



# **Development and Retention of Autistic Staff in Hospitality**

## **Module 6**

### **Work Environment Management**

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Project Number 2023-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000152721

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### **Using the PERFORM Trainer's Guide**

The PERFORM Trainer's Guide has been designed specifically to support the delivery of the Vocational Education Curriculum developed in the context of the PERFORM project. The Curriculum constitutes a 1,5-day course, a total of 12 hours of training.

## Slide 1: Introduction

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PERFORM

# DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION OF AUTISTIC STAFF IN HOSPITALITY

Project Number 2023-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000152721



### Trainer's Notes:

Introduce yourself and dedicate some time to introduce learners to the PERFORM project. Describe the learning objectives of the course as well as Module 3; learners will be educated on Work Environment Management.

- What is an autism-friendly work environment
- The development of team management skills in an inclusive workplace
- Assessing and adapting the work environment in an autism-friendly hospitality context

Give learners the opportunity to introduce themselves and ask about their expectations.

## Slide 2: About the PERFORM Project

### ABOUT:


The 'PERFORM' project is about educating Hospitality Managers and HR Experts in developing and supporting Autistic Staff in the EU Hospitality Sector. It also delivers an Innovative HR Platform, for performance appraisals and employee monitoring.

### PROJECT RESULTS

- 1 Project Result 1: PERFORM HR Platform
- 2 Project Result 2: PERFORM Digital Toolkit
- 3 Project Result 3: VET Course for Hospitality Managers and HR Experts



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### Trainer's Notes:

Describe the concept of PERFORM and give a brief description of each Project Result.

## Slide 3: Module Aims and Outcomes


### Module 3 : Work Environment Management

#### Module Aim


In order to support the Development and Retention of Autistic Staff, Hospitality Managers and HR Experts need to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to appropriately evaluate and adapt the Work Environment. This module aims to do so.

#### Learning Outcomes

- 1 To give the understanding the Definition of an Autism-friendly Work Environment
- 2 The Development of Team Management Skills in inclusive workplace
- 3 Provide Guidelines for assessing and adapting the Work Environment in an Autism-friendly context



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### Trainer's Notes:

Explain the main aim of this module: to help managers and HR professionals in the hospitality sector understand how to support autistic employees more effectively. The focus

is on recognizing barriers in the work environment, improving team management skills, and learning how to create inclusive, autism-friendly workplaces.

Make the disclaimer that even though it is important to bear in mind that all individuals are different, it is possible to use generic tools to support decision making when creating an inclusive and autism friendly organisation (Matusiak, 2023). Most people on the spectrum operate best when they are in a structured environment (Oesch, 2019). With the right tools in place, hiring employees with autism can provide multiple benefits like increasing diversity, filling skills gaps, and deploying an almost untapped yet competitive and talented group of individuals (Oesch, 2019).

#### **Slide 4: Module content**

### **Module 3: Module content**

- 1. Defining an Autism Friendly Work Environment**
- 2. Sensory Overload**
  - Tactile
  - Auditory
  - Visual
- 3. Best Practices for Sensory Accommodation**
- 4. Inclusive Management Skills**
- 5. Building inclusive Teams**

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#### **Trainer's Notes:**

List the content of the presentation.

## Slide 5-8: What is an autism friendly work environment?



Introduce the section.



### Trainer's Notes:

Suggested activities:

- Ask the team what they think an Autism friendly environment is and write their responses on a whiteboard.

or

- Split the team into the smaller groups and invite them to write their definition of the Autism friendly environment.. Give them 10 minutes for the discussions and invite each group to share their responses

or

- invite the team to name the aspects of Autism friendly environment. Write it down and compare it with your next slide



Physical environment  
Social environment  
Organizational culture:

- o Job tasks and responsibilities
- o Work-life balance





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Sensory accommodations  
Clear communication  
Flexibility  
Routine  
Inclusive culture  
Supportive management

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Explain that an autism-friendly work environment means making intentional changes so that autistic employees feel safe, supported, and able to succeed. It's not about giving everyone the same treatment—it's about giving people what they specifically need. This might include

sensory supports, clearer communication, or flexible routines.

Explain that it often requires more focus on:

**Sensory accommodations:** The work environment should be designed to minimize sensory overload, such as reducing background noise or providing sensory tools like noise-cancelling headphones or fidget toys.

**Clear communication:** Communication should be clear and direct, with an emphasis on written instructions or visual aids when possible.

