



**EMBRACING DIFFERENCES:
LESSONS FROM THE WAR OF THE CURRENTS**
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The ditch digger spoke eight languages.

He was a lean, tall man obsessed with cleanliness and accustomed to wearing elegant suits. Yet there he was, shoveling New York City dirt mixed with horse manure—this was 1886—and who knows what else.

It did not help that he had dozens of engineering patents, most of them for ground-breaking inventions that could improve the lives of all people. All he got from them so far were the heavy shovel, dirt, and betrayal.

His last employer promised him a sizable bonus for solving issues with the company's vital technology. He delivered the work, but the employer never paid. He quit and started his own company, producing more inventions and patents—until his partners pushed him out and kept his patents.

And so, he dug ditches to survive. Dealing with dirt was unpleasant. Digging a trench to support technology that was not nearly as advanced as his own was worse. But the worst part was not working on inventions that could make the world much more comfortable and everyone's labor much more efficient.

"My high education in various branches of science, mechanics and literature seemed to me like a mockery," he wrote about that time.

BRAINS BEYOND BOUNDARIES

If you are reading this online, you are benefiting from this ditch digger's work. When you plug your gadgets into an outlet, use remote control, or rely on other types of wireless technology, you are benefiting from Nikola Tesla's world-reshaping inventions. The alternating electric current (AC) he learned to harness powers most of our homes, and the Tesla coil is the forerunner of all wireless transmission.

But we will never know how much more he could have accomplished if he could have spent more time doing the work most aligned with his talents. Perhaps we would have had cell phones and the internet much earlier—both were envisioned by Tesla in 1926.

By all accounts, Nikola Tesla was quite an unusual person. In modern terms, he would be considered "neurodivergent": someone whose thinking and way of being were quite different from the expectations of the day.

He thought in pictures, visualizing and testing his inventions in his mind until he perfected them without the need for drawings or models. That thinking was undoubtedly aided by his photographic and eidetic memory and the ability to perform complex calculations in his mind. Most of his life was centered around his work and intellectual pursuits, to the exclusion of any romantic partnership. His elaborate daily routine included working, walking, and dining on a precise schedule, which made some suggest that he had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

However, OCD does not explain Tesla's complaints about noise—such as the “deafening” sound of the train 30 miles away—and his other peculiar characteristics. Of course, diagnosing based on historical records is always a guess, but all his “eccentricities,” as was the term of the time, seem to align with autistic traits. Autism can explain sensory sensitivities, a single-minded commitment to one's work, a trusting nature, and thinking in pictures—Temple Grandin, another autistic inventor, describes that last quality as her way of thinking.

The story of Nikola Tesla, Thomas Edison, and the race to provide electricity to the US and the world, known as the “War of the Currents,” is one of the most fascinating and dramatic chapters in the history of innovation and business. It is also a story of neurodivergent minds, bias, ethics, leadership, and organizational talent systems.

Edison did not recognize Tesla's talent because it was unlike his own.

ELECTRICITY AND ETHICS

In the 1880s, electricity was just becoming a viable source of power for homes and businesses. In 1882, Thomas Edison opened the first power plant in lower Manhattan to electrify wealthy New Yorkers' homes using his preferred direct current (DC) technology.

In 1884, Nikola Tesla arrived in New York with four cents in his pocket and offered Edison his services. Instead of the direct current, which could only travel about a mile, he proposed developing motors to harness alternating current (AC) that could deliver electricity between cities and states.

Edison was not interested. Instead, he reportedly offered Tesla a \$50,000 bonus if he could improve DC generators. When Tesla did so, Edison told him the offer was a joke and that Tesla, as a new immigrant, did not understand American humor. At the time, American-born descendants of Western and Northern Europeans looked at Slavic and Southern European immigrants with contempt and suspicion. It was unlikely that Tesla, born in modern-day Croatia and a son of a Serbian small-town priest, would have any recourse against Edison or the other partners who defrauded him.

