



Conflict, Communication & Misattunement Guide

How to resolve issues without shame, threat, or misunderstanding.

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

A clear orientation (for organisations and leaders)

This is not a conflict-management playbook.
It is not a script for “handling difficult people.”
It is not a requirement for emotional disclosure or reconciliation.

This guide exists because many workplace conflicts involving neurodivergent (ND) staff are **misattunement problems**, not interpersonal failures... and because common organisational responses often **add threat**, escalate shame, and harden misunderstanding.

This resource supports organisations to:

- recognise misattunement early
- reduce nervous system threat
- repair without spotlighting or blame
- prevent repeat harm through better design

It must not be used to assess attitudes, police emotions, or pressure staff to resolve issues before they are safe to do so.

1. A foundational reframe: most workplace conflict is misattunement

Misattunement occurs when:

- intent and impact diverge
- expectations are implicit or inconsistent
- tone is interpreted differently across nervous systems
- timing or pacing overwhelms capacity
- power dynamics amplify ambiguity

In ND contexts, misattunement is common because:

- communication styles differ
- processing speed and sequencing vary
- sensory and cognitive load affect expression
- masking obscures early signals

Misattunement is **not**:

- defiance
- bad faith
- lack of professionalism

It is a **coordination failure**... and coordination can be repaired.

2. Why conflict escalates in ND contexts

Conflict escalates when nervous system threat increases.

Common escalation drivers include:

- surprise feedback or confrontation
- public correction
- ambiguous tone or mixed messages
- pressure to respond immediately
- demands for explanation or emotional insight
- minimisation (“It’s not a big deal”)

For ND staff, escalation is often **delayed**:

- they may appear fine in the moment
- impact lands later, after processing
- withdrawal or shutdown follows

Escalation is not evidence of fragility.
It is evidence of **unmet safety needs**.

3. Conflict vs misattunement: why the distinction matters

Conflict (true)

- opposing goals or needs
- incompatible constraints
- resource or priority clashes

Misattunement (common)

- unclear expectations
- mismatched assumptions
- timing or tone issues
- information gaps

Treating misattunement like conflict:

- increases defensiveness
- personalises the issue
- invites blame

Treating conflict like misattunement:

- reduces threat
- restores coordination
- preserves dignity

Most ND-related “conflict” resolves when **clarity replaces interpretation**.

4. Early signs of misattunement organisations often miss

Communication signals

- repeated clarification requests
- over-explaining or hedging
- delayed responses
- sudden brevity after engagement

Behavioural shifts

- withdrawal from meetings
- reduced initiative
- increased error rate
- heightened sensitivity to tone

Relational cues

- avoidance of specific interactions
- reassurance-seeking
- loss of trust following feedback

These are **signals**, not failures.

5. What makes misattunement worse (even with good intent)

Avoid responses that:

- ask for emotional explanation (“What’s really going on?”)
- attribute motive (“You seemed defensive”)
- rush resolution
- centre harmony over safety
- require immediate repair

These increase:

- self-monitoring
- fear of misinterpretation
- masking
- disengagement

Resolution that is not safe is not resolution.

6. The regulation-first response (in the moment)

When misattunement appears, prioritise **stabilisation**, not outcome.

Helpful leader actions:

- slow the pace
- reduce audience size
- clarify scope (“Let’s focus on X”)
- offer time and choice
- move to written follow-up

Simple, safe language:

- “Let’s pause this and come back.”
- “We don’t need to resolve this right now.”
- “I’ll summarise in writing so it’s clear.”

Neutral tone is protective.
Silence can be supportive.

7. How to repair without shame or spotlighting

Repair works best when it:

- reduces visibility
- avoids emotional interrogation
- focuses on coordination

Effective repair includes:

- brief acknowledgement (“I see where this misaligned”)
- clear restatement of expectations
- confirmation of next steps
- reassurance that no penalty occurred

Avoid:

- dissecting reactions
- replaying the interaction
- asking for reassurance or apology

Repair should **lower future risk**, not relitigate the past.

8. A simple, safe repair structure

Use this sequence to keep repair bounded:

1. **Name the misalignment** (not the person)
“It seems expectations weren’t clear.”
2. **Clarify the intended outcome**
“What we need going forward is...”
3. **Adjust the condition**
“We’ll share this in advance / in writing / with more notice.”
4. **Close the loop**
“Let’s check back after this change.”

This keeps repair informational, not personal.

9. When power dynamics are present (especially important)

Power amplifies misattunement.

Leaders can reduce harm by:

- explicitly naming intent
- separating feedback from evaluation
- offering opt-out or delay
- avoiding public settings
- not requiring emotional labour

A critical rule:

The person with more power carries more responsibility for safety.

10. Communication practices that reduce future misattunement

Organisations that prevent repeat issues often:

- make expectations explicit
- separate information from evaluation
- provide written summaries
- avoid mixed messages
- standardise feedback timing
- allow processing time

Clarity is not rigidity.
It is **access**.

11. When misattunement keeps recurring

Recurring misattunement usually points to:

- unclear role boundaries
- inconsistent leadership behaviour
- chronic overload
- sensory or pacing mismatch
- reliance on implicit norms

At this point, individual repair is insufficient.

The question becomes:

What condition keeps producing this pattern?

Change the condition, not the person.

12. What not to require from ND staff during conflict

Do not require:

- emotional insight on demand
- verbal processing in the moment
- reassurance for others
- disclosure of diagnoses
- performance of calm

Safety precedes articulation.

13. Organisational guardrails (non-negotiable)

This guide must not be used to:

- pressure reconciliation
- demand apologies
- assess “communication style” as attitude
- minimise harm
- rush resolution for comfort

If repair increases exposure or shame, it is unsafe.

14. A brief organisational self-check (optional)

Leaders and teams may reflect:

- Where do we rely on implicit norms?
- Where is tone carrying meaning instead of clarity?
- Where does urgency replace coordination?
- Where might power be amplifying threat?
- What would reduce misattunement upstream?

This is an orientation tool... not an audit.

A closing note for organisations

Conflict does not always mean opposition.
Often, it means **misalignment in systems built on assumptions.**

Organisations that respond to misattunement with:

- clarity instead of correction
- pacing instead of pressure
- repair instead of blame

do not become permissive.

They become **safer, more effective, and more resilient...** for everyone.

ND-inclusive conflict resolution is not about avoiding difficulty.

It is about **making coordination possible without harm.**