Not a Misfit — Misunderstood

From neurodiversity awareness to conditions that make contribution possible

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Organizational companion to the WEO Framework™ poster presented at the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit 2026.

A practical lens for the leader who has tried to fix the problem—and is ready to question where the problem lives.

Stop Fixing People. Start Changing Conditions.™

A person can look like the problem in one setting and make an extraordinary contribution in another. I have been both.

This paper asks what changes when we stop treating that difference as a mystery about the person—and start investigating the conditions.

A note on reading. This paper is designed for reading in short stretches, scanning, or listening with text-to-speech. Short paragraphs, descriptive headings and clear tables offer several routes through the ideas. These choices are intended to reduce reading friction, including for neurodivergent readers; no layout suits everyone. The design draws on cognitive-accessibility guidance, not a claim of formal conformance. (W3C, 2021)

Start here: the decision before the decision

Before a performance plan, a rejected application, or a student's lower placement, there is usually a smaller decision: what do we think is causing this?

Get that explanation wrong and a perfectly competent intervention can be aimed at the wrong problem. Coaching cannot clarify a priority nobody has agreed. A reminder cannot make an inaccessible system usable. Another awareness session cannot, by itself, redesign Monday's meeting.

The WEO Framework™—Wiring × Environment → Outcome—keeps the person and the conditions in view together. Its practical method, Conditions-First™, asks us to investigate with the person before a tentative explanation becomes a verdict.

The promise is concrete: by the end, you will be able to take one recurring difficulty, separate observation from assumption, identify conditions worth examining, and agree on a change with a meaningful review.

The explanation you choose determines which variables you allow yourself to change.

Choose your reading route

For the core idea · The problem with the easy explanation; What WEO asks you to see

For the evidence · Four workplace findings worth acting on carefully

For Monday's next step · Six moves, with the person at every step; The one-page inquiry

For a partnership · From one conversation to a Conditions-First™ Audit

What this work is. An independent, evidence-informed practitioner synthesis developed through work in organizations and classrooms. WEO is not a diagnostic test, a score for human potential, or a validated predictor of performance. Its complete method has not been evaluated as an intervention. Conditions-first means support the person and examine the setting—not conditions-only.

1. The Problem with The Easy Explanation

Consider an analyst whose work has usually been strong. Recently, reports have arrived late. She interrupts in meetings, then stops speaking. Her manager arranges coaching on communication and time management.

Meanwhile, the team has moved to an open office. Instructions arrive in three channels. A deadline changes in a conversation she misses. Before starting the report, she must reconstruct what the report is supposed to do.

This is an illustrative situation, not a documented client outcome. The point is not that coaching must be wrong. It is that the organization has not yet established what the coaching is meant to solve.

A skill gap is possible. So are unclear priorities, late inputs, overload, a health need, or several interacting problems. The person's account can help distinguish them. A character judgment cannot do that work for us.

Awareness is a beginning, not an operating method

Awareness matters. It can give people language for experiences that were previously misread. But agreement that minds differ does not automatically tell a manager what to ask when a deadline is missed—or who has authority to repair the workflow.

The next step is not to discard awareness. It is to connect understanding to decisions: what changes in the brief, the interview, the meeting, the assessment, or the way support is used?

That is the shift this paper offers. Not a promise that every difficulty disappears. A refusal to make the person the whole explanation before the conditions have had a hearing.

We already know how to be curious about a plant

Imagine two similarly wilted plants. The soil in one pot is dry. The roots in the other sit in water. The visible signal is similar; the useful response is not. More water could help one and harm the other.

We do not convene a meeting about the basil's attitude. We check what it is experiencing.

People deserve at least that much curiosity. People also have histories, agency, disabilities, relationships and needs that a plant metaphor cannot capture. The analogy is a reminder to investigate, not evidence that human difficulties have simple botanical causes.