**Flexibility:** Scheduling and work arrangements should be flexible to accommodate the individual needs of employees with autism, such as allowing for breaks when needed or offering work from home options.


**Routine:** Changes in schedules can be challenging for individuals with autism due to the importance of routine and predictability for many individuals on the autism spectrum. Some individuals with autism may become anxious or distressed when there are unexpected changes to their schedule or routine, and may struggle to adjust to new expectations or activities.


**Inclusive culture:** The workplace culture should be inclusive and accepting of neurodiversity, with education and training provided to colleagues to help them understand and support individuals with autism.

**Supportive management:** Managers should be trained in how to support employees with autism, including recognizing the signs of sensory overload and knowing how to provide accommodations.


## Slide 9-10: How can the work environment feel like?

What can the work environment **feel** like for an individual with autism?





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### Trainer's Notes:

Ask the team what they think a typical type of work environment can feel like for an individual with autism?

# 2. SENSORY OVERLOAD



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Introduction to the next slides about sensory disturbances that neurotypical usually do not mind, but that can have a huge effect on the autistic employee causing sensory overload.


## Slide 11: Tactile issues

# TACTILE ISSUES


A person who is hyper-responsive (over-responsive) to touch may:

- avoid or be bothered by light touch;
- be bothered by certain fabrics, textures or clothes;
- be bothered by tags on clothing;
- have an aversion to normal skin-contact interactions, handshakes for example;
- get very upset by minor bruises;
- being resistant on wearing protective clothing or using safety aids etc.





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### Trainer's Notes:

**Trainer's notes:** Describe possible tactile issues individuals with autism may experience

Many individuals with autism have tactile sensitivities, meaning they may have difficulty processing or tolerating certain types of touch or textures. This can impact their ability to work in a variety of ways. Tactile sensitivities can be distracting or uncomfortable, making it difficult for individuals with autism to focus on their work. Certain materials or textures may be triggering, making it difficult for the individual to feel comfortable or safe in their work environment.

A person with autism who is hyper-responsive (over-responsive) to touch may:

- avoid or be bothered by light touch;
- be bothered by certain fabrics, textures or clothes;
- be bothered by tags on clothing;
- have an aversion to normal skin-contact interactions, handshakes for example;
- get very upset by minor bruises;
- being resistant on wearing protective clothing or using safety aids etc.

**Add the sidenote that sometimes autism means to be hypo-responsive (under-responsive) to touch may:**

- touch people (even when it's inappropriate);

- have an innate desire to touch different textures; possess an unusually high or low pain threshold. etc (Sher 2016, p.27-28)

### **Group Activities:**

- **Group activity No 1.** Invite the team to develop a scenario with the sensory overload cases at workplace they don't know how to solve. There are two examples:

#### **Scenario 1:**

An employee with autism who is sensitive to loud noises is working in an open office space.

Suddenly, there is a loud burst of noise from a nearby construction site, causing the employee to become overwhelmed and agitated. They try to block out the noise by putting on noise-cancelling headphones, but the noise is still too loud. The employee becomes unable to concentrate on their work and needs to take a break to calm down.

#### **Scenario 2:**

An employee with autism who is sensitive to strong smells is working in a laboratory where strong chemicals are used. The employee becomes overwhelmed by the strong smells, causing them to feel sick and dizzy. They need to leave the lab and take a break to recover. The rest of the team is unsure how to support the employee, as they are not familiar with their sensory sensitivities. The situation leads to a delay in the project and decreased productivity.


- **Group activity No 2.** Invite the audience to name their sensory challenges at workplace. This task will help them to develop the empathy and understanding of the sensory challenges for the persons with Autism.


## Slide 12: Visual distractions

# VISUAL DISTRACTIONS


Person with Autism who are hyper-responsive (over-responsive) to visual stimulation may:

- be bothered by bright or fluorescent lights;
- be bothered by patterns;
- have trouble reading high-contrast materials (such as black on white);
- squint, blink, or rub their eyes frequently.





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### Trainer's Notes:

**Trainer's notes:** Describe the types of visual processing differences autistic individuals may experience and explore how these may affect comfort, focus, and participation in the workplace. Visual hypersensitivity is when an individual has an intense or exaggerated response to certain visual stimuli. This can include bright lights, flashing lights, crowded environments, or certain patterns or textures. Visual hypersensitivity can cause discomfort, anxiety, or even physical pain in some individuals. Visual hyposensitivity, on the other hand, is when an individual has a reduced sensitivity or response to visual stimuli. This can make it difficult for them to notice or process certain visual information, such as written instructions or visual cues in the workplace.