Yet, even while supporting himself with manual labor, Tesla kept envisioning ways to transmit electricity over long distances without having a coal power plant every mile. This would make it available to all people, rather than only to those in rich urban centers. Eventually, George Westinghouse, an industrialist and inventor in his own right, saw the potential in Tesla's work and partnered with him to power the US—and the world—using Tesla's system of AC distribution.

Westinghouse-backed AC was a threat to Edison's DC enterprise, and Edison fought against it in every way he could think of. In the War of the Currents, Edison's tactics included using newspaper articles to spread fear and misinformation; publicly electrocuting dogs, calves, and horses with AC to demonstrate its dangers; and eventually procuring a secondhand Westinghouse generator to power an electric chair for the first human execution by electricity. Edison termed it "westinghousing."

But despite anti-AC propaganda, Tesla/Westinghouse technology was versatile, effective, economical, and preferred by most customers. Westinghouse's company won the contracts to light up the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and to install AC generators at Niagara Falls.

AC, Tesla, and Westinghouse clearly won the War of the Currents. Edison's board sidelined him and switched the company to AC, effectively putting Edison out of the electricity business.

Edison's connections with the media helped, in part, to protect his reputation. Many biographers gloss over his ruthless tactics and his treatment of Tesla and other employees, who were expected to work from morning until the next morning, without holidays, for low pay and with little acknowledgment of their efforts. Nonetheless, historical records did note Edison's questionable business practices including the appropriation of others' work—at least part of the credit for the lasting incandescent lightbulb is due to Lewis Latimer, a Black inventor—and his prejudices.

Of course, neither Tesla nor Westinghouse were saints. To complicate the matter, there are conflicting accounts about many of the events surrounding the War of the Currents. Nevertheless, the records of Westinghouse's management show a clear pattern of practices that were well ahead of its time.

The victory in the War of the Currents was not just a fluke of luck or even the work of a singular genius creating a better technological system—however exceptional. It was, in many ways, a reflection of a better talent system.

WESTINGHOUSE: MINDFUL INVESTMENTS, HEARTFELT RETURNS

Possibly the largest private employer in the world at the peak of his business success, George Westinghouse was viewed with suspicion by his industrialist peers for being “too good” to his people. He shortened the workweek to five-and-a-half days—unheard of at the time when weekends in a modern sense did not exist. He was determined to attract the best talent—and paid better wages than his competitors. He invested in state-of-the-art work facilities and provided his employees with low-cost and high-quality housing—homes with nice yards, indoor plumbing, and electricity. He also helped break gender biases by employing Bertha Lamme, America’s first woman electrical engineer.

A positive organizational culture leads to employee commitment, and Westinghouse’s employees were fiercely dedicated to his company. During a banking crisis when credit dried up, they offered to work for half-pay, which Westinghouse rejected. He did, however, approach Tesla for relief on his substantial royalty payments. Tesla went beyond what was asked, giving up or tearing up his royalty contract altogether to save the business.

The War of the Currents exemplifies the impact of the talent-focused, human-focused, difference-welcoming system developed by Westinghouse.

Westinghouse might have invested in Tesla's brilliance, but it's the loyalty return on investment (ROI) that was priceless. And it was not just Tesla's loyalty—many of Westinghouse's employees felt the same because Westinghouse also invested in them. Individual decisions and acts of betrayal versus loyalty matter.

The War of the Currents victory was not just a victory of more efficient technology. It was a victory of an organizational system built to attract and support talent—including the talent others discarded, excluded, or drove out. The War of the Currents exemplifies the impact of the talent-focused, human-focused, difference-welcoming system developed by Westinghouse.

Edison's error was not just his stubborn investment in DC technology. It was his stubborn investment in only one type of talent—his own—and his choice to use his power to hold down the different types of talent.

EDISON'S ERRORS—AND OURS

In the War of the Currents, Edison made two errors stemming from limiting beliefs. First, he believed that AC was too powerful and so could not be managed effectively. Second, he believed that his iterative, perspiration-based, trial-and-error approach was THE way to invent. Tesla's theory-driven, boundary-pushing, leapfrogging, inspiration-based thinking clashed with this style. Edison did not recognize Tesla's talent because it was unlike his own.

