

Experiences of Managers Upon Handling Neurodiverse Employees

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Abstract: The intent of this research is to unfold managers' experiences in handling neurodiverse employees. Managers who help their employees succeed in the organization have tremendous accomplishments, but among all the tasks that manager must perform, managing people is by far the most challenging as each employee is different, unforeseen, and driven by the own set of forces. Proponents used a qualitative research method specifically narrative inquiry and conducted an in-depth interview with semi-structured questions. The following themes revealed in this study are (1) manager's knowledge and involvement in neurodivergent employees at work, (2) acknowledging the challenges faced by the managers in handling neurodiverse employees, (3) strategies of managers in dealing with neurodivergent employees, and (4) the influence of manager's positive approach in the welfare of neurodiverse employees. Therefore, it is concluded that managers have little to no challenges in handling neurodiverse employees. Moreover, these types of employees are above average people in terms of performance but lack emotional control that leads to anger and frustration. In the perspective of the following participants, there is no perfect strategy in handling neurodiverse employees. Managers must be diversified and versatile in handling these types of employees and use strategies that fit in with their needs. This study was assessed and completed that allows managers, especially the human resource management, to get an informative approach in neurodiverse employees.

Keywords: strategies/approaches, neurodiversity, leadership, workplace, condition

I. INTRODUCTION

There are individuals who believe that working is essential to one's life. It brings people meaning and a place to belong as well as having to contribute to society by putting their abilities and talents to service. The World Health Organization (WHO) said that being employed gives stability, social identity and social contact, regular activity, and purpose that are considered as vital factors in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. However, being employed alone does not guarantee success within the workplace and this is when the role of a manager comes in since it is their responsibility to lead their employees. They prioritize tasks, provide motivation, and supply job opportunities for their employees to thrive (Purcel, 2021).

As a manager, handling people is by far the most difficult of all responsibilities. Every individual is distinct, unexpected,

and driven by a particularly unique set of forces (Alton, 2020). Any manager, or aspiring manager, must understand how to deal with employees efficiently. Employee engagement is dependent on relationships with managers and employees (Martic, 2019). You are accountable for the improvement of your employees, there will still be challenges or difficult moments along the way. In fact, in 2019, 79% of employees said they were disengaged from their jobs (Wooll, 2021). "Challenge" is a situation to face an obstacle to overcome and achieve a goal that needs significant effort to be done successfully and assess the person's ability (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). If applied to the workplace, it is a problem that keeps you from achieving success in the workplace or career where even new or seasoned employees face challenges at work.

According to Indeed Editorial Team (2021), there are twelve common management challenges and the researchers decided to narrow them down to three which are; performance, coordination, and leadership. Pulakos & O'Leary (2011) explain that employees can't assume that their managers can read their minds and need to start a conversation about their performances whenever they meet obstacles or wanted to know about the managers' opinion. Pulakos & O'Leary believe that educating both managers and employees about how performance management plays a significant role in maximizing performance.

Vasilescu (2019) said that leadership influences people willingly perform their assigned task, both effectively and efficiently and as a result it becomes crucial for enhancing firm performance. Leadership is a complex subject that has mixed factors to help know why there are great leaders and having to understand that it involves the dynamic between the leader and their followers. "The relationship that engages with different individuals who are working within the environment." Balcik et al., 2010 is used to describe the word coordination. Achieving organizational goals and success must be understood that coordination is necessary for aligning the company's operations. It means combining employees with different yet connected tasks (Vanagas & Stankevic, 2014).

Australian sociologist and autism rights advocate Judy Singer, who happens to be on the autistic spectrum as well, coined the

term of neurodiversity in 1990. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that refers to individuals with different neurological conditions, namely dyscalculia, dyslexia, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other brain functions (Disabled World, 2021) or people with diverse ways of thinking. The social model of disability influences that advocates are adopting this principle would benefit society by recognizing the talents of these neurodiverse individuals rather than pathologizing them for their weaknesses (Doyle, 2020).

They have a higher probability of being underemployed or unemployed than the wider population which was individuals with a common neurological function or development or neurotypicals, Day-Duro et al., 2018 who takes up most employees (Loiacono, 2018) due to the stigma and prejudice of psychiatric disabilities that becomes one of the main factors of the low prevalence of people with psychiatric conditions Kosyluk et al., 2013. Though, it does not mean that the talents and potential of the neurodivergent should be ignored since some neurodivergent have specific skills that could contribute to success and show a competitive advantage to an organization (Brinzea, 2019).

