

'A fresh water fish in a salt water ocean'

Coaching and Aspergers

The benefits of an alternative perspective



Executive summary:

- Asperger's Syndrome is a highly personalised condition that affects the way people communicate, see and understand the world around them. It focuses on key areas of difficulty, such as, social awareness, imagination, language and communication.
- Highly skilled and successful professionals within specialist fields can present behaviours that appear incongruent within their emerging leadership responsibilities that necessitate positive interaction with clients and colleagues.
- Coaching approaches that focus on communication develop an understanding of language, social expectations and alternative perspectives. They offer creative strategies for individuals and teams that enhance positive interaction, harnessing the best of everyone's abilities.
- What is Asperger's? How to spot it? What is the negative impact? What are the potential benefits? What can be done to help? What are the implications for coaching?

'Asperger's Syndrome' is fascinating. In a society where social interaction is increasingly seen as a core skill, On the one hand people with Aspergers can present with traits where rigidity and discordance may lead to social isolation and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, professional and personal. On the other hand they can offer great insight into technical detail, creativity and a sense of directness that is totally focused on results. Whilst there are currently relatively few people within the business community with an Asperger's diagnosis, the traits that could lead to a diagnosis are evident in many successful and highly acclaimed business leaders and academics, such as Professor Vernon Smith, Nobel prize winner for economics, Albert Einstein and Andy Warhol.

There are many highly skilled and technically excellent professionals, whose success in specific fields leads them into additional responsibilities that require alternative skill sets based around social interaction and communication. The characteristics and qualities that led to their success need to be developed to enable a convergence of skills and strategies that help them and their business environment accommodate the changing culture needs of their role. There can be significant negative implications for both the individual and organisation if these issues go unchecked and ability gets wasted. The key for coaches and business leaders is to look beyond the initial behaviours and trust in people's and the organisation's capacity to adapt and harness the best of everyone's ability. There are significant implications for individuals with responsibilities for team leadership, interaction with clients and in managing conflict. It is therefore from a positive perspective that this issue is examined, focusing on ability, rather than disability. From a business and coaching perspective there is much to be gained by tapping into this talent and developing invaluable leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome is a neurobiological disorder on the higher-functioning end of the autism spectrum, with symptoms that can range from mild to severe. It is a condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people, and affects how they make sense of the world around them. Individuals with Aspergers exhibit an alternative understanding of the use of social and communication skills, despite having IQ scores typically in the normal to very high range. Aspergers is

associated with the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum, which is classically identified as having a triad of impairment in social communication, social interaction and imagination, although in the case of Aspergers language development is generally not an issue.

Aspergers is not a mental illness; whilst classified as a medical condition, in many ways it is a behavioural response to environmental and cultural expectations. Every person is unique, asperger or neurotypical; we all have a bespoke perspective of the world around us and this is as true for people with Aspergers as anyone else. They generally would like to fit in socially, but have difficulty making effective social connections or understanding emotional responses, which can in turn lead to retreating into their own 'safe' worlds or making inappropriate statements and challenges that isolate them further from colleagues or clients. Constant exposure to changing social dynamics (relationships and environmental) can result in a heightened state of anxiety and subsequent negative behaviours.

How can I identify it?

Organisations may observe behaviours that may be deemed to be 'negative' or beneficial depending on the task, environment or perspective.

Behaviours

- Incongruent use of nonverbal behaviours e.g. eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gestures to regulate social interaction.
- Inflexible adherence to routines and repetition in inappropriate situations - rigidity of thought. This is often a strategy to reduce anxiety.
- Fascination with plans, timetables, figures and technical detail.
- Powerful rote memory. Preoccupation with a particular subject to the exclusion of all others.
- Sensitivity to the environment, loud noises, clothing and food textures, and odours.
- Stereotyped or repetitive motor mannerisms. Judging personal space, motor clumsiness.
- Anxiety, frustration and intolerance.
- Obsessive-compulsive tendencies.

Communication

- Unusual use of speech and language; semantic pragmatics and prosody (volume, intonation, inflection, and rhythm).
- Pedantic, formal style of speaking; monosyllabic.
- Difficulty interpreting social cues and offering emotionally inappropriate responses.
- Misunderstanding other's feelings, "give and take" of conversation (Metacognition/Theory of Mind).
- Extensive vocabulary. Reading commences at an early age (hyperlexia).
- Difficulty in translating thoughts into words.