Credit where it belongs. Neurodiversity's biodiversity analogy appears in Harvey Blume's writing. Thomas Armstrong developed botanical comparisons and positive niche construction—deliberately building supportive environments. WEO builds on that design tradition; it does not claim to have invented it. (Blume, 1998; Armstrong, 2012; Armstrong, 2015)

2. What WEO Asks You to See

Wiring × Environment → Outcome

Wiring is shorthand for a person's characteristic ways of sensing, feeling, processing information, learning, attending, communicating and regulating. It points to patterns, not a fixed destiny. A neurotype does not tell us everything about an individual. Skills, health, experience and current state also matter.

Environment is the ecology of conditions surrounding a person. More than a place: what is asked of them, how information arrives, what tools and choices exist, how they are treated, and whether support is safe to use.

Outcome includes the work and the experience of doing it. Accuracy, learning and participation matter. So do effort, distress, recovery, agency and what the person regards as a worthwhile result. An outcome is not a person's ceiling.

A starting map, not a complete taxonomy. The relevant conditions depend on this person and task.

Look beyond the room	Questions that make conditions visible
Information and tools	Where do instructions and changes live? Can the person use the format and technology?
Time and demands	What must happen at once? What interrupts the work? Is there preparation and recovery time?
Relationships and safety	What happens when someone asks, disagrees, admits uncertainty or uses support?
Rules and opportunity	Who gets admitted, assigned meaningful work, heard, evaluated and promoted?

The multiplication sign is a prompt—not a calculator

The × emphasizes the power conditions can have over access to someone's abilities. A condition may open a route, make it harder to use, block it, or change the effort behind the same visible result. The arrow marks a proposed relationship, not a numerical prediction.

The initial spark was Dr. Luke Beardon's autism + environment = outcome. His formulation already places environment inside the explanation. WEO keeps that insight and uses a

different teaching symbol to emphasize access, cost and inquiry. It is not a mathematical correction of Beardon. (Beardon, 2017; Beardon, 2022)

The wider foundation includes Lewin's person–environment approach, research on fit at work, the World Health Organization's contextual account of functioning, and Edmondson's psychological-safety research. Lawrence Fung's strengths-based models likewise recognize that context matters to how strengths and challenges are understood. (Lewin, 1936; van Vianen, 2018; World Health Organization, 2001; Edmondson, 1999; Fung, 2021; Fung, 2024)

The contribution here is a practical synthesis: keep the conditions visible, distinguish access from ability, and give the next decision a better starting point.

3. Capacity Possessed is Not Capacity Accessible

A person may know the work and still struggle to reach that knowledge through a particular task format, workflow or social demand. Equally, someone may need to learn a skill that the task genuinely requires. The job is to investigate which situation we are in, not assume the more flattering explanation.

The WHO distinguishes capacity in a standardized environment from performance in a person's current environment. That is a related, specific precedent—not a measure of someone's total potential. WEO uses "accessible capacity" as practical language for what someone can draw on here and now. (World Health Organization, 2002)

Same person. Three rooms.

For a thought experiment, give one person's relevant capacity a reference value of 100. Hold it constant while changing the conditions. We are not testing anyone, comparing people, or claiming that capacity remains unchanged throughout life.

Illustrative arithmetic only. Not measured capacity, output, worth, audit scores or productivity predictions.

Conditions	Illustration	What the illustration means
Enabling	100 × 1 = 100	A workable route supports access to the reference capacity for this task.
Taxing	100 × 0.5 = 50	Friction restricts access in this illustration. The fraction is not a measured loss of output.
Blocking	100 × 0 = 0	Access is blocked through this route. Ability and contributions elsewhere are not being scored.

Zero belongs to the route, not to the person. An applicant excluded before a relevant work sample leaves the organization with an unanswered question—not proof that the applicant had nothing to contribute.

One does not mean a perfect life or limitless performance. It represents supported access within this deliberately simplified illustration. "Enabling" describes supported access relative to constraining conditions, not the manufacture of extra human worth.

A tax is not always visible as lower output. Someone may preserve the result by working longer, preparing intensely or recovering privately afterward. The same outcome can carry a different cost. The arithmetic does not quantify that cost.

You cannot learn what a person could contribute from an opportunity they never had.

Enabling, taxing, and blocking are working descriptions, not validated categories. A condition can help one task and hinder another. In real life, learning, health, fatigue and prolonged demands can change capacity as well as access.