### Activity:

Divide participants into small groups. Ask each group to:

1. Identify common visual triggers in hospitality environments (e.g. lighting, signage, clutter).
2. Brainstorm practical strategies to reduce or eliminate these triggers (e.g. soft lighting, simplified visual layouts, personal adjustments).
3. Role-play a scenario where an employee discloses visual sensitivity and the team responds supportively.

*Goal:* Encourage problem-solving, inclusive thinking, and respectful communication strategies that can be applied in real work settings.

## Slide 13-14: Audial distractions

# AUDIAL DISTRACTIONS

### Hypo-responsive (under-responsive)

- seeks out noisy situations or specific noises;
- makes noise to themselves or make noise "for noise's sake";
- do not respond to verbal cues (even when called by name);
- likes excessively loud music;
- seems oblivious to certain sounds;
- do not understand or remember things said to them



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# AUDIAL DISTRACTIONS

### Hyper-responsive (over-responsive) :

- is easily distracted by noise;
- makes their own noise to drown out other sounds;
- dislikes noisy appliances (printers, air conditioners, ventilators, chatting) etc;
- notices background noises others don't seem to hear;
- frequently asks people to be quiet—to stop talking or singing.



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## Trainer's Notes:

Explain that sound can be a major challenge. Some people are overwhelmed by background noise; others may not register it well. Offer support through things like noise-cancelling headphones, quiet work zones, or written communication.

## **Group activity**

Ask participants to work in small groups to brainstorm ways to make the workplace more comfortable for autistic employees with sound sensitivities.

1. Start by identifying common auditory triggers, such as loud machinery, overlapping conversations, or sudden noises.
2. Discuss strategies to reduce or manage these sounds—for example, by using quieter equipment, offering noise-cancelling headphones, or creating quiet break areas.
3. Role-play a situation where a colleague is overwhelmed by noise, and the team responds with support and understanding.

Goal: Help trainees practice problem-solving and learn how to respond respectfully to sensory needs in real workplace situations.

## **Individual Activity**

Play a set of simulated audio recordings that include different types of overwhelming sounds—such as construction noise, multiple people talking at once, or high-pitched alarms.

Ask trainees to listen carefully and write down:

1. How the sounds make them feel
2. Whether they find it difficult to focus
3. Any signs of discomfort, frustration, or anxiety

Goal: This helps trainees understand what sensory overload might feel like for someone who is sensitive to sound, and why certain accommodations are important in the workplace.

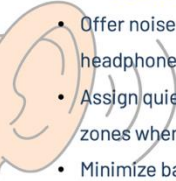
## Slide 15-16: Best practices for sensory adjustments

# 3. BEST PRACTICES FOR SENSORY ADJUSTMENTS




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### Sound (Auditory)

- Offer noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs
- Assign quieter tasks or zones when possible
- Minimize background noise in staff areas
- Provide written instructions to supplement verbal ones





### Light (Visual)

- Use soft, adjustable lighting (avoid fluorescent lights)
- Install blinds or allow sunglasses/caps
- Reduce visual clutter in shared spaces
- Provide clear, simple signage



### Touch (Tactile)

- Allow alternative uniform fabrics
- Respect personal space and physical contact preferences
- Provide fidget tools or sensory items if helpful
- Offer quiet break areas for regulation



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### Trainer's Notes:

Summarize the most common practices for sound, light, and touch;

- Sound: quiet zones, headphones, written communication
- Light: soft lighting, blinds, clutter-free spaces
- Touch: clothing flexibility, personal space, sensory tools

## Slide 17-18: Inclusive Management Skills

# 4. INCLUSIVE MANAGEMENT SKILLS



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## SUPPORTING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES THROUGH INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

Promote autonomy	Respect emotional expression
Provide structure	Reframe social participation
Adapt communication	Avoid assumptions
Rethink feedback	Train managers and teams
Assign based on strengths	



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### Trainer's Notes:

Explain that inclusive leadership involves adapting your management style to support diverse ways of working, communicating, and participating. Key elements include:

