

The Negotiation EDGE for NEURODIVERSITY

A practical guide to negotiating with less
masking, less mind-reading, and more clarity.



Aligned.



INTRODUCTION

Negotiation is stressful for most people. It can bring up the fear of saying the wrong thing in the moment, pressure to respond quickly, and the uneasy feeling that expectations are unclear or changing as you speak.

The art of negotiation is deeply tied to communication and social cues. But most negotiation advice assumes neurotypical communication norms: speed, subtext, ambiguity tolerance, and social performance.

For many neurodivergent people, that combination amplifies the load. The interaction demands more processing, more interpretation, and more self-management at the exact moment the stakes rise.

Our stance: Inclusive negotiation is better negotiation design. It reduces misunderstanding, rework, and escalation for everyone. That's why it's time for neurodivergent professionals to **get the edge**.

Use this guide if you're neurodivergent and negotiation feels harder than it "should." Use it if you manage, support, or develop talent and you want inclusive negotiation practices that reduce friction.

MEET SAMANTHA

SAMANTHA
CALAMARI × Aligned.

Our contributor and inclusive learning design SPECIALIST



LinkedIn   Microsoft

Samantha Calamari is an inclusive learning strategist, instructional designer, and doctoral researcher whose work sits at the intersection of neurodiversity, accessibility, and AI-enabled learning. She has designed and led learning initiatives for organizations including Microsoft, LinkedIn Learning, MasterClass, Atlassian, and ArtsFund, and multiple higher-education institutions. Samantha helps teams build learning and communication systems that honor the full range of human cognition by centering clarity, co-design, and learner needs from the very beginning of a design process. Her consulting practice supports nonprofits, enterprise teams, and public-sector organizations in creating environments where more people can participate fully and confidently.

THE CONTEXT

Neurodivergence & Negotiation



NEURODIVERGENCE AT WORK

Neurodivergent employees face different job demands than neurotypical peers, and negotiation is one of those environments that causes unnecessary friction:

WHY NEGOTIATION IS A PEAK STRESS ENVIRONMENT

Negotiation concentrates several stressors into one moment:

Uncertainty and ambiguity:

Shifting terms, unclear expectations, hidden constraints – intolerance of uncertainty is strongly associated with anxiety in autism across studies.

Real-time processing under pressure

Rapid turn-taking, interruption, and “on the spot” decisions.

Social interpretation load

Reading subtext, tone, and status dynamics.

Sensory load (often overlooked)

Lighting, noise, video calls, room dynamics; sensory sensitivity and uncertainty can interact with anxiety, particularly in autistic adults.

OUR MISSION

At Aligned, we're on a mission to rebrand negotiation. The default, outdated negotiation playbook rewards a narrow set of communication norms. This guide shows what changes when we design negotiation for clarity and fairness.



SAMANTHA'S TAKE:

“In inclusive learning design, I encourage designers to consider the full learner rather than designing around a default template. Negotiation benefits from a similar mindset: when we broaden our assumptions about how people communicate and show up in general, we create space for more people to participate fully and confidently.”

INTRODUCING ASF

The Aligned Strategic Framework



HOW WE TEACH NEGOTIATION

The Aligned Strategic Framework (ASF) is the backbone of our training at Aligned. Practical lenses that work for different brains, communication styles, and high-stakes realities.

THE THREE PILLARS



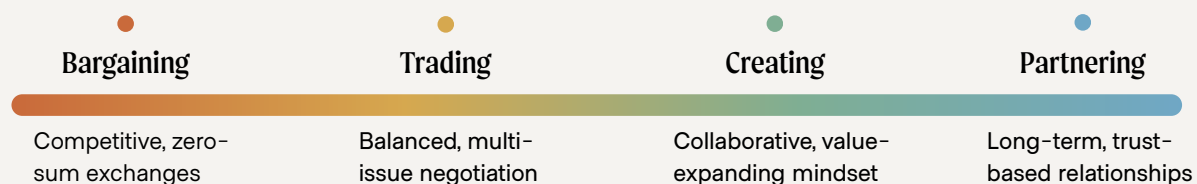
The ASF is a structured approach to negotiation that ensures alignment across all critical dimensions of a deal. This proven methodology balances Relationships, Process, and Goals:



- Relationships build trust and open communication
- Process keeps the negotiation on track and ensures clarity
- Goals make sure both sides understand what success looks like

THE FOUR TYPES

Across four different types of negotiation:



THE FOUR PHASES

Most negotiations move through four phases. Skipping one creates friction later:

PREPARE → COMMUNICATE → PROPOSE → ALIGN

PRACTICAL TRAINING TIPS

This guide is structured around five common negotiation frictions that show up when mainstream advice assumes neurotypical norms. Each friction is paired with an inclusive fix that comes directly from ASF principles.

