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ASPERGER'S SYNDROME
WORKPLACE
SURVIVAL GUIDE

A NEUROTYPICAL'S SECRETS FOR SUCCESS

BARBARA BISSONNETTE

FOREWORD BY YVONA FAST

“Barbara Bissonnette’s book is a must-read for those with Asperger’s Syndrome preparing to enter the workforce or who are struggling in their jobs. It provides a comprehensive, well-organized wealth of knowledge about areas of possible workplace challenge along with concrete, practical coping strategies for successful employment. Most importantly, Barbara writes from a respectful, compassionate, non-judgmental viewpoint, weaving in real-life workplace stories gleaned from her years of successful coaching. Her message is one of hope and encouragement. In addition to providing invaluable information and practical advice for individuals on the autism spectrum, *Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide* is an essential reference book for parents and professionals and should be required reading for every job coach and Vocational Rehabilitation counselor.”

—Brenda Weitzberg, *Executive Director, Aspiritech*

“This is a one-of-a-kind resource that is equally useful to adults on the spectrum and neurotypical employers. Bissonnette very artfully uses her years of experience as an NT employer to offer detailed and practical ‘inside information’ to the reader with AS, and does so with a voice that is genuinely sensitive. She is honest while respectful, encouraging without patronizing. This is going on my must-read list for my patients. Well done!”

—Valerie L. Gaus, *Ph.D., psychologist in private practice*

“Understanding Asperger’s Syndrome itself is a pre-requisite for someone with AS; understanding exactly how it impacts in a real-life work context is quite another matter. *Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide* overcomes this by providing the understanding and tools that a person with Asperger’s needs in the workplace and explaining the rules of employment that can appear so alien. It is the perfect guide for surviving and thriving in the world of work!”

—Malcolm Johnson, *author of Managing with Asperger Syndrome*

“Ever had a toolkit that had just the right tools you needed for a range of jobs? That’s the feeling you get reading *Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide*. Barbara’s real-world examples and tactics will help people with Asperger’s Syndrome land and hold jobs. It’s also a great resource to help companies tap a pool of exceptional talent.”

—Dan Coulter, *author of Life in the Asperger Lane and co-founder of Coulter Video*

“Barbara Bissonnette’s book is loaded with common-sense, no-punches-pulled direct action examples of interventions by a personal coach intimately familiar with the real world of work and empathetic to the different workings of the ASD mind... It not only preaches the gospel of success but also explains employment failure warning signs and provides ASD adults with multiple pathways to high-grade, professionally proven changes in behavior and attitudes likely to assure individual success in the workplace.”

—Roger N. Meyer, *author of Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook*

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A Neurotypical's Secrets for Success

BARBARA BISSONNETTE

Foreword by Yvona Fast



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This book is dedicated to the men and women with
Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder
who I have had the privilege to know and to coach.
Thank you for all that you have taught me.

To Anna S., whose hard work and refusal
to give up truly is an inspiration.

To Ellen Korin for her encouragement,
mentoring and friendship.

To my husband Michael for his love and support.

CONTENTS

	FOREWORD BY YVONA FAST	11
1	WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE IT IN THE NT WORKPLACE, ANYWAY?	13
	How to Use This Book to Develop and Make Changes	17
2	A PRIMER ON COMMUNICATION AT WORK. . .	20
	Meaning Comes from Context	22
	Most Communication is Nonverbal	25
3	MAKING THE RIGHT FIRST IMPRESSION AND FITTING IN	30
	How to Introduce Yourself to Co-Workers	33
	Using Small Talk to Build Relationships	34
	How to Make a Reasonable Amount of Small Talk	35
	Anatomy of a Welcome Lunch	37
	Why You Need a Work Buddy	40
	Asking for Help is a Good Thing; <i>Being</i> Too Helpful is Not	43
	How to Be a Team Player	46
	Meeting Employer Expectations	49
	Strategies for Clarifying Expectations	53
	Projecting Confidence	57
4	PEOPLE SKILLS	61
	Accepting Feedback and Criticism	62
	Being Critical of Others	64
	Dealing with Authority	65
	Dealing with Change	68
	Conflicts and Disagreements	72
	Conflict...or Misunderstanding?	77
	A Primer on Office Politics	78
	Office Politics in Action	80
	What if Things Get Ugly?	85

