The Canary Code

A GUIDE TO NEURODIVERSITY, DIGNITY, AND INTERSECTIONAL BELONGING AT WORK

Ludmila N. Praslova, PhD

The Canary Code

This page intentionally left blank

The

Canary
Code

A GUIDE TO NEURODIVERSITY,
DIGNITY, AND INTERSECTIONAL
BELONGING AT WORK

Ludmila N. Praslova, PhD

The Canary Code

CONTENTS

PRELUDE AND DEDICATION

People have more change-making power than we give ourselves credit for.

In late June 2023, this book was nearly finished. Four years of research, almost eight months of writing, and one month to the deadline. But the last few steps of major projects—even passion projects—tend to be the hardest.

Despite all the examples of inclusive companies, despite all the business case research, advancing neuroinclusion at work is hard. Excruciatingly hard. Just a few weeks earlier, many members of neurodivergent communities voted strongly against using the word "included" in one of the proposed titles of my book—because many of us have never felt included in the world of work and in the larger society.

I worried, "Will all my work make a difference? Will enough people care?"

Then I witnessed something that renewed my faith in humanity and hopes for acceptance and belonging for everyone.

On June 24, a crowd of more than 100,000 gathered at the Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performance, an outdoor event held in Somerset in the southwest of England, to see Lewis Capaldi, a Scottish singer-songwriter. Capaldi is known for his chart-topping hit "Someone You Loved" and his unpretentious style, humor, and candid disclosures about his diagnosis of Tourette Syndrome. Tourette Syndrome causes involuntary tics that vary between individuals and are often intensified by stress and anxiety.

As he performed his hit song, Capaldi's tics became increasingly pronounced. His shoulder moved in ways he did not intend. His voice faltered. His struggle was visible to all. When Capaldi stumbled over the words to "Someone You Loved," the audience joined in, finishing the song as he tried to sing a few words here and there.

There were no boos, no complaining. Just empathy and support.

There was no mockery or impatience. Just love.

Those fans did not buy festival tickets because they intended to make a difference. But when a difference-making moment happened, they rose to the occasion.

I was one of many neurodivergent people who watched this moment and felt hope. Hope to see this type of support and acceptance in their lives.[1,2] For many people with Tourette Syndrome, as well as for autistic, dyslexic and dyspraxic people; ADHDers; and others whose neurobiology differs from the typical, the Glastonbury crowd showed what might be possible. Acceptance. Support. Inclusion. All denied to too many, for too long.

What would it take to replicate the Glastonbury effect—the acceptance and support for neurodivergence—in our workplaces?

In this book, I explore strategies for cultivating a more empathetic and inclusive, "Glastonbury-like" organizational environment. Systemic factors within workplaces can bring out the best or the worst in humans. This book shows how to bring out the best.

For now, much research documents the worst. A UK study published in 2020 reported that 30 percent of managers would not want to hire someone with Tourette Syndrome. About half of the respondents would not want to hire or manage someone with at least one of the conditions typically associated with neurodivergence.[3]

The Glastonbury crowd showed there is more caring in the world than these dire statistics suggest. Their humanity was enough inspiration to help me push through the final hurdles of finishing my work. I saw an example of people showing love and support to those who are different from them, and becoming changemakers just by opening their hearts. I want to contribute to building a world where more people are loved and supported. Regardless of differences.

This book is dedicated to everyone who struggles with being different, bullied, rejected, and told to try harder to fit in.

And to every changemaker who helps show that kindness and humanity can triumph.

July 11, 2023

PREFACE

I stepped out of the women's inclusion conference reception into the hotel garden. Ahh, the quiet, the cool evening air. Except there was someone who seemed to be struggling to breathe. The person was vaguely familiar—we might have been in some sessions together. Anne? I thought her name might have been Anne.

I approached her, and she held up her EpiPen. I hung near just in case. When she finally caught her breath, Anne said she was sure she had mentioned her food allergies on the sign-up form. But evidently, the reception options had not been safe. Ah, yes, one of the main dishes filled the room with the smell of peanuts, but I did not pay attention. I don't have allergies. Perhaps the organizers also did not have allergies. We humans are rarely good at noticing issues that don't directly affect us.

