

The AID feedback field guide

How to give feedback that creates clarity, ownership and better performance



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AID in a few minutes

Feedback should be one of the simpler things we do as leaders. We notice something, explain why it matters and help the other person understand what to do with that information. Yet in practice, feedback is often delayed, softened, overloaded or made unnecessarily personal. Sometimes we avoid the conversation because we expect it to be uncomfortable. Sometimes we give so much context that the point disappears. At other times we are very clear about what we think went wrong, but much less clear about what we actually observed. The result is feedback that feels more like judgement than useful information.

The AID model offers a simple way through this. It helps you separate what happened from what you think about the person, connect behaviour to its consequences, and then turn the conversation towards what happens next. AID stands for Action, Impact and Development (This is sometimes also called Desired Behaviour or simply Do) . Action asks what happened. Impact asks why it mattered. Development asks what should continue, change or develop from here.

That simplicity is part of its strength. You do not need a complicated script or a ten-stage process to give useful feedback. You need enough structure to make the message clear, fair and useful. The skill comes in how you use the structure.

Good AID feedback is not simply a three-part statement delivered to another person. At its best, it creates a conversation. You bring information that the other person may not have, while also making room for their interpretation, context and ideas. Sometimes you will need to be very direct. Sometimes you will want to ask far more than you tell. Sometimes the issue is straightforward and there is a clear standard that needs to be met. At other times, the situation is more ambiguous and the value comes from helping the other person think through what happened.

The structure stays the same. The conversation around it changes. The aim is not to win an argument about the past. It is to create better understanding and better choices for the future.

AID at a glance

At its simplest, AID can be remembered through three questions:

- Action: What happened?
- Impact: Why did it matter?
- Development: What should continue, change or develop?

There is also a useful deeper logic underneath those three questions. Action is about evidence. Impact is about meaning. Development is about movement. The first keeps the conversation grounded. The second makes the feedback relevant. The third makes it useful.

If Action is weak, the feedback quickly becomes vague or judgemental. If Impact is missing, the feedback can sound like personal preference. If Development is unclear, the conversation may create awareness but little change.

A worked example

Imagine a salesperson has just finished a client meeting. During the meeting, they repeatedly answered questions before the client had finished explaining what they wanted.

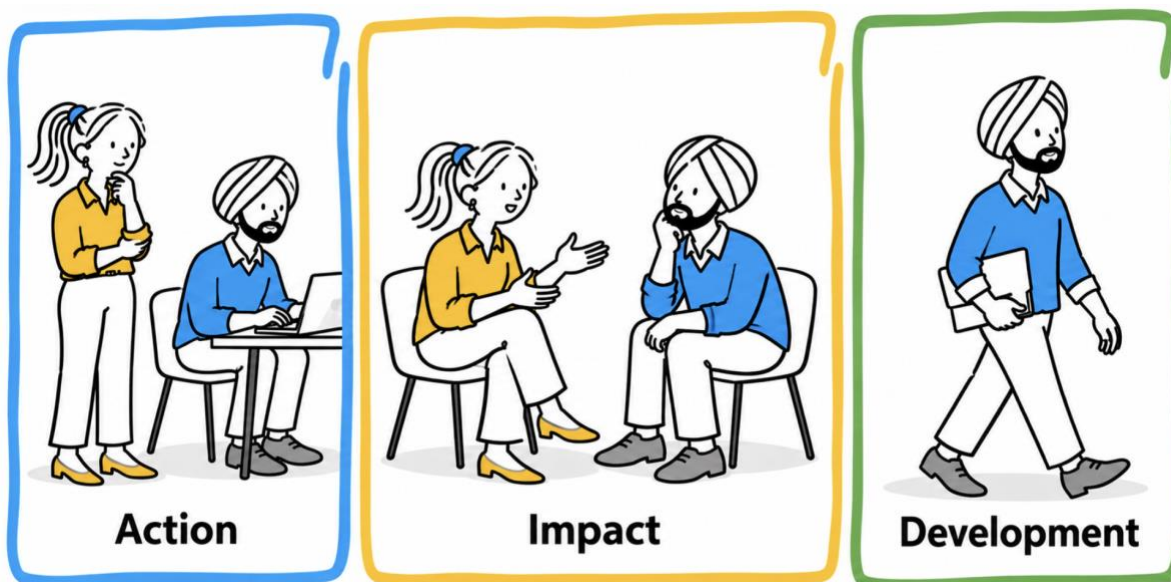
A less useful version of the feedback might sound like this: *"You need to listen more carefully. You were too quick to jump in and it made you look unprepared."*

There may be something valid behind that judgement, but the statement mixes observation, interpretation and advice together. It also gives the salesperson very little opportunity to think.

