LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Fostering Inclusive Environments for Neurodivergent Team Members: Leveraging Universal Design to Optimize Engagement and Productivity

Dr. Emily C. Daigle

No matter your industry or the size of your company, you are here today because you are invested in further **developing an engaged and productive workforce**

Empowered
Support. Knowledge. Tools.
EmpoweredTeam.org
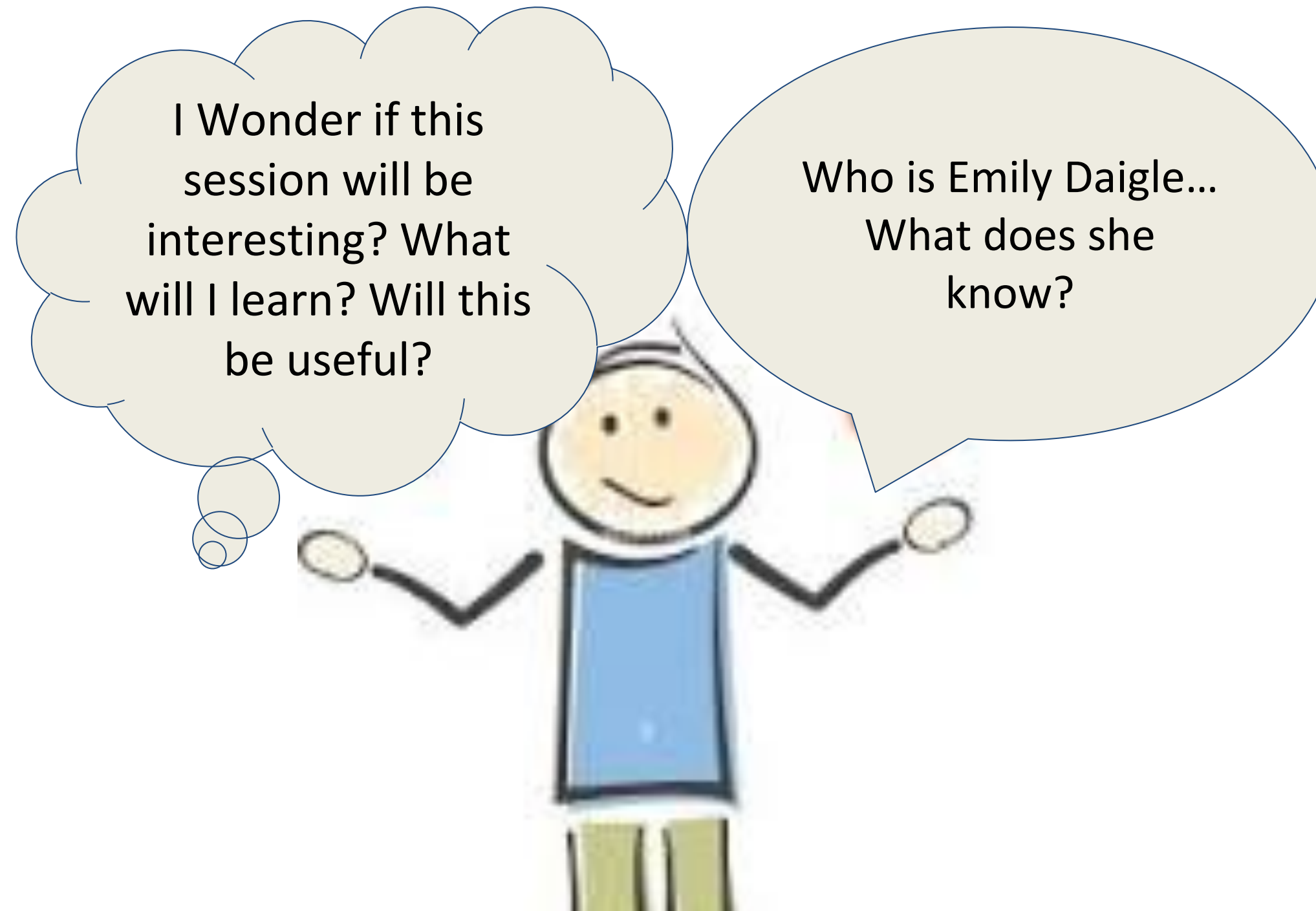
Experience vs. "Expertise"

Learning Targets:
- I can confidently **define** and explain key terms related to neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and workplace inclusion
- I can identify specific ways today's learning **applies to my role**, my team, and my workplace environment
- I can describe the benefits of fostering a **work culture** that values neurodiversity
- I can identify at least three **actionable strategies** to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment
- I can **recognize opportunities to implement** inclusive practices that enhance collaboration and productivity
- I can **develop a plan** to implement these strategies within my team to improve relationships, enhance engagement, and align employees with company goals

"Neurodiversity in the workplace" is more than a trending term—it's a **movement toward true inclusion and accessibility**. But what does it really mean?