- **Providing extra structure:** Create predictable routines and inform staff in advance of any changes. Consistency helps reduce anxiety.
- **Adapting communication:** Use clear, direct language. Offer written instructions alongside verbal ones. Avoid metaphors, sarcasm, or indirect phrasing.
- **Rethinking feedback:** Give timely, specific, and supportive feedback. Avoid vague praise or criticism. Understand that emotional reactions may vary.
- **Assigning based on strengths:** Match roles and tasks to the individual's interests, skills, and sensory preferences. Recognize the value of focused, detail-oriented work.
- **Respecting emotional expression:** Don't assume that lack of eye contact or limited verbal response means disinterest or disengagement.
- **Reframing social participation:** Normalize quieter or more limited social interaction. Inclusion doesn't mean everyone has to socialize the same way.
- **Promoting autonomy:** Allow employees to work independently where possible, based on clear goals and expectations. Avoid unnecessary micromanagement.
- **Training teams:** Educate supervisors and colleagues to understand autism, respect differences, and support inclusive collaboration.

These practices not only support autistic staff but help build stronger, more flexible teams overall.

## Slide 19-20: Team management skills

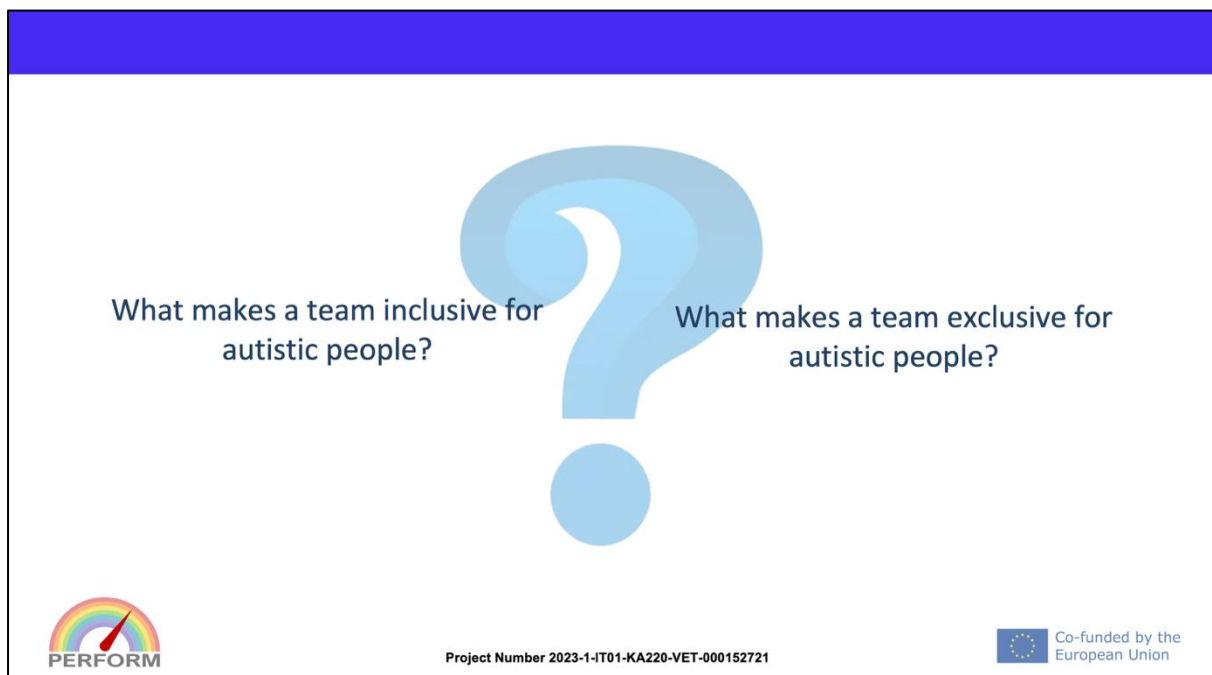


# 5. TEAM MANAGEMENT & BUILDING INCLUSIVE TEAMS





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## What makes a team inclusive for autistic people?

## What makes a team exclusive for autistic people?



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### Trainer's Notes:

**Practical task:** Explain that this module also focuses on building inclusive teams and developing team management skills that support autistic employees.

Explain why Inclusive Teams Matter: Inclusion benefits everyone. When autistic employees feel respected and supported, they are more likely to thrive, collaborate, and stay engaged.

Teams that welcome diverse thinking become more creative, adaptable, and effective. Inclusive team cultures also improve employee retention and trust.

Discuss the questions on slide 20.

### Slide 21: Preventing bullying and isolation



#### Trainer's Notes:

Use real data to show the risks of inaction. Explain that autistic employees face higher rates of exclusion even in well-meaning workplaces.