Using AID, the conversation could sound more like this: *"In the meeting this morning, there were three occasions when you started answering before the client had finished explaining the question.* On two of those occasions we then had to go back and clarify what they were actually asking, which made parts of the conversation feel rushed and cost us time. What did you notice, and what might help you create a little more space before responding next time?"

The message is still clear. This is not softer feedback. The difference is that the conversation is anchored in something observable, explains why it matters and invites the other person to take some responsibility for what happens next.

There is another shift happening here. The weaker version moves quickly from judgement to instruction: you did this badly, so do this instead. The stronger version moves through evidence, consequence and reflection. That creates a much better foundation for learning.



Understanding AID

Why feedback goes wrong

Feedback is rarely difficult because people do not know that they should give it. It is difficult because the moment itself is often messy. You may have only part of the picture. You may already be frustrated. The other person may be defensive. The behaviour may have happened several times, which makes it tempting to unload everything at once. Or you may have waited so long that the conversation now carries far more emotion than the original event deserves.

There are also some very common traps:

- We move from what happened to what we think it means.
- We describe somebody as careless, negative, defensive or unprofessional when what we really have is an observation that needs unpacking.
- We assume intent.
- We generalise from one event.
- We soften the message so much that the person is left wondering what the point was.
- We deliver the feedback so firmly that there is no space left for context, reflection or disagreement.

Sometimes the problem is simply timing. Feedback that would have been relatively straightforward on Tuesday becomes much harder three weeks later.

AID helps because it creates a disciplined sequence. Start with what happened. Then explain why it matters. Then work out what should happen next. That sounds simple, but each stage asks something quite demanding of the person giving feedback. It asks you to separate observation from judgement, to make impact explicit rather than assume it is obvious, and to think carefully about whether the Development stage requires instruction, reflection, support, experimentation or some combination of these.

Action: Stay close to what happened

The Action part of AID is about observable behaviour. This is where many feedback conversations become weaker than they need to be. The person giving feedback has already reached a conclusion, so the conclusion is presented as if it were the observation.

Statements such as “you were dismissive”, “you were defensive”, “you were not prepared” or “you were not listening” may point towards something important, but they are interpretations. A stronger starting point asks what the person actually did or said.

One of the simplest tests is to ask whether a camera or microphone could have captured it. A camera could capture someone speaking before another person had finished. It could not capture whether they respected them. A camera could capture someone arriving 15 minutes late. It could not capture whether they cared about the team. A microphone could capture somebody saying “that is ridiculous” while speaking over a colleague. It could not capture whether they were arrogant.

This distinction matters because observable behaviour is much easier to discuss. It gives both people something concrete to work with.

- Instead of “*you were not listening*”, try “*while James was explaining the issue, you looked at your phone several times and responded before he had finished.*”
- Instead of “*you were defensive*”, try “*when I raised the missed deadline, you gave three reasons why other teams were responsible before discussing your own part in it.*”

- Instead of “*you were unprepared*”, try “*when the client asked about the implementation timeline, you did not have the milestones or dates available and we had to pause while I looked them up.*”

The purpose is not to make feedback cold or forensic. It is to give the conversation a firmer foundation.

Observation, interpretation and assumption

A useful way to sharpen feedback is to distinguish between observation, interpretation and assumption. An observation is what happened. An interpretation is the meaning you make from what happened. An assumption is what you think explains why the person behaved that way.

- Observation: You interrupted twice while Sarah was explaining her recommendation.
- Interpretation: I thought it came across as dismissive.
- Assumption: I assumed you had already decided that her idea was not useful.

These three levels are not equally reliable. The observation is the strongest ground. The interpretation may still be useful, especially if it reflects the impact you experienced. The assumption is where the greatest risk appears because you are moving into the other person’s intentions, motives or mindset.

This does not mean you should never share an interpretation. Sometimes it is exactly what the other person needs to hear. It does mean that you should recognise the difference between “this is what happened” and “this is the meaning I made from what happened”. The more aware you are of that distinction, the less likely the conversation is to become a debate about whether your judgement of the person is correct.



Be specific enough to be useful

Vague feedback is difficult to act upon. Statements such as “you need to communicate better”, “you need to be more strategic” or “you need to show more leadership” may point towards something important, but they leave too much work for the other person.