I can't help thinking that decision makers in many modern organizations do not know how to manage the power of neurodivergent talent. They prefer to stick with the familiar cultural narrative of the "ideal worker"—where the ideal is often defined as "similar to me"—and the "ideal work."

But the familiar is so very limiting.

In 2019, disabled and neurodivergent employees were routinely denied the opportunity to work from home as an accommodation. It was not considered reasonable.

You know how this story goes. In early 2020, most office workers rapidly transitioned to working from home. After a few months of stressful transition, the majority came to love it and did not want to go back. A stressful tug-of-war between employees and employers over the return to the office ensued.

Ultronauts, a tech company founded by Rajesh Anandan and Art Sheckman in 2013, did not have to deal with all that stress. The company was designed with autistic talent in mind from the start, and 75 percent of employees are neurodivergent. Remote working was the norm, and so the company avoided the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and revenue continued to grow by 50 percent a year. The quality of work that Ultronauts' employees delivered was exceptional. As a result, Fortune 100 companies have chosen their services over the global firms they were previously using.

Discarding limiting cultural beliefs and cultivating an openness to a different type of talent and a different way of working were foundations of the company's resilience and thriving in a changing environment.

INCLUSION BY DESIGN

The typical set of assumptions on “how to do inclusion” is limiting—and so are the systems based on these assumptions. As long as inclusion is thought of as something slowly doled out by the “born included” based on a limited set of characteristics they choose to include, some people will remain uncludable.

Half-measures do not work. Sequential interventions to fix one “ism” without fixing all others leave people out. True inclusion is systemic inclusion.

The *entire* organizational system must become inclusive—by design.

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Systemic inclusion must be **intersectional**. An intersectional approach considers multiple identities and characteristics that may create additional exclusionary barriers—and addresses them all. If a woman is invited to a gender-focused event but cannot attend because the venue is not accessible, disability exclusion nullifies the attempted gender inclusion. The lack of an intersectional approach excludes those facing multiple barriers: Black women, as in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original work, disabled women, or neurodivergent immigrants.

Systemic inclusion must be **comprehensive**. It must address all elements of talent management, from job descriptions to work organization, succession planning, and leadership development. Noncomprehensive approaches create bottlenecks and ceilings—people from certain groups might be hired but do not advance or are not retained.

Inclusion by design must be **embedded**. It must be reflected in processes and procedures, personnel forms, and workplace norms. Embedding inclusion in organizational functioning means *removing* barriers—for example, revising the promotion process to make it more transparent and based on objective, measurable criteria—helps those who would be left behind by subjective evaluations of “fit.” Embedding inclusion into organizational functioning makes it sustainable.

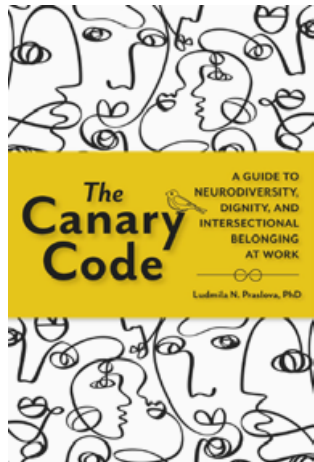
Finally, inclusion by design must start **from the margin**. Creating systems that remove barriers for the most marginalized and multiply marginalized is the fastest way to remove all barriers. When organizational systems are designed to support the most excluded, removing barriers addresses the specific needs of those groups and supports broader inclusivity.

The classic example is curb cuts. Curb cuts, one of the accomplishments of the disability rights movement, remove barriers for wheelchair users. They also make getting around easier for everyone, from parents with strollers to delivery people with heavy loads.

Consulting the most marginalized among us about what would be helpful for them is likely to lead to innovative solutions and a more human-centric design for all. In the context of neurodiversity, optimizing the environment for neurodivergent people by providing flexible schedules, quieter workplaces, lower stress, clear communication, and training designed for a broader range of learning needs—the psychological curb-cut effect—will create an environment **where everyone can thrive.** 🏡



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