5	EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS AT WORK: MANAGING TIME AND GETTING THINGS DONE	86
	Working Memory and Multitasking	87
	Managing Time	89
	Planning Projects	94
	Getting to the Point: Right-Sizing Communications	100
	Being Flexible and Seeing Options	103
	Setting Realistic Goals	106
	Creating an Action Plan that Works	110
6	MANAGING ANGER, FRUSTRATION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS	115
	Put the Actions of Others into Perspective	119
	How to Change Distorted Thinking Patterns	122
	Managing Anxiety	125
	More Anxiety Management Strategies	129
	Sensory Issues on the Job	130
	Bullying and Harassment at Work	134
	What to Do if You Are Bullied or Harassed	138
7	MANAGING YOUR CAREER	141
	Build on Your Strengths	142
	Accept Your Limitations	145
	How to Tell if You Are in the Wrong Job or Career	150
	Should You Be a Manager?	152
	Performing a SWOT Analysis	155
	Why You Need to Network, Even When You're Employed	160
	Professional Associations	162
	More Ways to Network	163
	Anatomy of a 30-Second Elevator Speech	164
	What to Do if You Are Fired	165
	What <i>Not</i> to Do if You Are Fired	168
	How to Resign	169
8	DISCLOSURE AND ACCOMMODATIONS	172
	Disclosing in a Solution-Focused Way	175
	Dos and Don'ts of Disclosing	183
	Examples of Disclosure Strategies	185

9	IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS	188
	APPENDIX: ASPERGER'S SYNDROME GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS	191
	Common Workplace Challenges	193
	Communication Challenges	193
	Organizational Challenges	194
	Sensory and Motor Challenges	195
	Optimal Jobs and Work Environments	196
	Working with People Who Have Asperger's Syndrome	197
	REFERENCES	200
	FURTHER READING	202
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	203
	INDEX	204

FOREWORD

I consider it a privilege to write the foreword to *Asperger's Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide*. Barbara has been helping individuals on the spectrum obtain and maintain employment for many years.

Sigmund Freud said that everyone wants to work and to love—and people on the autism spectrum are no exception. Work is not just a means to earn money to supply our needs and wants. Work is how we contribute to our communities, how people see us as valuable, productive citizens of society.

Individuals on the autism spectrum have many wonderful characteristics that can be useful in the right work environment. As a group, we tend to be articulate, thorough, kind, and persistent. Many of us are highly educated, have great verbal and writing skills, and are highly motivated, conscientious, honest, and hardworking. In spite of this, it can be difficult to find the job that will make allowances and accommodations for our disabilities while making our abilities shine.

Those on the autism spectrum who find a career that allows them to thrive are the lucky few. According to the Social Security Administration, only about 6 percent of adults with autism work full time. The majority are unemployed or under-employed. It is appalling that so many intelligent, educated, honest, hardworking folks are unable to find or maintain meaningful employment. And to extend that figure to 85 percent of a given population shows something is wrong with the system.

Barbara Bissonnette is working to change that. Over the past years, she has coached individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder on a range of issues related to work and career. She has a lot of experience assisting those on the spectrum in finding and maintaining fulfilling careers.

Barbara understands that everyone has unique gifts that they bring to the world and the workplace. People on the autism spectrum can do a variety of jobs, from highly technical to creative. She recognizes that individuals on

the spectrum vary widely in their abilities, challenges, and communication styles. Some are awkward in their interactions, while others are charming and talkative but may alienate others with blunt comments or social gaffes.

Barbara understands that finding a career we can thrive in doesn't happen by chance. It requires planning and hard work. It entails understanding our strengths and how to best use them on the job.

There's a lot in this book that I wish I had known when I began planning my own career path. I thought my difficulties were due to poor self-esteem and incompetence, though I couldn't quite pinpoint why. After decades of struggle to establish a career and understand my unique mind, I learned that I had Nonverbal Learning Disorder. By then I was 42 years old, and years of repeated trying, failing, and not understanding what was going on had taken their toll.

My story is typical of many on the spectrum. We go through life pretending to be normal, trying to fit into a world that refuses to accept us. Most often, we are accused of being lazy or rude when in fact most of us work very hard to achieve—and yet all our effort and persistence is not good enough for the neurotypical world we live in. People don't understand how someone who seems so “normal” or “bright” has such problems with certain “simple” things.

Barbara's book would have explained to me how spectrumites and neurotypicals can clash in workplace environments due to differences in communication styles, learning styles, social interaction, and physical needs—things I was unaware of. From making the right first impression to being a team player and fitting in, Barbara guides the reader through the minefields of working in the foreign neurotypical culture. With her help, individuals on the spectrum can become useful to an organization, gain respect from their colleagues for their unique contributions, and begin to feel a sense of belonging.

