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Positive Organisations: Psychological Safety, Neurodiversity & Inclusion in the Workplace

Dr Pam Phillippo

0843 886 9900
research@ppnetwork.org
www.ppnetwork.org

St.Catherine's House
Tickhill Road
Doncaster, DN4 8QP



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Author: Dr Pam Phillippo

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Welcome!

It is my pleasure to share with you a white paper from one of our Academy course graduates, Dr Pam Phillippo. Pam completed our [Level 3 Certificate in Neurodiversity & Inclusion \(Train the Trainer\)](#) in 2023 and has been a consistent advocate of neurodiversity and inclusivity in the workplace. We are tremendously proud of her accomplishments and the positive energy and expertise that she brings to this field.

As you will read, Pam makes a strong argument for psychological safety in the workplace highlighting numerous benefits such as improving staff morale, decision-making abilities, innovation and creativity, productivity, and mental health across the workplace. She raises some excellent points around trust-building and the value of strengths-based approaches, both of which can help to foster a positive organisational culture.

As an organisation, we value inclusivity from the top down and bottom up, and every level in between. I am an individual with autism and Tourette's, and many of our students and members identify with or have been diagnosed with a neurodivergent profile. We do our best to listen when individual differences arise, and collaborate with the individual on how we can best support them.

I hope you enjoy reading this paper and that it prompts you to consider ways to introduce or strengthen inclusivity in your workplace.



Reece Coker

Director of Research
Positive Psychology Centre

Pam Phillippo

Dr Pam Phillippo has worked for over 25 years in the education sector. Formerly a lecturer in Further Education and Higher Education, she has spent much of her career working for several major UK Awarding Organisations as a Principal Examiner, Quality Manager, and Senior Qualification Development Leader. She is also a published author.



Pam studied a combined honours degree in Human Movement Science, Physical Education, and Cell Biology at The University of Liverpool. This degree provided a diverse in-depth scientific grounding in subjects including pharmacology, physiology, and human cadaver dissection. After completing her BSc (Hons) degree, Pam went onto lecture in Further and Higher Education.

Pam commenced her PhD studies part-time by research at The University of Bristol. Working alongside world experts in psychophysiology, she completed her Doctorate at The University of Wales, Bangor. Her research was presented at the 10th World Congress of Sport Psychology in Skiathos, Greece, and her studies have been published in a number of scientific academic journals and textbooks.

Having had extensive experience working in qualification design and development, Dr Phillippo now currently works for a UK Awarding Organisation as a Product Specialist. Her role involves the design and development of assessments, training, and support materials across a range of different products including regulated qualifications, apprenticeships, and eLearning solutions.

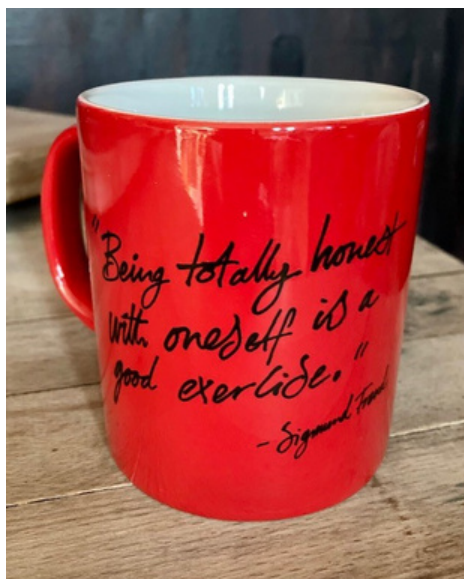
Dr Phillippo has a specific interest in neurodiversity and is now 'PPGCert' having recently completed the Level 3 Certificate in Neurodiversity and Inclusion (Train-the-Trainer).

“Talk your talk, walk your walk, dance your dance, speak your truth, and be yourself.”

Aiyaz Uddin (author & poet)

“It’s better to be a flamboyant failure than a benign success.”

Malcolm McLaren speaking at Learning without Frontiers 2009



“You can fail at what you don’t love, so, you might as well do what you love. There is no other choice to be made.”

Jim Carrey

“I challenge you to make your life a masterpiece. I challenge you to join the ranks of those people who live what they teach, who walk their talk.”

Anthony Jay Robbins (author & philanthropist)

“In life there’s the avatar you create, and the cadence you come-up with that is pleasing to people and takes them away from their issues and it makes you popular.”

“And then at some point you have to peel it away; you know it’s not who you are.”