#### Key Statistics (UK 2018):

- 75% of autistic adults experienced isolation at work
- 58% reported bullying or harassment
- 42% said anxiety stemmed from social interaction

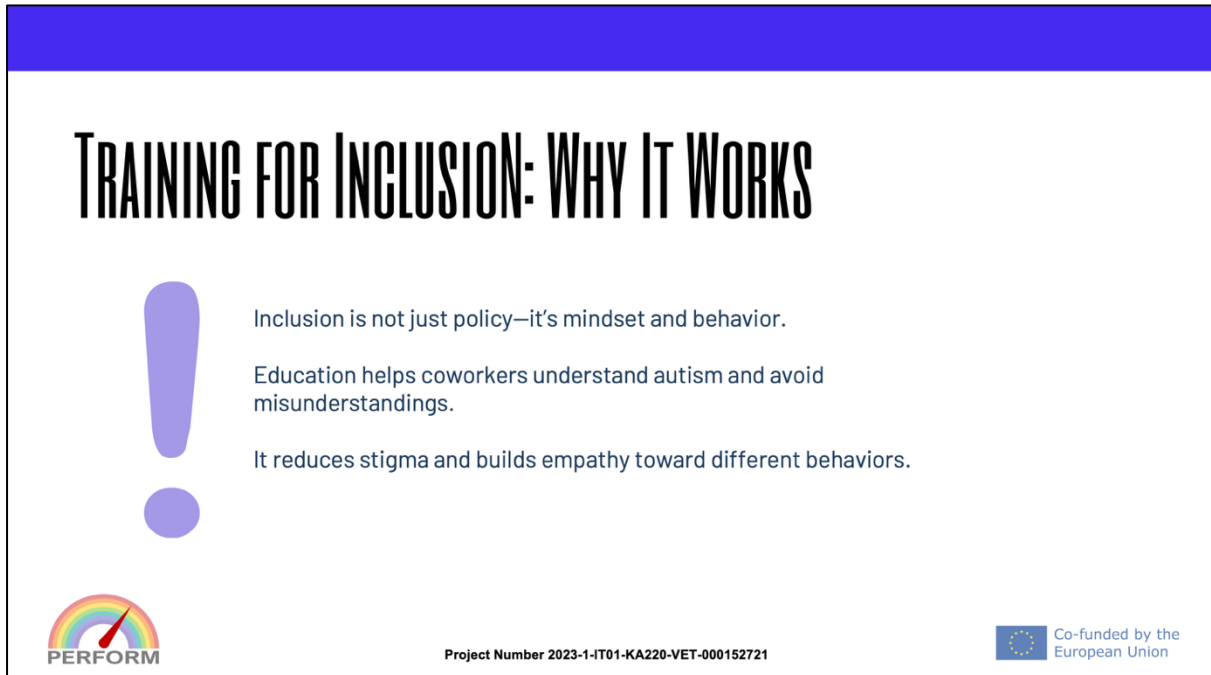
#### Explain the underlying causes:

- Lack of autism awareness among coworkers
- Misinterpretation of social behavior

- Poor management of team dynamics

And explain how this shows how important it is to create environments that prevent isolation and harassment before they happen.

## Slide 22: Training for inclusion: why it works

The slide has a blue header bar. The title "TRAINING FOR INCLUSION: WHY IT WORKS" is in large, bold, black, all-caps font. To the left of the text is a large purple exclamation mark. To the right of the exclamation mark are three lines of text: "Inclusion is not just policy—it's mindset and behavior.", "Education helps coworkers understand autism and avoid misunderstandings.", and "It reduces stigma and builds empathy toward different behaviors." At the bottom left is the PERFORM logo. At the bottom center is the text "Project Number 2023-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000152721". At the bottom right is the European Union flag logo and the text "Co-funded by the European Union".

# TRAINING FOR INCLUSION: WHY IT WORKS

Inclusion is not just policy—it's mindset and behavior.

Education helps coworkers understand autism and avoid misunderstandings.

It reduces stigma and builds empathy toward different behaviors.

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### Trainer's Notes:

Explain that managers should provide training on autism and inclusion and all the listed positive reasons for education on the area. Emphasize that inclusion should be treated as a regular practice - not a one-time session.

