

# LEADING DIVERGENCE

*A Field Guide to Neurodivergent Leadership*

**TANMAYA KUMAR**

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## **Leading Divergence: A Field Guide to Neurodivergent Leadership**

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*tanmayakumar.com*

*Sample chapter from Leading Divergence (Buggy OS Press, 2026)*

## CHAPTER 1

# The Divergence Advantage

### *and the Cost*

You are not broken. You certainly have a buggy OS, and you are using up too much RAM to run those superpowers.

Actually, let me take that back. They're not superpowers. Superpowers are fantasy. What you have are skills, forged in wars fought inside your own head and your day-to-day. We'll get to those. But first, we need to talk about what divergence actually looks like when you're the one in charge.

Because the brochure version leaves a lot out. The brochure says you're creative, you think differently, you bring unique perspectives to the table. Sure. Fine. But nobody tells you that the same brain that makes you exceptional at reading a room will also make you forget what was said in that room five minutes later. Nobody tells you that the same intensity that drives a team to deliver will also fracture that team if you're not careful. Nobody tells you that some mornings your brain will look at three tasks on a screen and simply refuse to pick one.

So let's be honest about what this actually is. Divergent leadership has four common traits: intensity, speed, depth, and sensitivity. Each one builds power. Each one extracts a tax. I say all of this as an observation, one I've earned the hard way.

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## **Intensity**

Intensity is one of the first things people notice about a divergent leader, and it's the one that will get you in the most trouble.

Here's what intensity looks like when it works: you walk into a discussion about a feature's viability, and while everyone else is hedging and circling, you've already mapped the problem. You push. You drive the point home. You don't accept a soft yes or a soft no. Either we want to work with this person or we don't. Either this architecture holds or it doesn't. Either we're building this or we're wasting time. People will call this admirable. They're right.

Here's what intensity looks like when it costs you: you make a decision that is strategically correct, tactically brilliant, and humanly devastating.

I learned this the hard way. At a previous company, our new platform initiative was drowning in politics. Two of my best engineers, people I trusted deeply, came to me and asked for a small advance team to lay the foundations. Start with 2-4 people, figure out what the hell we're building, then bring everyone else in when the work is clear. I believed in that approach then and I believe it now. You don't start with every cook you have. You start with the people who can architect the bones, and you add the team in 21 days when you know what they'll actually be doing.

I drove that idea hard. Got approval from leadership. Split the team. The strike team started moving. The remaining group felt left out, and every single one of them was someone I had hired, promoted, mentored, and believed in. Some of them came to me directly and we worked it out. Others went over my head to leadership that was, to put it kindly, not equipped to handle the situation.

Here's what I missed: I had a plan, but I did little planning. Eisenhower said that, or something close to it. The decision was right. The execution was a unilateral directive that bruised the egos of good engineers who deserved to know where they fit. I knew people wouldn't love being left out on day one. I would have felt the same way. But my intensity blinded me to the work I needed to do to bring them along. I needed a roadmap. I needed it to be visible. I needed to have asked for volunteers, even if the outcome was already decided, because giving people agency matters even when the architecture doesn't require their input yet.

The ending wasn't pretty. My best people quit. I was asked to step aside from the leadership role I'd built. I stayed longer than I should have, not entirely by choice. Within months of my departure, the VP who replaced me was fired, the executive who'd never been my fan was pushed out by the board, and half the engineering team was laid off.

The intensity didn't break the company. There were forces above me I didn't fully understand at that time: politics, structural incentives, a system that punishes the person who pushes the hardest. Those broke the company. But my intensity was the thing they pointed at. And the part that haunts me isn't being wrong about the strategy. It's knowing that the culture I built, the trust I thought was unshakable, cracked because I moved at my speed instead of the pace of those around me.

I've since come to terms with it. I wrote a letter of recommendation for one of the people who went over my head. Another one texts me occasionally. Chapters close. You move forward. But you carry the lesson: intensity without inclusion is just force.

\* \* \*

## Speed

Speed is the one that feels like a gift until it isn't.

The diagnostic engine in my brain runs fast, sometimes terrifyingly fast. I can look at a system, trace the failure, and know where it broke before most people have finished reading the error message. This has been true since my first day of development.

Thirteen years ago, at my first real engineering job, I had memorized the entire HL7 format and fields for the interfaces we used to import data during historical conversions. During a late-night install, I found an issue where some data wasn't processing properly from an older lab system. One HL7 field needed a quick mapping fix. So I wrote a patch and pushed it into the entire repository for that lab system's interfaces.