What exactly would better communication look like? Where were they insufficiently strategic? What leadership behaviour was missing? The more senior the person, the more tempting it can be to use broad labels. Yet senior people benefit from specificity just as much as anyone else.

A useful principle is to describe the smallest meaningful behaviour that explains the issue. You do not need every detail. You do not need the entire history. You need enough to make the feedback clear.

One issue at a time

When feedback has been delayed, several examples often accumulate. This creates another common problem. The conversation starts with one issue and quickly becomes a catalogue. You raise the client meeting, then remember the previous meeting, then the late report, then the conversation with Finance. Before long the person is trying to respond to six different issues at once.

The more issues you add, the harder it becomes for the other person to understand what really matters. If everything is important, nothing is. A useful discipline is to ask: What is the one piece of feedback that would make the biggest difference right now?

You can always come back to something else later. Clarity is often more useful than completeness. There are times when a pattern matters, and then several examples may be necessary. Even then, the aim is not to build a case for the prosecution. Use the minimum amount of evidence needed to make the pattern clear: *"This is the third time in the last month that the agreed handover has arrived after the deadline. I want us to look at what is getting in the way"* That is usually stronger than reading out a long list of failures.

Impact: Explain why it matters

Action describes what happened. Impact explains why it is worth paying attention to. This matters because people often receive feedback without understanding the consequences. *"You interrupted the client several times"* may be completely accurate, but the person may still wonder why you are raising it.

Adding the impact changes the conversation: You interrupted the client several times. After that, the client became noticeably quieter and stopped expanding on the issue. We may have lost some useful information.

Impact helps move the conversation away from personal preference and towards relevance. It answers the question: so what?

Impact can show up in different places. It may affect results, people, customers, the wider system or the individual themselves. Useful areas to scan include:

- Quality, speed, cost, delivery, risk and decision-making
- Trust, confidence, workload, motivation and willingness to contribute
- Customer experience, relationship and confidence
- Handovers, dependencies, other teams and coordination
- Credibility, reputation, influence and development

You do not need to cover everything. Usually one or two consequences are enough.

As you think about impact, I often consider "onion rings": Impact on the person, the relationship between the two of you, the broader team, the department, your organisation and possibly the client company.

Look for the nearest impact

Impact works best when it stays close to the event. If the behaviour caused a delay, describe the delay. If someone withdrew from the conversation, describe that. If the client had to ask for clarification, describe it. If another team had to redo work, describe it. Do not jump too quickly to dramatic consequences.

For example, *"this could damage your reputation across the whole organisation"* may be possible, but it is a long way from the event. A stronger version might be, *"the project leads left the meeting unclear about who was"*

making the final decision.” The second statement sounds less dramatic, but it is more credible and therefore more useful.

Actual impact versus imagined impact

There is an important difference between impact you have evidence for and impact you are inventing. *“The meeting ran 20 minutes over because we had to revisit the numbers”* is concrete. *“Everyone probably thought you did not know what you were doing”* is speculation.

Feedback loses credibility quickly when the Impact stage becomes exaggerated. If you are not sure, say so. *“My concern is that this may have reduced the client’s confidence in the answer”* is very different from claiming certainty. Good feedback does not require pretending that you know more than you do.

The same applies when you are speaking on behalf of other people. *“Everyone was frustrated with you”* is a risky statement unless you genuinely know that. A more grounded version might be *“after the meeting, two people came to me because they were still unclear about the decision”*. Stay as close as possible to what you actually know.

Impact is not the same as emotion

Sometimes the impact is something you experienced personally, and that is entirely legitimate. For example: *“When the figures changed the night before the presentation, I had to rebuild the financial section and recheck all the assumptions.”*

Your own emotional reaction can also be relevant. The risk comes when your emotional reaction becomes the only reason the feedback matters. If the conversation reduces to *“I did not like this”*, the other person may hear it as preference rather than useful performance information. Where possible, connect your reaction to the wider consequence. *“I felt frustrated because the late change meant we had to rebuild the material overnight, and that increased the risk of errors”*. Now the feedback contains both the human impact and the practical consequence.

Positive impact matters too

Impact is just as important when the feedback is positive. *“Great presentation”* may feel good, but it produces very little learning: *“You opened by summarising the client’s three priorities and then linked each recommendation back to them. That kept the discussion focused and the client referred back to those priorities several times.”*

The second version tells the person what worked and why it worked. That makes the behaviour much more likely to be repeated. Positive feedback becomes useful when the other person can identify what to continue.

