



The Moccasin Approach® and Neurodiversity.

An Approach to Communication between Neurotypical and Neurodiverse People

Introduction

My name is Mac Macdonald, and I am the founder of LAPD Solutions Ltd. For over 30 years, I have facilitated training and development workshops, webinars, and programmes on emotional intelligence-based leadership, management and organisational culture.

I am diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As an autistic person, I have managed the challenges I have faced for years, finding workarounds and helping to raise awareness of the various challenges that neurodiverse people face in their work environments, socially and in society in general. I have also had the privilege of learning from, supporting, and assisting other neurodivergent people along the way.



Please bear in mind that the term “neurodiversity” encompasses the entire human population, whether a person is neurodivergent or neurotypical, whereas “neurodivergent” refers specifically to individuals whose neurological profiles differ significantly from neurotypical patterns.

As we facilitated our leadership, management, and organisational culture programmes, we realised that for organisational cultures to become great, we had to help leaders and managers engage with their people and understand them as well as possible so that they could build the best relationships. Only this would help establish the cohesion we know is essential to building and sustaining high-performing teams. We needed teams to build trust through empathy and psychological safety, resulting in a motivational and inspiring organisational culture.

Over those years, out of necessity, we developed the Moccasin Approach® that anyone can use to understand the people they work with and communicate with throughout the organisation, whether regularly or infrequently. As we introduced it in organisations, we quickly realised how useful it could be in neurodiversity.

What is the Moccasin Approach?

The Moccasin Approach is based on emotional intelligence (EI). It is primarily designed to foster self- and social awareness, as well as a deeper understanding of colleagues’ likes, dislikes, personal values, concerns, etc.



If you are new to EI, in our view, it involves intelligently managing the follow-on behaviours and impacts of our own and others' emotions. Using it helps us see and understand how things are from the perspective of those we communicate with. The approach is critical to understanding the challenges they live with. These challenges may not be tangible, but, as we discovered so many times, a person’s belief creates the reality they live in. (Handout – “[Belief creates reality](#)”).

Why was it named the Moccasin Approach?

Our Moccasin Approach took its name from the phrase "Walk two moons in someone else's moccasins." Whilst this phrase is commonly believed to have Native American origins, our research shows it originated in a poem called "Judge Softly," written by Mary Lathrap in 1895. Handout ([The poem "Judge Softly"](#)). To understand the commitment required, the period between two moons is 29 days, 12 hours, and 44 minutes (the average length of a [synodic month](#)).



How does it work?

To understand someone, we must also understand what drives their behaviours and responses to their environments (work, home, social) and interactions with people. We must understand their triggers, worries, concerns, happiness, contentment, and more. After all, if we want to walk a mile in their shoes, we need to try to experience their world from **their** perspective, and not ours.



The Moccasin Approach is a question-based enquiry strategy that helps anyone understand the world through another person's perspective rather than through one's own lens. The approach is also an empathy-based tool for learning about others and understanding why they are as they are.

A workplace example might be meeting a neurodivergent person new to the team/organisation. **Before** speaking with them, ensure you understand their role and how they will operate within the team. Find out all you can, including whose work/output they will depend on and who will rely on their work/output. How does the team's output fit into the broader organisational objectives?

If possible, determine where they will be sitting and consider common factors that can impact neurodivergent people, such as lighting, office noise, such as chatter, air conditioning units, fridge motors, hot drink machines, photocopiers, printers, banging doors, colleagues on phone calls, footfall from the floor above, noise from a stairwell, and possibly even vibrations from traffic. Other things, like what flexible working arrangements may be available in the team, in other words, put yourself in **their** shoes even before they start. Consider these factors when arranging to meet.

As we have dipped into empathy, let me touch on what is often called the "Double Empathy Problem". Dr Damian Milton, an autism consultant with the National Autistic Society, introduced this concept.



Dr Milton's Double Empathy Problem acknowledges that communication difficulties often arise from a mismatch in perspective rather than a deficit in the neurodivergent person. He maintains that these communication difficulties "are not due to autistic cognition alone, but a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding that can happen between people with very differing ways of experiencing the world".

He likens this to an experience many of us can relate to, which is when having a conversation with someone with whom we do not share a first language, or possibly during a conversation on a topic of interest that we do not share, we experience similar challenges in communication."



My own personal opinion is this. When we see a person in a wheelchair, on crutches, or using a white cane/walking stick, we immediately understand at least some of the challenges they may face. It could even be argued that many of those challenges are common among wheelchair, crutch, and white stick users.