### List the suggested topics that should be included in training:

- What autism is (and isn't)
- Strengths associated with autism
- Differences in communication and sensory processing
- Inclusive hiring and onboarding practices
- How to create psychologically safe spaces
- Everyday strategies for supporting autistic colleagues

## Slide 23-24: Team building activities



# TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES


*Avoid or make alternatives to activities that are...*

- ✗ Loud, high-sensory environments (e.g. crowded parties, bars, or noisy venues)
- ✗ Unstructured social events
- ✗ Mandatory participation in group games involving touch, improvisation, or fast-paced talkin
- ✗ Activities focused on small talk or networking (e.g. speed networking or “get to know you” mingling)
- ✗ Alcohol-centered events (e.g. pub crawls or cocktail hours)



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# TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES


*Instead, offer structured, calm, and optional alternatives like...*

- Icebreaker activities
- Collaborative problem-solving activities
- Group brainstorming sessions
- Team-building games

*Social events or parties can involve e.g. escape rooms, alcohol free lunches, interest-based workshops, quiet areas*



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### Trainer's Notes:

Help participants recognize and critically reflect on traditional team-building formats that might unintentionally exclude autistic employees—and understand why adjustments are necessary.

Explain how many typical team-building activities are built around spontaneity, noise, social bonding through chatting or drinks, and competitive games. While these might energize some,

they often create discomfort or anxiety for autistic employees, especially those with sensory sensitivities or social communication differences.

When team events are overstimulating or unstructured, autistic staff may feel pressured to mask their discomfort or simply not attend. This leads to exclusion—even when inclusion was the original intent

**Loud, high-sensory environments** (bars, karaoke nights, crowded venues)

These spaces can cause sensory overload for people sensitive to noise, light, or unpredictable movement.

**Unstructured social events** (hang out and mingle evenings, casual drop-ins)

Without clear expectations, some may struggle to participate or feel left out.

**Mandatory participation in group games** (Especially those involving physical contact, fast talking, or improvisation)

These can feel overwhelming, competitive, or confusing to those who process social cues differently.

**Small talk-focused events** (e.g. “get to know you” mingling or speed networking)

Small talk is often challenging and draining for autistic people, especially in noisy or fast-paced contexts.

**Alcohol-centered events**

Some autistic people may avoid alcohol due to sensory or medical reasons. When bonding is centered around drinking, it creates an implicit barrier.

Provide inclusive alternatives that make autistic employees feel welcome, respected, and comfortable participating—without pressure.

Explain how team building doesn’t have to be loud or unstructured to be effective. In fact, the most meaningful connections are often built through shared purpose, structured activities, and environments where everyone can contribute in their own way.

The goal isn’t to eliminate fun—it’s to redefine fun in ways that are fair and accessible to all, including autistic and neurodivergent team members.

### **Icebreaker activities**

Keep them clear and structured (e.g. “One word to describe your week” or “Share one hobby”). Avoid open-ended social prompts.

### **Collaborative problem-solving**

Activities like escape rooms, service scenarios, or planning a project encourage cooperation without requiring small talk.

### **Group brainstorming sessions**

Use sticky notes, whiteboards, or silent idea collection. This helps people who prefer time to think or non-verbal communication.

### **Team-building games**

Choose games that allow for different strengths (logic, creativity, planning) and avoid games based on speed or social cleverness.

### **Interest-based, low-sensory social events**

Examples: Creative workshops, board game afternoons, nature walks, or quiet lunches without alcohol.

## Slide 25: 10 steps to manage an inclusive team

# 10 STEPS TO MANAGE AN INCLUSIVE TEAM



1. Educate the team about autism regularly
2. Set clear communication guidelines (avoid sarcasm, use written follow-up)
3. Establish consistent expectations and routines
4. Foster a culture of mutual respect and curiosity
5. Provide structured, low-pressure social interaction
6. Train managers in inclusive leadership techniques
7. Encourage open, non-judgmental communication
8. Be flexible in how work gets done
9. Evaluate and adjust practices regularly
10. Partner with autism organizations for support and guidance



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### Trainer's Notes:

Give the team this practical, actionable checklist for building a team culture where autistic employees can thrive.

Explain how inclusion is an everyday practice—not a one-time event. Managers play a key role in shaping the work environment and the team culture. These 10 steps are designed to help shift from intention to action.

Even small adjustments, when made consistently, can build trust and create a workplace where autistic team members feel valued, not just accommodated.

## Slide 26: Thank you

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# THANK YOU



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### Trainer's Notes:

Thank you for today and time for questions.



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