



# Turning Neurodiverse Talent Into Strategic Advantage

**Companies recruiting high IQ people and ‘supergeeks’ start to acknowledge their differences and provide help to make the most of them.** *By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell*

**W**e all have or have had someone at work, who was mildly or even deeply annoying to work with, who just did not seem to “get” situations, and who seemed to function in a world apart. At the time, most of us probably just gently put up with the misfit, occasionally becoming more annoyed, and thought little more of it.

However, right now, in this high-tech twenty-first century, there is an increasing need for numerical, technical brains, with big horsepower, and organizations are noticing that these big brains do not necessarily fit in well with the status quo. They are often the ones that end up being the misfits, whose brains are

needed, but whose presence is barely tolerated, and whose value is definitely not fully exploited, due to all the contradictions involved in working with such a person.

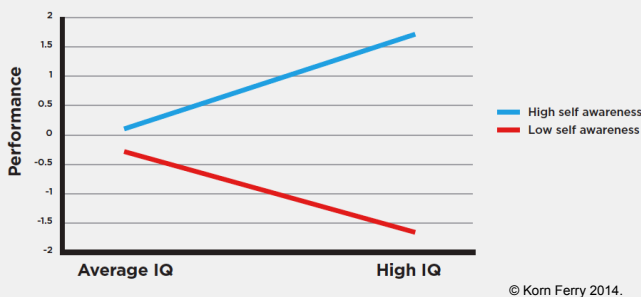
In this article, we explore the fate of four executives, who did not fit in with the norm in their organizations, and found themselves on the periphery, not understanding the “way things work round here” in the same way as others. Each of them received help and support, in differing ways, from their company and coaches, and effected a significant, but difficult transformation, which brought them back closer to the crowd, or at the very least, understanding the crowd better.

### (IQ+TechQ) x EQ = Human Potential<sup>1</sup>

The nature of 21st century business is such that technical brains are hot property. Companies recruit increasingly high IQ and technically specialized people, to manage the complexity of today’s business challenges, and yet, scientific findings have consistently found that, in the very high ranges, IQ tends to be inversely related to EQ.

A recent Korn Ferry study, as shown in Figure 1, shows that self-awareness determines whether a very high IQ improves leadership performance or hurts it. Assessment data from 209 managers and executives suggests that if two executives have high self awareness, the one with the high IQ will be the better performer. But among those with low self-awareness, the reverse is true.

Figure 1  
**Executive performance across IQ and self-awareness levels.**



This formula can be pretty shocking to people like Jan, a senior team and thought leader in the science field in Scandinavia. He was identified by his board as “the least self-aware” of all the leaders, and by his staff as lacking in empathy and communication skills, as well as clarity and vision.

For some years previously his relatively low impact and team morale had been attributed to significant organizational change and disruption, rather than looking at the leadership skills and behaviors of Jan and his colleagues on the leadership team. They had all been promoted to leadership roles without actually having development in their leadership skills. The entire team began a development journey. As Elliott Nelson and his coaching team completed

the team and individual feedback in the first phase of training with the management team, Jan began to realize how he could change, and the opportunities to improve his impact on his team. He openly sought guidance for how to coach and lead his people and became a student of how to improve himself, with a high level of personal commitment. He sought to understand the challenge laid down by the realization that others saw him as difficult. With objective curiosity and his high IQ on his side, it became easy to ask open questions about what and how he wanted to change, and Jan’s scientific mind led him towards more conscious and vastly improved behavior in meetings and in one-to-ones with his team. Jan himself made a strong realization: “this work is the most important thing I can do”, and he was later rated as the “biggest transformation” by the same leadership team that had been so negative about him at the outset. Questioning, checking assumptions and leading as a coach, not as a controller, were very enabling techniques for him, and, allied with a humility in taking feedback, this transformation allowed him to fly at a performance level in line with his IQ.

### A Beautiful Mind

A key to making this kind of transformation a reality is that of understanding and supporting the “issue”, of seeing it as “a different thing” instead of “a bad thing”. Many leaders and executives seem to struggle on the sidelines, with little support, but it is our observation that when they are supported towards better self-awareness, they really can improve dramatically. Michelle, whose nickname actually is “The Brain” works in a French consulting firm, and had a clear belief, before help was sought for her, that she “did not need people”. She was serious, introverted, and rarely laughed. She was about to take on a new challenge, with a need to lead people all over the world, and yet her typical approach was as a solitary analyst. The coach who worked with her, asked her to estimate how many people her behavior impacted, and her answer was “seven”. When she showed her, with all kinds of graphs, arrows

1. By Julia Goodman

and links, that in fact, every time she acted, at least fifty stakeholders were affected, she was shocked, but curious, and quick to seek solutions.

Michelle's managers, and her team, were willing players in the process on which she embarked, and her coach took great pleasure in finding her very technical tools with which to work. For example, she loved using psychometric tools, as they felt scientific to her, and she used it to analyze not only herself, but also those around her, and it gave her more comfort and certainty when planning interactions. As the support continued and she progressed in her work, Michelle was able to "practice" her new empathic communication style, by connecting with a colleague around a common passion, tennis. While she still felt that this was "neither authentic nor useful", when it was pointed out to her that she had, nevertheless, built a different kind of connection, she accepted that and moved on to a greater challenge.



