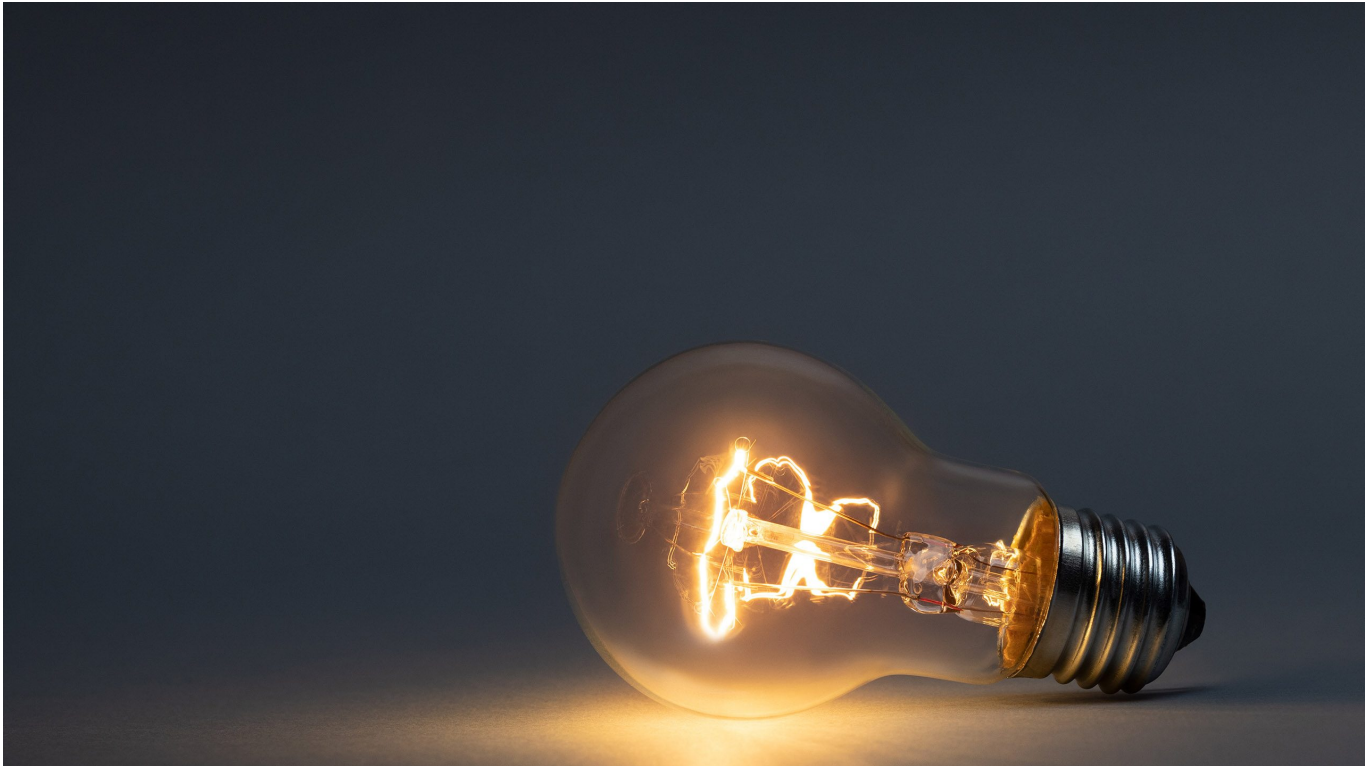


My A-Ha Moment

[Israela Brill-Cass](#)

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At the start of 2012, when I was in my ninth year as Executive Director of Boston Law Collaborative (BLC), I received a call that would change the trajectory of my career. A now-colleague of mine at Emerson College started our conversation by saying, “Your fall classes will be...”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “I’ve been training lawyers and judges for over a decade in mediation and other forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) but I have never taught a full semester course.”

“Perfect,” he responded, “we are hiring practitioners, not career academics.”

“Great,” I replied feebly, realizing that when I shared my Curriculum Vitae with Emerson (one that I created specifically for their Affiliated - read Adjunct - Faculty position six

months prior), I was getting exactly what I asked for.



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You see, as part of my role at BLC, it was my job to find places into which we could bring our expertise in ADR, conflict management and training. I never expected that I would be teaching a college course on Conflict and Negotiation, even though that was the exact space I had put myself into. I spent my summer vacation revising materials that had graciously been shared with me by the professor who taught the course for decades - actually two courses, both Conflict and Negotiation but different cohorts of 20 students each - who himself was absolutely an academic.