“People ‘create’ themselves to be popular or to be successful, and it’s not just in showbusiness, it’s Wall Street, it’s anywhere. You go to the office, and you put a monkey suit on, and you act in a certain way, and you say a certain thing, you lie through your teeth at times, and you do whatever you need to do to look like a winner.”

“And then at some point in your life you have to say... I don’t care what it looks like, I’ve found a hole in the psyche and I’m going through! And I’m going to face the abyss of not knowing whether that’s going to be okay with everybody or not.”

Jim Carrey

Positive Organisations: Psychological Safety, Neurodiversity and Inclusivity in the Workplace by Dr Pam Phillippo

Organisations and businesses are striving to create inclusive workplaces and organisational cultures where 'everyone matters'. Inclusive workplaces are environments where employees experience a true sense of community and belonging, where people have a voice and feel that their voice is listened to and heard.

Why is it important to create inclusion in the workplace?

The many benefits of an inclusive work environment are well-documented. These include improved:

- staff morale and therefore a happier more contented workforce
- decision-making abilities
- innovation and creativity
- productivity
- mental health and wellbeing across the workforce.

However, could organisations and businesses be so highly focused on achieving their inclusion goals and objectives that they have inadvertently overlooked a key factor that essentially forms the 'beating heart' of being able to create true inclusion in the workplace?

To get closer to the 'beating heart' of an inclusive work environment, organisations and businesses need to firstly take a self-reflective big step back and ask: How well do we actually know our workforce? Be honest.

1. How well do you know your workforce?

Knowing your workforce means understanding and appreciating all the differences that employees bring to the work environment, these include their diverse backgrounds, cultures, experiences, beliefs, talents, personalities, strengths, achievements and successes, challenges, barriers and support needs.

Talk the talk and walk the walk

As an integral part of getting to know your workforce, have you taken the time to consider and identify your own 'out groups'? Do you know who your 'out groups' are? Who are the people in your organisation or business who you don't usually choose to grab that morning coffee with or chat to at a work social or other work-based event?

Look around, notice more...

Who are the people who are not offered the invite to that meeting or the opportunity to attend the coaching/training session? Who are the people in your organisation or business who you perceive you have less in common with? What are these perceptions based on? Be open and honest. Be mindful. Change your perspective and you can change your mind.

Why not take some time to get to know the employees in your organisation or business who are not like you? You could find yourself on a journey of discovery. And you may find it to be a hugely worthwhile, enriching, and inspiring experience.

Small steps

So, after taking positive steps to know their workforce better, employers will now have an improved understanding of the unique differences and strengths that people bring to the work environment, which are of benefit to the business. The company is now heading towards creating an inclusive workspace. To succeed though, a key ingredient must be present, and that's psychological safety.

2. Psychological safety: The 'beating heart' of an inclusive work environment

To fully embed, embrace, and encourage inclusivity in the workplace, it is essential to create psychological safety.

Without establishing psychological safety, all those positive efforts to create inclusion and belonging will, for some employees at least, remain elusive... something that is simply a mirage of ideals. Employees will not be able to be their authentic selves at work. This means that they may never feel comfortable or safe enough to reveal their true selves, to 'speak-up' about their challenges, experiences, opinions, viewpoints, and support needs. And this could be for a variety of different reasons including anxiety-related, fear of being belittled or humiliated in some way, or worry about being perceived as 'different' to everyone else at work.

Inability to be authentic in the workplace can apply to everyone; both neurotypical individuals and those with neurological differences. Everyone has the capacity over time to learn to effectively 'mask' their conditions/traits or personal challenges, ultimately their true selves, in an attempt to better 'fit into' what society expects and what is expected in the workplace i.e., the status quo.

And that's not only sad (and potentially stressful) for those individuals who are masking, but it's a shame for employers too. Because they are missing out on all the wonderful untapped unknown attributes, experiences, talents, capabilities and unique strengths that different people can bring to the work environment.

Do you have 3 faces?

- The **first** face, you show to the world.
- The **second** face, you show to your close friends and family.
- The **third** face, you never show anyone. It is the truest reflection of who you are.

(Adapted from an old Japanese saying)

Without psychological safety in the workplace, people are not able to be truly open with their peers, colleagues, and managers. Employees will be less likely to take risks at work for fear of failure or making mistakes, which negatively impacts on innovation and creativity.

'Fear does motivate, but it motivates hiding. Fear is the enemy of flourishing.'
(Edmondson A., 2019)

3. Creating psychological safety in the workplace

Establishing a truly inclusive work environment starts with knowing your workforce well, and creating psychologically safe workplaces so that people can be their authentic selves. And a key ingredient in creating psychological safety is the ability to build trust.