Development: create movement

The final part of AID is Development. This is where the conversation turns from the past towards the future. It is also the part that is easiest to oversimplify.

Development does not always mean *“here is what I want you to do differently”*. Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. At other times, a stronger conversation comes from helping the person reflect, experiment, repair something, build a skill or continue something that is already working.

There are several useful forms that Development can take:

- Continue: reinforce something that worked and should be repeated.
- Change: make a specific behaviour different.

- Develop: strengthen a capability over time.
- Repair: put something right where damage has already occurred.
- Experiment: try a different approach where there is no single obvious answer.

These are not rigid categories. They are simply ways of helping you think more carefully about the kind of movement the conversation needs.

If something worked, Development might sound like: *“That way of summarising the disagreement helped the team move forward. Keep doing that when conversations become stuck.”*

You might also invite reflection: *“What do you think made that work so well?”*

If the required shift is clear, Development may be more direct: *“When you disagree with the recommendation, I need you to challenge it before the client meeting rather than during it.”*

If the issue points towards a broader capability, the conversation may be about development: *“You clearly understand the detail. The next step is being able to summarise it more concisely for senior stakeholders.”*

If there is something to repair, Development may focus on the immediate relationship: *“That exchange left the relationship with Operations strained. What do you think needs to happen now to repair it?”*

And in more complex situations, Development may be experimental: *“In the next two meetings, what could you try that might help you hear more from the quieter people in the room?”* Then agree what you will look for.

Development is not always optional

Modern leadership development tends to turn every feedback conversation into a coaching conversation. That can be useful, but it can also create confusion. Others involve a clear standard.

If someone consistently submits a critical report late, the conversation may not need an open-ended discussion about what they would ideally like to do. You may need to say: *“From next week, I need the report submitted by 12:00 on Friday.”*

You can still ask how they are going to make that happen. The important point is that asking questions should not become a way of avoiding clarity.

Ask or tell?

One of the most useful choices in the Development stage is deciding how much to tell and how much to ask. Telling is often appropriate when the standard is clear, the behaviour must stop, there is a safety or compliance issue, the person lacks important information, or the expectation is non-negotiable. Asking becomes more useful when the person has relevant experience, the situation is ambiguous, you want them to reflect, you want greater ownership, several solutions could work, or capability development matters.

Often the strongest approach combines both. *“I need the final report submitted by Friday lunchtime. What is getting in the way at the moment, and what will you change to make that happen?”* The expectation is clear. The solution is still theirs to work through.

Agreement is not always the goal

One of the most useful shifts in feedback is to stop assuming that the other person has to agree with every part of your view. They may remember the Action differently. They may disagree with your interpretation. They may believe the Impact was smaller than you think. They may see other factors that you have missed.

That does not automatically make the conversation unsuccessful. Sometimes the goal is not “we both agree that my interpretation is correct”. The goal is “we both understand the issue clearly enough to decide what

happens next". This becomes particularly important in senior teams, peer relationships and complex environments where different perspectives are normal.

AID gives you a structure for the conversation without pretending that only one person can hold the truth.

Moving between telling and asking

AID is a structure rather than a script, and this becomes particularly important when you think about how much you tell and how much you ask during a feedback conversation. It is easy to assume that good feedback should always become a coaching conversation, with the leader asking questions and the other person discovering the answer for themselves. There are certainly situations where this is useful, but there are also situations where the person simply needs clear information from you. The skill is not in asking as many questions as possible. It is in judging what the other person needs from you at that moment.

At one end of the conversation you may need to be quite directive. You observed something, the impact is clear and there is a standard that needs to be met. If a safety rule has been ignored, a critical process has not been followed or a behaviour is having a serious impact on other people, asking a series of open questions can create unnecessary ambiguity. You may need to say what you observed, explain why it matters and make the expectation clear. You can still invite the other person into the conversation, but you do not need to pretend that the required outcome is open for negotiation:

In the last two client calls, you interrupted the customer several times before they had finished. On both occasions we then had to go back and clarify what they were asking. I need you to let the customer finish before responding. What is making it difficult to hold back in those moments?

The first part is direct. The expectation is not hidden inside a coaching question. The question that follows is genuine because there may be several reasons why the behaviour is happening and several ways the person could address it.