I did pay attention to the fact that the music in the hotel lobby was torturous—a loud, pulsating, painful assault to my senses. I had to walk around the building to the back entrance to get to the conference meeting rooms. Noise makes me physically sick. That is also why I had to escape the reception. I brought up the music issue. But the organizers must not have had sensory sensitivities either.

Anne and I commiserated about the deep irony of being excluded at an inclusion conference. And I added another thing to my list of factors to solve for when creating inclusive environments—allergies. My list was getting very, very long. Many experiences, many decades long.

───────────────

I started working in global diversity when I was 19.

Nobody told me it was supposed to be hard, so I thought it was great fun. I got to figure out how to help people work with colleagues from drastically different countries, even when the countries weren't on the best terms, historically or currently. It didn't make sense to me to choose one culture and force everyone to fit into it. Why give up our cultures when we can share and enjoy many different traditions? This is how I stumbled on the "culture-add" approach—

creating an environment that incorporates many cultural ways of being and creates new ones. Instead of requiring people to conform or assimilate, the environment itself could flex, adapt, and be enriched by the diversity.

By age 25, I was running international relations for a large global not-for-profit focused on the post-Soviet areas of Eurasia. Our cafeteria served mashed potatoes with kimchi, and everyone knew basic phrases in multiple languages. I loved my job, with all its challenges. Despite tensions and historical adversities within larger cultures, we created a safe, productive, and inclusive environment—at least when it came to national-level cultures.

Gender inclusion was a different matter. I pushed it further than anyone ever had—but it was not far enough. Yes, I was a department head by 25, but I was also told point-blank that was as far as I was ever going to go. People in the organization could get professional development and advancement, one of my bosses informed me, but "a person" was "a brother." Or, in the words of another boss, "A girl should not be smarter than her boss."

Honestly, I tried being a "good girl" by making myself small—for a time. But it was not going to work. I wanted to grow. I wanted to figure out how to make organizations fully inclusive. Not along just one dimension of human differences but along all of them. So I left and moved continents to go to a PhD program in industrial-organizational psychology. Then I moved states, time zones, and climate zones for jobs in my "second career" in academia.

I learned a lot about organizational workings and organizational change. I also kept learning about human differences—often the hard way. In escaping blatant sexism, I ran straight into blatant xenophobia and classism and into a few less blatant, systemic ism-s.

I don't recommend experiencing xenophobic hate crime as a creativity booster, but somehow every knock made me think ever deeper about comprehensive inclusion. Running is not the answer to exclusion. Improving organizations is.

Every organization I encountered had diversity initiatives, inclusion statements, and some great people. And yet, someone was always excluded—be it from professional development or from basic human dignity. Someone was always on the margin. Women. Black women, Asian women, single women, tall women, short women. Caregivers. Disabled people. First-generation college graduates. People with kids and people without kids. Class migrants. Immigrants. Older people. Younger people. Quiet people and modest people. People with the "wrong" kinds of names. People with accents. People with allergies. People with a funky fashion sense. Really, just people.

Exclusion does not need a reason—just an excuse.

I eventually found a home in a good organization with great colleagues. I taught graduate students how to create organizational environments based on fairness. I managed departments and initiatives, hired people, and wrote policies. I was doing meaningful, rewarding work, the kind of work I was very good at. It was a good life. Challenging, but good.

Then, a rapid succession of bosses led to increased political jousting and changed the emotional climate of my job. Soon after that, my office relocated, and my commute became much more stressful. After enduring that commute, I sat shivering in a space where I was too cold to think straight—even when I was not getting interrupted, which was often. The work I'd been happily doing for many years turned into something I could not do. Something that made me physically sick and mentally miserable.

At first, I was mad at myself. Just how pathetic was I to let an office move, an extra bit of driving, and some office politics get to me? I wrote a dissertation while living at a poverty level. This should be nothing. It did not make any sense that I would be this miserable.

When something does not make sense, I research until it does.