Various theories have been led to the experiences of managers in the workplace. In the perspective of Situational Leadership Theory, this study tries to understand the experiences and challenges of managers in handling employees. In relation to the rationale of this study, this will serve as a basis to unfold the experiences of managers and to know what approaches managers will take, especially the Human Resource Management (HRM) could apply in handling neurodiverse employees. The theory of Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1997) which is Situational Leadership aims to find different managers' approaches toward their staff. In this theory, leaders are evaluated in terms of their leadership styles based on their team members' situations and developmental stages. This notion will aid them in successfully adjusting to their work environment and the people they supervise. (Wolf, 2021). It is the manager's responsibility to oversee the success and manage their employees (Perkbox, 2021) and to know how to find and address the challenges of supervising the teams that are often facing difficulties in productivity and communications (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021).

Hence, dealing with neurodiversity in an organization is more complex and requires careful planning and assessment. In other words, Human Resource Management (HRM) personnel face many challenges in handling neurodiversity employees (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Practices that support their workers to fulfill their potential rather than approaches that do not consider the advantages that each employee can contribute are beneficial for all staff, especially the neurodivergent. (Bewley & George, 2016).

There is a paucity of research on how managers should approach dealing with neurodiverse employees in the Philippines. Proponents assume that it is significant when viewed in this manner. Therefore, the primary goal of this

study is to create a narrative based on the participant's experiences upon handling neurodiverse employees.

Manager's Culture and Climate in Workplace

Patrick and Kumar (2012) state that understanding and appreciating the interdependence of the natural environment, humanity, and culture is involved in the conscious practices of diversity. Managers must adhere to organizational culture because it is vital for the growth and success of the organization (Griffin & Moorhead, 2013). People's feelings and emotions related to their work environment are referred to as "climate." Many individuals mix up climate with culture, believing that climate cannot be handled because it is too broad and set in the organization. The climate is measurable and much flexible to shape, while culture stresses an organization's unstated beliefs, which can be more difficult to change. Great managers understand that the climate can be transformed and making proper changes can turn employees from fear to confidence and from isolation to connection. A positive work environment does not always imply more enjoyment or leisure; it means setting up conditions in which workers feel productive and extraordinary (Freifeld, 2012).

Managers serve as a link between the vision of leadership and the harsh realities of the front lines. They are often the most dedicated workers, as well as your greatest critics, offering valuable feedback that propels the company ahead while avoiding barriers and blind alleys. Managers support their leaders in making better decisions, while also educating employees about organizational dynamics and making them feel like important contributions to an essential goal. (Wigert & Maese, 2019)

Factors that affect Manager's Performance

The main reason to employ a manager is to help the organization to achieve its goals as part of the manager's responsibility is to make their employees act both effectively and efficiently. According to Purnama (2014) that the manager's performance includes four characteristics such as knowledge, skills, emotional maturity, and attitude which she concluded are the qualities that managers need to perform their responsibilities. In addition, Aini (2018) study implies the model of competency-performance showed that the role of organizational culture, leadership, commitment, and competence improves the manager's motivation. With the lack of management theories to apply, Hosmer-Jolley (2018) believes that it limits managers from familiarizing themselves with an effective behavior to lead their employees to do their best at work and without enough knowledge it results using the wrong approach that decreases productivity.

The Emergence of Neurodiverse Employees

Based on reports from the World Report on Disability shows 15% of the world's population has some sort of disability (The World Bank & World Health Organization, 2011). A billion people around the world have some form of disability and neurodivergent takes up over 10% of the population. 1 in

68 people are diagnosed with Autism (ASD) and in the Philippines. It is estimated that 1 in 500 Filipinos total population has autism spectrum disorder (Autism Care Act, 2017).

The decline in employment of individuals with disabilities, like other minorities, is due to the prejudice from supervisors and coworkers, affecting their work experiences and skill development. A Danish software executive, Thorkil Sonne, encourages companies to employ disabled people out of a sense of goodwill. As 75% of his workers are people with Asperger's syndrome, and some other form of ASD. Society has slowly begun to accept neurodiversity. However, Balilan (2019) said that the society's perception in neurodiverse is still a mixture of both positive and negative due to the misconceptions about them.