Figure 1: Building Trust in the Workplace



Fig. 1: (Phillippo, 2024)

Building trust in the work environment

Psychological safety is essential for an inclusive work environment. Leadership behaviours that help to create psychological safety in the workplace include:

- Being curious and asking questions.
- Promoting open dialogue and discussion.
- Being interested in your peers, your workforce.
- Encouraging conversations about careers and aspirations.
- Speaking-up and reframing concerns.
- Encouraging the sharing of mistakes and errors. Successful cultures are those in which people can fail openly (Edmondson A., 2023), without their mistakes being held against them. Provide reassurance and highlight that errors are not always linked to poor performance. Develop a culture where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities and not as an opportunity to apportion blame.
- Listening to people and learning more. Being authentic and transparent
- Focusing on employee health and wellbeing. Wellbeing at work has a significant impact on psychological safety (Edmondson A. , 2012).
- Encouraging professional and personal dialogue between peers to help build trust in the work environment. Being able to share different perspectives.



Figure 2: Inclusion in the Workplace

Figure 2 summarises key aspects required for building inclusion and a sense of belonging in the work environment.



Why don't you?

Introduce a 'My latest mistake' sharing workspace or group channel at work, modelled and supported by managers and leaders within the organisation or business. Innovative approaches like this can help to bring to the forefront a culture of curiosity, acceptance and learning, rather than a culture of fear.

This helps to normalise errors, so instead of employees feeling embarrassed or wanting to hide mistakes, these are seen as learning opportunities for everyone.

Benefits of psychological safety in the workplace

A psychological safety literature review (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017), found that performance, learning, innovation, creativity, communication, commitment, and empowerment are all outcomes that are moderated by psychological safety.

Team psychological safety is defined as 'a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking'. In 1999, Dr Amy Edmondson conducted a groundbreaking study, which used 7 key questions and a scale (Edmondson A., 1999) to help teams to assess their level of psychological safety.

Edmondson's 7 Questions

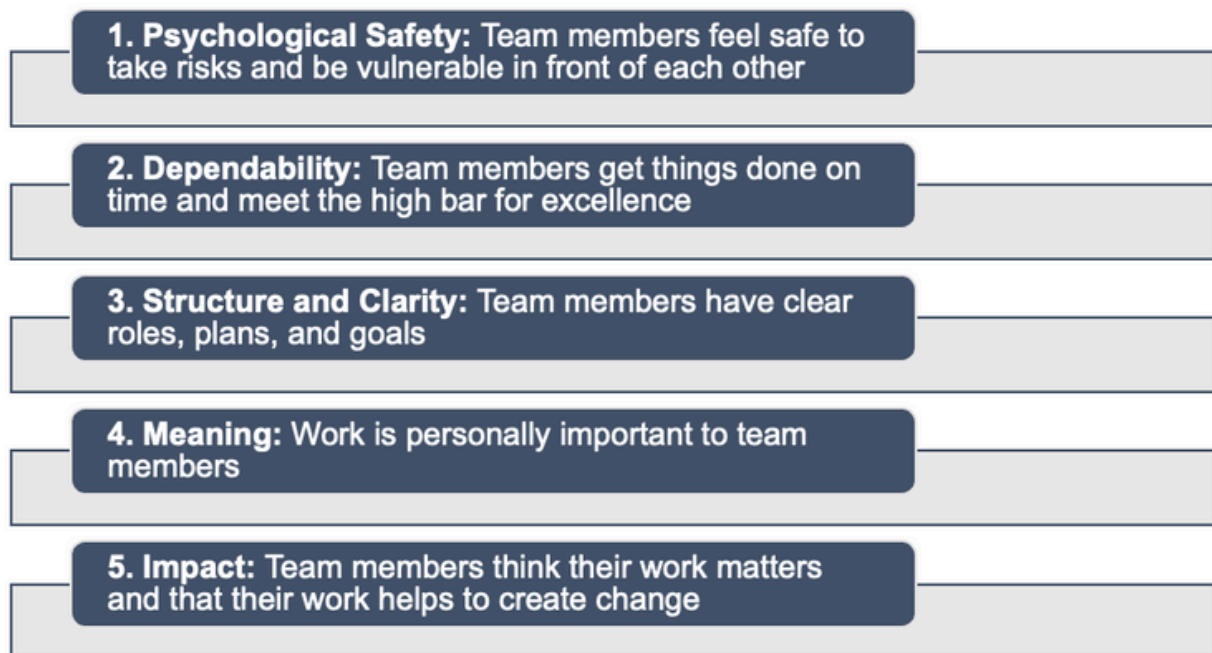
How safe is it to take a risk on this team?

