

BEING AN INFORMED COACH OR LEADER

Being a coach or leader isn't just about calling the shots, it's about seeing your team's needs and building them up towards success. Your actions can change your participants journey in life. They could find a life long passion, build friendships, or discover a new way to be their best selves, but it's up to you to light the flame!



STEP 1: KNOW THE UNWRITTEN RULES

Before you can jump right in you need to take some time to understand how things work and what skills and abilities you'll need to join in. For many neurotypicals they can pick this up through observation or trial and error, neurodivergents may need to be taught these unwritten rules explicitly. Sometimes this does refer to the literal rules of the game, however, it is often the little things that can be harder to pick up on that make a big difference to the anxiety and stress levels of participants.

Some examples of unwritten "rules":

- How do you identify "your team"?
- Who do you talk to if you're struggling?
- Where are you meant to be before/during/and after the game?
- Are there any non-game related traditions or activities involved?
- Who is responsible for equipment, uniforms, and extras?

While each of these may seem trivial it helps you as a leader to look at things from the outside with fresh eyes and identify possible points of miscommunication and friction.



STEP 2: PLAY THE FIELD YOU HAVE

Just as you've looked at the sport itself with fresh eyes its time to think about the practicalities of where your sport is played. Different locations place a different load on the individual.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Are you indoors or outdoors?
- How much space and flexibility do you have to work with? Can they move away from the team without disruptions?
- Are there any risks if the participant flees?
- Do you go to the same location each time or will it change? How predictable is this?

Creating an inclusive & supportive environment starts with putting all the cards on the table & leveraging off one's strengths to bridge the gaps.

Approaching these conversations with non-judgmental curiosity opens the way for creative problem solving.



STEP 3: KNOW YOURSELF

There is no one way to be a leader or coach. Some lead with enthusiasm and humor, others through quiet guidance and support. Just because it isn't a good fit for one participant does not mean you aren't the best fit for another. By understanding and acknowledging who you are and what you can offer to those you lead you are in a better position to direct potential participants towards their best outcomes. We can't be everything to everyone.

What you may need to consider:

- How well do you handle disruption or distraction away from the plan?
- What happens when you get excited or need to coach from the sidelines?
- How do you handle conflict or challenging behaviour's?
- How much experience do you have with diversity in your own life?
- Are there certain things that stress you?

It's ok to not have the answers, and for most people, you only know what you've been exposed to. You may be coming across a particular type of neurodivergence for the first time and having to learn as you go. Likewise, sometimes you have a lot on your own plate in the background and your time coaching is where you get to disconnect and unwind, it is ok to express these needs when identifying potential teams and groups within a club or sporting organisation.

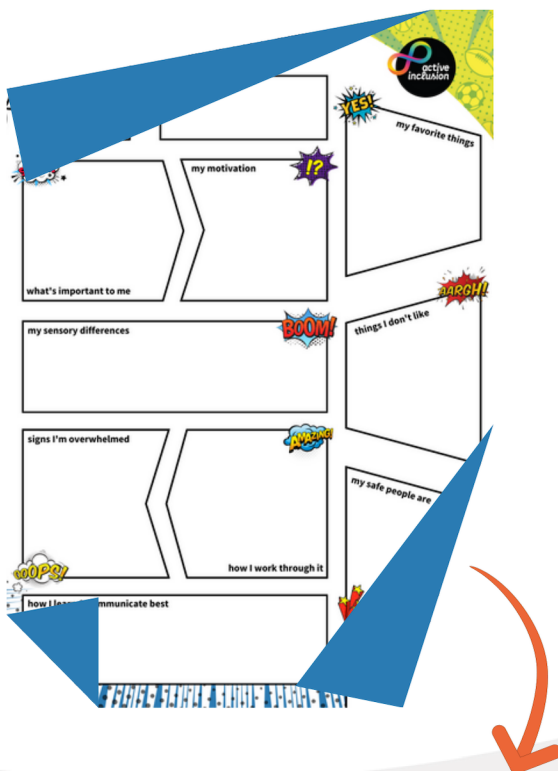


STEP 4: KNOW YOUR PARTICIPANTS

This step often focuses on the neurodivergent participant only; however, every member of your team will have their own strengths, limitations, and needs. Taking a bigger picture perspective allows you to better identify areas of potential friction between participants, finding team-level solutions rather than needing to single out a specific participant, or prepare strategies and educate teammates before game play starts. While it is often easier to “wing it” at the younger, non-competitive levels there is a lot to be said for being proactive in terms of your own stress levels.

Depending on the participants' age and comfort levels you may be able to work 1:1 or in a group setting to find out more about who they are and what helps them to thrive. Or you may need to work with their carers and supports.

We have outlined some of the questions you can discuss and what the answers can help accomplish. We have also created a guided “All About Me” resource to help create a personal profile for your participants - these can be useful for all teammates and help shed light on how you can help them reach their goals.



Some questions to discuss:

- **How do you communicate?** *Some neurodivergents may become selectively mute in times of distress and have other ways to communicate such as signing. Likewise the noisier and busier the sensory environment is the less likely they are to be able to identify and respond to verbal instructions. Knowing what works best and how to effectively coach from the sidelines can save a lot of mixed messages and meltdowns on the field.*
- **What are your other interests?** *These can be used to build up rapport, facilitate building team bonds, and redirect attention to calm.*
- **What things may cause you distress?** *Are you more likely to struggle with certain sensory inputs, or find certain behavior's from others harder to manage.*
- **What motivates you?** *Are you wanting to be seen as a team player or are you here to have fun, perhaps its needing to break social isolation or building up physical habits that can support your overall mental health and wellbeing.*
- **How do you prefer to be encouraged?** *Do you like verbal praise or does it cause discomfort, would you prefer quiet tangible rewards like stickers towards a goal?*
- **How do you know when you're agitated or upset?** *Not everyone shows they're struggling in the same way, knowing which signs to look out for can help coaches and leaders to be proactive in their approaches and get the game back on track sooner.*
- **How do you redirect yourself when you are getting agitated?** *Many neurodivergents have worked with multiple therapist and supports to help identity and implement ways to self-regulate. This is a skill that takes years to perfect and often needs adjusting to meet the situation at hand. Knowing what these may be and how to help your participant to use them can help reinforce skills growth while easing distress & building up confidence.*
- **Do you exhibit any stimming behaviors?** *These are repetitive self-soothing behavior's that may look different to others but allow the participant to self-regulate and stay calm and engaged. You may need to help team mates understand what these are and why they may help the participant.*



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