ND-Inclusive Meeting Template

How to run meetings that minimise cognitive load and prevent overwhelm.

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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)

This is not a productivity framework.
It is not a rulebook for "better participation."
It is not about making people more engaged or expressive.

This template exists because **meetings are one of the highest-load environments in organisations…** especially for neurodivergent (ND) staff… and because common meeting norms:

- overload working memory
- reward speed and interruption
- rely on implicit cues
- combine multiple cognitive demands at once

ND-inclusive meetings are not about adding more structure for its own sake.
They are about **removing unnecessary strain so thinking can happen**.

This template should be used to **change how meetings are designed**, not to evaluate behaviour or participation.

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1. Core reframe: meetings are sensory–cognitive systems

Meetings are often treated as neutral containers.

In reality, they combine:

- auditory processing
- visual input
- social monitoring
- rapid decision-making
- memory retention
- emotional regulation

For ND staff, this can mean:

- ideas arrive later, not slower
- speaking in the moment costs more than writing
- interruption fragments thinking
- ambiguity creates threat
- long meetings drain capacity disproportionately

If meetings require people to mask or push through overload to contribute, **the design is failing**.

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2. What ND-inclusive meetings are *not*

To prevent misuse, be explicit.

ND-inclusive meetings are **not**:

- about forcing quieter people to speak
- about reducing accountability
- about banning discussion
- about making meetings longer
- about treating ND staff as fragile

They *are* about:

- clarity
- pacing
- predictability
- optionality
- separating thinking from performance

3. Before the meeting: design for safety and clarity

3.1 Decide whether a meeting is needed at all

Many meetings exist by default, not necessity.

Ask:

- Can this be asynchronous?
- Is discussion required, or just information-sharing?
- Is a smaller group sufficient?

Fewer meetings = less cumulative load.

3.2 Share a clear agenda in advance (non-negotiable)

Advance agendas reduce anxiety and improve contribution quality.

An ND-inclusive agenda includes:

- purpose of the meeting
- topics (not just titles)
- order of discussion
- who is needed for what
- decisions expected (if any)

- approximate timing per item

Avoid:

- vague titles ("Catch-up", "Alignment")
- surprise agenda items

Clarity before the meeting reduces overload during it.

3.3 Share materials early

If reading or preparation is required:

- share documents in advance
- clarify what needs review
- note what is optional

Do not:

- introduce dense material for the first time in the meeting
- expect real-time comprehension and response

Processing and discussing are **different tasks**.

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4. At the start: set the container

The opening minutes shape nervous system safety.

Helpful opening practices:

- restate the purpose
- outline how the meeting will run
- confirm timing and breaks
- name how contributions will happen

Example:

"We'll go through the agenda in order. You're welcome to contribute verbally or in the chat. We'll pause between items."

Predictability reduces self-monitoring and fear of interruption.

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5. Agenda structure that reduces cognitive load

5.1 One topic at a time

Avoid stacking:

- problem + solution + decision + evaluation

Instead:

- clarify the topic
- gather input
- then move to decision (if needed)

Multitasking discussion fragments thinking.

5.2 Explicit transitions

Signal topic changes clearly:

- "We're closing this item."
- "Next, we'll move to…"

This helps ND staff reorient attention and reduces lag.

5.3 Time boundaries without pressure

Time limits help… but pressure harms.

Use:

- visible timers
- gentle check-ins ("We have 5 minutes left")

Avoid:

- rushing people mid-thought
- using time pressure to force consensus

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6. Participation without pressure

6.1 Multiple ways to contribute

ND-inclusive meetings offer options:

- speaking
- chat
- shared documents
- post-meeting follow-up

Do not equate contribution with speaking speed.

Some of the best input arrives:

- after reflection
- in writing
- asynchronously

6.2 No forced turn-taking

Avoid:

- "Let's go around the room"
- calling on people unexpectedly

These practices increase threat and reduce quality of input.

If input is needed, offer:

- opt-in prompts
- voluntary sharing
- written alternatives

Choice protects regulation.

6.3 Allow silence

Silence is not disengagement.

It often means:

- thinking
- processing
- regulating

Filling silence immediately privileges fast processors and penalises depth.

7. Managing discussion safely

7.1 Reduce interruption

Interruption is one of the biggest cognitive drains.

Helpful practices:

- use hand-raise features
- name turn-taking norms
- gently redirect interrupters

This is not policing… it is **access support**.

7.2 Clarify, don't interpret

If something is unclear:

- ask for clarification
- summarise neutrally

Avoid interpreting tone or intention.

Misattunement escalates quickly in meetings.

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8. Decision-making without overwhelm

Decisions often create the highest load.

ND-inclusive decision-making includes:

- stating clearly whether a decision is required
- outlining options explicitly
- separating discussion from decision
- allowing time to think

Where possible:

- defer decisions
- confirm after the meeting
- allow written input

Speed is not accuracy.

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9. Sensory considerations (often overlooked)

Meetings are sensory environments.

Consider:

- noise levels
- overlapping voices
- camera expectations
- lighting
- visual clutter

Supportive practices include:

- allowing cameras off
- encouraging headphones
- avoiding unnecessary visuals
- reducing screen sharing overload

Regulation supports cognition.

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10. Ending the meeting cleanly

A rushed ending increases stress.

Helpful closing practices:

- summarise key points
- restate decisions (if any)
- clarify next steps
- name how follow-up will happen

Example:

"I'll send a written summary. You can add thoughts afterwards."

Closure reduces rumination and memory load.

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11. After the meeting: written follow-up (essential)

ND-inclusive meetings **do not rely on memory**.

Written follow-up should include:

- decisions made
- actions and owners
- timelines

- unresolved questions

This is not bureaucracy.
It is access.

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12. A practical ND-inclusive meeting template (copy–adapt–use)

Meeting purpose:
(Why this meeting exists)

Topics:

1. Topic + context
2. Topic + context

What's needed:
☐ Discussion
☐ Input
☐ Decision
☐ Information only

Materials (shared in advance):

- Links / documents

Participation options:
☐ Speak
☐ Chat
☐ Shared doc
☐ Follow-up after

Time & breaks:

- Start / end
- Breaks (if needed)

Follow-up plan:

- Written summary
- Where input can continue

Use all or part of this.
Partial structure still helps.

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13. Common meeting practices that increase harm

Avoid:

- last-minute meetings
- unclear purpose
- dense slides read aloud
- surprise decisions
- performance-focused participation
- treating silence as disengagement

These practices systematically exclude ND thinking.

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14. What good ND-inclusive meetings enable

When meetings are designed with load in mind, organisations often see:

- higher-quality input
- better decisions
- less burnout
- fewer follow-up meetings
- increased trust
- more equitable participation

These outcomes come from **clarity and pacing**, not from asking people to "engage more."

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15. Organisational guardrails (non-negotiable)

This template must not be used to:

- evaluate participation
- pressure speaking
- demand cameras on
- assess attitude
- require disclosure

Meetings should reduce risk… not increase it.

A closing note for organisations

Meetings are where power, pace, and norms collide.

When meetings are designed only for fast, verbal, interruption-tolerant thinkers, organisations lose insight… quietly and consistently.

ND-inclusive meetings are not slower.

They are **clearer, calmer, and more effective…** because they allow thinking to happen without threat.

Design meetings people don't have to survive.

Design meetings people can actually think in.