There is a wide range of associated behaviours potentially linked to Aspergers, but few should be considered in isolation, as the impact will vary considerably dependent on the individual and the environment they live and work in. For the coach it is important to consider all perspectives, as each will be valid. There is a danger in jumping to early conclusions and making assumptions that put people into boxes. Lack of empathy, imagination and flexibility are all associated with Aspergers and yet there are many examples of people with clearly defined Aspergers showing great kindness, creativity and adaptability, it is just that they do not always communicate it in the most accessible way.

Business benefits of Asperger traits:

(Adapted from Kristina Sullivan's 'Asperger Advantages')

Focus:

An ability to focus on one objective over long periods of time without becoming distracted enables individuals to accomplish large and challenging tasks.

Unique global insights:

An ability to find novel connections among multi-disciplinary facts and ideas creating new, coherent, and meaningful insights that others may not have considered.

Independent thinking:

A willingness to consider unpopular or unusual possibilities generates new opportunities and can pave the way for others to consider alternative creative solutions.

Internal motivation:

Unswayed by social convention, other's opinions or social pressures, individuals hold firm to their purpose; unique ideas can thrive, despite those who doubt them.

Attention to detail:

An ability to remember and process minute details without getting lost or overwhelmed gives individuals a distinct advantage when solving complex problems, including an ability to utilise 3-dimensional visioning gives a unique perspective when designing and creating solutions.

Directness:

An ability to recognise and speak the truth that is being "conveniently" ignored by others can be vital to the success of a project or endeavour ("the elephant in the room").

Logical decision-making:

An ability to make logical, rational decisions and stick to a course of action without being swayed by impulse or emotional reactions.

Questions for businesses and coaches to consider:

1. What typically will be "going wrong" around someone with Aspergers?
2. How do I know this is what I'm dealing with?
3. If I have a hypothesis how can I check it out?
4. What are the implications for naming it?
5. What are the implications for contracting?
6. How does coaching Aspergers differ?
7. Who should be responsible for change?
8. What is the range of interventions? (organisational/individual)
9. What are the indications that coaching might be the right/wrong intervention?
10. How sustainable/transferable are supporting strategies?

What can be done to help?

There are many effective strategies that can be used to enhance the quality of communication and interactions for people with Aspergers. The unique nature of the condition means that bespoke stepping-stones need to be created to bridge the gap between the differing perspectives. There is a danger in getting too distracted by the label that has many stereotypical connotations. It should be

more about the individual traits and how targeted support; self-awareness and personal responsibility can positively impact on their effectiveness in the working environment. Coaching Aspergers is not about cure, but about respect and robust challenge that enables individuals to develop coping strategies that harness their potential.

Strategies that can help coaches support people with Aspergers to interact positively:

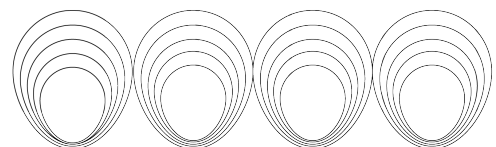
- An authentic appreciation of a client's potential.
- Commitment to understanding an 'aspie's' perspective and raising their awareness of others.
- Active listening and clarifying the understanding behind language and behaviours.
- Acknowledge an alternative perspective without judgement. This does not mean that it abdicates their responsibility, rather accepts their reality and then begins to explore a desire to adapt and accommodate parallel perspectives.
- Use of 'clean' language, crisp and to the point; the fewer words the better,
- Testing use and understanding of metaphor and assumptions.
- Personalised strategies for 'hot spots'; social stories and symbolism to structure responses.
- 'Scaffolding' tasks so that key milestones are identified and consideration given to alternative perspectives, especially in relation to social and emotional intelligence.
- Using 'third person' strategies help focus on an issue, rather than personalities (behaviour not character).
- Engage in conversation based on their concrete experience, something that is tangible.
- Raising awareness across organisations to think creatively about how corporate structures accommodate this kind of diversity.

Further Reading:

Attwood, T, (2008) The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome
Jessica Kingsley Publishers;

National Autistic Society (NAS)
www.autism.org.uk

This is a very brief overview of Asperger traits and how coaching can add real value to both individuals and organisations in gaining an appreciation of alternative perspectives, facilitating sustainable strategies that enable clients to function effectively in an emotional world where the rules are somewhat confusing.



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