Adapting these materials to my teaching and training style was so concerning to me that in August of 2012, I was in the best shape of my life because I would often run twice a day to combat the incredible stress I felt. I told myself, "It's just training, except you have to do it 26 times and 13 of those are with different materials that build on each other." I distinctly remember coming out of the first class I taught (the morning group, after which I'd walk back to my office on Summer Street in downtown Boston, and work until I went back to teach my afternoon class), and saying to myself, "One down, only 25 more to go".

My first a-ha moment came after mid-term exams. Having never taught a college course (I think I mentioned that already but it's worth mentioning again), I had no idea what a mid-term exam was supposed to look like. When I asked my students how they felt about the exam, some literally burst into tears. They shared that, "50 questions in 90 minutes is impossible," "We're not list-learners," and, "Why are your PowerPoints *so dense*?" I listened and told them to take a breath, that we'd adjust the semester together so that the final exam would feel better for them and my slides would be less overwhelming.

It was the first time I recognized that how I process and absorb information - lists and writing - was not how everyone else processed and absorbed information. It made me reflect on how I studied for the Massachusetts Bar Exam in 1993. I realized that my process was to condense my subject notes into smaller and smaller lists until, the day before the exam, I had a single piece of paper with only 7 words on it that would trigger all of the materials I had learned over three years of law school and everything I was told I needed to know to pass the Bar. Side note: I thankfully passed on my first try, otherwise I would have considered being a carpenter (no joke).

The a-ha moment from my first cohort of students was that people learn and absorb information in lots of different ways and that to effectively create understanding and shared meaning, I would need to step out of my comfort zone and into everyone else's.

Fast-forward to 2022, when I became the Ombuds for the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. By that time, I had been teaching for a decade and mediating, facilitating and consulting on dispute systems design for over two decades. I was trained in intercultural and cross-cultural communications, with decades of experience working across race, gender identity, socioeconomic and language differences. What understanding I didn't have, however, became my second - and led to my third - a-ha moment.

Going into my role with The Broad, I was preparing for a difference in communications that I had only touched upon a few times in my career during trainings; namely, engaging with scientist-brained folks. When engaging with all of the different layers "Broadies" brought into our conversations - differences based in culture, language, gender-identity, power, etc. - and then layered those with their science-focus (which is openly not my area of expertise), I was presented with a steep but quick learning curve around sharing information. Thankfully, I was able to conquer that learning curve fairly quickly by necessity, but I came to recognize another, more nuanced layer that presented itself in communications. That layer was neurodiversity, and it brought me back to my first year of teaching and the different ways that I would need to shift in order to connect and create shared meaning with Broadies.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that most of us associate with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc. Without going into the specifics of neurodivergent vs. neurodiverse language (there is ample discussion about that and I am not an expert), neurodiversity is the overarching biological concept that all human brains naturally vary and process the world in unique ways. It's not a trait a person possesses, but rather an umbrella term for the diversity of all human minds. ¹ It's a term that goes back decades to describe all brains that don't behave in ways that neurotypical brains are expected to behave, the intent of which is to destigmatize those differences.

For example, a neurotypical brain is expected to "read a room" and to pick up on nonverbal communication signals in order to extract information and meaning. So, if you're asked by someone with autism how your day is going, and you respond "greaaaat" with an eye-roll and added inflection to indicate sarcasm, you might get back to your confusion, "I'm glad you're having a great day" with absolute sincerity. This is because some autistic brains process the word "great" with its actual, literal meaning, and the visual and verbal sarcasm cues are blocked. It's a disconnect I see often in folks expecting neurotypical responses - whether diagnosed or not - in their communications, but not getting the responses they expect.

This learning helped me recognize neurodiversity across all of the organizations with which I work, as well as within my daily communications with others, and helped me shift my expectations and understandings to meet the various ways people communicate. It