There was a reason I had chosen to pay extra to live close to the (old) office: driving in traffic always left me drained. So did politics. Driving and politics felt unnatural to me. And then there were other things I never quite mastered. Dealing with interruptions, multitasking, tolerating loud music and synthetic clothes . . . It's almost as if I were autistic, except I love words and writing . . . Oh wait, many autistic people love writing.[1,2] And that research on autistic women sounds so, so much like me.[3]

The diagnostic tests showed I was autistic after all. And the current version of my work environment was not inclusive of autistic people. Mystery solved.

Workplaces, in general, are not designed for autistic talent. If they were, autistic people with college degrees would not have an 80–85 percent unemployment rate in the United States;[4,5] reports from some other countries, like Australia and Germany, indicate lower but still concerning rates.[6,7]

Discovering the horrifying US statistic—just before the misfortunate conference experience—got me out of my head. It added fuel to my mission of finding a way to create organizations that welcome all differences and intersectionalities.

In that statistic was also the answer. If organizations could learn how to welcome people as excluded as autistic talent, surely they could welcome all differences, all the time. By including the most marginalized, we can include everyone.

And that is when a picture formed in my mind: a complete model for making organizations radically inclusive across the entire cycle of employment. From designing jobs to professional development. From access to jobs to success in jobs. The key was to design for the canaries in the coal mine—the ones who struggle to breathe before anyone else is affected.

The way to prevent or heal toxic work environments is to start at the margins, to create systems that support the people most sensitive to toxic problems in the workplace, who are the most excluded. That model—the Canary Code for intersectional inclusion—is the core of this book.

The model is centered on six core principles embedded across all talent processes in organizations. By practicing employee participation, focusing on outcomes, promoting flexibility, ensuring organizational justice, enhancing transparency, and using valid tools in decision making, organizations can support the well-being of all employees. More than that, they can help create a more inclusive, thriving society.

Since 2019, I've been refining my approach to systemic inclusion, researching and helping organizations develop systems for neurodiversity and intersectional inclusion. I threw myself into neuroinclusion work. My consulting, speaking, and writing help leaders break free of myths and stereotypes so they can develop a systemic and comprehensive approach to inclusion. I spoke at companies like Amazon, IBM, and the Bank of America; healthcare systems; and universities; I wrote academic papers and published business articles in *Harvard Business Review* and *Fast Company*.

But more questions were coming my way than I could possibly answer one at a time. My LinkedIn box was exploding. And when a Berrett-Kohler editor invited me to submit a book proposal, I was thrilled to write it.

This is that book.

The Canary Code

This page intentionally left blank

UNINCLUDABLE TALENT

A bad system will beat a good person every time.

—W. Edwards Deming

THE CANARY CODE: METAPHOR, MODEL, AND METHOD

Exclusion robs people of opportunities, and it robs organizations of talent. In the long run, exclusionary systems are lose-lose.

The Canary Code is a guide to building win-win organizational systems. It outlines specific steps to embedding inclusion across the entire talent cycle and creating fair, outcomes-focused cultures in which everyone can participate and belong.

The model's goal is to provide organizations with a framework and tools for creating fair and flexible talent processes (figure 1). Fairness and flexibility are essential for supporting marginalized and forgotten humans—and unlocking their often-remarkable talents. Better yet, applying the same principles improves work for everyone. Although the primary focus of this model is identifying and removing barriers to the employment and success of dyslexic, autistic, ADHD, and other neurominority communities, the same barriers exclude many aspects of humanity, from physical disabilities to cultural differences.

The book's title, *The Canary Code*, stems from the metaphor of people particularly impacted by dysfunctional organizational environments and injustices as canaries in the coal mine. The "canary in the coal mine" is not a myth or a literary device. For most of the twentieth century, each coal mining pit in the United Kingdom employed two canary birds.[1,2] They went underground with the miners as living, breathing carbon-monoxide detectors. Canaries' intense breathing allows them to fly—but it also makes them sensitive to airborne poisons, and their distress was an indication that miners should evacuate.

After serving that warning function, the canaries were given oxygen and revived. The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, England, showcases

a canary-resuscitation device: a bird-sized box with a metal frame, glass walls, and an oxygen cylinder with some tubing.[3]

In 1986, electronic carbon monoxide detectors replaced the birds. But the imagery remains a part of many cultures.