A Kinesthetic Activity to REINFORCE your learning– Get ready to MOVE

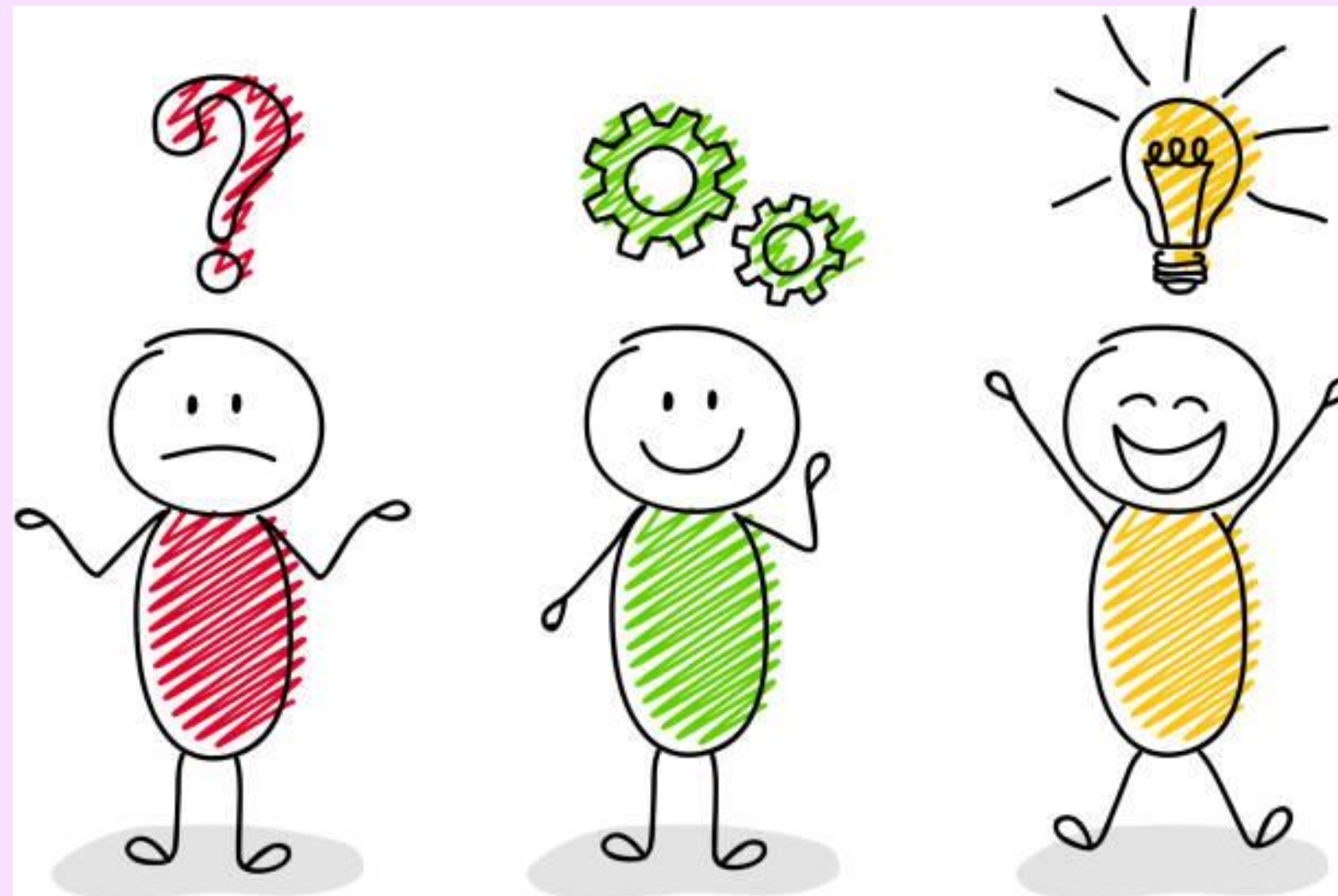Social (forward facing skills)

Sensory Input and Processing
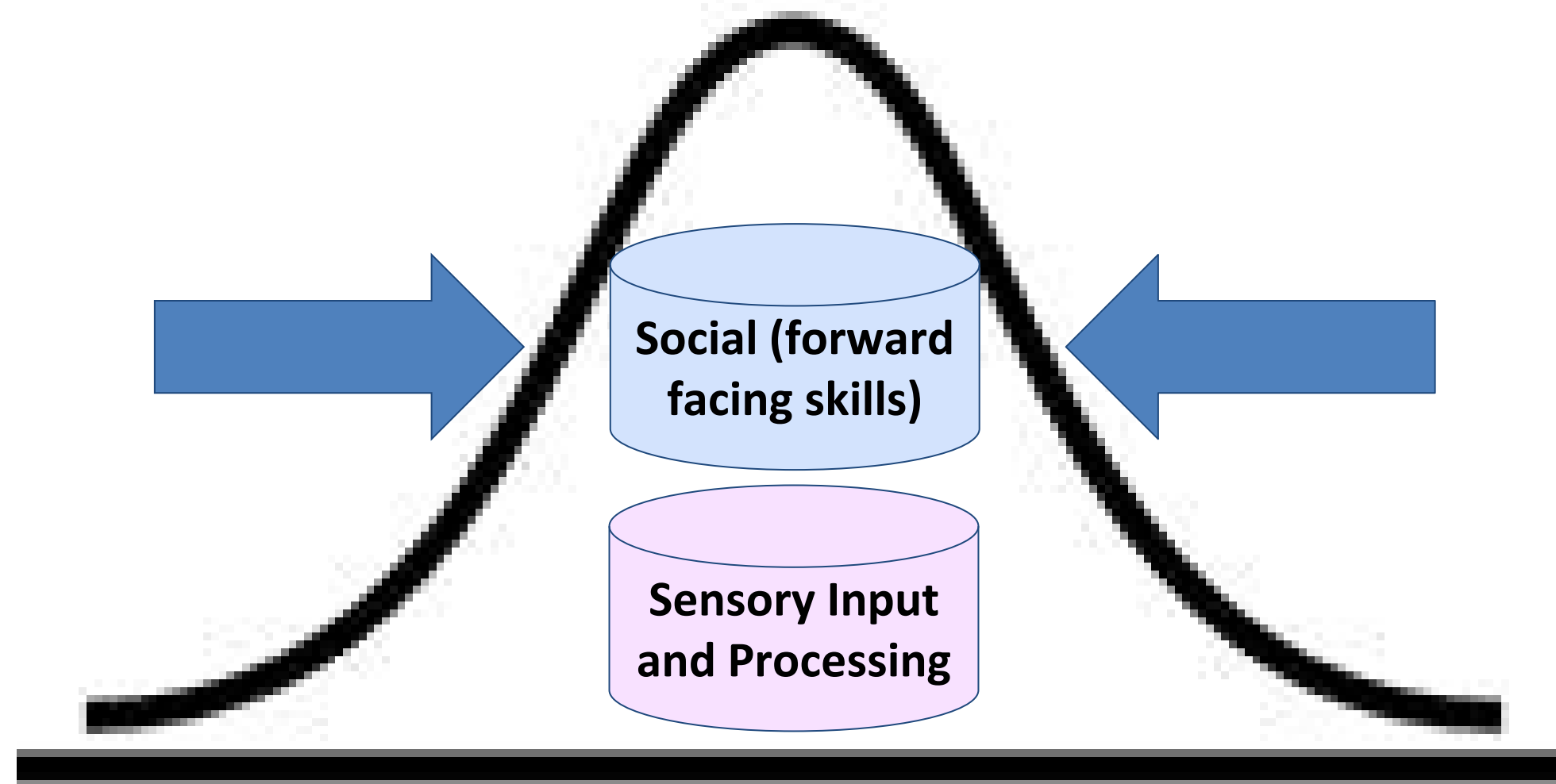
Today's Focus/Theme Areas: Social Sensory

Based on what we just did as a group …. What do **YOU t**hink neurodiversity means?

- **Explain** it to your neighbor

How did you do?