Rapport first, clarity later



THE (NEUROTYPICAL) ASSUMPTION

If the vibe is good, the deal will work itself out.

WHY IT BACKFIRES

Rapport norms are culturally narrow and cognitively expensive. When “rapport” becomes the goal, people leave key terms vague. Vagueness creates rework. Rework creates conflict.

THE INCLUSIVE FIX

Make clarity the fastest path to trust:

- Set a simple structure early (agenda, goals, decisions)
- Use meaning checks so no one has to guess

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- “Here’s what I’m hoping we cover today. What’s most important for you?”
- “Quick agenda so I can stay focused: goal, options, decision, next steps.”
- “Before we talk solutions, can we define what success means for both sides?”
- “I’m going to summarize what I heard, then you tell me what I missed.”

ANCHOR: CONTROLLED TRANSPARENCY



Use the Four Phases of Negotiation to name what you’re doing and why, then offer structure:

- 1 Prepare**
Write your “clarity contract” in one line: what we’re deciding, what info we need, how we’ll capture it.
- 2 Communicate**
Ask two clarity questions early: “What does success look like?” and “What constraints matter most?”
- 3 Propose**
Make the first proposal a structure proposal (agenda + decision points), then move to numbers.
- 4 Align**
Confirm the deal in writing: decisions, owners, dates, and definitions open to interpretation.



SAMANTHA’S TAKE

“Rapport and clarity aren’t opposites. In fact, for many neurodivergent professionals, clarity is what creates rapport. When expectations are transparent and the purpose is shared, people feel safer and more connected.”

Speed gets mistaken for confidence



THE (NEUROTYPICAL) ASSUMPTION

Fast answers signal competence. Pauses signal weakness.

WHY IT BACKFIRES

Speed can reward impulsive concessions, sloppy thinking, and agreement without alignment. Some brains need more processing time to respond accurately and calmly.

THE INCLUSIVE FIX

Normalize time as a negotiation tool.

- Build in pauses
- Move complexity into writing
- Turn “thinking time” into a professional process step

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- “I want to give you a considered answer. I’m going to take 24 hours and reply in writing.”
- “Give me 30 seconds to think. I’ll come back with two options.”
- “I can react now, or I can be accurate. I’d rather be accurate.”

ANCHOR: STRUCTURAL PATIENCE

Don’t let speed force a commitment.



- Buy time explicitly (“I’ll respond tomorrow in writing”) so the pause is professional, not awkward.
- Use the time to produce two options (not one reactive answer).
- Commit only after you’ve seen the options in writing and confirmed understanding.



SAMANTHA’S TAKE

“One of the things I emphasize in inclusive learning is that reflection is a strength and should be welcomed. The same applies in negotiation.

A respectful, credibility-protecting response to buy more time could be:

“I want to give you a thoughtful response rather than a fast one. Let me take a bit of time to process this and come back with a clear recommendation by [time/day].”

Subtext is treated as skill



THE (NEUROTYPICAL) ASSUMPTION

If you're senior enough, you'll pick up what's implied.

WHY IT BACKFIRES

Hidden expectations create avoidable conflict. People can't align on terms they haven't named.

THE INCLUSIVE FIX

Make the invisible, visible.

- Ask for specificity on timelines, definitions, and "what good looks like"
- Confirm meaning early, then confirm again in writing

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- "When you say 'soon,' do you mean today, this week, or by Friday?"
- "Can we list the top 3 constraints so I don't assume wrong?"
- "I'm going to recap in writing to make sure we're aligned."

ANCHOR: FRAME THE OBVIOUS



Make implied expectations explicit so no one has to guess.

- Translate vague words into clear definitions
- Surface the real constraints early (budget, timing, policy, resourcing).
- Ask for decision criteria ("what would need to be true for this to be a yes?").