4. When a Signal Becomes a Verdict

The Diagnostic Fallacy, as used here, is not a claim that clinical diagnosis is a fallacy. Clinical assessment can be an important route to understanding and support. This term names an everyday reasoning error: an unverified explanation about a person becomes the basis for a consequential decision.

The phrase itself predates WEO. What follows is this framework's practitioner-facing use of it. (Goodman, 1977)

The Assumption-to-Assertion Cascade. A conceptual teaching sequence, not a measured probability model.

Stage	An illustrative account-manager example
Observe	Two deadlines were missed.
Interpret	"Disorganized?"
Assume	"Doesn't care."
Assert	"Unreliable."
Act	The person is taken off the account.

The first line records a signal. The later lines add explanations and consequences. Between them, what was checked? Did priorities change? Were inputs late? Was the final version identifiable? What did the person say?

Research on correspondence bias explains why observers can overread dispositions and underread situations. Confirmation bias can then make the original story easier to reinforce. These are tendencies, not claims that every manager is biased or every difficult judgment is wrong. (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Nickerson, 1998)

Medicine offers a useful parallel. In an analysis of 100 diagnostic-error cases, premature closure was the most common cognitive problem identified; system factors also mattered. The lesson for leaders is to keep alternatives open—not to diagnose employees or import a medical error rate into the workplace. (Graber et al., 2005)

The observer is part of the environment

Once a manager decides “not a team player,” that interpretation can change who receives information, whose questions are welcomed and who is invited into the next project. Those decisions change the conditions in which later performance appears.

This is a plausible feedback loop to investigate, not an inevitable destiny. An accurate concern may remain accurate. The safeguard is to record what happened, what we inferred and what evidence could change our view.

Get curious about the conditions before drawing conclusions about the person.

5. The Cost That a Good Performance Review Can Miss

A finished report tells you the report was finished. It does not tell you whether the author spent the evening finding missing instructions, the morning filtering noise, or the weekend recovering.

Workplace masking research describes pressure to manage how others perceive difference, including reported exhaustion and strain. Community-based research on autistic burnout describes prolonged exhaustion and loss of functioning in the context of chronic stress and inadequate support. These findings warrant attention to experience; they do not supply a universal energy multiplier or diagnose an individual. (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Raymaker et al., 2020)

Equal visible output does not establish equal experience. These are inquiry prompts, not a screening tool.

What the dashboard may show	What is still worth asking
The work met the standard.	What effort and recovery did that require? Is this sustainable for the person?
The adjustment exists.	Can it actually be used? Is requesting it embarrassing, risky or administratively exhausting?
Few people use the option.	Is it unnecessary, unknown, difficult to access—or socially costly?
The team has no complaints.	Do people expect a useful response when they raise a problem?

An option is more than permission on paper

A quiet room is only part of the environment. The meaning attached to using it is another part. If using the room is read as withdrawal, a person may face a choice between concentrating and protecting their reputation.

The practical question is safe to use? Ask about access, choice and consequences in a way that protects confidentiality. Do not turn participation or disclosure into a new compliance target.

Nor should every design goal become “less stimulation.” Some people need movement, interaction or a different level of challenge. The useful target is a workable range of options, negotiated around the actual task—not a universal quiet room. Reviews of workplace adjustments support taking such variation seriously while emphasizing limits in the intervention evidence. (Weber et al., 2024)

Ask what the work costs while it is still getting done.

6. Four Workplace Findings Worth Acting on Carefully

The evidence does not validate WEO as a package. It does give leaders specific reasons to examine conditions rather than treat them as background.