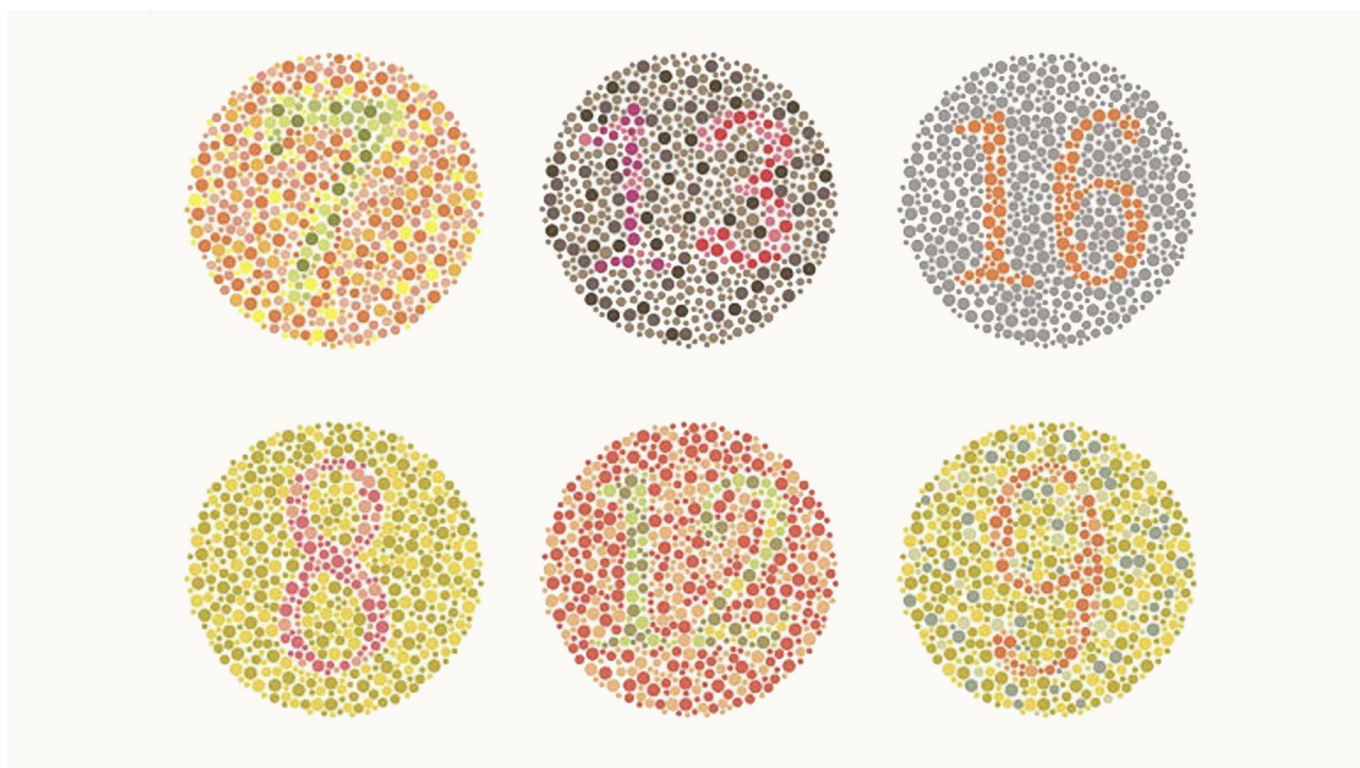
helped shape my experiences and prompt the changes that I made to my practice so that in 2023, I shared them in a presentation at IOA's Annual Conference in Seattle. The responses I received to that presentation led to others and to my first peer-reviewed piece in 2024, *Ombudsing with Neurodiversity in Mind*.²

I've since included neurodiversity in all of the workshops I've done on productive conflict communications and I've found that, over the past few years in particular, neurodiversity has been one of the more prevalent and often intensifying factors in workplace communication disconnects. Because one's neurodiversity is often invisible, I think it's particularly important to create understanding and highlight it for employers as possible alternative reasons for someone's "difficult personality" or "direct" behavior, their "inflexibility" or why they might not be a "great team player."

While sharing this information in my slides, I found myself wanting to make sure the audience really connected with the information - more than just reading and listening to me explain it. I needed to know that they absorbed the information in the same, personal and visceral way I make them absorb active listening, reframing, and other lessons I share, not as an academic, but as a trainer.

At a workshop for the International Monetary Fund in March of this year, on *Understanding and Mediating with Neurodiversity*, I included a slide with the following image:

*Figure 1: A color-blindness test from colorblindness.org.*³



Color Blindness Test

It's a common color-blindness test that I shared while revealing to them that I assumed at least a few in that room full of international mediators - like me - could not see all of the numbers in the circles. Many of them nodded in response while I explained that color-blindness is a type of neurodiversity, because neurotypical brains are expected to see color, and we don't. Some folks smiled, a few gasped and many laughed, and - not unsurprisingly for mediators - they had a lot of comments. It was an a-ha moment for them, and another a-ha moment for me, as so many folks I've delivered workshops to see that slide and mention it as a particularly impactful moment for them. My bonus a-ha moment: recognizing that by continuing to evolve the ways in which I learn, work, and teach, I can create more a-ha moments for others.

Endnotes

1. Cleveland Clinic, *Neurodivergent: What it is, symptoms & types*, Cleveland Clinic (June 2, 2022) <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/23154-neurodivergent>.
2. Israela Brill-Cass, *Ombudsing with Neurodiversity in Mind*, Journal of the International Ombuds Association (2024) https://ioa.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/JIOA_Articles/JIOA-2023-L%20Proofs%20for%20Publication.pdf
3. Color Blindness Test, *Color Blind Test*, <https://www.colorblindnesstest.org/>.

Author



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