This book addresses those on the spectrum seeking employment, but will also benefit career counselors, employers hiring those on the spectrum, and anyone who wants to understand people on the spectrum and help them fit into the workplace culture.

Yvona Fast

Support Groups Manager, GRASP, and author of Employment for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome or Non-Verbal Learning Disability: Stories and Strategies

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE IT IN THE NT WORKPLACE, ANYWAY?

I am not aware of any reliable employment statistics for adults with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). An often-quoted statistic is that 85 percent are either un- or under-employed. Whether that number is accurate or not, clearly there are too many intelligent, talented, college-educated individuals who are not able to fully utilize their talents in the workplace.

Kevin summed up a big part of the problem. He was crushed after losing his first post-college job in just six weeks. "At school, it was about getting good grades," he said, "at work, it's about figuring out what people want."

If you are a person who has Asperger's Syndrome, like Kevin, figuring out what people want probably seems like an impossible task. No matter how hard you try, you just don't "get it" like everyone else. At work, people can say one thing but mean another. They accuse you of not listening, yet won't explain exactly what they want from you. When you guess, you usually guess wrong.

It is exhausting to be anxious every day about saying or doing the wrong thing. You want to interact with your co-workers, but don't know what to say. Sometimes, their conversations seem so trivial or boring that you don't even try to join in. Other times, you think that you're being friendly and helpful, but are accused of being "rude" or "hard to get along with." Why all the emphasis on socializing, anyway? What is more important: chatting in the lunch room or getting your work done?

Speaking of getting your work done, the continual interruptions make it so hard to concentrate! You lose track of what you were doing, or forget altogether. The pressure starts to mount. You're getting confused. Soon, you become paralyzed. You are not sure what you should be doing, so you abandon the current project and return to an earlier task. Later, your supervisor says that you need to prioritize better.

On top of all this, you are assaulted by sights, sounds, smells, and textures that are uncomfortable (even torturous) and that no one else seems to notice. Why can't people turn down the lights, be quiet, and stop eating noxious-smelling food at their desks?

It is all very frustrating, and sometimes makes you really angry, particularly if you have been fired once, or more than once, or many more times than once and you don't really know what went wrong. What are you supposed to do differently now? It keeps getting harder to explain the employment gaps and short-term jobs on your resume. You shouldn't lie, but if you tell the full truth, no one will want to hire you.

Perhaps you are employed, but struggle to carry out job duties, or are bored in a position that doesn't make use of your talents or intellect. Maybe you have earned a promotion because of your excellent work; you now are required to show "leadership" and have no idea what to do. Or, worst of all, a new supervisor has changed all the rules leaving you frantically trying to figure out what is expected of you now.

At times, you wonder whether you should disclose your Asperger's Syndrome to your employer. Technically, there is legislation (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States) which protects people from discrimination, but this is the real world. It is hard to predict how your manager will react, and proving discrimination can be difficult, time consuming, and expensive. Still, disclosure means that you can request accommodations, which you are certain would enable you to improve your performance.

If you can relate to any or all of the above, then you have a lot in common with the clients in my coaching practice. They are men and women who, like you, are smart and skilled. Most have college degrees, and some have Masters' degrees or doctorates. They are young people who are just entering the workforce, and individuals in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and even 60s who have spent years in the workforce.

Although they have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, or strongly suspect that they have it, each client is very different. For some, holding on to *any* job is a significant challenge. Others maintain steady employment, and some get promoted, but struggle to understand expectations and communicate with co-workers. Even those who are earning six-figure salaries have difficulty interacting with colleagues.

My clients seek coaching to discover what career they will like and be successful at, to learn how to interview, and to maintain employment. They want techniques for managing their time and prioritizing projects. They want to know how to address performance problems, and figure out whether to disclose. All are eager to learn just what it is that NTs want. (NT stands for neurotypical, meaning a person who is not on the autism spectrum.)

As a neurotypical, I act as a bridge between my clients and their co-workers. Prior to starting my coaching practice, I spent 20 years in the business world. I hired staff, managed departments, launched new products, and increased sales.