- Neurodiversity describes the **differences between how people think, learn, and behave**. There is **no "one way" or "correct way"** for the brain to function

- Honoring neurodiversity recognizes each person's **unique perspectives, strengths, and grows without judgement**
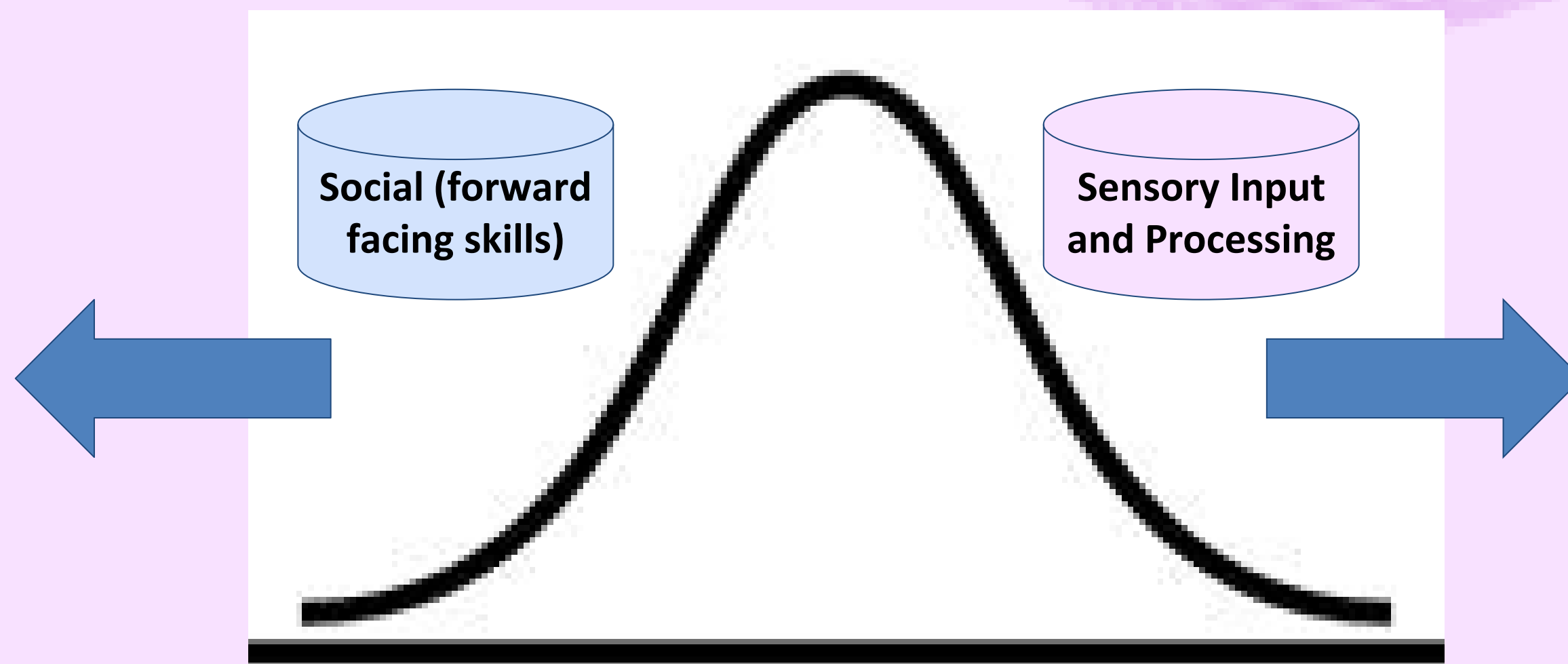
We can all RELATE to neurodiversity … because as we just reinforced together…we all have a profile of **strengths and weaknesses**

Most of us can leverage these to discover what we want to learn, who we want to be, and **adjust** our own expectations and behaviors to **adapt** to different situations

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRZ5RpsytRA

But for some …

Neuro**divergence**: (Remember the bell curve)

- When an individual "diverges" from what we consider "typical" neurocognitive functioning they are **neurodivergent**
- May think, learn, behave **differently** compared to those who are "neurotypical"

- Remember that 'typical' neurodiversity exists along a **wide continuum**, and differences in cognition, learning styles, and behavior are **natural variations** of the human experience
- Individuals who are **neurodivergent** (think/learn/behave differently), may have **difficulty: adapting, being flexible, and adjusting**

(The terms neurodivergent and neurodivergence were introduced in 2000 by K. Asasumasu, a neurodiversity activist)

Terms, Lingo, Buzz, Trending Terminology: NOT exhaustive

Neurodivergent

Neurominority

Neurospicy

Neurotypical

Multiply Neurodivergent

Dysgraphia

Root cause "drivers" (Proceed with caution: People are *not* their labels) NOT exhaustive
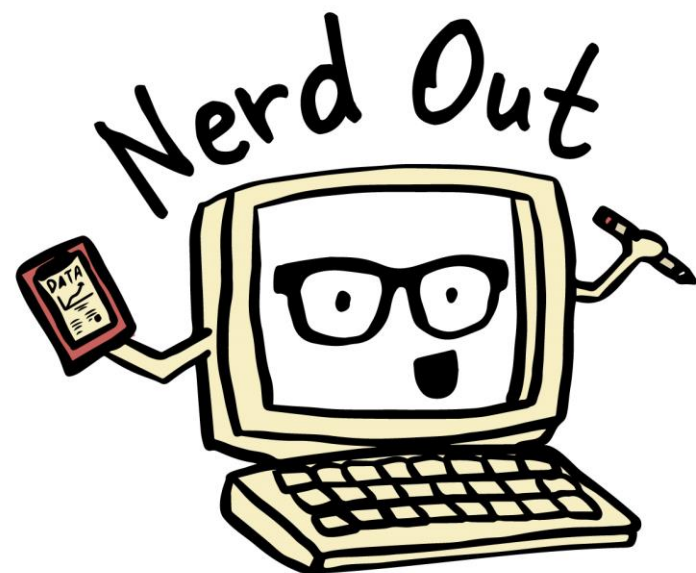
Sensory Processing Disorder

Autism

Dyslexia

Dyscalculia

Misophonia

Dyspraxia

ADHD

Traumatic Brain Injury

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Too often the the achievement gap that neurodivergent students face throughout their school experiences becomes an employability gap in adulthood.