1. If you make a mistake in your team, is it held against you?
2. Are you able to bring up problems and tough issues?
3. Do people on the team sometimes reject others for being different?
4. Is it safe to take a risk?
5. Is it difficult to ask other team members for help?
6. Do people on the team deliberately act to undermine your efforts?
7. Are your unique skills and talents valued and utilised?

Project Aristotle

Google carried out research to explore what makes a great manager and to identify what makes a successful Google team (Rozovsky, 2015). They studied the behaviours of their most successful teams and found that the most positive impact wasn't intelligence or creativity, but how psychologically safe employees felt in the work environment.

The 5 keys to a successful team are:



Employers can implement a number of different practices in the workplace that will help to promote psychological safety. These include:

- **Team performance:** Focus on team performance rather than on the performance of individual employees. People are more likely to feel failure when working on their own (Edmondson A., 2019).
- **Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration through knowledge-sharing within teams and across the wider-workforce.
- **Team learning:** Focus on collaborative team learning rather than individual learning. This creates a supportive culture, where people feel more comfortable asking questions and asking for help to aid their understanding.
- **Learning opportunities:** Use interactive learning solutions to help develop autonomy and empower people in their roles.

Positive Psychology: Building Strengths

In addition to building trust in the work environment, it is also important to recognise and build-on employees' strengths, talents, and preferences, without unduly challenging their weaknesses. Ask employees questions, such as:

- 'What CAN you do?'
- 'What aspects of your job role do you enjoy doing the most?'
- 'What is your ikigai?'

This approach helps to open the door to positive psychology i.e., encouraging people in the workplace to connect with their inner strengths. And in turn this helps to cultivate:

- Happiness
- Personal health and wellbeing
- Flow
- Productivity
- Gratitude
- Professional development
- Personal growth
- Meaning and purpose (ikigai).

Positive psychology is an umbrella term for theories and research that examine what makes life most worth living. (The University of Zurich, 2020) offer a free 'Train your Strengths' online survey and programme which is based on positive psychology. The survey enables people to identify their strengths, reflect on those, and then train their strengths overtime (in association with the VIA Institute on Character) for personal development and well-being (VIA, 2018).

Taking the time to ask a work colleague or team member, 'What can you do?'...is such a small thing to do but can make a big difference to that person. Because the employer is recognising, valuing, and allowing that individual to connect with and use their strengths so that they have meaning and purpose and can thrive in the work environment. This also contributes to an organisational culture and community of belonging, and therefore an inclusive workplace.

'Appreciating diversity and the differences that employees bring to the work environment cannot be achieved without taking the time to really know your workforce. For example, are employers aware of employees in their organisation or business who may have neurological differences?'

'Neurodiversity' is a term which is used to describe a range of neurological differences or conditions that exist in the human population, and these account for differences in the way people perceive, think, feel, behave, experience, and interact with the world around them. Neurodiversity accounts for everyone's neurology being different and unique. These differences should be acknowledged, valued, and celebrated in the workplace.

Because neurodiversity spans the spectrum of neurology, everyone will appear somewhere on the 'neurological spectrum'.

Managing neurodiversity in the workplace

There are 3 key steps for effectively managing neurodiversity in the workplace.

Step 1: Having an improved awareness of neurodivergence and how neurological differences can affect individuals in the work environment. Do you really know your workforce?

Step 2: Create psychological safety in the workplace, so that employees are freely able to share their views, challenges, unique strengths, and support needs.

Step 3: Be open to accommodating individual support needs and making reasonable adjustments in the workplace. For example, making simple adjustments to how meetings are organised, so that communications are accessible and inclusive for everyone.

Workplace adjustments

Dr Phillippo recommends using the '11 STEPS proforma', adapted from work undertaken by (The University of Bath Centre for Applied Autism Research). When considering workplace adjustments, the proforma can help to structure meaningful discussions about how to create neurodiverse-friendly work environments.

The 11 STEPS approach encompasses five key areas and can be used to evaluate the current work environment and encourage discussions and feedback about the:

- Sensory environment
- Timely environment
- Explicit environment
- Predictable environment
- Social environment (The IMI, 2023)

By using the reasonable adjustment 'STEPS', employers can reflect on the extent to which the work environment is inclusive for all employees across the five areas (Sensory, Timely, Explicit, Predictable, and Social).