There are positive perceptions about neurodivergent individuals, and the most common belief is that they are incredibly gifted where they excel in specific fields (Maddocks & Hughes, 2019). Organizations should establish new norms and encourage HRM to design and adjust their practices if they want to provide support to neurodivergent employees and applicants. Human resource management practices are often catered for the neurotypicals, it is suggested that the organization has a foundation that supports neurodiversity and their inclusion in the workplace (Valpone et al., 2022).

The Struggles of Managers in Handling Neurodiverse Employees

Managers must be prepared to respond to the specific challenges that Neurodiverse Employees bring to the workplace. This includes management of time, interacting well with people around, committing careless errors, impetuous actions, mood swings and antisocial actions (Pitts, Mangle, & Asherson, 2015). Managers are sometimes hesitant to engage with neurodiverse staff, not because they believe they are less talented or intelligent, but because they are unsure how to speak with them. "Can they ask questions about a person's disability?", "Will they be labeled as ignorant, mean or 'politically incorrect' if they do?", "What happens if a neurodivergent employee is insulted by the question?", "What questions are managers legally prohibited from asking?". Many managers ask themselves these critical questions but are often afraid to ask (Loiacono, 2018). They occasionally assert that taking part in programs to promote neurodiversity at work "improves them as managers." (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Employers may find it challenging to know how to best recruit and support mental health service users within their organizations due to the ambiguous legal status (Wheat et al., 2010).

Handling Employees is Pivotal for Organizational Success

Finding the cultures that their firms ought to adopt and those that they ought to reject has become more difficult for managers to undertake. There is a risk that an employee will switch companies in quest of a better work environment if the

workplace is unpleasant at the current company. (Siddiqui, 2014).

Managers have an overall performance of an organization, which is likely the most significant of any role in the workplace. Managers have the greatest potential for having an immediate impact on how they handle the employees under their direct supervision. They are tasked with the duty of guaranteeing that the achievements of both their department and the personnel working within it are in line with the overall goals of the company. So, managers and the employees are the ones who play an extremely key part in the formation of the company's culture (Foster, 2017).

It is crucial for both the company and the individual that managers and employees are engaged. The provisions of contract agreements could be used by employees to obstruct the manager's position has gotten more challenging in terms of defining which organizational cultures to adapt to and which to prevent the company's aims from being met. Any successful company needs executives that can take advantage of employee engagement efforts. (Hammoud, 2017). Employees are the ones who are directly accountable for carrying out an organization's goal, which is one of the primary reasons why employees are so vital to the success of a company (Peek, 2022).

II. METHODS

This study used a qualitative research design specifically the narrative inquiry as it gives an opportunity to allow participants to express themselves freely and publicly (Austin, Zubin; Sutton & Jane, 2014), allows researchers to understand how participants create stories using a narrative structure based on their own experiences (Limpaecher, 2022) and eventually to interpret them and any resulting themes to aid in understanding the topic being examined (Sargeant, 2012).

Researchers conduct an in-depth interview with semi-structured questions to gather information that goes beyond the initial answers and answers on a more superficial level (Macfarlan, 2020) and allowing the interviewer to make up follow-up questions in response to the participant's answers (from Hardon, Rubin & Rubin, Polit & Beck [as referenced in Kallio et al., 2016]) and giving them a room to express themselves verbally (RWJF, 2008).

This study's participants are the managers who handle neurodiverse employees selected using the purposive sampling method due to the limited mobility of the researchers in this time of pandemic.

Saturation is referred to as the golden standard or the rule that influences the size of the purposive sample and it was used to discontinue the collection of data when it is figured out that there are no more other data gathered from the participants (Saunders, et al., 2017).

Participants are the three (3) managers from the companies of selected cities in the National Capital Region (NCR),

particularly in Quezon City and Manila that meet these following criteria:

- Currently employed in any company within the NCR
- At least at the age of 20 to 60 years old
- Have at least two (2) years of working experience as a manager
- Have at least six (6) months of working experience in handling neurodivergent employees
- The participants are open to any gender.

The instruments used in the study before the collection of data were interview guide questionnaires, audio and video record, and transcription prepared by researchers has Ethical Consideration and Informed Consent approved by the Branch Research Ethics Board (BREB) of PUPQC given and signed by the participants.

The data collected on the in-depth online interview, particularly in “Google Meet” focuses on the experiences of managers in handling neurodiverse employees. This online interview happened in June 2022.

