NEXT FOR AUTISM



AUTISM AT WORK

ARE MANAGERS READY?

A National Survey of Managers on Their Awareness and Readiness of Supporting a Neurodiverse Workforce

A companion to *Inside the Autistic Workforce*

NEXT for AUTISM | 2026

AUTISM AT WORK: ARE MANAGERS READY?

A companion to *Inside the Autistic Workforce* | NEXT for AUTISM | 2026

For autistic employees, a workplace is often only as inclusive as the manager they report to. Policies and programs matter, but inclusion happens in everyday moments: how a manager gives feedback, handles a change in plans, or responds when someone discloses their diagnosis. Today's workforce includes more autistic and neurodivergent people, and more of them are choosing to be open about who they are.

NEXT for AUTISM wanted to know whether managers are ready to lead these increasingly neurodiverse teams. So we asked 521 managers what they know, how prepared they feel, and where they turn for help.

The good news is that managers want to build successful, sustainable neuroinclusive workplaces. But wanting it isn't the same as being ready.

More than 60% of managers feel prepared to support an employee who discloses their autism diagnosis. The challenge is only a third are confident in their ability to support an employee through the specifics of the accommodations process.

Most are learning on the job, often from the autistic employee themselves, and what works for one manager rarely reaches anyone else.

This report explores where the readiness gap is between organizations, managers and employees. Identifying this gap will help us build workplaces that are more proactive and better prepared to support their neurodiverse teams.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This report draws on two companion studies conducted in 2026 by NEXT for AUTISM in partnership with Sago, a global research firm, and funded by the Anita Bhatia Foundation for Tomorrow:

- Inside the Autistic Workforce: a national survey of 417 autistic adults, plus qualitative interviews with 26 autistic adults.
- Autism at Work: Are Managers Ready?: a national survey of 521 U.S. managers with at least one direct report.

The samples are independent: the managers surveyed are not the managers of the employees surveyed. Read side by side, though, they describe the same relationship from both ends. Throughout, we pair what autistic employees told us with the closest matching finding from managers. A full respondent profile and methodology appear at the end of this report.

Where this report refers to employee success, it uses the measure managers were asked about. NEXT for AUTISM recognizes that success should be defined by each person based on their own experience and goals.

WHAT READINESS LOOKS LIKE

Throughout this report, we use readiness to describe whether managers have the understanding, preparation, and flexibility to proactively support autistic and neurodivergent employees. The findings point to three core dimensions of manager readiness, supported by a fourth: whether the organization equips managers to succeed.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF MANAGER READINESS

UNDERSTAND

Recognize needs employees may not say out loud, such as masking, exhaustion, and silence, and respond by checking in and offering support, without asking for a diagnosis or disclosure.

PREPARE

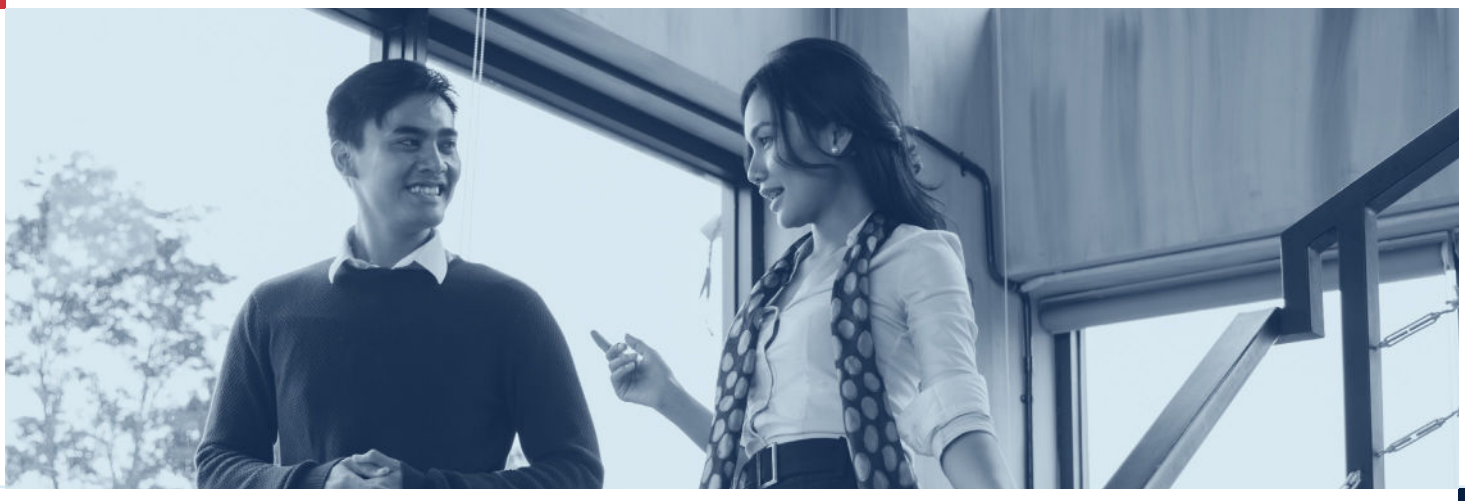
Be ready to respond when an employee discloses or asks for support, including what to say, what options to offer, and how to follow up.