At the other end of the continuum, you may be working with someone who has considerable experience, where the situation itself is more ambiguous or where developing their judgement matters as much as correcting the immediate behaviour. In these situations, asking more can help the person notice patterns and make sense of their own impact. You might still bring an observation, but instead of immediately telling them what you think they should do, you create some space for them to interpret it:

"In yesterday's meeting, you spoke first on almost every question and interrupted twice while Priya was answering. What did you notice about how much space you were taking up?"

You could then explore the impact by asking what effect they think that had on the rest of the group, and move towards Development by asking what they might want to do differently in the next meeting. The difference between these two approaches is not that one is good feedback and the other is bad feedback. They are responses to different situations. Telling becomes more useful when the standard is clear, the person lacks information or the behaviour needs to change quickly. Asking becomes more useful when you want reflection, ownership and judgement rather than simple compliance.

A useful way of thinking about the choice is:

- Tell more when the standard is clear, the behaviour must stop, there is a safety or compliance issue, or the person needs information that they do not currently have.
- Ask more when the person has useful experience to draw upon, several solutions could work, the situation is ambiguous, or you want to build their capacity to notice and respond for themselves.
- Combine both when the outcome or standard is fixed but there is room for the other person to decide how they will achieve it.

In practice, this third option is often the most useful. You might say, “I need the final report submitted by Friday lunchtime. What is getting in the way at the moment and what will you change to make that happen?” The standard is clear, but responsibility for the solution remains with the other person.

One trap worth avoiding is the fake question. This happens when you ask what appears to be an open question even though you have already decided that there is only one acceptable answer. “What do you think you should do differently next time?” may sound developmental, but if the person gives an answer you do not like and you immediately correct them, the question was never really open. In these situations, it is often more respectful to state the expectation and then ask a genuine question about how the person will meet it. Questions should create thinking, not disguise an instruction.

The same flexibility applies across all three parts of AID. In Action, you may need to tell because you have observed something the other person has not noticed. You can then ask whether they noticed it too. In Impact, you may bring your own observation while also inviting theirs. In Development, you may ask first if there are several possible ways forward, or be more directive where the expectation is clear. This means that the same basic piece of feedback can be delivered at different points on the continuum, and all of those versions can be appropriate depending on what the person needs from you and what the situation requires.

This is also true when the feedback is positive. Leaders often become very precise when something has gone wrong and surprisingly vague when something has gone well. “Great presentation” may feel encouraging, but it tells the person very little about what they should repeat. AID helps make positive feedback more useful because it asks you to identify the behaviour and its consequence.

“You opened the meeting by summarising the client’s three priorities and checking that you had understood them correctly. That gave the discussion immediate focus and the client referred back to those priorities several times.”

You could simply reinforce the behaviour and say to keep using that structure. Or you could use the moment developmentally and ask what they think made that opening work so well. The second version helps the person understand their own effective behaviour. This matters because people often repeat successful behaviour without being fully aware of what made it successful. Specific positive feedback helps turn something that happened to work into something they can use deliberately again.

There is no need, however, to turn every piece of feedback into a lengthy reflective conversation. Sometimes a short, specific comment is enough. The goal is not to maximise conversation. It is to create enough clarity and thinking for the situation.

A useful preparation question is therefore not simply, “What feedback do I want to give?” It is also to consider what the person needs from you. Before the conversation, it may help to ask yourself:

- What does this person need to know from me?
- What could they usefully work out for themselves?
- What expectation, if any, needs to be clear by the end?

Those three questions can prevent two opposite errors. The first is over-directing, where you provide your diagnosis and solution before the other person has had any opportunity to think. The second is under-directing, where you hide a clear expectation behind a series of coaching questions because asking feels more developmental. Good feedback can contain both clarity and curiosity.

Using AID in real situations

The best way to get comfortable with AID is to see how it changes across different situations. The underlying logic remains the same, but the language, level of directness and amount of discussion can vary considerably. Feedback about a missed deadline will not sound the same as feedback after an excellent client meeting. A conversation with your manager may need a different tone from one with somebody you lead. Some situations need a clear expectation. Others benefit from much more exploration.

The examples that follow are not scripts to copy. They are illustrations of how you might take a vague judgement or general impression and turn it into something more specific and useful. In each case, notice what happens to the conversation when the feedback stays close to observable behaviour, makes the impact clear and then creates an appropriate way forward.

When someone dominates a meeting

A common piece of feedback is that somebody dominates meetings. The problem is that “you dominate meetings” already contains a judgement. The other person may immediately start thinking about all the occasions when they did not dominate, or about why they felt they needed to speak.