The canary metaphor is popular in Autistic culture, as well as in chronic illness and disability communities. The Autistic Doctors International group adopted the canary as its symbol because of the belief that "*if a workplace is manageable for us as autistic doctors, then it is likely manageable for most others. If we 'fall off our perch,' others are likely to follow.*"[4] Organizational problems like the lack of fairness, bullying, and toxic cultures impact people with more intense senses and nervous systems before affecting others. Sensitive does not mean broken: it means processing the experience more fully, and intensely, just like birds process the air—the oxygen and the pollutants—more fully.

A dramatic illustration of the impact of broken and toxic systems on the "canaries" is the high unemployment rate of 30–40 percent among all neurominorities in the United States and an even higher rate for autistic college graduates.[5] However, if organizational problems are not addressed, not only the "canaries" but everyone in the organization will eventually be overcome by stress and burnout.

Just like fresh air benefits all, work environments that welcome human cognitive and emotional differences—including the acute sensitivity to the world associated with many forms of neurodivergence—benefit all. Creating organizations where canaries can thrive, create, and innovate also means creating healthier, stronger organizations.

Although neurominority experiences and research focused on autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette Syndrome, and other developmental differences inform much of this book, most of the advice is applicable to many forms of neurodivergence, including mental health differences, psychological trauma, and acquired neurodivergence due to brain surgery or long COVID. People from much larger groups—for example, those who identify as highly sensitive, introverts, people from disability and chronic illness communities, and many others—also often find environments that support neurominorities helpful. Flexibility and fairness at work help everyone thrive.

You don't need to be a neurodiversity expert to get insights from this book. In the first set of chapters, we will build the foundational knowledge together. In addition, a glossary provides definitions for some of the key terms.
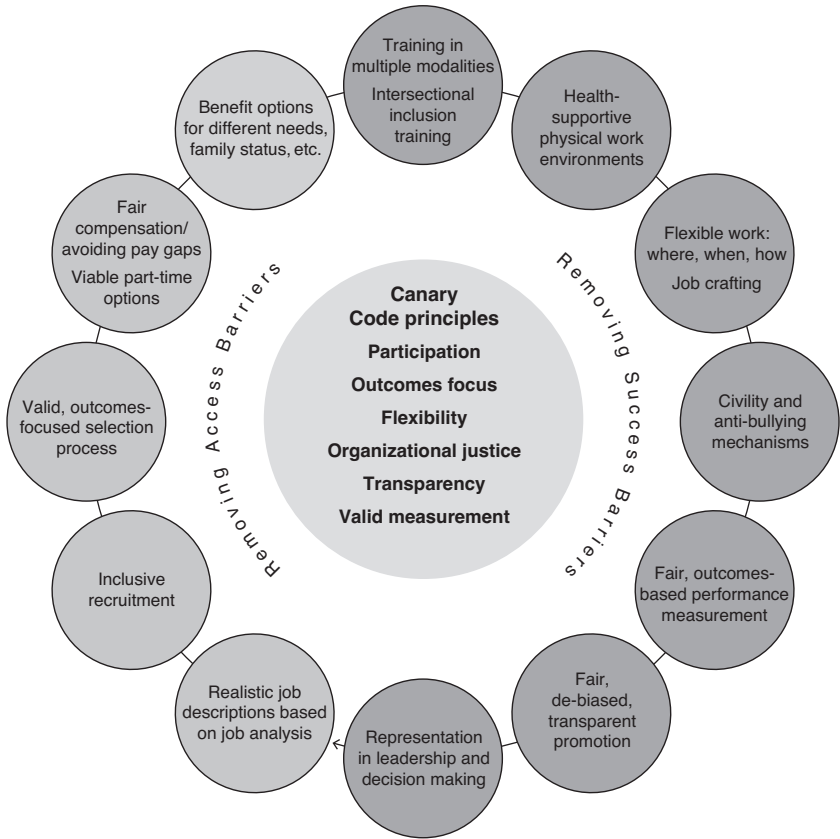
FIGURE 1: The Canary Code for Building a More Inclusive Workplace (Originally published in *Harvard Business Review*, Ludmila N. Praslova, "An Intersectional Approach to Inclusion at Work," *Harvard Business Review*, June 21, 2022, https://hbr.org/2022/06/an-intersectional -approach-to-inclusion-at-work.)