In data analysis, proponents included the procedure of transcription, familiarization with the interview, coding, and thematic analysis. Transcription, coding, and thematic analysis are used for analyzing the information gathered through interviews to extract the participants’ leadership approaches toward their neurodiverse employees. The questions that are asked during the interview reflect the Situational Leadership Theory, which evaluates the manager’s leadership styles based on situations and developmental stages. Thematic analysis was used for interpreting and finding the repeated patterns found in the experiences of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The Manager’s Knowledge and Involvement in Neurodiverse Employees at Work

This theme tackles the overall knowledge and involvement of the three (3) participants who are managers. It is notable to see that these participants have enough knowledge and more than a year of involvement in handling neurodiverse employees. P1 stated that neurodiverse refers to someone who acts differently from the majority. P2, however, said that neurodiversity is not profound and there are times that their attitudes cannot be controlled so managers should let themselves be more involved in the matter.

It also affirms the statement of Indeed Editorial Team, 2019 that great managers have the ability and knowledge to help their employees whatever the situation, especially when dealing with neurodiverse employees.

Theme 2: Acknowledging the Challenges Faced by the Managers in Handling Neurodiverse Employees

This theme pointed out that there are little to no challenges at all in handling neurodiverse employees. In fact, according to

the two participants, the issues fall into the superior’s end. These superiors who were handling these neurodiverse employees needed to be more knowledgeable and empathic on handling these types of employees. On the other hand, all participants said that they are above average when it comes to performance level. However, P1 and P3 added that usually neurodiverse employees lack emotional control and are prone to anger and frustration.

Austin & Pisano (2017) said that managing the stress of neurodiverse staff is another difficulty and to keep everything under control you must keep them under their feet, you must gently help them and make them aware by explaining to them where these emotions came from or how to release it. Managers must be quick in responding and resolving the situation so that it will not escalate.

Despite the difficult features associated with various kinds of neurodivergence, it is vital to recognize that they also have beneficial traits such as hyperfocus, tenacity, visual-spatial, loyalty, lateral thinking, creativity, and more. However, not all neurodivergent people are gifted, but they all have strengths and unique combinations of qualities linked with their illnesses (Bewley & George, 2016).

Theme 3: The Influence of Manager’s Positive Approach on Welfare of Neurodiverse Employees

This is encouraging to hear through interviews among the participants’ answers that they use a positive approach at work on handling neurodiverse employees. It is also notable that they care for the welfare of these types of employees, boosting their morale and ending discrimination present at the workplace. The participants are really devoted to promoting a positive environment and it is important to acknowledge the power of influence that a manager could bring forth for the betterment of the workplace.

Whether they are aware of it or not, managers have a lot of influence especially their behavior over the employee under their care. In addition to helping workers understand and appreciate their value within the team and company, they can decide career advancement, and development possibilities (Knuth, 2022).

Managers taking regards of a clear understanding of their employee’s conditions and effective interaction guidelines can have a positive effect in the employee, industry, and in the organization (Holley-Jolley, 2018). Managers who had gone through proper training allows them to recognize and use their neurodiverse employees’ strength and allow them to understand what to expect from them, in terms of needing to make accommodations and differentiation of management styles, thus resulting in new ways for support and better productivity as well as creating a better environment where employees and managers can have an open conversation (Orduna, 2019; Austin & Pisano, 2017; Loiacono & Ren, 2018).

Theme 4: Strategies of Managers in Dealing with Neurodiverse Employees

The participants said a few strategies that would overcome the challenges in dealing with neurodiverse employees. Proponents compile those strategies that fall into these four categories which are communication, coordination, training, and monitoring.

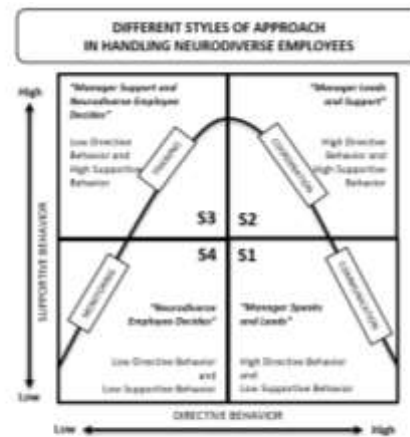
Referring to the P1 statement, monitoring monthly with the use of Key Performance Index is a clever way to form a strategic and proper approach for neurodiverse employees. P1 also said that communication and coordination are key or vital factors for them to be able to manage their employees, particularly neurodiverse employees. It's also important to set those expectations for every manager that handles different people with distinct roles and has their own responsibilities. So, that's why in setting up the expectations with those people, it is nice to be more open, honest, and transparent with them in terms of the expectations as well.