SAMANTHA'S TAKE

"In inclusive learning design, we don't expect learners to infer hidden expectations, so we make them explicit. Negotiation works the same way. Instead of decoding subtext, you can bring expectations into the open with simple questions, like:

"Can we name the key priorities so we're working from the same assumptions?" or
"What would a successful outcome look like for you?"

These questions are direct but collaborative, and reflect a co-design mindset: let's build shared understanding together rather than relying on unspoken rules."

Directness gets misread as aggression



THE (NEUROTYPICAL) ASSUMPTION

There's one 'professional' communication style.

WHY IT BACKFIRES

Style bias derails substance. People end up negotiating tone instead of terms.

THE INCLUSIVE FIX

Separate intent from style.

- Name your intent
- Use “process language” to keep the conversation on terms
- If needed, set a norm: direct + respectful beats performative

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- “I’m being direct because I want to be clear, not because I’m pushing.”
- “If my tone sounds blunt, that’s not my intent. I’m focused on precision.”
- “Let’s capture the constraint first. Then we can work the options.”

ANCHOR: THE LABEL



Give your intent a name so style doesn't overshadow substance.

- Label your intent: “I’m being direct because I want precision, not because I’m pushing.”
- Label the constraint: “The constraint I’m working within is timeline/budget/policy.”
- Label the next step: “Let’s capture terms, then we can talk tradeoffs.”



SAMANTHA'S TAKE

“Direct communication is often a sign of cognitive efficiency, not conflict.

When we design conversations the way we design inclusive learning, by naming intent early and separating style from substance, we create clarity as collaboration rather than confrontation.”

Live negotiation is treated as the default



THE (NEUROTYPICAL) ASSUMPTION

Negotiation happens in boardrooms, or on calls, in real time.

WHY IT BACKFIRES

Real-time environments amplify cognitive load and sensory stress. They also advantage the quickest speaker, not the clearest thinker.

THE INCLUSIVE FIX

Design the medium:

- Offer written-first proposals
- Use async rounds for complexity
- Use calls to finalize, not to invent the deal live

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- “I’ll send a written proposal with 2–3 options so we can react to something concrete.”
- “Can we do this async first, then use a short call to finalise?”
- “Let’s use the meeting to decide, not to discover the terms.”

ANCHOR: THE SLOW PLAY



Shift complexity out of live conversation so clarity wins.

- Send a written proposal with 2–3 options.
- Use async feedback to refine terms.
- Use a short call only to make final tradeoffs and confirm commitments.



SAMANTHA’S TAKE

“I have witnessed real-time negotiation favors speed over depth. In inclusive learning design, we never assume everyone thinks best on the spot and negotiation should be no different. When we offer multiple types of communication such as written or asynchronous formats, we give people space to process and contribute their best thinking.”



Negotiation Clarity Menu



Use this menu when a conversation has stakes and uncertainty: performance feedback, workload changes, scope negotiations, deadlines, comp changes, or any meeting where you've been burned by vague expectations before.

Choose 2–3 items to request upfront so the conversation is easier to follow, easier to respond to, and easier to act on afterward.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

- ✓ Share agenda + desired outcomes in advance
- ✓ Clarify the decision needed (and what's not being decided)
- ✓ Provide the relevant context in writing

DURING THE CONVERSATION

- ✓ Pause points ("let's take 60 seconds to think")
- ✓ Option to respond in writing for complex questions
- ✓ Less interruption: one speaker at a time
- ✓ Breaks in longer meetings

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- ✓ Written recap: decisions, owners, dates
- ✓ Confirm definitions of key terms

EXAMPLE SCRIPTS

- "To give you my best thinking, can you share the agenda, desired outcome, and what decision we need to make? Written context helps me move faster."
- "If something comes up live that needs more thought, I'll follow up in writing by [time/day] so you get a clear recommendation."

Building an inclusive clarity-first culture



If you want better negotiation outcomes, design for clarity by default.

Managers, HR, L&D, and DEI teams set the norms for how decisions get made, how conflict gets handled, and whose communication style gets rewarded.

The five frictions you just read are rarely “personal quirks.” They are signals that the environment is asking people to do extra work just to participate. When you build clarity into the system, you make negotiation safer and more effective. You get fewer misunderstandings, fewer escalations, and fewer follow-up cycles that drain time and trust.

