting out. We found that so many of them were avoidable with just slightly clarified instructions, especially for people who are neurodivergent, but also for anyone who hasn't had time to observe the archetypes, expectations, and standards.

Think about your first day at your first real job. What did you expect heading into that new chapter of your life? What were the expectations you had of your arrival?

The first day of my first job is seared into my brain. I was doing a six-month internship at an interesting multinational industrial manufacturing and design firm headquartered in the suburbs of Philadelphia. With the help of my parents, I had bought my first car using the anticipated funds from my new role, a Honda Civic coupe that was an ideal blend of affordable and sporty. I was dressed in my elevated business casual, as is the expected archetype and unspoken expectation for your first day of work, and I wanted to make a good impression. I was ready, and I had even spent the previous few days reading what I could find on the best practices of product management, the department I was working within. The only thing I didn't know was how to get in....

When I pulled up to the front of the office park on that Monday morning, I pulled up to the gate but had to hit the brakes as the gate didn't move. Confused but unbothered, I drove my car all the way up to within an inch or two of the bar that blocked the entrance. It wasn't moving. Perhaps it was just slow? It being Monday morning, another

car pulled up behind me almost as soon as I arrived. After the increase of attention of more eyes on me, I relaxed as I thought that maybe, like some traffic lights, there was a sensor in the ground that the other car would help me set off to trigger the gate to open. It did not open.

I thought, maybe I am at the wrong entrance? Pulling out my printed instructions in my binder (I was very prepared and had assembled a binder), I was fairly certain I was at the correct place. By this time, especially after reading through my bound instructions, five to six cars had pulled up behind me, which started to set off a mild panic, but surely it would open soon! It was maybe 45 seconds before the first person used their horn, a short burst, coming from maybe eight cars back.

I couldn't just sit there, so I thought, maybe there is a latch? I got out of the car. I looked around, and I gave the gate a little shove to see if I could raise the bar, nothing! I moved my hand under it, thinking the stubborn sensor was just really nonresponsive, nothing worked. By this time the line had gotten out of hand and multiple, longer, slightly aggressive beeps were echoing through the business park as the line of cars stretched into the intersection and around the corner blocking traffic on the main road. I turned to the line of people who were growing increasingly more frustrated and coyly smiled as if to say, "I don't know what to do?" As I was standing there facing them, a tall well-dressed man in a blazer got out from his Porsche about eight cars back. I don't know if I was nervous or intimidated, but I quickly jumped back into my car instead of talking to him. Without saying a word, the man walked up to about 4 feet back from my car window and scanned his badge at a little white square kiosk that jutted up out of the ground. A beep sounded, and the gate opened! I hadn't noticed this kiosk; of course it made sense there would be a kiosk, but in my eagerness I had pulled right past it. Thoroughly embarrassed, probably completely red-faced, I hit the accelerator. My engine revved, but my car didn't move. Right. . .need to put it back in drive, the gate started lowering, but I screeched forward sending it back up! I was in. I pulled off to the first parking spot I could find and watched as a line of cars, now slightly later for work than they had wanted to be, come pouring in. For a second, I considered calling it there. . .maybe I didn't need a career? But I worried I wouldn't be able to get back out. Was there another secret

method to leave? I composed myself and decided to give it a go. I walked into a small conference room set up to welcome the new interns, and on the wall next to the conference room was a big picture of the well-dressed man breaking ground at a new company site in his role as CEO.

This was not the start I wanted for my career or how I wanted to be introduced to my team (“Oh, you are the kid at the gate this morning!”). This is not the archetype of what the first day of work should look like, but I often think back to that moment as a useful analogy to what our careers contain: the human element, the inexperienced people facing problems that are easily solved by the more experienced, and also maybe a best practice of telling your interns specifically that they will need to scan their badge at the gate—communicate the hidden curriculum!