ADAPT

Hold everyone to the same goals while changing how the work gets done, and turn what works for one employee into how the team works.

EQUIP (The organization's role)

Give managers the training, funding, resources, and a way to share what works, so readiness doesn't depend on luck or experience.



WHY READINESS MATTERS

The finding: Autistic employees and managers agree that the direct manager shapes whether an employee succeeds. And when an autistic employee decides to disclose, the manager needs to be ready because they are usually the first to hear it.

SEEN FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE DESK

AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES

79%

say their manager trusts them to do their job

MANAGERS

71%

say they significantly influence whether an employee succeeds

Employees and managers were asked different questions, but both point to the direct manager as central to success.

Mutually Assured Success

When asked to rate their employers on various elements of the culture, their relationships with their managers was ranked number one. Managers see it too: **71% say they have a significant influence on whether an employee succeeds at work**. Two independent studies, asking in different ways, reach the same conclusion, and both point to the same qualities.

Managers say the top traits of an effective manager are clear communication, fairness and consistency, problem solving, and building trust.

Much of what autistic employees value is simply good management: trust, room to work, and basic respect. The weakest point is understanding autism itself, which is where the rest of this report begins.

> I want to understand my fellow humans. Everyone deserves to be understood and have the opportunity to do the best they can even if everyone around them doesn't completely understand."
>
> — MANAGER

> It would help me the most if my managers understood that sometimes it's hard for me to ask for help and making that easier for me would help a lot."
>
> — AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE

The Disclosure Moment

Nearly all autistic employees (92%) had at least one concern about disclosing, most often being labeled or stereotyped. Disclosure is less a single event than a bet on a relationship, and employees usually place that bet with their manager.

Safety matters on both sides of the conversation. Autistic employees most often disclose because they feel safe being open, want better communication, trust their manager, and making employees feel comfortable and safe is among the things managers most want to do well. This is accompanied by providing support and understanding individual needs.

Disclosure carries real risk, and employees shouldn't have to take that risk before a manager is ready to understand them. Creating that safety is the manager's and the organization's responsibility, through how managers respond to questions, how they talk about difference, and whether the workplace signals that disclosure will be met with support.

Managers don't have to wait for a disclosure to make a difference. Learning to recognize signs of strain, such as masking or an employee who has gone quiet, and checking in can show that it's safe to be open. That kind of understanding builds trust, whether or not an employee ever chooses to disclose.

DISCLOSURE HAPPENS ON BOTH SIDES AT NEARLY THE SAME RATE

AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES

49%

have disclosed to a manager or supervisor (44% to HR)

MANAGERS

48%

have had an employee disclose that they are neurodivergent; more than a quarter had more than 1 employee disclose

READINESS: WHY IT MATTERS

THE MANAGER IS THE FRONT DOOR

HR policies matter, but the first experience with a disclosure usually comes from one person, in one conversation. That response sets the tone for everything after.

TRUST IS WHAT'S AT STAKE

When disclosure is handled well, it can strengthen the manager-employee relationship: **66% of managers** said the relationship improved, helping them better support the employee. A disclosure managed poorly can damage it and teach an employee not to ask again.

UNDERSTAND

The finding: Managers' understanding is thinnest exactly where autistic employees' strain is greatest: masking, and the needs employees don't say out loud.

A Limited Starting Point

About a half of managers had slightly to no familiarity of the term "neurodiversity", and only about one in five consider themselves very familiar with autism.

