

Keynote Perspective on neurodivergence and autism

By Katrina Liew Wilson, MS:

Lesson Objectives

1. **Understand Definitions:** Gain a clear understanding of neurodivergence, autism, and related conditions.
2. **Explore Research:** Examine current research on neurodivergence and identify gaps in the literature.
3. **Identify Superpowers:** Recognize the strengths and unique abilities associated with neurodivergent individuals.
4. **Effective Practices:** Learn effective practices for youth leaders to support neurodivergent individuals.
5. **Framework for Support:** Implement a framework to coach and support neurodivergent youth.

Introduction

- **Personal Background:** Katrina shares her personal journey with neurodivergence and autism, including her late diagnosis at age 41 and her experiences growing up in the 80s. She discusses the challenges she faced, such as being bullied and dealing with stress and burnout.
- **Session Overview:** The lecture covers definitions, research gaps, effective practices for youth leaders, and a framework for supporting neurodivergent individuals.

Definitions and Concepts

- **Neurodivergence:** Diversity in brain function and thought processes. Includes conditions like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.
- **Neurodiversity:** The concept that neurological differences are natural variations of the human brain.
- **Neurodiverse vs. Neurodivergent:** Neurodiverse refers to the environment, while neurodivergent refers to the individual.
- **Neurotypical:** Refers to individuals whose neurological development and functioning are typical by societal standards.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- **ASD:** A range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, and communication. Katrina prefers not to use the term "disorder" and emphasizes the spectrum nature of autism.
- **Masking:** The act of hiding one's true self to fit in, often leading to burnout and mental health issues. Katrina shares her experience of masking growing up with a strict "tiger mom."

Neurodivergent Conditions

- **ADHD:** Characterized by difficulties with attention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. Katrina describes her experience of paying attention to everything at once.
- **Dyslexia:** A learning disorder affecting reading and related language-based processing skills. Katrina shares her experience of being able to read books quickly but struggling with textbooks.
- **Other Conditions:** Bipolar disorder, Down syndrome, and various learning disabilities.

Research and Statistics

- **Underdiagnosis:** Many neurodivergent individuals, especially women and marginalized groups, are underdiagnosed. Katrina highlights the importance of recognizing diverse presentations of neurodivergence.
- **Gender Differences:** Boys are more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls, who often present different traits. Girls may be quieter and more introverted, making their autism less noticeable.

Addressing Biases and Stereotypes

- **Common Stereotypes:** Neurodivergent individuals are often misunderstood and face stereotypes such as being unemotional or lacking leadership abilities.
- **Superpowers:** Reframing neurodivergent traits as strengths, such as unique perspectives, hyperfocus, and creativity. Katrina emphasizes the value of these traits in various roles and tasks.

Effective Practices for Youth Leaders

1. **Self-Awareness:** Leaders must understand their own biases and regulate their emotions to effectively support neurodivergent individuals.
2. **Creating Space:** Allow for transitions and avoid a sense of urgency to reduce overstimulation. Katrina shares the importance of making space for creative approaches and flexibility.
3. **Superhero Approach:** Focus on strengths and unique abilities. Katrina encourages leaders to recognize and value the unique perspectives of neurodivergent individuals.
4. **Presuming Competence:** Assume that neurodivergent individuals are capable and provide the necessary support. Katrina stresses the importance of presuming competence and providing clear communication and expectations.

Framework for Supporting Neurodivergent Individuals

- **Self-Awareness for Compassion:** Leaders should practice emotional regulation and self-awareness. Katrina highlights the importance of leaders taking care of their own well-being to be effective mentors.

- **Making Space:** Create environments that allow for creative approaches and flexibility. Katrina suggests using sensory items, fidget toys, and alternative seating arrangements to support neurodivergent individuals.
- **Clear Communication:** Provide clear instructions, context, and deadlines. Katrina emphasizes the importance of breaking tasks into digestible chunks and providing rewards and encouragement.
- **Interest-Based Motivation:** Frame tasks in a way that aligns with the individual's interests. Katrina shares examples of making tasks more engaging by connecting them to the individual's interests.

Examples of Neurodivergent Traits

- **Spectrum Wheel:** Katrina presents examples of how neurodivergent traits can vary widely among individuals. She describes different profiles, such as individuals with high support needs, those who are constantly in motion, and those with increased noise and light sensitivity.
- **Self-Awareness and Regulation:** Katrina discusses the importance of self-awareness and regulation for neurodivergent individuals. She shares her own strategies for managing sensory overload and maintaining well-being.

Addressing Challenges with Parents and Institutions

- **Parental Involvement:** Katrina discusses the challenges of working with parents who may have different perspectives on their child's neurodivergence. She emphasizes the importance of collaboration and empowering parents to support their children.
- **Institutional Barriers:** Katrina acknowledges the limitations of institutional policies and the need for reasonable accommodations. She encourages leaders to work within their means to provide support and advocate for change when possible.

Conclusion

- **Collaborative Leadership:** Encourage leaders to leverage their strengths and focus on opportunities for growth. Katrina highlights the importance of self-awareness and emotional regulation for effective leadership.
- **Empowering Individuals:** Help neurodivergent individuals understand their own needs and advocate for themselves. Katrina emphasizes the importance of providing tools and language to support self-advocacy.