Now. Versions matter. If the lab system is old and has newer versions out there too, and one customer is on version 1 and another is on version 12, and your code unilaterally "fixes" everything... you see where this is going.

My boss at the time, a guy I did not get along with for many reasons, drilled a phrase into my head that I still hear thirteen years later: \*big picture thinking.\* I hated hearing it. He was right to say it.

The speed of finding the problem was never the issue. The speed of the fix, outrunning your own process, skipping the step where you zoom out, that's where the grenade lives. I'd memorized the system well enough and moved quickly enough that I bypassed the part where I asked: where does this come from? Where is it going? What else does this touch?

That doesn't happen to me anymore. Not because my brain slowed down, but because I built a checklist between the diagnosis and the action:

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Breathe. Oh, there it is. That's the problem, and here is the quick... no, stop. Breathe again. Where does this come from? Where is it going? Yeah, not planning on nuking that. Let's see the right flow, architecturally..

Big picture thinking is scored into my brain at this point. Some of my sulci and fissures probably spell it out. But it took years of conscious effort to build that gate between "I found it" and "I fixed it." The speed never left. The guardrail was learned.

\* \* \*

## **Depth**

Depth is the one that doesn't look like a leadership quality from the outside, but it might be the most important one.

I listen to everyone, especially the people who are not in my reporting chain. Over the years, I've spent hours advising front desk staff who wanted to grow, gone to lunch with colleagues from entirely different departments just to hear what's on their mind, gone out for beers and pool with people across the org to talk about anything and everything. None of this was strategic. I go all the way in with people, and I've been doing it since I was a lanky 22-year-old fresh out of college. Some of those connections outlast the job entirely.

One of my customers from my first job, a man close to 50 at the time who ran the team I interfaced with, is one of our closest family friends today. My daughter calls him uncle. None of my other colleagues from that era built that bond. I did. Because when I connect with someone, depth is the only mode I have.

This is what depth gives you as a leader: real relationships, real trust, and the understanding of people that lets you make hard calls. I once had a senior engineer who was brilliant at architecture and code quality but painfully slow on delivery. The obvious move would have been a performance conversation. Instead, I looked deeper: bottleneck on code delivery, accelerator on architecture. So I pushed him toward a software architect role: mentor others, design high-level systems, do the thinking nobody else on the team could do. It wasn't the direction he expected, but it was the one that matched who he actually was. I call this the Tetris approach: finding the real shape of a person instead of grinding them against the shape you wish they were.

But depth has a ruthless side too, and this is where it sounds contradictory.

I am okay letting people go if they are not doing well or are unhappy. You cannot continue to justify for your high performers why they should keep putting in the effort while someone else coasts by. And if people are unhappy, it's infectious in all the wrong ways. I need people pushing the ceiling and not measuring the basement.

The depth is what makes the ruthlessness possible. Because I know my people, really know them, I can tell the difference between someone who's hit an asymptote but still has the desire to grow, versus someone who's checked out and dragging the room down. The first person gets coaching, opportunities, redirection. The second person needs to find their fit somewhere else. Both of those calls require depth. Surface-level management gets neither right.

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## **Sensitivity**

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Sensitivity is the one most divergent leaders don't want to talk about because it sounds like weakness. It's not.

I am an emotional creature. I am open about who I am: the ADHD, the losing attention, the hyperdrive focus, the calendar being my rock or falling apart entirely. This openness isn't a strategy. It's just who I am. And what it does is create permission. When the boss says "I struggled with this too," the junior engineer exhales a little.

But there's another side of sensitivity that's less about vulnerability and more about radar. I have a hypervigilant ability to read moods. My wife hates it, but I catch the slightest inflection in her voice and I know her mood has shifted. I don't always know the right thing to *\*say\** after that. But I sure as hell know.

At work, this radar becomes a leadership tool. I use it to know when *\*not\** to push. Swallow my pride, park the agenda item, don't drop a new initiative on a team that's still reeling from the last one. It's the ability to read the room and then respect what the room is telling you.

This doesn't work on everyone. Some people are wired clinical and see my warmth as unprofessional. Some people are themselves neurodivergent in a way that clashes with my particular flavor, and I'll be honest, I've accidentally disrupted coping mechanisms that were working fine before I showed up with my sarcasm and intensity. And the toxic power players, the ones who see vulnerability as a target, will use your sensitivity against you. The same radar that reads warmth also reads intent. You learn to calibrate who gets the real version and who gets the professional one.