This is where a real shortfall shows up, not in effort, but in preparation. Managers aren't choosing not to know this; it simply isn't something most of them have been taught. But when that gap exists, it's the autistic employee who tends to fill it; teaching their own manager as an unspoken condition of getting support, adding further strain, stress and effort on the employee. That's a training and systems problem, not a character one, and closing it shouldn't be anyone's job but the organization's

Managers can't support what they don't understand. Many have limited familiarity with autism itself, let alone how it can show up in the workplace. That can make challenges like sensory overload, communication demands, social dynamics, and masking easy to miss.

> "It would help me the most if my managers understood that some social interactions are very stressful for me even though I seem to be understanding them well."
>
> — AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE

MASKING: THE WIDEST GAP



50% of autistic employees mask most of the time at work

16% of managers are not at all familiar with what masking is

Masking: The Least Understood Challenge

Masking means hiding or holding back autistic traits to fit in, including things like: forcing eye contact, suppressing stimming, scripting conversations, or hiding the need for routine. It takes real effort, and by design, it's hard to see. Of all the challenges managers rated, masking is the one they know least, but it has a huge impact on an autistic employees energy and wellbeing.

Understanding takes more than caring. Most managers want to be supportive. When asked the one thing they'd most want to do well, many named understanding individual needs or showing empathy and compassion. But caring about someone is different from understanding their experience.

Cognitive empathy, the ability to understand how a situation looks and feels from another person's point of view, is what helps a manager recognize that an employee who seems fine may be working hard to appear that way. Like any skill, it can be learned.

Hard to See, Harder to Support

We described situations autistic employees commonly face and asked managers whether they could confidently identify and support an employee in each one. The most common answer was some version of **"I could offer initial support, but I'd want guidance."**

Percentage of Managers Who Could Confidently Identify and Support Employees Who:

47%
Needs very clear, specific feedback

41%
Experiences sudden changes in priorities or disorganized tasks

37%
Has sensory sensitivities, such as to noise or lighting

36%
Rarely speaks up or raises concerns

33%
Seems worn down from constantly adapting to fit in

None of these situations reached a majority. Managers felt most confident with the most concrete need, clear and specific feedback, and least confident with the needs that are hardest to see, like an employee who is quiet or worn down from adapting to fit in.

The quiet employee deserves particular attention. Eighty-one percent of autistic employees find workplace social dynamics challenging, and many hold back questions or concerns to avoid standing out. Yet only 36% of managers could recognize an employee who rarely speaks up as a situation to respond to, the highest share of any situation tested.

Safety Comes Before Disclosure

Disclosure is one of the clearest ways managers learn. Managers who have had an employee disclose report more knowledge, more confidence, and more action. But disclosure can't be the starting point, because it depends on something that has to come first: psychological safety, the sense that it's safe to speak openly without being judged or penalized.

UNDERSTAND: WHY IT MATTERS

THE COSTLIEST NEEDS ARE THE LEAST VISIBLE

A manager who doesn't know what masking looks like may not see a problem until it shows up as burnout, a performance issue, or a resignation.

SILENCE IS NOT A STATUS REPORT

Quiet can mean everything is fine. It can also mean someone has learned that speaking up feels risky.

SIGNAL SAFETY BEFORE IT'S NEEDED

Talk openly about different working styles, respond to questions without judgment, and make clear that disclosure will be met with support.

PREPARE

The finding: Managers generally respond positively when an employee discloses, but many are learning how to handle these situations as they happen rather than being prepared in advance.

Good Instincts

When an employee discloses, most managers take action. About half changed how they managed or communicated (51%), followed up proactively (51%), or discussed accommodations directly (48%). Two-thirds (66%) say the relationship improved afterward; only about 1 in 10 say it got worse. These are encouraging signs, but disclosure still too often fails to lead to meaningful action. Only about half of managers followed up after an employee disclosed, meaning many employees took a real personal risk and may have seen little or no change in return. That is a significant cost to employees and a missed opportunity for managers and organizations. When disclosure leads to stronger manager-employee relationships, the benefits can extend well beyond that individual interaction, supporting better work, stronger teams, greater retention, and a more psychologically safe workplace.

The challenge is turning good intentions into consistent action, not only in the moment of disclosure, but in the follow-up and ongoing support that comes after.

Thin Preparation

At a high level, managers feel prepared to support an employee who discloses. But when asked to apply that readiness to specific scenarios, far fewer feel confident in what to do.