Taking steps to encourage positive inclusive attitudes towards other colleagues in the workplace should not be seen as something that only a small group of people in an organisation or business are responsible for.

Everybody has a reason to learn about the impact of differences on the work environment. And we all have responsibility for helping to create a more diverse-friendly, inclusive work environment where people can be their best selves and thrive.

Figure 3: Positive Inclusive Attitudes



4. Summary

Creating inclusion in the workplace

In summary, to create true inclusion in the workplace, there are several key pieces of the jigsaw that need to be carefully pieced together. Creating inclusion begins with...

✓ **Psychological safety**

To enable people to open-up and share their challenges and support needs. To enable people to be their authentic selves. Mutual trust and respect are integral to psychological safety.

✓ **Core values**

The culture of the organisation or business, which is developed and enhanced through education and raising awareness.

✓ **Diverse voices and representation**

Who are those role models in your organisation or business? What is your Senior Leadership Team like? Are Diversity and Inclusion champions in place?

✓ **Education**

Mentoring, networking opportunities, and disseminating best practice approaches.

✓ **Running effective meetings**

Providing simple housekeeping rules to ensure meetings and events are accessible to everyone.

✓ **Having regular check-ins with staff**

Do you know your workforce? Do you know what people are experiencing? Do you know about their coping strategies?

✓ **Celebration**

Of people's stories and shared experiences and then learning through that.

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Positive Psychology Guild



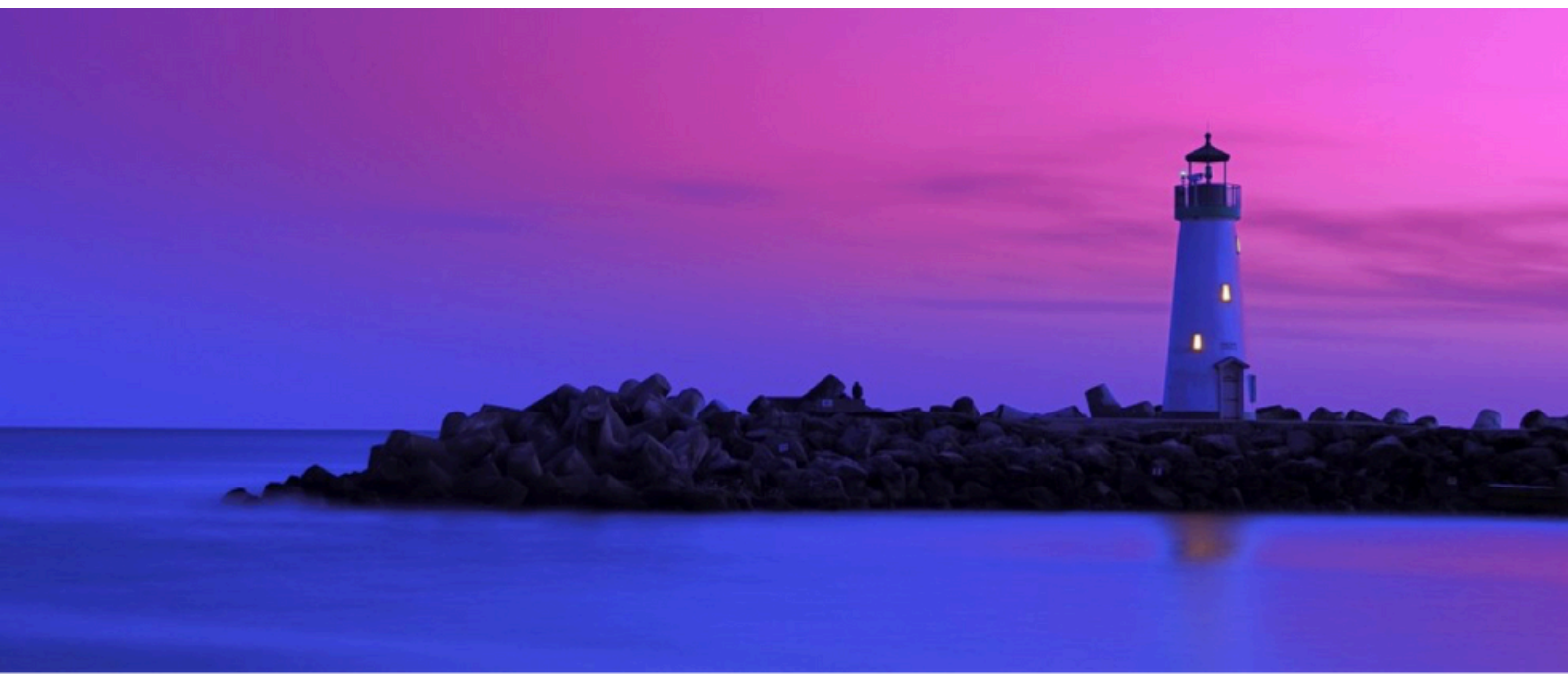
The Positive Psychology Guild is a Not for Profit Organisation and a government registered learning provider with a UK Provider Reference Number: 10067939. We are also a CPD Group Certified Provider dedicated to raising the standards of training and continuing professional development.

