Leadership That Works for Every Mind

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LIS 707: Leadership, Marketing, and Strategic Communications

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August 4, 2025

Neurodiversity isn't a passing idea. It's the reality that people's brains work in different ways, in how they think, process information, and see the world (Singer, 1999). This includes people with autism, ADHD, OCD, dyslexia, and other ways of thinking that aren't "typical."

Libraries and other information institutions often mention neurodiversity in their diversity statements. But too often, these mentions are just that, words. On paper, there may be policies. In daily life, it can still feel like the workplace is set up for one kind of brain. In law, if you make rules but don't apply them, the system loses its credibility. In the workplace, it's the same.

Leadership is the difference between inclusion that actually works and inclusion that's just a poster on the wall. The recent shutdown of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) is a reminder of what happens when support systems are pulled away. For libraries, the question is: do you protect what allows people to succeed, or do you let it slip away?

This paper looks at two leadership styles, servant leadership and authentic leadership, and how they can help libraries go beyond "checking the box" to actually creating spaces where different ways of thinking are part of the work, not an afterthought. A lot of leadership approaches expect employees to adjust themselves to fit the leader's style. Servant leadership and authentic leadership flip that; the leader adjusts to the people they work with.

Servant leadership, described by Greenleaf (1977), is about listening, empathy, and removing barriers so people can do their best work. In a library, this could mean changing workflows, communication, or the workspace so people don't have to mask their differences just to get through the day.

Authentic leadership, as George (2003) explains, is about self-awareness, honesty, and sticking to your values. For neuroinclusion, that means being upfront about what the workplace can and can't offer right now, and then asking the people affected how to make it better.
Both styles move away from "top-down" control and make room for people to work in ways that fit them.

In practice, this can mean:

- Sharing information in multiple ways, like sending agendas before meetings, following up afterward, and allowing input outside the meeting (Doyle, 2023).

- Making spaces more comfortable, lowering harsh lighting, cutting down noise, or offering quiet rooms (Newman, 2022).

- Shaping jobs to fit strengths, instead of trying to force every role into the same mold.

- Giving clear, direct feedback, so no one is left guessing what's expected.

Some libraries are already doing this well. The Toronto Public Library's Neurodiversity at Work program builds jobs around people's skills and gives structured onboarding. The State Library of Queensland set up "low-stimulation" service areas that help both patrons and employees.

When leadership works with people instead of against their needs, the results are real. JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work program saw productivity gains of up to 140% in certain jobs (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

In libraries, people who think differently often excel at things like metadata work, cataloging, or problem-solving that others might find tedious. Supporting them isn't just the right thing to do; it makes the work better.

The biggest problems usually come from habits that were set up without neurodivergent people in mind:

- Hiring someone because they're "different" without changing anything else.

- Misreading a preference for written follow-up as being "checked out."

- Rewarding quick talk over thoughtful responses.

- Expecting people to hide how they think or work to look "professional."

At the University of Chicago Library, I've seen both sides of this. In past jobs, big meetings could be chaotic and dominated by a few loud voices. Here, leadership runs them in a way that's calmer and more organized. Agendas usually go out ahead of time, and it's clear that written follow-ups are welcome. That means people who need time to think don't get drowned out. It's a small thing, but it makes a big difference.

There's still room to grow. Noise near busy entrances can be overwhelming, and sudden changes in procedure can throw off anyone who relies on predictability. But compared to other workplaces I've been in, there's a stronger baseline of awareness here.

As AI, automation, and hybrid work reshape libraries, leaders need to think about how these changes affect different working styles. AI cataloging tools, for example, might play to the strengths of some neurodivergent staff. But if they replace tasks that require deep focus, they could also take away work people do best. Planning for inclusion has to

happen before new systems are rolled out, not after.

Leading for neurodiversity isn't about a set of policies that sit on a shelf. It's about paying attention, adjusting, and making sure people don't have to fight the system just to contribute. Servant and authentic leadership give a roadmap for doing that. Once support systems are gone, in a library, in media, anywhere, they're hard to get back. It's better to keep and improve what helps people do their best work. In the end, this isn't just about inclusion. It's about making the library a place where everyone's skills are part of what makes it strong.

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