ASKED IN GENERAL

61%

feel very or extremely prepared to support an employee who discloses

90%

could point an employee toward accommodation options

78%

want to learn how to better support neurodivergent employees

ASKED ABOUT SPECIFICS

NEARLY 8 in 10

worry about saying or doing the wrong thing

33%

could confidently walk them through the process

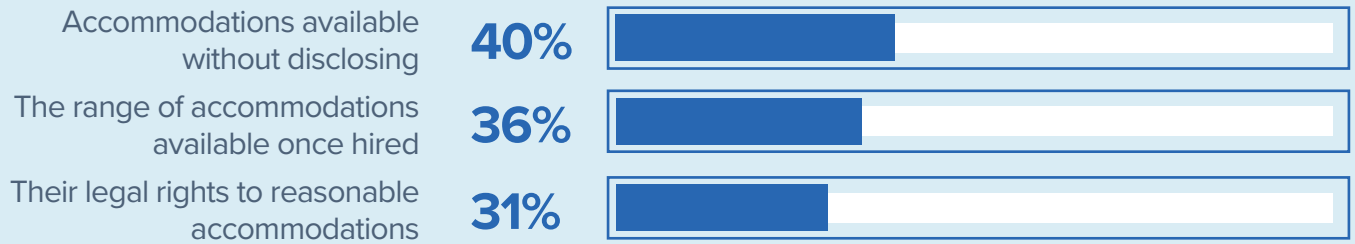
None

In **none** of the specific situations tested did a majority feel confident

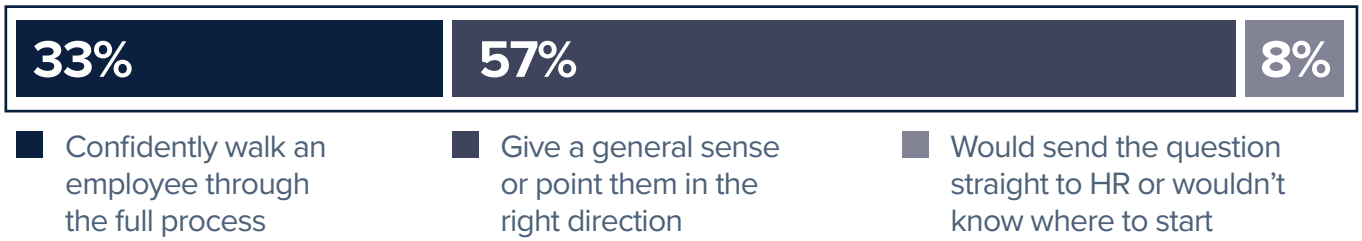
Partial Knowledge on Both Sides of the Desk

When an employee asks about accommodations, the manager usually has a general idea but not the details, and the employee often isn't sure what's possible either.

AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES SAY THEY ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH...



MANAGERS SAY: IF AN EMPLOYEE ASKED ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS, I COULD...



The gap usually isn't a blank. It's partial knowledge on both sides, and when neither person knows the options, the conversation stalls or the employee ends up doing the research.

> "One thing I learned is that accommodations can make a huge difference even when they seem small."
>
> — MANAGER

PREPARE: WHY IT MATTERS

THE FIRST DISCLOSURE SHOULDN'T BE THE TRAINING

Right now, many managers learn how to handle a disclosure by experiencing one, with an employee on the other side of the conversation. Preparing managers before that moment is an organizational responsibility: employers need to provide clear guidance, practice, and access to support rather than expecting each manager to build that knowledge independently.

WORRY, NOT UNWILLINGNESS, IS THE OBSTACLE

Managers want to help. A clear playbook turns good instincts into confident action.

MANAGERS CAN OFFER ONLY WHAT THEY KNOW EXISTS

Options available without formal disclosure are the ones employees know least and managers are least likely to raise.

ADAPT

The finding: Support is still largely reactive. Managers wait to be asked, hesitate over fairness, and keep what works to one employee.