“In yesterday’s project meeting, you were the first person to respond to most of the questions and you interrupted Priya twice while she was explaining the delivery risks. By the end of the discussion we had heard very little from two of the people closest to the implementation work. What did you notice about your role in the conversation, and what might you do next time to create a little more space?”

The feedback is still challenging, but it gives the person a specific event to examine rather than asking them to accept a label. If this is already a well-established pattern and previous conversations have not changed it, the Development stage may need to become more explicit.

“In the next few meetings, I need you to hold back from being the first person to answer and make a deliberate effort to bring other people in. Let’s see what difference that makes.”

The Action and Impact may stay almost identical. What changes is the level of direction required.

When a deadline keeps being missed

Repeated missed deadlines often produce frustrated feedback because the manager has stopped seeing each event as an isolated occurrence. “You are unreliable” can start to feel like an accurate description. Unfortunately, it is still a judgement about the person rather than useful information about the problem.

“The last three weekly reports have arrived on Monday rather than the agreed Friday deadline. Finance cannot complete the consolidated numbers until they have your figures, which means they are starting Monday already behind. This is now a pattern rather than a one-off delay, so I need Friday to become reliable. What is getting in the way and what needs to change?”

The conversation does not pretend that the deadline is optional, but it also creates an opportunity to understand what is causing the repeated problem. Accountability and curiosity can exist in the same conversation.

When someone is poorly prepared

Poor preparation is another area where feedback quickly becomes personal. “You weren’t prepared” may be broadly true, but it gives the other person little information about what adequate preparation would have looked like.

"In the client review this morning, you did not have the latest implementation dates or the open risk log with you. When the client asked about both, we had to pause while I found the information. That disrupted the flow of the meeting and reduced the amount of time we had for the decisions we needed to make. What would good preparation for the next review look like?"

The point is not that asking is inherently better. The point is to avoid confusing the observation with the conclusion. "You were poorly prepared" becomes useful only when both people understand what was missing and why it mattered.

When somebody has done something particularly well

Positive feedback is often much shorter than developmental feedback. We may spend fifteen minutes explaining a problem and five seconds saying "great job" when something works. That feels positive, but it wastes valuable information.

"When the disagreement started escalating, you stopped the discussion and summarised the two different positions without taking sides. You then asked each person what they thought the other was most concerned about. The tone changed noticeably after that and the group was able to return to the issue without attacking each other. I would keep using that approach when conversations get polarised."

Or, if you want the person to understand their own skill more deeply, you could ask what they were paying attention to at that moment and what made them decide to intervene in that way. This kind of positive feedback does more than recognise success. It helps turn effective behaviour into something the person can understand, repeat and potentially teach to others.

When somebody agrees but does not follow through

This can be particularly frustrating because the conversation often appears successful at the time. The person agrees, sounds committed and then little changes. The feedback can quickly become "you never follow through on anything", which may express the frustration but does not help isolate the pattern.

"In our last two one-to-ones we agreed that you would speak with the regional leads before the next review. Both times you agreed to do it, but neither conversation happened. The result is that we are now making the same decision without their input for the third time. I want to understand what is happening between the commitment in the meeting and the follow-through afterwards."

Notice that the Development question is slightly different here. Rather than immediately asking for another commitment, it explores the failure of the existing commitments. Otherwise, there is a risk of simply creating a third promise that will also disappear.

When someone becomes defensive

"Defensive" is a particularly easy label to use because most of us recognise the experience of talking with someone who appears to reject every piece of feedback. Yet the label can make the situation worse if it becomes the feedback itself.

"When I raised the concerns about the project timeline, your first response was to explain what Procurement, Finance and the customer had done wrong. We spent most of the conversation discussing their contribution before we looked at what was within your control. That made it difficult to identify what you could change. Next time we review a problem, I would like us to look at your own part first and then bring in the wider factors. How does that land with you?"

The word defensive may still have a place in your own thinking, but it is rarely the most helpful place to begin the conversation.



When someone does not speak up

The opposite problem can happen when someone contributes too little. Again, the reason matters. They may lack confidence, disagree with the direction, need longer to process, feel excluded from the discussion or simply believe that nothing useful will happen if they speak.

"In the last two planning meetings you did not contribute to the discussion, even when we were talking about the part of the programme you lead. After both meetings, you raised important concerns with me privately. That means the wider group is making decisions without hearing information that could change those decisions. What makes it difficult to raise those concerns in the meeting itself?"