In the coming weeks, there was a big international meeting for which Michelle was responsible. Previously, these meetings had been cumbersome, not much fun, and lacking in social highlights. For this next occasion, Michelle forced herself not only to plan a dinner and drinks evening for the participants, but also to stay and join in. This was far from a natural action on her part, but much appreciated by the whole group, and she was at least able to see the gratitude and the increased team spirit, even if she maintained she had not enjoyed it. She described the new behaviors she was engaging in as a big game of chess, and her coach says that what she did, with the support

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of the others, was to show her how to use more pieces on the chessboard than previously. At the end of the long engagement, Michelle expressed sadness that it was coming to an end, and acknowledged that she had finally learned to help her team to help themselves, rather than dominating them, and that she felt more supported by the senior management of her company. The change in her demeanor was striking: HR noted change, and the coach bumped into her one day, and she actually said "Hello" and smiled! Unthinkable a year earlier, this was a true breakthrough, and Michelle is now an effective leader, with widespread support.

### Lost in Translation

Paul is a senior developer in a registered UK charity. He speaks primarily of having been worried and stressed by the perception others had of him at work : "does not deliver", "does not fit in", and by a sense of just not understanding what was required of him. His colleagues, as well as his coaches, described conversations with him as being very tiring, as there was so little comprehension, and they "got nowhere". While highly valued for his contribution on the scientific and technical front, Paul was on the verge of being let go from his job, after a lengthy and destabilizing review process, and in the knowledge that he had never had a pay rise nor a positive evaluation. He described himself as always having been socially awkward, never really knowing what to do in certain situations that others seemed to understand effortlessly. He also felt it was embarrassing to ask, as people would think less of him, despite his great intelligence and abilities. So, as he was about to be terminated, the colleague he had been allowed to bring along asked "have you actually thought about the Asperger's?" This created a stunned silence,

as nobody had thought of this aspect, nor indeed was there a diagnosis, but it gave pause for reflection.

What followed was a very positive and supportive phase, in which his immediate entourage mobilized to find the right support for Paul, and he was helped in deciphering all the language and situations he had previously found unfathomable. The coach, Sally Moore, helped him to see how people found him rude and abrasive, and to give him tools to avoid this impression in future. They dealt with some very basic vocabulary and coping systems, which ranged from a simple translation of business jargon, such as “taking ownership”, to explanations of why colleagues found clear communication about timekeeping important, and how he could help them. Once he understood that this was mostly about deciphering previously incomprehensible language, and being helped to see things from the others’ point of view, Paul got on with adopting tools and techniques with great enthusiasm. He describes these as simple strategies, that he could use to help himself. He also talks with great pride of how he has begun to systematize these skills, setting them up as habits. He feels confident that once a new habit has been anchored in his life, he can manage it, however alien it used once to feel.

### **The Imitation Game**

It has helped Paul tremendously to feel supported by a whole team of colleagues, management and external advisors. His confidence has come back, his work is steaming ahead, and he is even building a more enriching social life as a result of techniques and tools learnt at work. He says clearly that he is hardwired to be a particular way, and that he would not want to change his fundamental character and personality, but that he now recognizes what barriers there were to productive relationships with him. He says that he is now building up a picture of the world and people around him in a way that he could not have previously achieved, and his success is being very concretely recognized by his management, as he is currently having previous

evaluations re-done, with performance measures calculated differently as a result of this revelation, and even with pay rises being given to him retroactively. It is also extremely heartening to note that the company is now acknowledging that they may have other people among them with similar profiles and challenges, and, when identified, will be prepared to work towards supporting them more pro-actively than they had with Paul, seeing that the value far outweighs the trouble.

### **A very important part of the work was helping him decipher the language of management jargon**

Malcolm is an executive at an oil company in Northern Europe, and is another case of where trauma mixed with natural symptoms and behaviors. He had recently suffered a non-work-related drama, and this confused those trying to interpret the results of the seemingly endless psychometric tests and psychology sessions he underwent at work. All in all, he was in a bad place and a cause for concern, so his boss called on Julia Goodman to work with him, in the hope of helping him to repair and get back on board. Initial resistance lasted almost a year, says Julia, making it difficult to imagine him ever complying, but she was surprised by his enthusiasm for the process, once it began. She was particularly careful to work around the “person Malcolm is”, helping him to build on the strengths he had, but with understanding and ensuring he was understood by his team and group. Her words were: “you are the putty, and I am going to teach you to mold yourself”.

### **Blinded by Science**

Malcolm’s problems had always been there, and it was pretty clear he was somewhere on the autistic spectrum, though he had never been diagnosed, and there was no need felt to formalize the diagnosis either. She focused far more on “pulling him from a left brain place to a right brain place” and Malcolm did indeed complain that at the end of every session in



which he worked with her, his brain “hurt”! His team and he had come to a crisis, due to his behavior that left them feeling excluded and clueless as to what was required. A very important part of the work was helping him to decipher the language of management jargon. Even his job description was partially illegible to him: “we expect you to be an inspiring leader of your team and an emotionally strong team player”. Until Julia helped him break this down into small parts and define in minute detail what each meant, he had no idea how to interpret. Without guidelines that we can understand, we cannot follow and meet expectations.