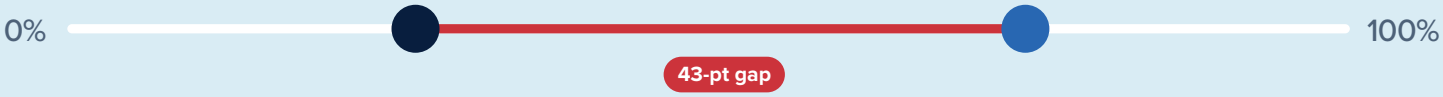
Support Waits to Be Asked For

Managers are split almost evenly on how they approach different work styles: 38% keep standardized expectations across the team "to ensure equity and fairness," 38% tailor their approach to each person, and 24% adjust only if an employee explicitly asks.

That split shows up in practice. Over the past six months, most adjustments to tasks, hours, feedback, or workspace happened only after an employee asked. Fitting tasks to individual strengths is the most common regular habit, but only 34% do it for most or all employees. Adjusting the workspace is least common: 26% do it regularly, while 15% never have.

33%
of managers routinely ask each direct report how they prefer to receive feedback

76%
of autistic employees say unclear feedback has been a barrier at a current or past job



47% of managers could confidently support an employee who needs very clear, specific feedback

64% of autistic employees say they receive clear instructions and feedback

More than a third of autistic employees are left without consistently clear instructions and feedback, which can mean spending energy guessing at expectations instead of meeting them. Simple practices can help: brief written instructions, bullet-point emails, and agendas with follow-up notes. Most would benefit anyone on a team.

> "I work really, really well with brief specific written communication. As an analyst, I really need to know the details and have things spelled out for me so there is no misunderstanding."
>
> — AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE

Managers Reveal Their Top 4 Roadblocks to Accommodations

When asked what gets in the way, managers don't point to a skills gap first. Their top three barriers are all versions of the same tension:

34%
cite treating everyone fairly while accommodating differences

32%
cite balancing individual needs against business demands

31%
cite maintaining consistent expectations across the team

13%
Only 13% name a lack of training or guidance, the same share that cites limited authority to make changes.

These barriers point to a tension that runs through the data: some managers may see fairness as treating everyone the same, rather than holding everyone to the same expectations. That can make individualized support feel like an exception, even when the goal is the same.

Managers' views on neurodiversity and how to support them vary widely. Managers who had an employee disclose were asked what they learned from that experience. One answered:

> That all neurodivergent people are different."
>
> — MANAGER

A small number of managers pushed back on the idea of learning to support neurodivergent employees at all. Asked to explain their level of interest, one wrote:

> Come to work and do your job. Leave the labels in the car."
>
> — MANAGER

These views are the exception: **78% of managers want to learn how to better support neurodivergent employees**. But they show there is still work to do in building a shared understanding of neurodiversity and what inclusion looks like in practice.

Equal vs. Equitable

Fair doesn't mean identical. Equal treatment gives everyone the same thing. Equitable treatment gives each person what they need to reach the same goal. For example, two employees may have the same deadline, but one may need written instructions instead of verbal directions. The expectation stays the same; the path to meeting it can be different.

Fairness, Voice, and the Daily Manager

Managers do not always personally value the same things their workplace culture rewards. We saw that most clearly around **flexibility** and **speaking up**.

	ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE	MANAGER'S PERSONAL PREFERENCE
FLEXIBILITY	**45%** say their workplace gives employees flexibility in how they get their work done — compared with — **34%** who say it emphasizes following standard procedures	**50%** personally value employees who can adapt and work flexibly — while only — **19%** prefer employees to closely follow established processes
SPEAKING UP	**50%** say their workplace encourages employees to question decisions, raise concerns, and admit mistakes — compared with — **28%** who say their culture places more emphasis on hierarchy and protocol	But managers themselves are more divided: **ONLY 24%** say they value employees who question decisions or challenge assumptions **40%** prefer employees who align with decisions and move forward without pushback.

How We Asked

Managers rated their organization's culture and their own preference on a five-point scale between two approaches: flexibility in how work gets done versus following established procedures, and speaking up versus prioritizing alignment and hierarchy.

What It Means

The biggest gap is around speaking up: managers are less likely than their organizations to welcome questions and pushback. Employees experience culture through one manager, but managers don't create it alone. What organizations reward, model, and train for decides whether inclusive practices become the norm or remain individual choices.

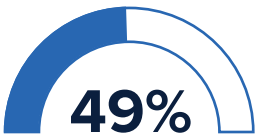
There is also common ground. Autistic employees described strengths such as attention to detail, deep focus, and pattern recognition, and managers said they value many of the same qualities.