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK: DESIGN YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

To support different types of readers—practical and artsy, detail loving and summary seeking—most chapters include multiple types of content. With this book, you can build your own experience. As when visiting a park, you could take the "ultimate experience" path and follow the book in its entirety. Or you could take the "key points" path; then, if you wish, you can return and do "the story path" or "the deep dive" path. Most chapters can also be read independently, although I recommend reading the book in order. For those who prefer

to read summaries first, Appendix A, "Spoiler Alert," contains the key takeaways of every chapter.

EASY CONTENT GUIDE

Human Happenings—real-life stories of individuals from around the world

Employer Excellence—case studies and interviews with employers

Neurodiversity Narratives—cultural-level observations on the place and the treatment of neurodiversity within the larger human diversity

Bridging Science and Practice—explorations of academic studies with application to creating neuroinclusive organizations

Points of Practice—application points for a quick reference

Deep Dive—a deeper exploration of key points, research, and theories

Deeper Dive—a further exploration of key points, including new, original, and possibly controversial ideas—for those who enjoy getting (closer) to the bottom of things!

Key Takeaways—chapter bullet points for busy readers

Developmental Questions—chapter reflection and application questions

CHAPTER GUIDE

Part 1 is focused on the foundations of neuroinclusion. **Chapter 1** provides a neurodiversity primer, a terminology review, and explores the origins of neurodiversity as a scientific concept and a social movement. It challenges common myths and misunderstandings that perpetuate neurodiversity exclusion in the workplace. **Chapter 2** explores stories of neurodivergent people at work, the human need to belong, and the holistic approach to inclusion. **Chapter 3** discusses the key idea of the Canary Code framework: contexts that support the most vulnerable support everyone.

The applications portion of the book is split into three parts. First, we discuss removing access barriers to work by improving recruitment, selection, onboarding, and accommodations. Then, we focus on removing success barriers by making the work environment, performance management, and organizational culture neuroinclusive. We conclude with an in-depth exploration of inclusive leadership and neurodivergent leadership. Each chapter contains case studies of organizational success and stories of neurodivergent individuals navigating work.

In Part 2, **Chapter 4** discusses the hiring process, starting with job descriptions and recruitment, and focuses on removing selection barriers irrelevant to the job but nevertheless faced by job seekers. **Chapter 5** examines training, onboarding, and accommodations and tackles pay, the elephant in the room of inclusion.

In Part 3, **Chapter 6** considers how the work is done and provides recommendations for optimizing physical work environments. **Chapter 7** offers tips for better work organization and scheduling to maximize both inclusion and productivity. Humans now have the opportunity to create much more flexible and inclusive work, and it is our responsibility not to squander this opportunity. **Chapter 8** explores psychological work environments that are so crucial to our well-being and outlines the principles of detoxifying organizational cultures and facilitating psychologically healthy work.

One of the key determinants of psychological health at work is performance management. **Chapter 9** outlines the principles of inclusive performance management that focuses accountability on outcomes and the substance of performance—not the surface characteristics that often bias evaluators.

Part 4 explores leadership in the context of neuroinclusion. **Chapter 10** focuses on the WHY of inclusive leadership, and **Chapter 11** provides tips for inclusive HOW. **Chapter 12** takes on a rarely discussed topic that is long overdue for some attention: neurodivergent individuals as leaders and the role of organizations in creating neuroinclusive leadership pathways. **Chapter 13** considers leadership from the perspective of neurodivergent leaders and provides advice for overcoming the deep stigma they face.

Finally, the **Conclusion** outlines the ways for everyone to lead and participate in changemaking and creating an inclusive future of work.

Let's build systems where good people can be good, and nobody feels unincludable. History suggests that so far, such systems have been possible but rare.

HUMAN HAPPENINGS

THE DITCH DIGGER SPOKE EIGHT LANGUAGES

The ditch digger spoke eight languages. He was a lean, tall man obsessed with cleanliness and accustomed to wearing elegant suits. Yet there he was, shoveling New York City dirt mixed with horse manure—this was 1886—and who knows what else.