Clearer questions can change the quality of an answer

In a mock-interview study, 42 adults—including 21 autistic adults—completed both phases. Making questions more explicit, breaking them down and providing written prompts improved answer ratings, particularly for autistic participants. This was an initial evaluation of interview answers, not evidence of increased hiring. The phases were not a randomized comparison of adapted versus unchanged interviews. (Maras et al., 2021)

Relationships belong in a retention investigation

A study of 985 UK neurodivergent employees linked manager support and psychological safety with career satisfaction and intention to leave. It was cross-sectional: these associations do not establish that a particular change prevents resignations. Adjustments losing significance in fuller statistical models does not mean they are unnecessary. (McDowall et al., 2025)

Flexibility is not one intervention

An analysis of a nationally representative UK dataset of more than 25,000 people found that flexible and homeworking arrangements related differently to employment outcomes across groups. That number describes the whole sample, not 25,000 neurodivergent workers. The practical lesson is fit: do not assume that remote work, flexible timing and every outcome move together. (Branicki et al., 2024)

Ask employees what enables their work

In the 2026 Neurodiversity in Business report, 72% of neurodivergent employee respondents selected work-structure support, such as flexible or home working, as enabling their best work. This is an endorsement within a non-representative UK survey—not a 72% performance improvement or a forecast for your team. (McDowall & Srinivasan, 2026)

Taken together, these findings justify better questions and carefully evaluated changes. They do not justify another one-size-fits-all checklist.

7. Keep The Strengths. Lose The Stereotype.

The alternative to a deficit stereotype is not a more flattering stereotype. An autistic person is not a guaranteed quality-control department. A dyslexic person is not automatically a visionary. ADHD is not a job description.

A critical systematic review found insufficient strong evidence to establish or rule out a general autism advantage at work. Individual strengths remain a question for discovery, not an entitlement to assume. (Bury et al., 2020)

That makes opportunity more important, not less. A spelling difficulty does not establish the limits of someone's strategic judgment. A slow spoken answer does not establish the quality of the reasoning behind it. Examine the relevant work, teach what needs teaching, and avoid making one difficulty a verdict on the whole person.

The evidence must be allowed to complicate the story

An influential 2020 communication study found greater information loss in mixed autistic/non-autistic chains. A larger preregistered 2025 study did not reproduce an overall mixed-chain disadvantage. Rapport was a separate outcome. Neither a universal communication deficit nor a universal advantage follows from those tasks. (Crompton et al., 2020; Crompton et al., 2025)

A framework about premature conclusions has to be willing to change its own.

A new lens changes the place we look for leverage

Donella Meadows argued that the assumptions beneath a system can be powerful places to intervene. WEO applies that insight to a familiar organizational assumption: if the outcome disappoints us, the deficiency must live in the person. Changing that assumption makes other actions available—without deciding in advance which explanation will win. (Meadows, 1999)

The shift is not from blaming people to blaming rooms. It is from blame to a better investigation.

And the aim is larger than productivity. People do not need to reveal an exceptional talent to deserve respect, usable conditions and appropriate support.

8. Where to Apply The Lens

Start with a decision that matters. The following examples are hypotheses to investigate, not explanations to paste onto people.

In organizations

Illustrative applications. Investigate resources and structural constraints as well as small workflow changes.

Recurring problem	A condition to investigate	A useful review
An unfilled role	Does selection assess essential work, or unrelated speed and social familiarity?	Candidate access, work-sample quality and later role performance.
Inconsistent delivery	Conflicting priorities, late handoffs, usable tools, training and staffing.	Timeliness and quality alongside rework and extra hours.

Recurring problem	A condition to investigate	A useful review
Strong output, rising exhaustion	Avoidable switching, masking pressure, workload and recovery.	The person's chosen burden measure alongside the actual standard.
Conflict or lost ideas	Decision rights, communication norms and who can contribute in which format.	Clarity for both sides, repeated disputes and ideas considered fairly.
Regrettable turnover	Pay, workload, usable support, management changes and safety to speak.	Experience and intention to stay, followed separately by actual departures.

In classrooms and campuses

Elementary school: the child who does not start. After spoken instructions, a child leaves the page blank. A visible first step may improve access to the task. If the child begins but still misunderstands the concept, the teaching need remains. Getting started and understanding are different outcomes.

Middle school: the transition that consumes the lesson. A student arrives unsettled after a crowded, unpredictable change of rooms. Explore the route, timing and what the student needs on arrival. Review participation and experience—not simply whether the student looks quiet.