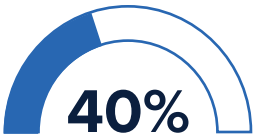
From One Employee to the Whole Team

An employee asks for written instructions, a quieter place to work, or a heads-up before priorities shift. The manager tries it, and it works. Most often, the learning stays local.

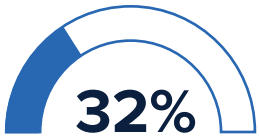
What Managers Do With an Approach That Works



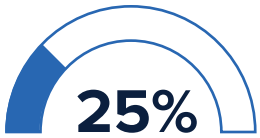
Apply it to that one employee



Try it with other employees who may benefit



Share it informally with peer managers



Raise it with leadership for organizational adoption

More than 1 in 10 don't necessarily recognize what they've learned as transferable at all. The 40% who try a successful approach with others are practicing the core of universal design: building work to fit a wider range of people from the start. The accommodations autistic employees most often receive already fit that idea: flexible hours and breaks, flexible leave, regular check-ins, and written instructions or checklists. These are practices that can benefit many employees, not only those who request them.

The broader opportunity is to shift some of the adapting from the employee to the work itself and to team culture.

ADAPT: WHY IT MATTERS

FAIR MEANS THE SAME GOALS, REACHED BY DIFFERENT ROUTES

Identical treatment looks neutral but quietly gives less to anyone whose needs differ from the default.

CULTURE IS EXPERIENCED ONE MANAGER AT A TIME

But built organization-wide. An organization's commitment to voice reaches an employee only if their own manager shares it.

EVERY SOLUTION THAT STAYS LOCAL GETS REINVENTED

The next manager starts from scratch, and the employee has to explain their needs all over again. Team culture doesn't move forward either.

EQUIP

The finding: Managers are more likely to learn from the employee or their own research than from employer training or HR. The findings and outcomes typically stay with the manager, and rarely get incorporated into broader organizational practices or policies.

Where Managers Turn

When managers have supported a neurodivergent employee, the resource they draw on most is the employee. Formal employer training ranks fourth, and HR fifth.



Asking the employee is a good instinct. But it only works if the employee knows their options, and many don't. When the main resource is the employee, the work of explaining falls on the person who needs support.

When managers discover something that works for one employee, most keep it close. About half apply the adjustment to how they manage that employee going forward, and two in five extend it to other employees they think might benefit. From there, it drops off: roughly a third share it informally with peer managers, write it down for later, or pass it on to whoever manages that employee next, and only about a quarter raise it with HR or leadership as something the organization could use more broadly. One in ten managers say they don't typically think of these adjustments as something transferable at all.

Willing, but Without Backing

Managers face two practical limits. The first is resources: about one in four receive no professional development funding. The second is authority: 13% say they don't have enough say to make changes that would help an employee. Together, these help explain why what works rarely spreads. Only a quarter of managers raise a successful approach with leadership.

An Open Question: Retention

Managers clearly see their influence on whether an employee succeeds. Yet asked to choose the single biggest factor in keeping employees from leaving, they rank the manager relationship last of seven factors (11%), behind compensation (18%), meaningful work (17%), career growth (15%), and culture (15%).

This study didn't measure whether employees stay or leave, and we don't claim the manager relationship drives retention on its own. But the employee data shows how much that relationship can vary, and how closely it tracks with trust. For organizations counting on managers to help retain talented autistic employees, it is a contributing factor worth measuring.



EQUIP: WHY IT MATTERS

READINESS IS CURRENTLY SELF-BUILT

When managers learn on their own time from their own sources, readiness will be uneven.

WHAT ISN'T MEASURED ISN'T MANAGED

If the manager relationship matters to retention, it belongs in the data organizations already collect.

READINESS TO SUPPORT ISN'T EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

The finding: Readiness varies substantially with prior disclosure experience and also differs across generations.

Experience and Readiness Go Hand in Hand

Managers who have had an employee disclose report more readiness on nearly every measure: what they know, how confident they feel, and what they do.

	MANAGERS WHO HAVE HAD EMPLOYEE(S) DISCLOSE	MANAGERS WHO HAVE NOT HAD EMPLOYEE(S) DISCLOSE
Good familiarity with autism	**64%**	34%
Very or extremely familiar with "neurodiversity"	**48%**	18%
Had never heard the term "neurodiversity"	6%	**25%**
Very or extremely familiar with masking	**54%**	21%
Could confidently walk an employee through accommodation options	**43%**	23%

The difference is not just in confidence. It shows up in managers' actions, too. Managers who have had a disclosure are more likely to have proactively customized a role around an employee's strengths (44% vs. 36%) and to raise a successful approach with HR or leadership (35% vs. 16%).