Here the Development stage starts with exploration because you do not yet understand the cause. Jumping straight to "you need to speak up more" may address the visible behaviour while missing the real problem.

When somebody challenges constructively

AID can also reinforce behaviours that organisations often say they want but accidentally discourage, such as constructive challenge.

"When the team was ready to approve the proposal, you asked us to go back to the assumptions about customer demand and showed that one of them was based on data from two years ago. That delayed the decision by about twenty minutes, but it stopped us committing to a plan based on a weak assumption. Keep challenging the thinking in that way, particularly when everyone seems to be reaching agreement very quickly."

This is useful because it reinforces not just the challenge, but the way the person challenged. It signals that slowing the group down can sometimes be valuable when the quality of the decision is at risk.

When the feedback needs to go upwards

Giving feedback to someone more senior can feel riskier because the power relationship changes. That often leads people either to say nothing or to soften the message until it becomes almost impossible to understand. AID can help because it allows you to stay close to the work.

"In the last two steering meetings, the project priorities changed during the discussion without the workstream leads being involved. Both times the teams then spent several days reworking plans that had already been agreed. Could we find a way of testing those changes with the workstream leads before they become decisions?"

There is no need to say, "You keep changing your mind", even if that is how it feels. The Action and Impact make the issue visible without requiring a judgement about the senior person's character or intentions.

When feedback is between peers

Peer feedback often works best when the person makes their own experience visible rather than trying to sound like the other person's manager.

"When I was explaining the concern in yesterday's meeting, you started answering before I had finished twice. I found it difficult to get the whole issue on the table and I left the discussion feeling that we had answered a slightly different question. Next time we disagree, could we both make sure the other person has finished before responding?"

The Development stage is mutual rather than hierarchical. The structure remains clear without pretending that the relationship is something it is not.

When a stakeholder relationship is being damaged

Sometimes the most important Impact is not an immediate result but what is happening to a relationship over time. This is an area where it is worth being careful not to overstate what you know.

"In the last three calls with Operations, you have opened by going straight into the overdue actions without checking in on the issues they raised in the previous meeting. In the last call they gave much shorter answers and stopped volunteering information unless we asked for it directly. I am concerned that we are starting to lose some openness in the relationship. How do you see it?"

The phrase "I am concerned" matters because the longer-term relationship impact is partly an interpretation. You are being clear about what you observed while distinguishing it from what you think it may mean.

When somebody makes an inappropriate joke or comment

Some behaviour requires more direct feedback because the question is not whether the person personally believes it was a problem.

"In the team call yesterday, you made a joke about Maria's age after she mentioned how long she had been with the company. She stopped speaking for the rest of that part of the discussion and two people contacted me afterwards about the comment. Jokes about personal characteristics are not appropriate here, and I need that not to happen again. I also want you to think about whether you need to follow up with Maria."

There is still a Development stage, but there is no need to create artificial ambiguity around the standard. This is one of the situations where clarity matters more than turning everything into a coaching question.

When work is technically strong but the person is difficult to work with

This type of feedback is often expressed at such a high level that it becomes almost impossible to act on. “Your work is excellent, but you are difficult to work with” is likely to be heard as a judgement rather than useful information. AID requires you to unpack “difficult”.

“Your analysis on the project has been consistently strong. At the same time, in the last two review meetings you dismissed suggestions from other people before asking how they had reached them, and on Tuesday you described one proposal as “obviously unworkable”. Both times the discussion stopped rather than developing the idea. I want you to keep bringing the same level of challenge, but find a way of doing it that keeps other people in the conversation. What might that look like?”

This is a useful example of feedback where you do not want less of the person’s strength. You want them to use it in a way that creates a different impact.

When the person is already performing well

Feedback is not only about correcting problems. Some of the most valuable developmental feedback can be given to somebody who is already doing a good job and is ready for the next level of responsibility.

“Your project reviews are consistently well prepared and you usually have the answers when people ask for detail. What I noticed in the executive review last week, though, was that you answered every question at the level of detail it was asked. The senior team ended up spending a lot of time in operational discussion. At the next review, I would like you to experiment with answering first at the level of the decision they need to make, and then go into the detail if they ask for it.”

Here the feedback is not saying that the person’s current approach is poor. It is helping them adapt something that already works to a different context. That distinction becomes increasingly important as people become more senior. Development is often less about fixing obvious weaknesses and more about understanding when an existing strength needs to be used differently.