My introduction to Asperger's Syndrome happened by accident. In the spring of 2006, I was midway through a graduate certificate program in executive coaching from the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology (MSPP). Four years earlier, I had quit my job as Vice President of Marketing and Sales, and then consulted part-time with that company, while testing the waters of professional coaching. I was looking for a way to give back my business experience to people who could benefit the most from it. Coaching entrepreneurs and small business owners seemed the ideal way to do that.

Thumbing through the MSPP continuing education catalog, I noticed a workshop about coaching people with Asperger's Syndrome. It sounded interesting so I gave myself permission to take a Friday morning off to attend. I spent the better part of four hours that Friday literally on the edge of my chair. What I heard was fascinating and familiar. I was certain that during my corporate career I had worked with people who had Asperger's Syndrome. A few weeks later, I met with the executive director of the Asperger's Association of New England. She asked a question that changed everything: "Have you thought about coaching people with Asperger's?"

Could I? I began learning about Asperger's Syndrome by reading books, visiting websites, and talking to professionals such as educators, advocates, psychotherapists and neuropsychologists. I attended workshops and conferences. I talked to more professionals. My idea was to specialize in career development coaching for adults. It was met with enthusiasm by these professionals. "No one is doing that," I heard, again and again. Finally, I had found a group of people who could benefit from my business experience.

Today, I coach individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder on a range of issues related to work and career. The coaching process requires my clients learn and practice new skills, take action toward a goal, and be willing to experiment. It is not about changing *who you are* as

a person; it is about changing *how you approach* situations and interact with others, so that you can function more effectively at work. It can be about finding a job that capitalizes on your strengths, while discovering ways to minimize or work around your limitations.

In this book, you will learn about the techniques that I use with my clients. I'll share information about how to get along with your co-workers, clarify expectations with your supervisor, and handle specific problems. Since I believe that it is easier to learn from examples, I have included many from my client cases. In order to protect people's privacy, names and identifying details have been changed, and composites have been used.

My perspective as a neurotypical business person will help you navigate the workplace and "fit in." This means being able to interact with co-workers in a way that makes them feel comfortable working with you.

Sometimes I am asked why NTs are so "mean," or why Aspergians have to do all of the changing. "Just because I'm not a social person, it doesn't mean that I'm a bad person," one man said. NTs aren't intentionally mean. They just have a very limited understanding of Asperger's Syndrome. Myths and misconceptions abound. I still meet NTs who think that everyone with Asperger's is a genius, or is working in the information technology industry. Many believe the stereotype of the loner who "doesn't like people," and who isn't empathic. Some think that Asperger's Syndrome is a personality problem.

In a workplace dominated by neurotypicals, this lack of understanding results in communication gaffes being treated as attitude or behavior problems. Difficulty with executive functioning is interpreted as lack of effort or a disregard for doing a good job. The individual who is sensitive to light, odors or sounds is viewed as demanding and picky.

Should it be like this? No. Will it change overnight? No. Will it change someday? Yes. But what do you do in the meantime?

Choose a career wisely, based on your interests and strengths. Learn how to communicate *well enough* to get along with co-workers. Be open to new ways of doing things. Ask NTs for help (they are everywhere, so why not use them?!). Do not allow bad experiences from the past to make you angry and bitter. Instead, think about how you want people to perceive you.

Remember, *everyone* has to fit into cultural expectations and norms. During my corporate career, there were times that I had to work with people whom I didn't like, adhere to policies that I thought were silly, and settle for doing work that was good enough, instead of outstanding. I experienced periods

of boredom, uncertainty, and frustration. I found some senior executives thoroughly intimidating. No job is perfect, but you probably get a regular paycheck, paid vacation and sick time, and health insurance if you live in the U.S.

This is not to minimize in any way the very real challenges that the majority of people with Asperger's Syndrome face at work. It is to let you know that whenever groups of people get together, there will be conflicts, power struggles and frustrations. Neurotypicals have problems on the job, too.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK TO DEVELOP AND MAKE CHANGES

The content of this book is based on the situations that I see again and again in my coaching practice. Not every chapter will apply to you, but many of them will. My intention is to offer specific techniques that you can use to address various circumstances. If you are just entering the workforce, this book will help you understand what employers expect from you, and show you how to avoid some of the common problems that occur.

This first chapter has provided an overview of the challenges that many people with Asperger's Syndrome face in the workplace.

Chapter 2 is a primer on interpersonal communication. It is my experience that communication causes most of the problems people with Asperger's Syndrome have at work. This is because communication problems often appear to be attitude or behavior problems. This chapter explains the importance of situational context and nonverbal cues for understanding the real meaning of what someone says.