Nerd Out

Hireability

Onboarding

Retention

- The unemployment rate for neurodivergent adults is **30% to 40% (rates can soar upwards of 80% for certain disability categories)**

- This represents about **8x the unemployment rate** for neurotypical adults

- There are approximately **67 million adults** across the country who identify as neurodivergent
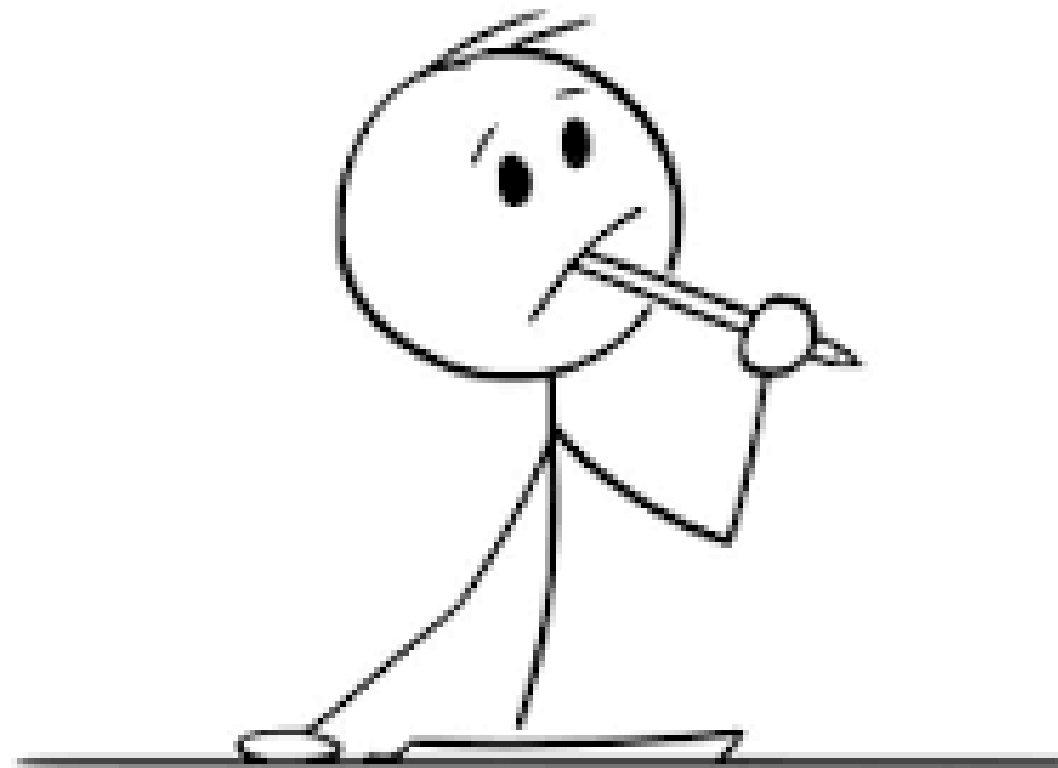
(CTEPolicyWatch 5/17/2024)

Companies that **tap into the strengths** of neurodivergent employees have:

- Higher rates of **retention**
- Stronger workplace **culture**
- A competitive advantage:

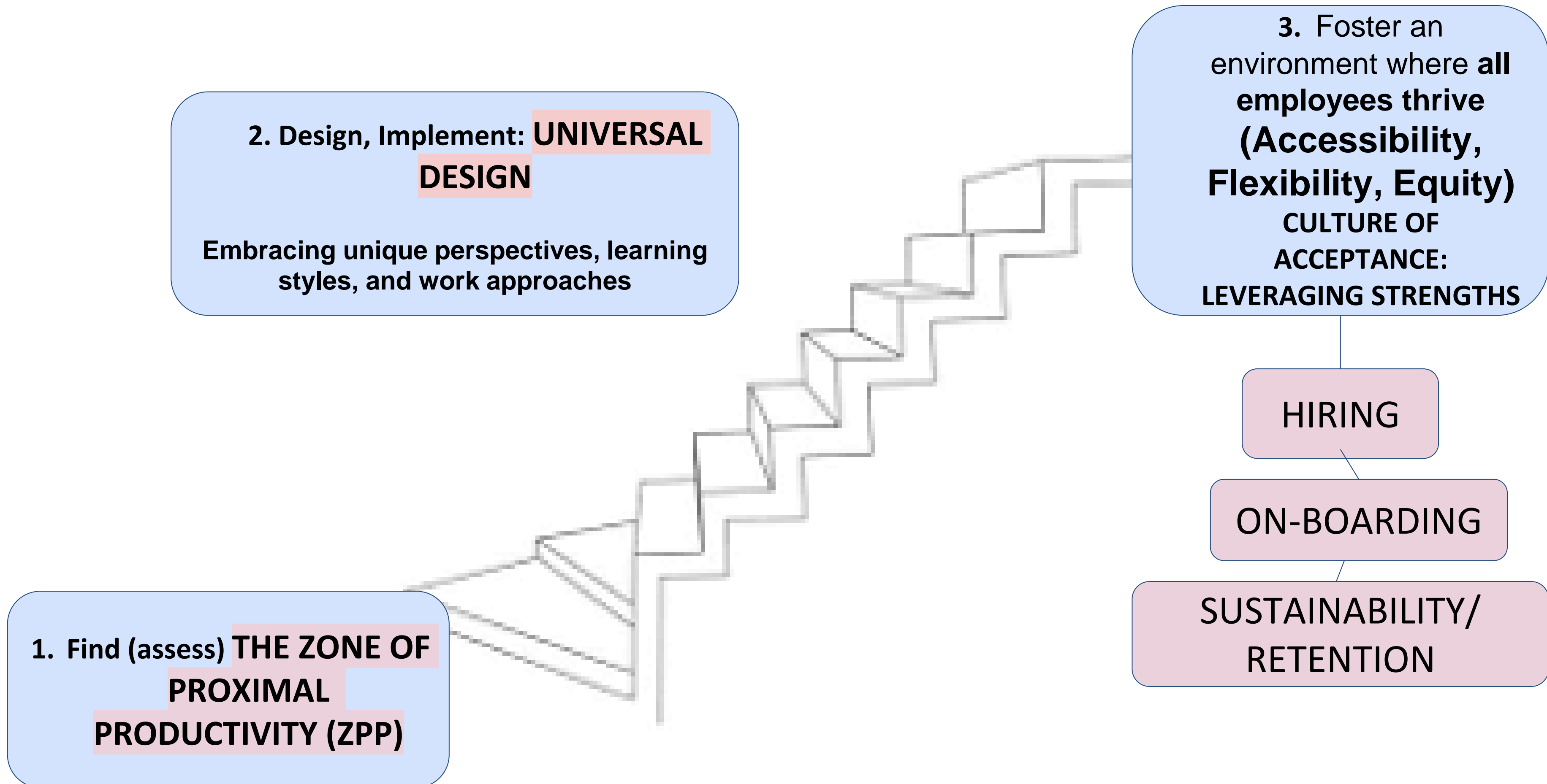**28% higher revenues and 30% higher profit margins**