This doesn't mean disclosure alone makes a manager ready. It may prompt managers to learn more, or employees may choose to tell managers who already seem open and informed. Managers who have heard a disclosure also tend to be younger and more likely to know someone who is neurodivergent. Either way, readiness tends to arrive with experience rather than before it.

Different Starting Points by Manager Generation

Each generation was associated with some of the largest differences in familiarity, disclosure experience, perceived preparedness, and development funding.

	GEN Z	MILLENNIALS	GEN X	BABY BOOMERS
Understand: had never heard "neurodiversity"	7%	9%	**19%**	**29%**
Understand: not at all familiar with masking	6%	7%	**18%**	**36%**
Prepare: have had an employee disclose	**76%**	48%	41%	28%
Prepare: would feel well prepared to respond	34%	**41%**	29%	24%
Equip: receive no professional development funding	8%	**26%**	**34%**	**34%**

Bold figures are significantly higher than at least one other generation at the 95% confidence level.

Gen Z managers report more direct experience with disclosure and greater access to development funding. One possible factor is where they learn: Gen Z managers are nearly four times as likely as Baby Boomer managers to turn to social media to learn about management. Other factors likely play a role, including knowing someone who is neurodivergent. Familiarity is not the same as readiness, however: Gen Z managers were no more confident than others supporting an employee who is masking.

These are not measures of who is a better manager. They show that each generation in this sample entered the survey with different exposure and resources, reinforcing the need to meet managers at different starting points.

DISCLOSURE: WHY IT MATTERS

WHAT EXPERIENCE TEACHES, TRAINING CAN TEACH SOONER

Most managers get better after their first disclosure. They could be ready before it.

NO TWO MANAGERS START FROM THE SAME PLACE

Training shouldn't assume they do.

A CLEARER PATH FORWARD

Managers want to get this right. The survey results point to four practical priorities, each responding directly to a gap surfaced across the two studies.

UNDERSTAND

Build foundational knowledge. Teach managers about autism and neurodiversity, the strengths autistic employees may bring, and the challenges they commonly face at work, such as sensory overload, communication overload, social dynamics, and masking. Pair learning with practice, routine check-ins, and measures of what changes.

Make check-ins part of everyday management. Ask every employee how they work best and whether anything would help them work more effectively, including employees who are quiet or have already disclosed. Train managers to recognize less visible signs of strain, such as masking, sensory overload, difficulty with shifting priorities, or rarely asking questions or raising concerns. The goal is not to ask about a diagnosis, but to stay curious and offer support before a problem escalates.

PREPARE

Give every manager a simple playbook. Cover disclosure and accommodations, including what autism is, the strengths and challenges autistic employees may bring, what to say, what to keep confidential, what options exist, when to involve HR, and when and how to follow up.

Practice before the moment. Use scenarios so managers can respond to disclosure, explain options available with or without formal disclosure, and follow up proactively.

EQUIP

Meet managers where they are. Offer development at more than one level and fund access to vetted resources, rather than leaving managers to learn from the employee or a search engine.

Build organizational memory. With employee consent, record and share what works across manager transitions, and include the manager relationship in engagement and exit data.

Reinforce inclusion through communication. Share inclusive practices, expectations, and successes internally and externally. Consistent messaging can help demonstrate that inclusion is part of how the organization works and create an environment where employees and managers feel safer speaking openly and asking for support.

ADAPT

Define fairness around outcomes, not sameness. Set consistent goals while allowing flexibility in how employees reach them, and give managers concrete examples across feedback, scheduling, communication, and workspace. Include how managers can respond when employees ask detailed questions or challenge a process.

Make individual preferences routine. Ask every employee how they prefer feedback, instructions, and communication, then turn broadly useful practices, such as meeting agendas and written follow-up, into team norms.

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S NEXT

Closing the readiness gap doesn't require different people in the manager's chair. It requires openness, preparation, and a clearer understanding of what a fair, equitable, and inclusive workplace looks like.