Use the list below as a practical baseline:

DO

- ✓ **Offer structure:**
Agenda, recap, explicit expectations
- ✓ **Reward clarity:**
Documented decisions, clean follow-through
- ✓ **Offer modality choice:**
Async-first or written-first options
- ✓ **Give processing time:**
Build in pauses and response windows

AVOID

- ✗ **Style cues:**
Equating eye contact, or speed with engagement
- ✗ **Surprise calls:**
Pulling people into live decisions without context
- ✗ **Implied terms:**
Leaving critical definitions, expectations, or next steps unspoken



SAMANTHA'S TAKE

“Organizations need to stop rewarding speed, charisma, or the ability to ‘read the room’ as if those are indicators of competence. Those norms favor a narrow set of communication styles and overlook the strengths of reflective, analytical, or direct communicators.

When we design negotiation with the same care we bring to inclusive learning – not the same lens, but a similar commitment to understanding people’s needs early and co-designing the experience – we create conversations where more people can participate fully and confidently.”

SAMANTHA CALAMARI

Designing for inclusion



SAMANTHA, IF YOU COULD REDESIGN A TYPICAL WORKPLACE NEGOTIATION TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE, WHAT 3 CHANGES WOULD YOU IMPLEMENT?



"I love this question because redesign and iteration are my favorite parts of learning design – but I rarely see that same willingness to rethink or iterate in hiring processes or negotiation practices. We tend to treat them as fixed rituals, rather than experiences we can redesign for real humans.

If I approached negotiation the way I approach inclusive learning, I'd start early by understanding what people need to feel grounded.

BEFORE

That means sharing structure ahead of time (the agenda, goals, and decision points) so people can prepare in a way that aligns with their processing style.

DURING

During the conversation, I'd slow the pace and make thinking visible. Summaries, explicit transitions, and alignment checks help everyone stay oriented, not just neurodivergent professionals.

AFTER

And afterward, I'd build in reflection. A written recap or an invitation to follow up once someone has had time to think honors different cognitive rhythms. These aren't complicated changes, but they shift negotiation from a performance to a process, one that more people can succeed in."

LOOKING FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING DESIGN SUPPORT?

Samantha is offering a free consultation call for readers of the Edge.

Her services include:

- Inclusive Learning Strategy & Program Design
- AI-Enabled Learning Innovation
- Neurodiversity-Informed Communication & Facilitation

[LEARN MORE & BOOK TIME](#)

YOUR NEGOTIATION PARTNER

Time to get Aligned.



WORKING WITH ALIGNED

Most training vendors run a great session and disappear. That's not how negotiation capability gets built, and it's not how clearer, more inclusive norms stick. You need a partner who helps you set the standard, get it adopted, and keep it alive when priorities shift. Our customers gain:

- A shared negotiation language leaders can reinforce (with clarity built in)
- Real practice built around your situations, not generic role plays
- Tools and scripts that reduce ambiguity, rework, and unnecessary escalation
- A path to scale across teams, levels, and regions without diluting the standard

HOW WE CAN SUPPORT YOU

- In-person workshops (Fundamentals → Intermediate → Advanced)
- Executive and leadership coaching
- Consulting on rollout strategy and reinforcement
- Refresher sessions that keep the standard sharp
- Keynotes that create internal pull and sponsorship



Negotiation is an organizational capability. It needs consistency and reinforcement – especially when the goal is a more inclusive culture of clarity.

RESULTS OUR CLIENTS SEE

- Stronger outcomes with measurable cost avoidance
- Improved supplier relationships and collaboration
- Better cross-functional alignment on sourcing strategy
- Reduced dependency on adversarial tactics

“Aligned negotiation training was phenomenal. We are getting immediate ROI at all levels of the organization.”

ALEX WORLEY | CEO | HAPPY EGG

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR TRAINING

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Mets

Cargill

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McCANN
WORLDGROUP

Let's talk NEGOTIATION

Book some time with the team

READY TO TRANSFORM HOW YOUR ORGANIZATION NEGOTIATES?

Schedule a free consultation with our negotiation experts to:

- ✓ Assess your current negotiation capability
- ✓ Identify opportunities for improvement
- ✓ Develop a customized action plan to achieve your objectives

BOOK A MEETING NOW

[Or visit alignednegotiation.com to learn more about our approach and framework.](https://alignednegotiation.com)

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