(Harvard Business Review, May-June 2017)
(Companies Leading in Disability Inclusion Have Outperformed Peers, Accenture Research Finds, 10/29/2018)

If you take ONE Slide Away from TODAY It's THIS ONE

2. Design, Implement: UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Embracing unique perspectives, learning styles, and work approaches

3. Foster an environment where **all employees thrive (Accessibility, Flexibility, Equity)** CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE: LEVERAGING STRENGTHS

HIRING

ON-BOARDING

SUSTAINABILITY/ RETENTION

1. Find (assess) THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL PRODUCTIVITY (ZPP)

1. THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL PRODUCTIVITY (a "Daigleism")

- A term rooted in the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development
- Applied when we consider someone learning a new task
- In layman's terms: the "zone" represents the **GAP** between what an individual can do **on their own** and what they can achieve when provided with **help**
  (how do we get them **to their "stretch"**) (person/accommodations/tools/adaptations- "the help")

Teachers "teach in the gap" to stretch their students to conquer new learning
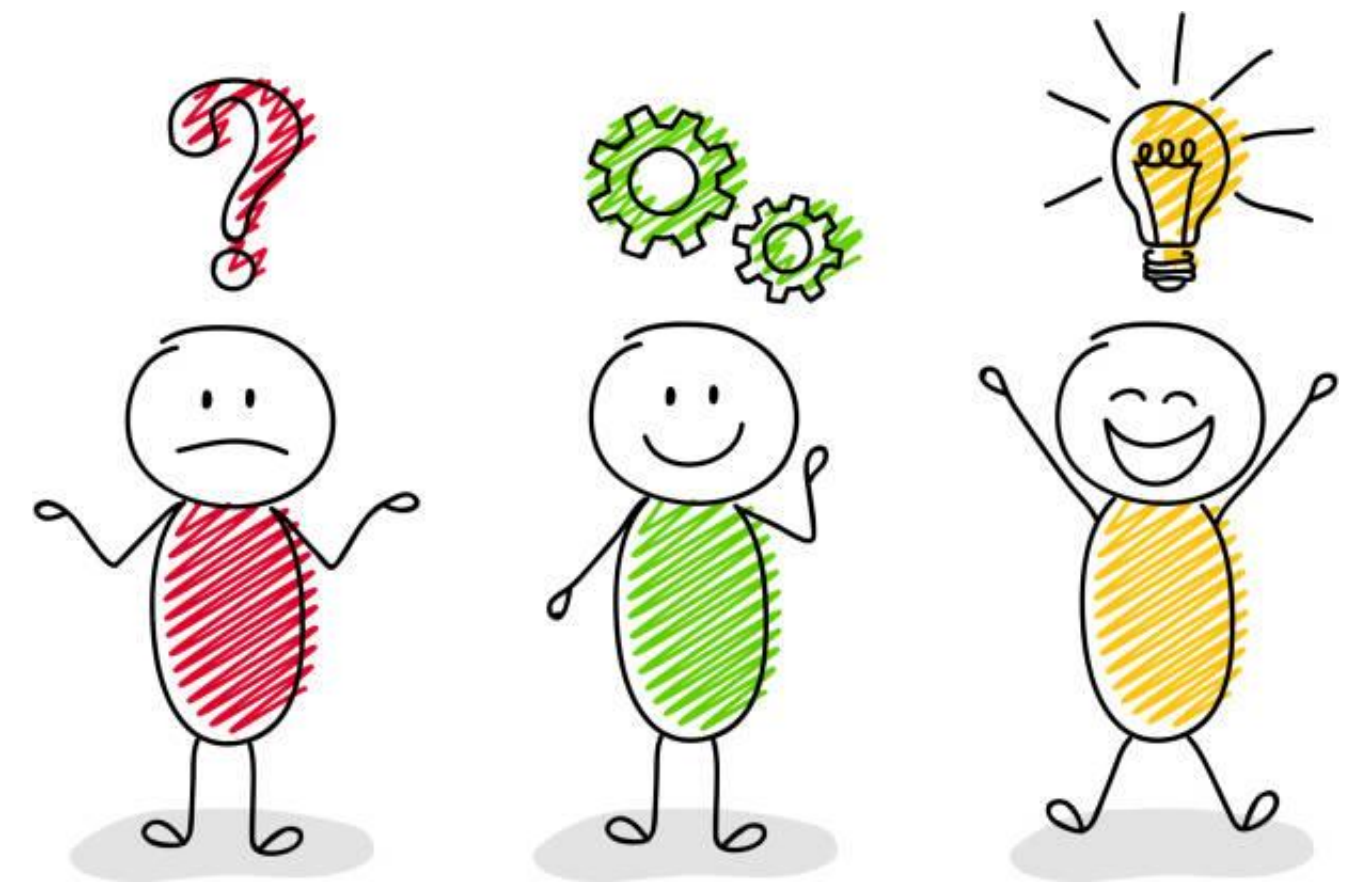❏ Scaffolding
❏ Modeling
❏ Multi-sensory Learning
❏ Tools/Accommodations
Then they raise the bar *again* …

**THINK about this concept for your employees-
What do YOU think I mean when I say the Zone of
Proximal *Productivity*?**

EXPLAIN IT TO YOUR NEIGHBOR

How do we ASSESS the Zone of Proximal Productivity for our Employees?