High school and university: the format that hides the work. A timed handwritten essay or rapid-fire seminar may combine subject knowledge with other demands. Ask which abilities are actually being assessed. When writing or oral argument is the learning objective, teach and assess it explicitly; changing format should not silently change the standard.

The educator's conditions count, too. A teacher who avoids a noisy planning room may still collaborate effectively through shared plans and written decisions. Define what collaboration must accomplish before treating physical presence as its proof.

Universal Design for Learning research supports attention to instructional design and variability, while effects differ across studies. This does not validate WEO or replace individualized teaching and support. Work with learners, families and relevant professionals in ways appropriate to age and communication needs. (King-Sears et al., 2023)

9. Six Moves, with The Person at Every Step

Conditions-First™ turns curiosity into an accountable next action. These are the same six moves used on the finished poster. The person is a partner throughout—not a source of data consulted after the plan is written.

1 · Notice the signal

Describe what happened, when, and in relation to which task or requirement. “Two reports arrived late” is useful. “Unreliable” is already a verdict. Record the interpretation separately.

2 · Get curious. Ask and listen.

What matters to the person? What are they experiencing? What helps? Offer spoken, written or other workable ways to respond. Do not require a diagnosis to begin asking about task conditions. An unanswered question remains unanswered; it is not permission to guess.

3 · Investigate together

Examine instructions, demands, timing, tools, relationships and support. Look for occasions when things worked better. Compare plausible explanations, including skills, health, staffing and resources. Distinguish a person’s account, an observed fact and a hypothesis.

4 · Agree and redesign

Define success together. Choose a feasible change and the support needed to try it. Preserve the essential purpose, name who has authority to act, and agree what would count as useful improvement or unacceptable burden.

5 · Try the change

Put it into practice, rather than only into a document. Record the starting point, owner, measures and review date. Invite feedback while the test runs. When several urgent barriers need attention, address them and record the bundle; do not withhold necessary support for a cleaner experiment.

6 · Review and repeat

Review the results together, including the person’s experience. Check implementation, quality, access, effort, recovery and effects on others. Keep, adjust or stop. Return to step 2: ask and listen again before deciding what to try next.

Urgent harm, safeguarding, health needs and immediate safety obligations require prompt action. Inquiry can proceed alongside protection and appropriate support. Understanding contributing conditions does not excuse harmful behavior or abolish accountability.

10. What Happens When The First Change Does Not Work?

Synthetic teaching example. The analyst, events and numbers below are invented to demonstrate review decisions. They are not client results, pilot findings or evidence of WEO effectiveness.

An analyst submits six of ten comparable daily reports on time. Quality is usually acceptable, but completion requires extra work after scheduled hours. The manager's first explanation is poor time management.

Asked about the work, the analyst identifies scattered instructions and late source information. They first test one authoritative brief. The prediction: less ambiguity will improve timeliness and reduce extra work.

All values are synthetic. Each phase covers ten comparable reporting days. Extra hours are a workload measure, not a measure of total capacity.

Measure	Baseline	Clear brief	Earlier handoff added
Reports on time	6 of 10	6 of 10	9 of 10
Reports needing substantive correction	1 of 10	1 of 10	1 of 10
Median extra work after scheduled hours, per report	70 minutes	65 minutes	25 minutes

First review: the brief is consistently available, but timeliness has not improved. The analyst finds it useful and wants to keep it. Records indicate that essential inputs still arrive too close to the deadline. Confidence falls in the claim that ambiguity was the main barrier to timeliness.

Next test: the manager arranges an earlier handoff with the supplying team. The brief stays. They also check whether the change pushes unreasonable pressure upstream.

Second review: in this invented sequence, timeliness improves and extra hours fall without more corrections. Keep the useful changes and examine whether the pattern lasts. One report is still late. The combined changes and short sequence do not isolate a cause.

The useful result is not a triumphant story in which the framework is right about everything. It is a more specific explanation and a better-supported next decision.

The one-page inquiry: begin here

Choose one task or recurring point of friction. Complete this with the person in a format they can use. Ten minutes may start the conversation; investigation and review take the time the situation requires.

