



## **'Best thing I've ever done': How a chance diagnosis transformed this WA mining worker's life**

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**Highlight:** Tristan did not just get his own desk at **Fortescue** when he shared his diagnosis. He got a ticket to be himself.

### **Body**

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When his son was being assessed for autism, Tristan Calder argued about various aspects of his son's behaviour: "That's normal, I did that as a child".

Then the penny dropped.

[Link to Image](#)

Colin Murty

So he got tested, too. And so in his early 40s, Calder discovered not only his son, but also himself to be autistic, as are one in 150 Australians.

"It's possibly the best thing I've ever done," the **Fortescue** worker says, of seeking the diagnosis. "It helped me fully understand myself."

Calder is clear, however, that his experiences are his alone. "If you meet one person with autism, you've met exactly one person with autism," he says.

"For me, I have challenges around social interaction, communication [and] repetitive behaviours that I can't get out of."

He likes a plan - and is good at making them - but deals poorly with surprises.

He must park in the same spot every day, take the same path from the car to the same lift, and then walk to the same desk - only possible because **Fortescue** exempted him from its hot-desking policy.

"I can't use these toilets," he says while being interviewed at the miner's Perth headquarters, "this is how stupid it is - I use the toilets out there."

Without his own desk, Calder says he would be overwhelmed by dealing with different screens, different lights and glare, the mouse and charger in different spots, and an unfamiliar coworker beside him.

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"These little triggers build up slowly," he says.

[Link to Image](#)

Colin Murty

"Your body doesn't filter any of this out, so it's taking all this sensory input and ... it's all rattling around in here."

Calder got his own desk because he was willing to share his diagnosis with his supervisor and say what he needed. To him, having a corporate culture where workers feel comfortable sharing their concerns is key.

"I don't want people to start to pigeonhole people and think 'he might be autistic,'" he says.

"The only way you can help an autistic person is for them to approach you."

Calder says he got more than his own desk when he shared his diagnosis: he got a ticket to be himself.

Because of the stigma attached to neurodiversity - a non-medical term for those who experience the world differently, including ADHD, dyslexia and various other conditions as well as autism - Calder would previously "mask".

"Masking, in layman's terms, is cosplaying as a normal person," he says.

"You're suppressing your diagnosis ... and that comes with a massive emotional, physical and mental drain."

Stimming - repetitive behaviours used by people with autism to reduce stress - can look unprofessional to neurotypical co-workers.

**Fortescue** head of healthy safety and risk Zara Fisher says she has seen workers get incredibly poor performance feedback for actions such as fiddling at meetings, which can be interpreted as a sign of not concentrating.

"Things like that have nothing to do with the person's productivity or capacity, but more about how they present themselves," she said.

The fortnightly 2½-hour team meeting was a particular ordeal for Calder. Now he can rock back and forth in his chair without explaining himself.

"They know that if I interject, or I talk loud, or I say something that might be perceived to be abrupt, I'm not just being an arsehole," he said.

"Weekends for me four or five years ago would be on the couch, zoned out, trying to recover from the week of work I've had because I've been masking."

The diagnosis has also led Calder to seek assistance from speech and occupational therapists and understand himself better, causing life to improve at home as well as work.

Now he understands his own triggers, and works around them with the help of his wife.

"That helps our relationship massively," he says.

Calder is part of a network of neurodiverse employees at **Fortescue** who support each other. They also provide "reverse mentoring" for supervisors by letting them chat with a network member with a similar diagnosis to someone on their team who they are unsure how to support.

For Fisher, the key for supervisors is realising that everyone - both neurodiverse and neurotypical - is different.

"Every one of us functions best under certain circumstances, or we might just have other things going on in our lives," she says.

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The trick is creating a "safe space" where workers will tell the boss they are struggling and what they need.

And the prize for employers? Fisher says freeing workers from exhausting themselves pretending to be someone else leaves them with more energy. Not just for themselves - but also for work.

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## Graphic

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"What it comes down to, from a neurological standpoint, is our brains are wired differently, and that comes with complexities but also comes with strengths and benefits."

Calder occasionally works in a pod in ***Fortescue***'s open-plan office when he really needs to focus.

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