Chapter 3 focuses on the elusive concept of "fitting in." As I will stress throughout this book, technical skill is not the primary factor in employment success. It is the ability to work with other people. This does not mean that you must be friends with your co-workers, or even like them. What you need to do is act in ways that enable others to work effectively with you. This involves establishing good relationships with your colleagues, asking for help when you need it, working as a member of a team, and meeting expectations for productivity and job performance.

The people skills discussed in Chapter 4 are necessary for navigating the complexities of social interaction in the workplace. You will interact with individuals who have different personalities, backgrounds, goals and styles of working. You will receive feedback, which may include criticism of certain

aspects of your performance. There will be disagreements and conflicts that must be addressed, so that they do not interfere with productivity. And although *everyone* dislikes office politics, it is part of the inner workings of every organization.

Chapter 5 is about planning projects, managing time, being flexible, and setting realistic goals. In other words: getting your work done on time! You will learn what it really means to multitask, how to improve your short-term memory, plan how long tasks will take, and produce clear written and verbal communications.

In order to maintain employment, it is essential that you cope with stress, and manage strong emotions such as anger and anxiety. When you are emotionally upset, you are literally not thinking clearly, and may say or do things that can damage your reputation, or cost you your job. Chapter 6 explains why this is so, and offers numerous strategies for avoiding meltdowns and burnout.

In the next chapter, career management topics are addressed. They are applicable no matter what kind of career or job you have. When I think about clients who are the most successful, what they have in common is knowledge of their strengths and limitations. They use this information to make better job choices, and to recognize when they are in the wrong position. This chapter also includes information about networking, which is an important activity even when you are employed. It also discusses how to leave a company—voluntarily or not—on the best terms possible.

Disclosure and accommodations are the focus of Chapter 8. For some of my clients, accommodations have meant the difference between losing a job and keeping it. There is an overview of the Americans with Disabilities Act that explains key terms such as *essential job functions*, *undue hardship*, and *reasonable accommodation*. The pros and cons of disclosing at various stages of the employment cycle are discussed. You will learn how to develop a disclosure strategy that increases the chances of receiving the modifications that you need.

You are probably pretty tired of having to do all of the adjusting to fit into the neurotypical workplace. Some innovative organizations are creating jobs that take advantage of the specialized skills of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. In Chapter 9, I will describe these models, and share some final thoughts about Asperger's Syndrome and employment.

Read through the book and decide what changes you need to make. Choose one or two areas to focus on at a time. Trying to make too many

changes at once is overwhelming and won't work very well. You might need help from a neurotypical who can translate some of the techniques into a plan that addresses your specific needs. This person can be a professional coach or psychotherapist, or someone in your personal life who you trust. Perhaps there is a colleague at work who is friendly and supportive, and can help you put some of the changes into action.

Action is the key when you want to make a change. Usually, it is the small, consistent steps taken over time that get big results. You don't have to do everything perfectly, either. It takes practice to master a new skill. The most successful clients I work with are those who are willing to practice new attitudes or behaviors, even though they initially feel uncomfortable. The more they practice, the easier the new way becomes.

Motivation is a factor when you are making changes. The best way to maintain your focus and determination over an extended period of time is to set a meaningful goal. Sometimes, the primary motivator for change at work is fear—usually of job loss. Even if this is your impetus, try to put it in the context of a larger, more positive goal. For instance, you may decide that your greater goal is to improve your communication skills, or ability to handle frustration, so that you are better able to handle daily situations.

Experiment with change. Decide what you will do differently, try it for a reasonable amount of time, and assess the results. Two to three weeks is a realistic experimental period. If the change isn't working, figure out why, or what else you can try.

Do not give up. I have worked with clients who tell me that they absolutely, positively, in no way, can never, *e-v-e-r* do something...and a few months later, they are doing it! If you find yourself becoming discouraged, seek out support. Difficulties in the workplace are not exclusive to people with Asperger's Syndrome. Plenty of neurotypicals get fired, passed up for promotions, receive disciplinary action or realize that they are in the wrong career. The key is to learn from your experiences and be willing to change.