- **ASK** them
  - ★ Needs assessments
  - ★ Surveys
  - ★ Include in your interview protocol

- **OBSERVE** them
  - ★ Assess their current skills
  - ★ Ask questions about where they see their grow areas
  - ★ Work together to identify next steps
  - ★ Track progress
  - ★ Celebrate goals and raise the bar again

What can you offer in the GAP: SUPPORT (person/ accommodations tools /adaptations) to increase productivity (stretch) What does your team need?
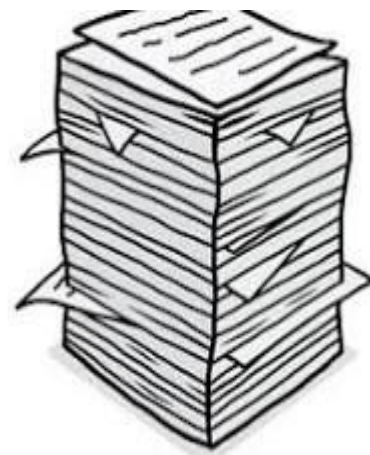
2. UNIVERSAL DESIGN - ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

Embracing unique perspectives, learning styles, and work approaches: Culture of Acceptance

- **Once you have an understanding of your team's needs and where they need support** ((person/accommodations/tools/adaptations)
- **You can develop an ACTION PLAN that LEVERAGES UNIVERSAL DESIGN**

Making
People/Accommodations/Tools/Adaptations
available to **ALL:**
❏ Reduces stigmas and "othering"
❏ Builds a culture of inclusion and acceptance
❏ Reduces vulnerability
❏ Helps SO many (remember we are ALL neurodiverse)
❏ Addresses/Supports the "GAP" (zone)
❏ Raises the bar- **PRODUCTIVITY**
❏ Optimizes performance

Apply in Practice: FOCUS Area One
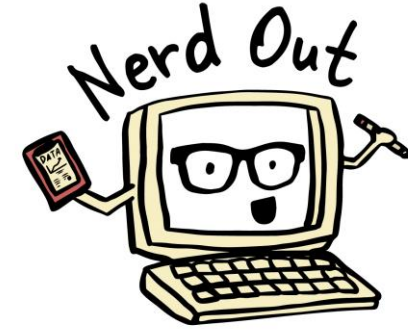
Social (forward facing skills)

- Active listening
- Verbal Communication
- Nonverbal Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Collaboration
- Respect
- Empathy
- Emotional Intelligence
- Emotional Regulation
- Adaptability
- Provide (and receive) Constructive Feedback
- Verbal (social) Reciprocity
- Teamwork
- Cooperation
- Leadership
- Reading Social Cues ("read the room")
- Ability to Build Professional Relationships

Nerd Out

Socialization is critical to happiness
(The Good Life, Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study, 2023, Waldinger & Schultz)

How Do These Skills Generalize to the Work Environment

Quiet does NOT mean disinterested or disengaged
Avoid assumptions and bias

People Skills

Public Speaking

Negotiation

Mediation

Networking

Connecting

Sales

Flexibility

Consulting

Adapting to Others'

For our employees who have challenges with social skills …

Social (forward facing skills)

Social (forward facing skills)

We ALL have a social reservoir that TAPS out
(remember the bell curve)
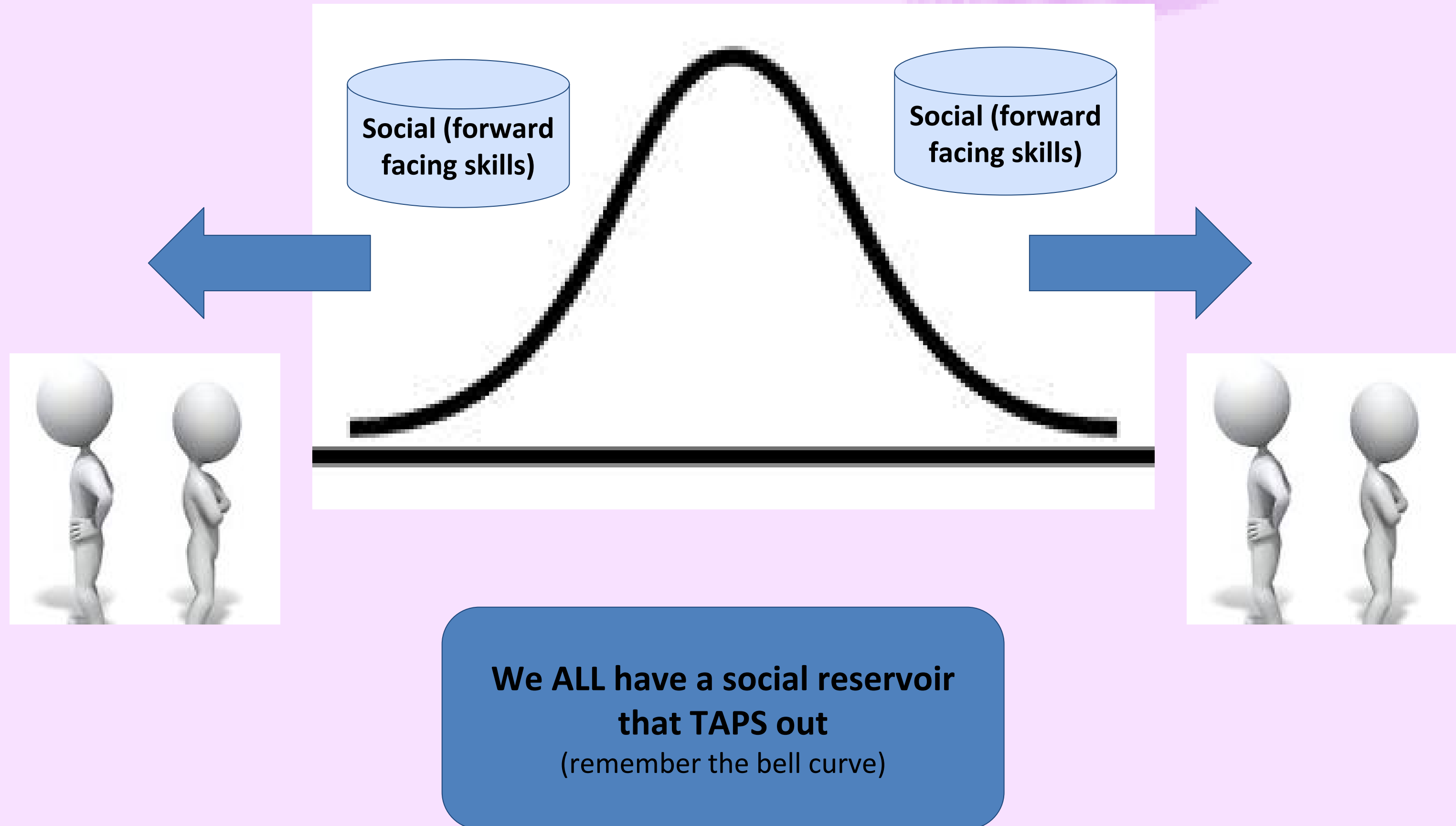
*Universal Design: Actionable Strategies

Ask ahead: What do YOU need from us?

