



How to Give Feedback Without Triggering Threat

Scripts, pacing, tone, and structure for psychologically safe feedback conversations.

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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 leaders and organisations)

This is not a feedback-performance framework.
It is not a guide to “delivering hard messages.”
It is not about making people tougher or more resilient.

This guide exists because many organisations unintentionally **trigger nervous system threat** when giving feedback... especially to neurodivergent (ND) staff — which leads to:

- shutdown or overwhelm
- defensiveness or people-pleasing
- reduced trust
- worse performance, not better

Psychologically safe feedback is not about being vague or avoiding accountability. It is about **how information is delivered**, not whether it is delivered.

This resource is designed to:

- reduce harm
- preserve dignity
- support learning without fear
- be usable without requiring disclosure

It should never be used to monitor emotional reactions or demand regulation from staff.

1. The core reframe: feedback is a nervous system event

Most feedback models treat feedback as a **cognitive exchange**.

For many ND people, feedback is first experienced as a **relational and nervous system event**.

Before the content is processed, the nervous system asks:

- *Am I safe?*
- *Am I being judged?*
- *Is my belonging at risk?*
- *Do I have choice here?*

If the system perceives threat:

- learning drops
- memory narrows

- nuance is lost
- the message is distorted

Good feedback does not require less honesty.
It requires **more safety**.

2. Why feedback often lands as threat (even when well-intended)

Feedback commonly triggers threat when it includes:

- ambiguous tone
- surprise or lack of warning
- mixed messages (“This is fine, but...”)
- global statements about the person
- implied judgement
- power imbalance without reassurance

For ND staff, additional load often comes from:

- history of being misunderstood
- masking to survive work
- heightened sensitivity to evaluation
- difficulty processing information in real time

None of this reflects fragility.
It reflects **patterned nervous system learning**.

3. The difference between accountability and threat

It is possible to be clear **without** being threatening.

Accountability:

- focuses on behaviour, output, or impact
- is specific and bounded
- includes choice and clarity
- preserves dignity

Threat:

- is vague or global
- implies character judgement
- removes choice

- escalates unpredictably

The goal of ND-inclusive feedback is:

Clear information with minimal nervous system cost.

4. Before the conversation: setting safety conditions

Feedback begins **before** any words are spoken.

Helpful pre-conditions include:

- giving advance notice (“I’d like to give you some feedback”)
- clarifying intent (“This is about improving X, not performance review”)
- choosing a low-pressure setting
- avoiding public or rushed contexts

Avoid:

- “Quick chats” with no warning
- feedback layered into unrelated conversations
- last-minute or end-of-day delivery

Surprise is one of the fastest ways to trigger threat.

5. Pacing matters more than wording

Many feedback conversations move too fast.

For ND staff, fast pacing can:

- overwhelm processing
- increase shutdown
- reduce recall

Supportive pacing includes:

- pausing between points
- checking for understanding without pressure
- allowing silence
- offering follow-up in writing

Pacing is not inefficiency.
It is **access**.

6. Tone: neutral beats warm or sharp

Leaders often aim for either:

- overly warm reassurance, or
- overly direct sharpness

Both can backfire.

For ND-inclusive feedback:

- neutral, steady tone is usually safest
- avoid sarcasm, irony, or implied emotion
- avoid “sandwiching” criticism between praise

Neutral tone reduces the need for interpretation.

7. Structure that reduces threat

A clear structure lowers cognitive and emotional load.

A helpful sequence is:

1. **Context** – Why this feedback is happening
2. **Specific observation** – What was noticed
3. **Impact** – What effect it had
4. **Expectation or option** – What’s needed next
5. **Choice and support** – How to move forward

This keeps feedback **bounded and legible**.

8. Language to avoid (and why)

Certain phrases reliably increase threat:

- “You always / you never”
- “It’s not a big deal, but...”
- “I’m just being honest”
- “Don’t take this personally”
- “We all struggle with this”
- “You should know better”

These either:

- globalise the issue
- minimise the impact
- imply judgement

They force the nervous system into defence.

9. Safer feedback scripts (copy-adapt-use)

These scripts are intentionally simple.
They can be used verbatim or adapted.

Opening the conversation

- “I want to give you some specific feedback about X. Is now okay?”
 - “This is about improving a process, not your overall performance.”
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Naming the issue clearly

- “I noticed that the deadline was missed on X.”
- “In the meeting, the agenda wasn’t shared beforehand.”

(No interpretation. No motive.)

Naming impact (without blame)

- “That made it harder for the team to prepare.”
 - “It created some confusion about priorities.”
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Naming expectations

- “Going forward, I need X to happen.”
 - “The expectation is that Y is shared in advance.”
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Offering support or choice

- “What would help make that workable?”
 - “Would it help to put a reminder system in place?”
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- “We can adjust how this is handled if needed.”
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Closing safely

- “You don’t need to respond right now.”
 - “I’ll summarise this in writing so you don’t have to hold it all.”
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10. When feedback triggers a strong reaction

If someone becomes quiet, overwhelmed, or emotional:

Do **not**:

- push for resolution
- demand reassurance
- interpret it as resistance

Instead:

- pause
- lower the pace
- acknowledge impact

Helpful responses:

- “Let’s pause here.”
- “We don’t need to resolve this now.”
- “We can revisit once there’s been time to process.”

Regulation comes before learning.

11. Written follow-up (often essential)

Many ND staff process best **after** the conversation.

A short written summary:

- reduces memory load
- prevents rumination
- clarifies expectations
- reduces fear of misremembering

Written follow-up should be:

- factual
- brief
- non-evaluative

This is not documentation for discipline.
It is **access support**.

12. What psychologically safe feedback changes

When feedback is delivered safely, organisations often see:

- fewer defensive reactions
- earlier course-correction
- improved trust
- reduced burnout
- better long-term performance

This is not softness.

It is **effectiveness**.

13. What this guide must NOT be used for

This resource must not be used to:

- police emotional reactions
- score “resilience”
- require staff to stay regulated
- justify harsh delivery
- demand gratitude for feedback

If feedback safety is framed as the employee’s responsibility, harm increases.

14. A quick leader self-check (optional)

Before giving feedback, ask:

- Is this specific and bounded?
- Have I removed unnecessary judgement?
- Am I giving notice and choice?
- Is my tone neutral and steady?
- Would this feel safe to receive under power imbalance?

If the answer is no... adjust first.

A closing note for leaders

Psychologically safe feedback does not lower standards.

It lowers **defensiveness**.

When people are not bracing for threat, they:

- hear more
- remember more
- change more

ND-inclusive feedback is not about comfort.

It is about **making learning possible without harm...**
and recognising that clarity delivered safely is one of the most powerful leadership skills there is.