A PRIMER ON COMMUNICATION AT WORK

“Social skills are the key to success in life. Lack of them will cost you everything—friends, lovers and a career in something you love.” (Industrial Hygienist, age 50)

When I speak to organizations about Asperger’s Syndrome, I explain it as a fundamental difference in the hardwiring of the brain. Neurotypicals, I say, orient themselves to other people, while Aspergians focus on facts and information. This does not mean that a person with Asperger’s Syndrome doesn’t *want* to have relationships with others. It is quite the contrary. However, initiating and maintaining these relationships is difficult. The interpersonal communication skills that NTs learn intuitively must be learned intellectually by Aspergians. This is difficult, time consuming, and exhausting.

It is my estimate that problems with interpersonal communication account for 80 percent of the difficulties that people with Asperger’s Syndrome have in the workplace. To neurotypicals, the communication problems of Aspergians appear to be attitude or behavior problems, and are treated accordingly. This is not because NTs are insensitive or mean. It is because they are unaware that some people do not develop this intuitive social understanding, and are unable to adapt their behavior.

Neurotypicals place a high value on interpersonal relationships at work. In a survey of the top skills and personal qualities that employers want from employees, the ability to work in a team was ranked number one, followed by strong verbal communication skills, and decision-making and problem-solving. Technical knowledge was ranked seventh (NACE 2011). I have seen many other surveys showing the correlation between satisfaction at work and the quality of relationships with supervisors and co-workers.

Interpersonal relationships even play a role in who is hired, fired, and promoted. Employers evaluate job candidates on their education, skills, experience, *and* their ability to work with other people. Several times during my corporate career, I was involved in decisions about layoffs. Presuming that two people were meeting performance expectations, the decision about who would stay was based on who got along better with co-workers. Similarly, when a choice was made about who would receive a promotion, invariably one of the final questions was, “Who do people like working with most?”

Work is a group endeavor. Even if you spend a large part of the day working by yourself, you still need to interact with your supervisor, and possibly co-workers, customers, or vendors. Self-employed individuals must manage relationships with customers, potential customers, and service providers, such as accountants and lawyers.

Developing your communication skills is the most important thing that you can do to maintain employment and manage your career. These skills enable you to interact effectively with others by:

- understanding employer expectations
- influencing how other people perceive you by working cooperatively
- sharing your ideas
- getting along with others.

Developing these skills is not about creating scripts, which are statements that are prepared in advance. Scripts can be useful for introducing yourself, initiating certain conversations, or explaining unexpected behaviors. However, they are insufficient for managing the complexity of human interaction in the workplace. It is not possible to anticipate and prepare a specific response for every interaction that might happen in a single day, never mind over the course of one’s career!

Later chapters of this book provide specific recommendations for effective workplace communication. First, it will be helpful for you to understand a few basics about how neurotypicals communicate.

MEANING COMES FROM CONTEXT

“Mental exhaustion comes from having to figure things out cognitively rather than intuitively. If I seem ‘slow,’ it is because I have to deliberately think things through.” (Web Content Administrator, age 42)

Sean had tried for months to land an entry-level information technology (IT) position. He was excited about the prospect of working at a small software firm. After successful interviews with the human resources manager and his potential supervisor, Sean returned to meet with two members of the IT department who had both worked in this field for more than a decade.

Sean listened as they described their roles at the company, and commented that their jobs sounded very simple. He was surprised when he received a phone call from the human resources manager telling him that his arrogance had cost him the job. “I figured that by telling them that their jobs were simple, they would see how smart I am and want to hire me.”

Kevin’s supervisor asked him to “take a look” at new scheduling software that the company had recently purchased. Two weeks later, the supervisor confronted Kevin, angrily inquiring why he wasn’t using the software. “I took a look at it like you asked,” Kevin explained, “but I didn’t think it would be useful so I deleted it off my computer.” Recalling the exchange during a coaching session, Kevin asked me, “If my boss wanted me to *use* the software, why didn’t he just say so?”

If you have experienced similar miscommunication, each incident probably leaves you more confused, frustrated and anxious. In the examples of Sean and Kevin, words were spoken, but there was not clear communication. They responded to *words* they heard, without considering the situational context, and nonverbal signals (such as body language and vocal inflection) that reveal the real *meaning* of the words.

Pragmatics is defined as “the rules governing the use of language in social situations” (Fogle 2013, p.12). Figuring out the social rules of how to interact with others depends on the context of a situation, and the type of relationship you have with the person or persons to whom you are speaking (Fogle 2013).

Examples of good pragmatic ability include: speaking to the president of the company in a more formal way than you speak to your peers; adjusting the content of a presentation based on what your audience already knows, and needs to know, about a topic; noticing when people are bored and want to end the conversation; staying on topic during a meeting.

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