



ND Communication Scaffolds

*Structural supports that make communication safer, clearer,
and more accurate*

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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.

Neurodivergent communication difficulties are rarely about “poor skills”.

They arise when:

- cognitive load is too high
- emotional threat is present
- timing is misaligned
- expectations are implicit
- processing speed is mismatched

Communication scaffolds **lower the load** so meaning can land.

What a communication scaffold is

A communication scaffold is a **temporary or permanent structure** that:

- clarifies expectations
- slows pace
- reduces ambiguity
- separates emotion from content
- preserves dignity under stress

Scaffolds do **not** simplify thinking.
They **protect access** to thinking.

Core principles (practitioner lens)

1. **Structure before interpretation**
2. **Clarity before consensus**
3. **Timing before content**
4. **Regulation before reasoning**
5. **Permission before participation**

If these are missing, communication quality drops... regardless of intent.

Scaffold 1. Purpose Framing

(Prevents threat responses)

Before any interaction, explicitly state:

- **What this is**

- **What it isn't**
- **What's expected**
- **What's optional**

Template

"This is a planning conversation, not a performance review.
The goal is clarity, not decisions.
You're welcome to pause or follow up later."

Why it works:

- reduces anticipatory anxiety
- prevents miscategorisation of threat
- preserves nervous-system capacity

Scaffold 2. Processing Time Protection

(Addresses delayed integration)

ND processing often lags **after** the interaction.

Options

- written follow-ups
- 24–48 hour response windows
- "You don't need to respond now" statements

Template

"You don't need to reply immediately.
Let me know once you've had time to think."

This prevents shutdown, appeasement, and later regret.

Scaffold 3. Channel Separation

(Reduces cognitive overload)

Separate:

- **information**
- **emotion**
- **decision-making**

Do **not** bundle them.

Example

1. Information first (facts only)
2. Emotional impact (named, not processed)
3. Decisions later (time-bound)

Template

“First I’ll outline the facts.
We’re not deciding anything today.
We’ll come back to next steps tomorrow.”

Scaffold 4. Explicit Turn-Taking

(Protects access to speech)

In groups, implicit turn-taking disadvantages ND participants.

Supports

- named turns
- hand signals
- chat-based input
- facilitator-led pacing

Template

“Let’s hear one response at a time.
Passing is always okay.”

Silence ≠ disengagement.

Scaffold 5. Question Containment

(Prevents overwhelm spirals)

Multiple open questions at once overload working memory.

Rule

- one question
- one response
- pause

Template

“I’ll ask one question and stop.
Take your time.”

This dramatically improves accuracy.

Scaffold 6. Emotional Safety Markers

(Prevents escalation)

Explicitly mark safety during difficult conversations.

Markers

- “You’re not in trouble”
- “This isn’t about your character”
- “Nothing bad happens if you say no”

Template

“I want to name that this is safe to talk about.
There are no consequences for honesty here.”

Safety must be **stated**, not implied.

Scaffold 7. Written + Verbal Pairing

(Improves retention)

Many ND people lose verbal information under load.

Best practice:

- speak → summarise in writing
- write → allow verbal clarification

Template

“I’ll send a written summary so you don’t have to hold this in your head.”

This is an **access accommodation**, not a preference.

Scaffold 8. Boundary-First Communication

(Reduces defensive responses)

Invite boundaries *before* content.

Template

“Before we start... what would make this conversation easier for you?”
“Is there anything you don’t want to cover today?”

This restores agency and reduces masking.

Scaffold 9. Repair Pathways

(Normalises miscommunication)

ND-friendly systems assume miscommunication will happen.

Pre-agree repair language.

Templates

“I think we missed each other... can we reset?”
“That didn’t land as intended... let me try again.”
“Can we slow this down?”

Repair should be **procedural**, not emotional.

Scaffold 10. End-Point Signalling

(Prevents post-interaction crash)

ND nervous systems often stay activated after conversations.

Always signal:

- what’s finished
- what’s next
- when to re-engage

Template

“We’re done for today.
Nothing else is required.
I’ll follow up on Friday.”

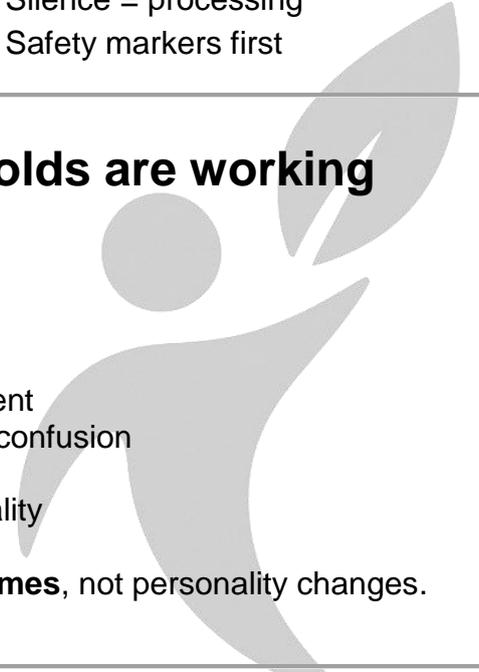
Clear endings protect recovery.

Common practitioner mistakes (and fixes)

| Mistake | Better scaffold |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| “It’s informal” | Define structure anyway |
| “Just checking in” | State purpose explicitly |
| Rapid questioning | One question + pause |
| Silence = disengagement | Silence = processing |
| Emotional challenge | Safety markers first |

Indicators scaffolds are working

You’ll notice:

- fewer escalations
 - less masking
 - clearer disagreement
 - reduced follow-up confusion
 - increased honesty
 - better decision quality
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These are **system outcomes**, not personality changes.

Ethical note

Communication scaffolds:

- do not remove accountability
- do not lower standards
- do not “special-case” ND people

They create **accurate access** to communication... which improves outcomes for *everyone*.

Summary for practitioners

ND communication scaffolds:

- reduce cognitive and emotional load
- prevent unnecessary dysregulation
- improve clarity and trust
- protect dignity under stress

They are not an add-on.

They are **infrastructure**.