This was another case of learning new behaviors and sensations, and Malcolm recognized this, even enjoying it at times. Julia persuaded him to take his team out for a drink after work once a month, though his initial reaction had been “but it’s not credible – they will not like me any more if I do that”. However, after encouragement to try pretending, and “see what happens”, Malcolm managed to pull this session off once, and found it really did garner him support from the team. The second time was easier, and his comfort level with them rose sustainably. Now this is a part of his habits, and the support and backup from his team and superiors is much stronger. Recognition of efforts on the part of the “misfit” seems to play a very strong role in the future success, as we have seen with all four, and it is crucial that those above, below and all around be involved in the process of change.



**“I’m treated more seriously, and this helps me with my search for my real identity.”**

The increased self-awareness, the new language, tools and feelings that our subjects now share have a deep effect, and it is enlightening to hear how they describe it. Paul says that “I have gone from ‘the guy who does not deliver’ to ‘Paul, who has made tremendous progress’. I am treated more seriously, and this helps me with my search for my real identity. I would not want to change the way I see the world, but I have come to map on to my own understanding of what people mean. I have learnt the language that other people use”. Jan tells us, “a year on, I feel more assured about what to do to guide team leaders. I also feel better equipped to deal with difficult behavior”. Malcolm jokes now about knowing that he has an “..ism”, but cannot quite bring himself to identify with it. He has been strong in learning new behaviors, while not really acknowledging the origin of the problem. For him, the “elephant in the armchair” is not an issue.

### **Big Bang Theory**

And so, the question arises about formal diagnosis. It is obvious that some of our subjects are on an autistic spectrum (Sally is a psychologist, and able to make diagnoses with some certainty, at least some of the time), with most of them displaying some behaviors most congruent with Asperger’s syndrome. And yet, not one of them wishes to have a formal opinion pronounced on the condition. Paul says “my priority is to keep my job, and not to go and get a label”, while Malcolm’s jokes about his “..ism” are a thin disguise for the true feelings that he, too, does not want to be pigeonholed. What does become clear is that an organization and the individuals in it can move past tolerance towards support, kindness and inclusion, without the need for a diagnosis, if they choose to.

But what do we call people like this? It is clear that there is a whole range of names, nick-names and insults that can be thrown around

people with these “less self-aware” characteristics. The word “super-geek” was our initial instinct, and we were delighted to find that Sally had conducted an informal research exercise into this word, and its associations, in exactly the community we are talking about. She polled many groups and communities and found that they actually liked being called geeks. Indeed the Collins Online Dictionary announced that “geek” had become word of the year in 2014, with a dramatically shifted meaning. Previously, the definition had been “someone preoccupied with computing”, and now it is “a person who is very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about a particular subject”. She even asked one of her contacts if she could call him a geek, and he said, with some humor, “yes, if I can call you a shrink!”. This is a clear reflection of the new reality of tech-based business and life in the 21st century!

So, if we are going to be dealing with more and more “geeks” in our working and everyday lives, how do we develop our thinking and actions to make the most of it? Well, by seeing the strategic value of this particular kind of diversity, of course! Neurodiversity is increasingly recognized as a phenomenon, and we actively encourage companies and individuals to consider and prioritize the value to their organizations of these people who are brilliant technically, but also willing to do isolated or repetitive, detail-focused work quite happily. They also bring a natural curiosity and scientific approach to all they do, and

## Neurodiverse Talent Management Dos and Don'ts

	Dos	Don'ts
RECOGNIZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat everyone as a fresh proposition</li> <li>• Be positively open to neurodiversity</li> <li>• Create the environment for conversation</li> <li>• Help them become self-aware</li> <li>• Use their special talents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat any different individual as isolated</li> <li>• See it as a bad thing</li> <li>• Look at the baggage too closely</li> <li>• Feel a need to diagnose and label</li> <li>• Use their “difference” as a stick to beat</li> </ul>
RESPOND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give them the tools and support</li> <li>• Help them understand management jargon</li> <li>• Help them see things from other's point of view</li> <li>• Get support around them: team, manager, advisors</li> <li>• Actively recruit them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Punish before exploring</li> <li>• Use tests to box them</li> <li>• Try to “cure” or change them</li> <li>• Take a one-way only approach</li> <li>• Let old images stick after the change</li> <li>• Miss out on these talents</li> </ul>

this can be a huge advantage in any development. If we can acknowledge and better understand what we are dealing with, then we can get on with making the most of it, and turning it into a true strategic advantage. We believe that in many organizations there are 15-20% of managers and leaders who fit this “super-geek” profile, and that, as the Korn Ferry study suggests, given help with their self-awareness, they can be encouraged towards great performance and contribute to a sea change in how we succeed.

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