The direct manager relationship is one of the strongest opportunities for improving the autistic employee experience. Most managers are open and willing. They agree on what good management looks like, they want to learn, and most respond well when an employee opens up to them. What's missing is readiness that arrives before the moment that tests it.

Manager development isn't a supplemental training line item. It's core inclusion infrastructure, supporting disclosure, accommodations, advancement, and retention alike. What matters is whether learning translates into better day-to-day management. Organizations can measure that by tracking follow-up after disclosure and including the manager relationship in engagement data.

Autistic employees told us their manager matters. Managers told us they want to get it right. Between those two answers is knowledge that can be taught, practices that can be shared, and support that employers can choose to provide.

Good management impacts more than autistic employees. Clear expectations, better communication, thoughtful flexibility, and stronger manager relationships benefit the whole team.

Managers want to lead. Their organizations have to get them ready.

ARE YOUR MANAGERS READY?

Get started at **nextforautism.org/workplace-resources**



ABOUT NEXT FOR AUTISM

NEXT for AUTISM transforms the national landscape of services for people with autism by strategically designing, launching, and supporting innovative programs. We believe that individuals with autism deserve to live fulfilling, productive lives, supported by excellent services and connected to their communities. We continually ask, what's next for people on the autism spectrum? Learn more at **NEXTforAUTISM.org**.

Survey Methodology

The manager findings are based on a 15-minute online national survey conducted by NEXT for AUTISM in partnership with Sago among 521 U.S. adults ages 18 to 80 who were working full-time, part-time, or self-employed and had at least one direct report. Employee findings come from Inside the Autistic Workforce (2026), a 20-minute online survey of 417 U.S. autistic adults ages 21 to 60, plus qualitative research with 26 autistic adults. The two samples are independent.

Both surveys used non-probability online samples. This is standard for this kind of research, but the results do not strictly represent all autistic employees or all U.S. managers, and no margin of sampling error is reported. All findings are self-reported. Differences between groups of managers described in this report are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Unless otherwise indicated, all data points are from NEXT for AUTISM surveys.

Manager Respondent Profile

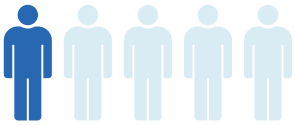
- 521 U.S. managers, ages 18–80, each with at least one direct report; 78% full-time, 11% part-time, 11% self-employed
- Generations: 21% Gen Z (18–29), 31% Millennials (30–45), 29% Gen X (46–61), 19% Baby Boomers (62–80)
- 58% men, 42% women
- 74% have four or more years of management experience, from team leads and supervisors to directors and VPs, with one to more than 25 direct reports
- Organizations from fewer than 50 employees (34%) to more than 1,000 (17%); 67% of teams work primarily on-site
- Industries include retail, construction, restaurant and food service, health care, software, financial and professional services, and manufacturing
- 33% report a neurodivergent or related condition of their own, such as ADHD, anxiety, or depression; 2% are autistic; 74% personally know someone who is neurodivergent

WHY MANAGERS MATTER

49% of autistic employees have disclosed their autism diagnosis to a manager or supervisor, a higher rate than to HR (44%).

NEXT FOR AUTISM

Awareness Is Just the Beginning



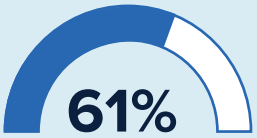
Only about 1 in 5 managers consider themselves very familiar with autism.

About **HALF OF MANAGERS** have little to no familiarity with the term neurodiversity.



79% of autistic employees find masking and the exhaustion that follows challenging, yet only 37% of managers are very or extremely familiar with masking.

The Readiness Gap



of managers feel very or extremely prepared to support an employee who discloses their autism diagnosis



could confidently walk an employee through the accommodations process.

Opportunity for Action



78% of managers want to learn how to better support neurodivergent employees.



only **28%** of managers who have supported a neurodivergent employee turned to formal employer training, compared with 48% who turned to the employee themselves.

Additional Insights

FAIRNESS IS A CHALLENGE

34% of managers cite treating everyone fairly while accommodating individual differences as a top barrier.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ARE STRIKING

76% of Gen Z managers have had an employee disclose that they are neurodivergent, compared with 48% of Millennials, 41% of Gen X, and 28% of Baby Boomers.

DISCLOSURE CAN STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

66% of managers who experienced a disclosure say their relationship with that employee improved afterward.