



A Manager's Guide to Neuroinclusive Feedback

Feedback is vital to employee growth and development.

As a manager working with neurodivergent employees, you may have found giving feedback to be a challenge. For example, autistic employees may have difficulty interpreting or processing feedback, and employees with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) may react strongly to feedback or struggle to implement your suggestions.

But feedback doesn't always land the way we intend. Employees may differ in how they process information, interpret tone and context, respond in the moment, or translate feedback into next steps. For neurodivergent employees, including autistic employees and employees with ADHD, those differences may make clarity, specificity, timing, or format especially important.

That makes neuroinclusive feedback good management practice. Gallup found that only 26% of employees strongly agree that the feedback they receive helps them do better work. Research has also shown that access to frequent, honest, and actionable feedback is not always consistent across employees. Creating a more intentional approach to feedback can help close those gaps while making expectations clearer and gives more people what they need to do their best work.

In this guide, we'll explore what makes feedback effective, introduce a practical model managers can use across their teams, and share strategies for making feedback more clear, actionable, and responsive to different communication and processing styles.

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in brain function that affect learning, attention, communication, sensory processing, and executive functioning. Conditions include:

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Autism

Dyscalculia

Dyslexia

Dyspraxia

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Tourette Syndrome

and more.

What does high-quality feedback look like?

Quality feedback has three main components: It is direct, actionable, and clear.

- **Direct feedback** is being honest with the person about the state of their performance and includes examples for reference.
- **Actionable feedback** focuses on a specific behavior and provides a concrete suggestion on which steps to take next.
- **Clear feedback** is concise and easy to understand. Clear feedback is respectful, but it doesn't sugar-coat the message or sandwich tough feedback between compliments.

A Model for Giving High-Quality Feedback

One model that works well for delivering high-quality feedback is the Situation – Behavior – Impact (SBI) model. Developed by The Center for Creative Leadership, the SBI model outlines a simple structure that you can use to give feedback:

Situation

Behavior

Impact

Let's look at how it works:

SBI Component	Definition	Examples
Situation	Define the where and when of the situation you're referring to. This puts the feedback into context and gives the other person a specific setting as a reference.	"During our team meeting yesterday, when you gave your presentation..." "At the client meeting Monday afternoon..."
Behavior	Describe the specific behaviors that you want to address. The goal is to communicate only the behaviors you observed directly without making assumptions or subjective judgments about those behaviors. These assumptions could be wrong, which will undermine your feedback.	"You were uncertain about where the data came from on two of the slides, and your sales calculations were incorrect. " "You ensured that the meeting started on time and that everyone had handouts in advance. All your research was correct, and each of the client's questions was answered."
Impact	Use "I statements" to describe how the action has affected you or others.	"I was concerned because the CEO was there and am worried that this might impact the reputation of our team." "I feel proud that you did such an excellent job and I feel confident that we'll land the account, thanks to your hard work."

When you structure feedback in this way, your employees will understand precisely what you are commenting on, and why. And when you outline the impact of their behavior on others, you're giving employees a chance to reflect on their actions and think about what they need to change. By describing only observable behaviors, the tool also helps you avoid making assumptions that could upset the other person and damage your relationship with them.

Additional Considerations When Giving Feedback to Neurodivergent Employees

In addition to providing high-quality feedback, there are some techniques you can use when providing feedback to neurodivergent employees that can improve the likelihood that your feedback will be well-received and put into practice:

Consider the timing of feedback.

If an employee is experiencing sensory or cognitive overwhelm, they may not be able to process the feedback in the moment.

- Provide a sensory break if possible or find an appropriate time to deliver the message when the employee is relaxed and at ease.

Remember that high-quality feedback is clear.

Autistic employees in particular may struggle to pick up on nuance, social cues, and figures of speech such as metaphors or sarcasm.

- To ensure employees understand the feedback you're providing, be respectful, but be clear; don't dilute constructive feedback with excessive praise.
- It can also be helpful to provide an evaluative statement at the end of the conversation to clearly convey where the employee stands with their performance, especially if they are underperforming or trending toward a performance improvement plan. For example,
 - "This is the third time we've talked about this issue. I'm concerned that if you don't make improvements in this area, it's going to prevent you from reaching your career goals."
 - "I've noticed this is something you do consistently well and I'm hoping you can help coach others on the team on how to prepare."

Additional Considerations When Giving Feedback to Neurodivergent Employees

Consider providing written feedback in advance of your conversation.

Giving your employee time to read and process the feedback is helpful for employees with auditory processing disabilities, slow processing speed, autism, and other neuro-differences.

- Write feedback in a concise format, using bullet points.
- Explain the “why” behind the feedback. Why is it important?
- Explain incorrect and correct behavior. Provide a model for what “good” looks like.
- Make unspoken and unwritten expectations explicit.
- Autistic employees may experience alexithymia, which is a condition that makes it difficult to identify and express emotions. Employees with ADHD can struggle with emotional dysregulation and rejection-sensitive dysphoria, leading to emotional outbursts. Having time to identify and respond to emotions in private can be helpful to ensure a positive and productive conversation when you meet for discussion.

Be available to answer questions and clarify expectations.

Some neurodivergent employees may experience slow processing speed.

- Processing speed is a combination of how accurately you perceive information, how efficiently you make sense of the information, and then how quickly you can formulate a response and take the appropriate action.
- People with slow processing speed need extra time to take in, make sense of, and respond to information. They may not be able to respond quickly to feedback in the moment and may need to follow up to ask questions and clarify understanding.

Provide access to tools that enable productivity.

- Neurodivergent employees may need support with executive function, which are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember, and juggle multiple tasks.
- Providing access to tools that help with prioritizing work, establishing deadlines, and providing reminders can enable greater productivity and reduce stress.