Charter

The Positive Psychology Guild (PPG) was formed with a constitution and a charter containing the following objectives:

- A professional membership body for Positive Psychology Practitioners and Autism Awareness Practitioners, including coaches, trainers, facilitators, educators, and counsellors;
- Independent Accreditation for non RQF Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing Training;
- Dedicated to providing training and educational activities for disadvantaged and disengaged members of the community;
- Enhancing human potential, happiness, wellbeing and flourishing;
- A thought leader within the field of Positive Psychology and Autism Awareness, and their applications across industry, culture and communities.

For further information, please contact: membership@ppnetwork.org



Positive Psychology Centre



The Positive Psychology Centre was founded in 2017.

The following year, it set about furthering Positive Psychology studies in under-researched areas. It has since published research studies on hope, fear, and motivation in partnership with Bucks New University. Today, it facilitates three Positive Psychology Applied Research Initiatives on Violence & Post Traumatic Growth, Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Somatics & Kinaesthetics.

The Centre focuses on bringing qualitative research methods related to practical applications or Positive Psychology in real world settings. It encourages interdisciplinary research approaches and collaborations within and beyond Psychology research and practice. Its aim is to offer a bridge between the rigorous research methods of academia and the dynamic needs of professional practice.

The Centre also runs CPD training events on Positive Education, Positive Health, and Positive Organisations for Positive Psychology Practitioners and other professionals. These are available as live events and via recording, and offer progressive routes to qualification as a Positive Psychology Practitioner or further research.

For further information on CPD training, please contact: events@ppnetwork.org

For further information on research, please contact: research@ppnetwork.org



Positive Psychology Academy



The Online Positive Psychology Academy was founded in 2020.

It was created during the early months of the global Covid-19 pandemic and has since evolved into a thriving online community of students and teachers.

The Academy is home to more than 120 students from the UK and around the world, all making their way through the following courses:

- Level 3 Award Positive Health
- Level 3 Award Positive Education
- Level 3 Award Positive Organisations
- Level 3 Certificate Positive Psychology Practice
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Fundamentals
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Practice & Coaching
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Practice & Training
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Organisational Psychology
- Level 7 Certificate Applied Positive Psychology Research

The Academy offers quiet and social spaces for adult learning and certification in multiple pathways to Positive Psychology in Practice and Research.

For further information on qualifications, please contact: training@ppnetwork.org



Autism Centre



The Autism Centre was founded in 2017.

The Centre works with many students who have an interest in autism. Our founder, who completed the MAPP Programme at Bucks New University – is currently undertaking a PhD at Sheffield Hallam University Autism Centre – studying courage through an autistic lens. He is also a member of the Doncaster Autism Partnership Board, a consultant for the National Autistic Society, and Honorary Senior Lecturer at Manchester University within the field of autism.

The Autism Centre runs a Neurodiversity Inclusivity Confident Award. The Centre's lead objective is to help make workplaces more inclusive for people with neurodivergent profiles that are often "hidden" or masked, such as autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia, and not taken into consideration when developing workplace cultures and norms. The Award is open to applications throughout the year. If you or your organisation is interested in learning more, please contact: training@ppnetwork.org

The Centre also runs the following professional qualifications:

- [Level 3 Certificate Neurodiversity & Inclusion \(Train the Trainer\)](#)
- [Level 5 Diploma Autism in Research, Theory & Practice](#)

For further information on qualifications, please contact: training@ppnetwork.org



"Taking the time to ask a work colleague or team member, 'What can you do?'...is such a small thing to do but can make a big difference to that person. Because the employer is recognising, valuing, and allowing that individual to connect with and use their strengths so that they have meaning and purpose and can thrive in the work environment."

DR PAM PHILLIPPO