The problem with a hidden disability is that it is literally hidden. Even if, like me, a person wears a [sunflower lanyard](#) (see image →), which signifies a hidden disability, the lanyard alone does not help us understand the disability or their individual challenges. The lanyard only alerts others that the wearer may need extra consideration or adjustments due to their condition. It is this unknown, this lack of perspective, which causes most people to falter when communicating with someone who is ND. The Moccasin Approach helps to remove such barriers.



Whilst this article is from the perspective of workplace communication, it can be easily adapted to any environment with careful consideration. We recommend that any organisation in any industry or sector use the Moccasin Approach to build relationships and foster a mutual understanding of what it is like to be in the other person's shoes, regardless of neurodiversity. If you think about your best friend, it is only because you know each other so well that you trust each other and speak openly, as you feel psychologically safe doing so. That's how high-performing teams are made.



We can't ask a person directly whether they are neurodivergent, so we believe organisations should adopt the Moccasin Approach for everyone. The approach will still benefit NT people by helping to develop and improve relationships. This approach can be used with nonverbal autistic people, provided they have a method of communication that allows them to ask and answer questions.

HR, Law, Rights, Support and Allyship

We can't legally ask if a candidate is ND during a job interview or on an application form, as neurodivergent people are considered to have a disability under the Equality Act 2010. Doing so can be seen as discriminatory. Instead, you should ask all candidates if they require any reasonable adjustments for the interview process.



People who are ND often have serious reservations about sharing that they have ADHD, ASD or other neurodiverse conditions due to perceptions of how others may react. ND people frequently say it is too risky to share this at job interviews or even when they are settled in their jobs. They feel they could be disadvantaged, not get the job, or be excluded from promotions or other opportunities. My question is: why do they believe this? The answer is usually that the organisation is not doing enough to ensure people feel safe enough to share that they are neurodivergent.

We ask organisations to **publicly** show how they support anyone with an undisclosed hidden disability by ensuring all colleagues **know** the organisation is proactive in supporting and, where possible, making reasonable adjustments for all employees.





Leaders and managers must receive proper training to encourage individuals with hidden disabilities to have conversations with their line managers and build relationships that create and maintain high-performing teams. The relationship and collaboration among HR, HRBPs, L&D, and all those who lead and manage others are critical to planning training.

Great organisations will care deeply about all their colleagues and actively demonstrate this through their People Strategy, values, support mechanisms, and by how they implement that support. While leaders and line managers cannot ask the question “are you ND”, colleagues have every right to raise their challenges with their line manager, and they should be encouraged to do so.

If you don't have a neurodivergent mental health first aider (MHFA), please consider asking ND colleagues to become ND champions who are happy to support new ND employees and other colleagues, and to be their allies (Handout on [Allyship](#)).



Please note that reasonable adjustments may vary from team to team, depending on job role, team size and other factors.

How the Moccasin Approach Aligns with Neurodiversity

Unusual or unexpected behaviours from ND people in the workplace are a form of spontaneous reactive communication, reflecting their internal struggle to deal with something they find challenging, overwhelming, or even painful. All too often, their follow-on behaviour is perceived as disengagement, disrespect, resistance, a poor attitude, or even as defiance. If people are unaware of their triggers, how can they help them?



The Moccasin Approach helps reframe such behaviours and create a pathway for collaborative work to remove or at least minimise future disruption. We believe it works well because it allows people to identify the challenges their colleagues face and how they can be supported. This reduces the impact of challenges and improves cohesion and collaboration across teams.

The Moccasin Approach® works well with anyone, whether they are NT or ND, because it starts with understanding before judgment, compliance, or correction. That principle directly counters many of the ways neurodivergent people are misunderstood or managed at work.

In communicating with neurodiverse people, this approach shifts the focus from "fixing" or "managing" behaviours to understanding the underlying reasons for them, fostering better connections and reducing communication barriers.

Internet/AI Chatbot searches

If you conduct a Google or AI chatbot search or a search with a question along the lines of “how does the Moccasin Approach help with neurodiversity”, you will find positive responses supporting our belief, findings and further evidence of how well it fits into the world of neurodiversity.





Autism aND Me

Autism Spectrum Disorder
is a term that I dislike.
It makes me feel I'm damaged,
like an old and broken bike.

Unlike that old and broken bike
I'm actually on fire.
I think of many different things,
I create, and I inspire.

Tenacious and fixated,
and sometimes stimming too,
each person on this planet,
is not the same as you.

Infinity is our symbol
(we're unstoppable, you see).
We live our lives as you do.
Come sit and talk; you'll see.

So don't believe the labels,
that we've had placed on us,
instead, enjoy our differences,
and please don't make a fuss.

My friends and all my family,
love me as I am.
Don't see me for what I can't do,
but for all the things I can.



Mac Macdonald (ND)