Do NOT make assumptions about abilities

The Interview:
A culture of acceptance right from step one

What are you ACTUALLY hoping to learn about the candidate (what **skills** are you assessing) Interview tasks look **different** depending on what **skills are required** for the job

Share very clear procedures and expectations ahead of time (anticipation and predictability)

Task based/ project based (hands-on)

Include questions about neurodiversity in your interview protocol

ZPP

Format

Time allotted

Topics to be covered

# of people in attendance

Type of room

Interview questions are direct and specific

Solo task OR group task? What will the job look like…. (could this be the gap support?)

Can be a survey: non forward-facing

Offer BREAKS

*This becomes your new norm (for ALL interviews): Accessibility / Flexibility/ Equity

Universal Design: Actionable Strategies

READ the neurodiversity survey they completed at the interview phase

Onboarding
Reinforcing the culture of acceptance for new employees

Do NOT make assumptions about abilities

CHECK IN with them during planned times: are they getting what they need **ASK again**
Have a 2 week/4 week/8 week review process

Share very clear procedures and expectations ahead of time (anticipation and predictability)

Scaffold

Model and Support

ZPP

Work Space

Have a (private) mechanism for collecting concerns

Scheduled collaborations

Clear expectations for all new tasks

Mentor on site and available (planned and reactive)

How does your company convey expectations (differentiated media)

Type of room

*This becomes your new norm (for ALL new employees): Accessibility / Flexibility/ Equity

Universal Design: Actionable Strategies

Administer your neurodiversity survey to all employees as a practice (annually)

Create a Neurodiversity action team
Focus Groups
Weave this into your culture (not just a trending term)

Sustainability (Retention)
Harness diversity to drive growth and achieve company goals

Do NOT make assumptions about abilities

Share very clear procedures and expectations ahead of time (anticipation and predictability)

Scaffold

Model and Support

ZPP

Deliverables

Scheduled collaborations

Adapt the environment to accommodate social differences so that employees feel **SAFE to take social RISKS** (stretch)

Mentor is maintained/ Coaching model

Offer a **variety** of social connection opportunities (remembering the study) **Socialization is critical to happiness**

Policies

Changes

With new tasks and expectations

*This becomes your new norm (for ALL employees): Accessibility / Flexibility/ Equity

Apply in Practice: FOCUS Area Two

Neuro"typical" Sensory Processing

Sensory Input and Processing

Our brain is constantly bombarded with sensory input from our environment

Visual

Taste

Auditory

Tactile/touch

Olfactory/smell
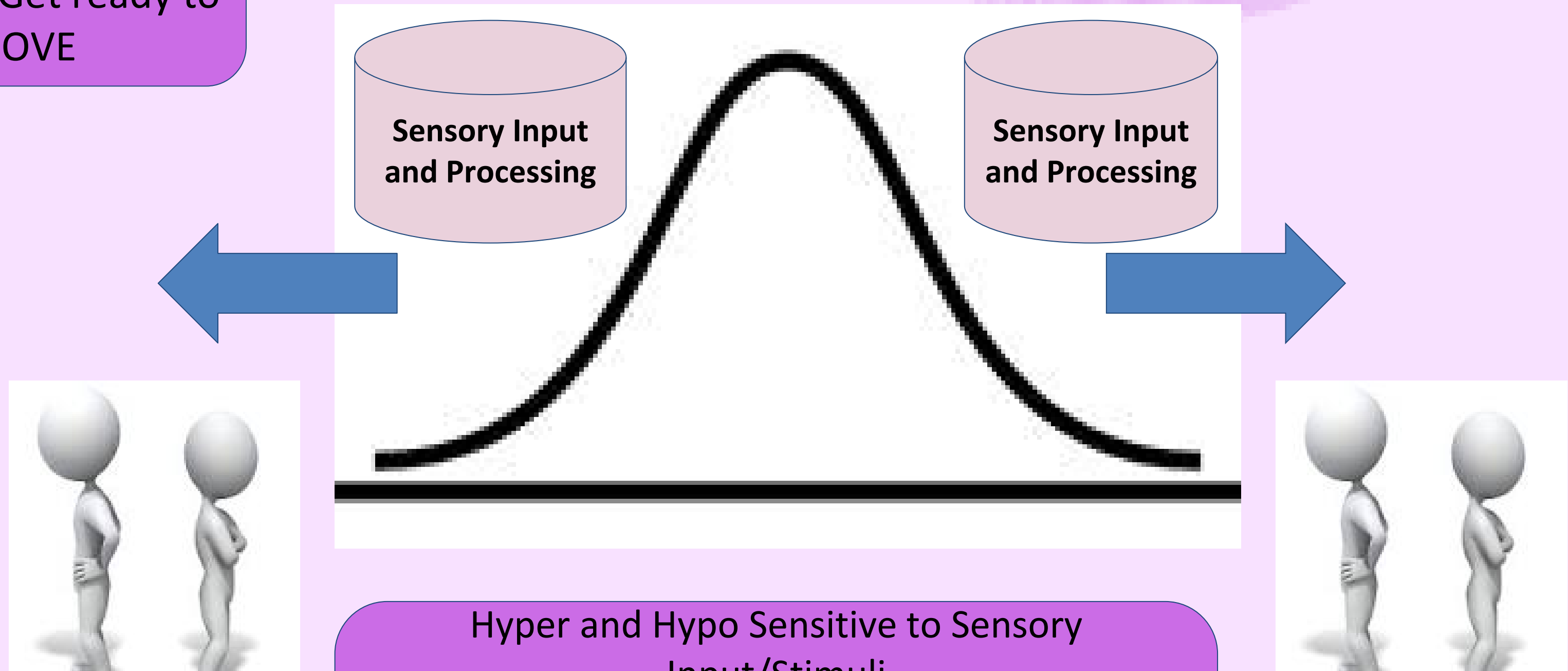
Vestibular

Kinesthetic

Proprioceptive

Interoceptive

Input in

Sensory Output (action)

A kinesthetic Activity to REINFORCE your learning– Get ready to MOVE

Sensory Input and Processing

Sensory Input and Processing

Hyper and Hypo Sensitive to Sensory Input/Stimuli
Makes adaptive responses CHALLENGING
Many neurodivergent individuals are challenged with Sensory Integration Variability that can **INTERFERE with their ability to stay REGULATED**