It is also noticeable how P3 arguments fall into the superior's end. The challenge on their part for human resource management is how to help not only those who have neurodivergence conditions, but to train their superiors as well on how to handle these kinds of situations involving neurodiverse employees. It is because they have direct control and direct management over the staff.

Participants also mentioned being diversified and versatile in handling these types of employees, using a strategy that fits in with their needs or to what is needed. We must look for a strategy that could fit in with the types of personality because this is important that one strategy may not apply to the rest of the employees or to everybody. So, we must use mixed or different strategies.

The action that needs to be taken to help neurodiverse employees or coworkers is to educate oneself on the minor adjustments every worker can make to the working environment to make it more approachable and accessible for everyone (Meehan, 2020). Seek someone different from you when you are managing and recruiting employees since they will give you a broader and more developed feel of the environment you are working in. (Austin & Pisano, 2017)

The findings under this theme suggest that a manager can use strategies to deal with employees who have neurodivergent conditions. As a result, the Theory of Situational Leadership developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey (1977), can be used in knowing the best approach they can do to deal with different performances and behaviors of neurodivergent employees as the theory itself is all about the manager being flexible in adapting their strategy based on their employees' needs (Rabarison, 2013).



DEVELOPMENT LEVEL IN PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIOR OF NEURODIVERSE EMPLOYEES			
Low	D1	Neurodivergent employee is dependent and do not know his or her tasks at all.	
Moderate	D2	Neurodivergent employee knows his or her tasks but do not perform it well.	
	D3	Neurodivergent employee performs well but is prone to anger and frustrations.	
High	D4	Neurodivergent employee is independent and motivated.	

Figure 1: Adaptation of Situational Leadership Theory Model

Figure 1 illustrates that a manager's strategy in handling neurodiverse employees should depend on their performance and behaviors in the organization. Thus, the more neurodiverse employees perform and behave well at work, the less the manager should be directive and spend more time in addressing, motivating and offering instructions to them.

Managers may find it time-consuming and distracting to understand and value people with neurodivergent problems at work, as well as adapting their leadership style to each employee's demands, caused by the failure to apply their abilities and comprehend strategies. (Hosmer Jolley, 2018) which is why it's crucial to educate future managers about such conditions to guarantee that they do not contribute to the emerging cycle of ignorance or inability to be supportive (Coetzer, 2016). In addition, Ortiz (2020) said that industry leaders claimed that the initiative to reform human processes so that neurodiverse skills are accessible is producing better managers because of their increased dedication to using all their employees' talents and having immense sensitivity to individual needs. Overall, managers can benefit from more knowledge, and employees benefit from more training (Knows & Styles, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

Handling employees that have neurodivergence condition in an organization is not a snap of a finger. First, there will be adjustments to be made not only by their superior but also by the other employees around the workplace to meet their needs. It takes time but with frequent discussions, training and mentoring by a manager, eventually all employees within the company will understand and help them out to cope up with their emotions, adapt to their work environment, perform ordinary tasks, and interact with ordinary people.

This study particularly focused on experiences of managers on handling neurodiverse employees manage to get the

standpoint of the participants successfully creating a narrative on how managers handle these types of employees. This research also shows different stories on how managers identify neurodiverse employees, facing different challenges and how to overcome them. Furthermore, the participant's experiences revealed that these different strategies were useful in handling neurodiverse employees.

It is also notable that the following participants have more than a year of experience and enough knowledge of how to handle these types of employees. This gives space to managers, especially human resource management, to acquire an informative approach in neurodiverse employees.

This research also shows that neurodiverse employees are the above average in terms of performance level but lack control of their emotional ability making them prone to anger and frustration. The participants also discuss that the only challenges they face are in how their colleagues treat these types of employees. There are lots of reflections in this study that neurodivergent employees are not that hard to handle.

Moreover, the following participants agree that managers should create a positive environment, influencing the workplace whilst preventing discrimination. Yet there is “no perfect fit for all” strategy in handling them, it is just a matter of how their managers are trained and knowledgeable to find an effective approach and strategy to manage them.

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