Sensitivity has never cost me with people who are truly good at what they do. It has cost me, repeatedly, with those who aren't.

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## **The Hidden Tax**

So you've got intensity, speed, depth, sensitivity. Now let's talk about what divergence costs on a Tuesday.

You wake up feeling like you slept four hours and forty-four minutes of the seven you were in bed. You make your double shot Americano, open your laptop, and stare at three things: the roadmap, the one trivial feature request, and the large decision tree matrix you made yesterday in a moment of brilliance. There's also the meeting at 11 that needs an agenda because you're going to lead it. And you immediately shut down.

Not because any of it is hard. Because all of it exists at the same time and your brain can't pick where to start.

I need to drink my coffee first.

Then your boss drops a casual hint about something completely unrelated to anything on your plate, and your brain says \*oh thank God, a shiny thing\*, and two hours vanish into research nobody asked for. You're scratching an itch that doesn't need scratching while the agenda sits unwritten.

The 4-line agenda you throw together at 10:45 is the most basic thing. It was much better in your head last night. Alas, we make do.

The gap between what your brain can produce and what it consistently produces under friction is the executive function debt. The brilliance and the paralysis live in the same brain, and you don't get to choose which one shows up at 8 AM.

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Some days have medicine. I take Vyvanse, a baby dose, started a couple of years ago, and I am supposed to take it daily. I take it about two days a week because it went from \$120 to \$300 a month to what will probably be \$400 this year. Insurance reclassified it when generics showed up. The generics make me jittery and anxious, which is the opposite of what the medicine is supposed to do. So I ration. I get to choose which two days a week I'm wired to be exceptional and which days are overheating RAM. That's not a personal failing. It's a systemic failing. And I am incredibly angry about it.

The medicated days? I am a different human entirely. Whole projects get delivered, the house is clean, every email gets sent. The unmedicated days, those depend on a chain of ifs. If I get 7 hours of sleep. If I get to the gym at 6:15. If I get my hot coffee. If the morning with my daughter hasn't been fraught with friction. If I get 10 minutes of meditation. Each one is a domino. They all need to fall right. And even on a good chain, put me in a meeting of 4 people and I still struggle, really hard, to pay attention. Someone says my name and I've missed entire threads of conversation.

I feel like Taravangian from the Stormlight Archive: waking up every day on a spectrum between genius and simpleton, never knowing which version you'll get until it's too late to plan around it. Some days the fire burns bright. Other days it feels like a blanket of CO2 smothering a flame: foggy, frustrated, squeezing the last drops of lemon juice only to get rind until 5 PM.

And Tuesdays. God, Tuesdays. Monday - you get what you get. Tuesday - you've spent whatever Monday energy you had, you're not close enough to hump day, and it's just limbo. Thursday is basically Friday. Friday is Friday. But Tuesday is where hope goes to stall.

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## The Reframe

This is the part where a different book would tell you it's all a superpower. That your ADHD is a gift. That you think differently and it's beautiful.

I'm not going to do that. The superpower narrative hides the harder side of things under a rug and doesn't face it. Are you seriously telling me I have a superpower because my brain is wired to 100 on anxiety and fear of missing a detail? It's hypervigilance born from a lifetime of dropping balls and building an alarm system to stop it from happening again.

But if you took away the excruciating experience of accessing those skills, they are some damned neat skills.

Your ability to read a room doesn't disappear on a bad Tuesday. Your ability to find the bugs, to architect complex systems, to recognize when a process is papering over a people problem, those don't go away. The deep relationships, the trust you've built across every org you've touched, the gear-shifting from a board-level funding problem to fixing colors on a page, the hyperfocus that delivers months of work in weeks, all of it stays.

Superpowers are fantasy. Skills are forged. You developed these by doing the same hard things over and over because your brain forced you to. They are earned, they are real, and they are permanent.

The operating system is buggy, yes. The RAM is overtaxed, sure. But the processor underneath is extraordinary, and with discipline, structure, and a little help from medicine when you can access it, it runs.

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One caveat before we go further. If you are broken broken, truly, deeply struggling in a way that this book can't reach, please go see a therapist. This

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is not a prescription and it is not a promise. Therapy is, well, greatly therapeutic. Everyone should seek therapy! My many years in therapy have been life-changing. This book can walk with you. It cannot carry you. Know the difference.

For everyone still here:

You are not broken. You are high variance. And high variance leaders either burn out... or build systems strong enough to hold their fire.

This book is about building the system.