**Universal Design
Actionable Strategies**

**Spoiler Alert:
We ALL use
sensory
strategies**

Universal Design to Support
Sensory Systems

- Applied to all phases of
  employability: Interview,
  On-Boarding,
  Sustainability/Retention
- Focusing on Sensory
  addresses **MULTIPLE**
  areas

ASK

Remember, providing for all:
- Reduces Stigma
- **Benefits all**
- Improves regulation
- Creates an individualized sensory
  environment (you are providing the
  opportunity) to optimize performance
- Becomes the norm as people **create** their
  best environment

Universal Design Actionable Strategies

Offer environmental options: CHOICE
Sensory Systems are HIGHLY variable and INDIVIDUAL

Plan for all Spaces:
**Lunch Break Spaces
Personal Work Space
Conference Space
Interview Room**

Reduce fluorescent lighting (visual AND sound)

Silent office spaces/zones

Whole Office Movement Breaks

Standing Desks

Stress Putty

Fidgets

Clothing Preferences

Natural Lighting

Provide a variety of noise cancelling headphones (hang them in common spaces for easy access)

Fragrance Free Zones

Treadmill Desk

Walking Meetings

Chewy Snacks

Salty, Crunchy Snacks

Theraband

Gum

Desk Pedals

Leverage Outside Spaces (walk/bike)

Mini Weights

ZPP: Environmental Options are the adjustments to stretch

Dimmer switches

Sound Machines

Weighted lap blanket

Accessibility / Flexibility/ Equity

1. **Has your understanding of neurodiversity and neurodivergence evolved as a result of today's workshop?** If so, what key insights have shifted your perspective?
2. **Can you identify three actionable strategies** from today's focus areas that you can implement with your team to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment?
3. **Is your company positioned to support and implement these strategies?** How can fostering neurodiversity drive growth, innovation, and collaboration in your workplace?
4. **Do you see yourself playing a role in bringing these ideas to life within your company?** What steps can you take to advocate for and implement these changes?
5. **Will you work with your team to develop a plan to integrate these concepts into your workplace culture?** What would be your first step in this process?
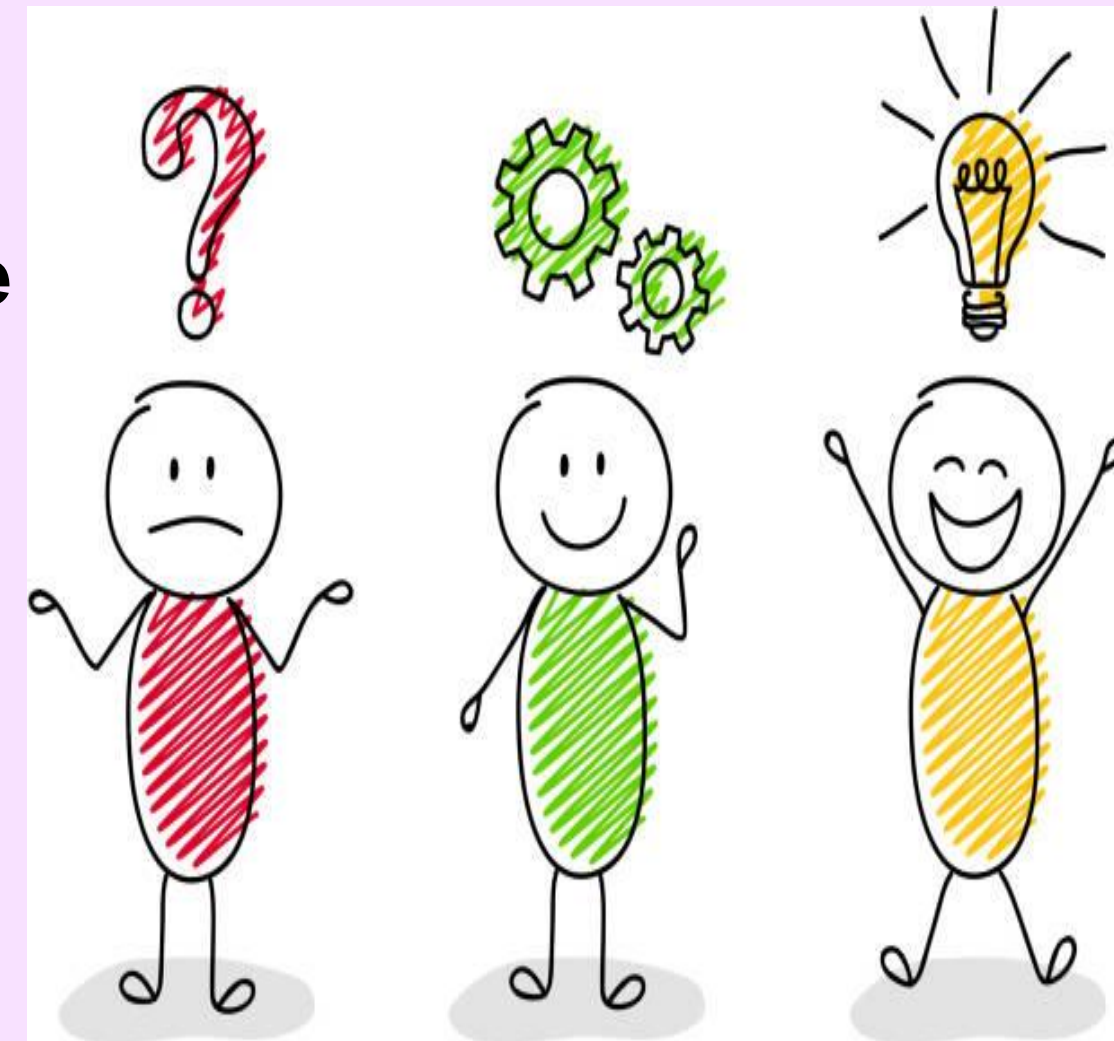
Shifts in how our Neurodivergent Adults are preparing for jobs.

Legislation for 18-22 year-olds

Workforce Development

NEXT gen…

Empowered
Support. Knowledge. Tools.
EmpoweredTeam.org

With **decades of experience** working with neurodivergent individuals, our team is dedicated to empowering employers with **actionable strategies** rooted in expertise and passion.

At **Empowered**, we do more than just provide training—we **partner with employers on-site** to implement meaningful changes that foster truly **inclusive workspaces**. Our team brings **hands-on support, professional development, and strategic consulting** to help businesses **design environments that unlock the full potential of neurodiverse employees**.

EmilyDempowered@gmail.com

Let's work together to design workplaces that empower everyone.

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Thank You