Conditions-First™ inquiry worksheet · JenniferCummings.com/weo

Move	Record together
1 · Notice the signal	What happened? When? What is the essential requirement? Keep observation separate from the interpretation. _____
2 · Get curious. Ask and listen.	What matters to the person? What are they experiencing? What helps? _____
3 · Investigate together	Which conditions may matter? What is known, inferred or still unknown? What alternative could explain the signal? _____
4 · Agree and redesign	What will change? What support and authority are needed? What is the prediction? _____
5 · Try the change	Owner: _____ Start: _____ Review: _____ Task measure: _____ Person-chosen measure: _____
6 · Review and repeat	Was the change usable? What improved, stayed the same or became harder? Keep, adjust or stop—then return to step 2. _____

Agree what information is necessary, who may see it and how it will be used. Do not turn someone's account of effort, disability or support into a ranking of their worth or resilience. No diagnosis or potential score belongs on this page.

Good intentions are not outcome data. A redesign is a hypothesis.

11. From One Conversation to a Conditions-First™ Audit

A single conversation can improve a single decision. A recurring pattern may require a system-level review: the same missing instructions, the same inaccessible selection step, the same support that disappears whenever a manager changes.

The Conditions-First™ Audit is a collaborative, scoped review of one team, classroom, campus service, clinic process or hiring pathway. It starts with selection and access: who never gets through the door? It then examines who can contribute, under which conditions, and at what cost.

Scope and deliverables are agreed around the problem. No fixed return on investment or universal multiplier is promised.

What the engagement produces	What it helps you decide
An evidence-backed conditions map	Which barriers, resources and unanswered questions matter to the selected task or process.
Priorities for action	What to change first, why, who can authorize it, and which problems require resources or policy decisions.
A practical test plan	Changes, owners, starting measures, review dates and explicit criteria for continuing or revising.
A shared review	What was implemented, what people could use, what improved, what did not, and what should happen next.

The audit assesses conditions with people. It does not diagnose employees, screen for neurotypes, rank human potential or offer a validated environmental score. Staff and candidates should control what personal information they disclose.

Conditions-First™ Audits · Advisory & Consulting · Training & Workshops · Speaking & Keynotes

Audits map recurring friction and prioritize changes. Advisory work follows a specific problem through redesign and review. Training, workshops and speaking introduce the lens and give teams practice.

Bring me the problem that keeps coming back

For an audit, workshop, speaking engagement, interview or research conversation, begin with the situation and the approaches already tried. The first useful question is not “Which program should we buy?” It is “What have we examined, and what are we still assuming?”

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A different next decision

Return to the late report, the blank page and the applicant whose work was never seen. None of those signals supplies its own explanation. Each is a place where a person's opportunity can narrow—or where someone can ask a better question.

"Misfit" makes the person sound like the error. "Misunderstood" asks whether the mismatch was ever investigated.

The goal is not to protect a favored theory. It is to create a fairer, more useful decision: support where support is needed, teaching where teaching is needed, redesign where the conditions are in the way.

This week, choose one recurring difficulty. Ask the person what the current explanation misses. Agree on a change and how you will know whether it helped.

Get curious. Understand the person. Rethink the fit.

About Jennifer Cole Cummings

Jennifer Cole Cummings, M.S.Ed., is a Human Systems Futurist, speaker, strategist, and creator of the WEO Framework™ and Conditions-First™. Her work connects entrepreneurship, business strategy and education around a practical question: What do the conditions make possible, and what do they make unnecessarily difficult?

She taught high school science through Teach For America in Baltimore and later taught middle school science in California. Identified as autistic in adulthood, she brings lived experience alongside her work with organizations and classrooms. She speaks, writes and advises on how systems can make more room for contribution.

Disclosure and boundaries

The author developed the framework described here and offers related services. This paper is a selective, evidence-informed synthesis, not a systematic review, clinical instrument or evaluation of those services. Examples and synthetic quantities are identified where used. References support specific components, not WEO as a validated whole.

References

Sources support the specific claims identified in the text. Foundational and conceptual works provide lineage; they do not validate WEO as an intervention. Links lead to publisher, author or official records.

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