What these examples have in common

The language changes across these situations, but the underlying discipline is remarkably consistent. The Action stays close enough to what happened that both people can examine it. The Impact explains why the behaviour is worth discussing without stretching beyond what you actually know. Development then matches the situation rather than defaulting to either instruction or coaching.

Sometimes the Development is a question. Sometimes it is an expectation. Sometimes it is reinforcement. Sometimes it is an experiment. Sometimes the first task is simply to understand what is happening before deciding what should change.

That flexibility is one of the reasons AID can be useful across such a wide range of conversations. The model does not tell you exactly what to say. It gives you a way of organising your thinking so that what you do say is more likely to be clear, grounded and useful.

A simple test across all of these examples is to ask:

- Have I described something the other person can recognise?
- Have I explained why it matters?
- Have I created an appropriate way forward for this particular situation?

If the answer to all three is yes, the feedback is usually in good shape.



Preparing for a feedback conversation

Most feedback conversations improve if you spend a little time thinking before you start. That does not mean scripting the conversation word for word or rehearsing every possible response. In fact, too much scripting can make the interaction feel rigid and reduce your ability to listen. The useful preparation is simpler. You want to be clear about what happened, why it matters, what you may be assuming, and what kind of movement you want from the conversation.

A good place to start is by separating the observation from the story you have built around it. If you are frustrated, disappointed or anxious about the conversation, it is easy to arrive with a conclusion already formed. You may be thinking that the person does not care, is avoiding responsibility, is not ready for the role or always behaves this way. Those reactions may tell you something about the situation, but they are not a strong foundation for feedback. Before the conversation, write down what you actually saw or heard. If you cannot describe the Action clearly, you are probably not ready to give the feedback.

The next step is to identify the Impact. Ask yourself what changed because of the behaviour. Did it create extra work, delay a decision, reduce trust, confuse a customer, make someone withdraw, increase risk or help the team perform more effectively? Stay close to what you know. The more speculative the Impact becomes, the easier it is for the conversation to drift into disagreement about your interpretation rather than the behaviour itself.

Development then asks what you actually want from the conversation. This is often where preparation makes the biggest difference. Are you trying to reinforce something that worked well? Do you need a specific behaviour to change? Are you trying to build a capability? Does something need repairing? Is there room for experimentation, or is the expected outcome already clear? If you are not sure what kind of

movement you want, the conversation can easily become an exchange of observations with no real direction.

It is also worth considering how much you need to tell and how much you want to ask. Some conversations require a clear message from you. Others need more reflection from the other person. Most will contain both. Before you start, it can help to think about three things: what the other person needs to know from you, what they could usefully work out for themselves, and what expectation, if any, needs to be clear by the end.

A simple preparation check might therefore be:

- What did I actually observe?
- Why does it matter?
- What am I assuming?
- What does the other person need to know from me?
- What could they usefully work out for themselves?
- What needs to continue, change or develop?
- Is the outcome fixed, or is there room to explore?
- What question might help them think?

This should not take half an hour. In many situations, one or two minutes is enough. The purpose is not to produce a perfect script. It is to sharpen your own thinking so that you can enter the conversation with clarity and still remain open to what you hear.

The more emotionally charged the feedback, the more useful this preparation becomes. Difficult conversations often go wrong before they begin because the person giving the feedback has already rehearsed the argument in their head. By the time they sit down, they are ready to prove a case rather than explore what happened. One useful check is to ask yourself what evidence would cause you to revise your view. If the answer is nothing, then you are no longer preparing for a conversation. You are preparing to deliver a verdict.

It can also help to separate the outcome you need from the route towards it. The outcome may be non-negotiable. A deadline must be met, a behaviour must stop, a safety standard must be followed or a commitment must be honoured. The route towards that outcome may still be open to discussion. This distinction allows you to remain clear without becoming unnecessarily controlling.

"I need the report in by Friday lunchtime from now on. What is getting in the way and what needs to change so that happens consistently?"

Where the issue is significant, it is also worth thinking about follow-up before the conversation starts. Some feedback is complete once the message has been understood. Other feedback is part of a repeated pattern and needs to be revisited. If you know that in advance, it is easier to make the expectation explicit. Feedback becomes more useful when both people know whether the conversation is a one-off observation or the start of an ongoing change.

A simple preparation tool

For most conversations, you do not need anything more complicated than a short note against a few prompts:

- Action: What did I actually see or hear?
- Impact: What happened as a result?
- Development: What needs to continue, change or develop?

- Assumptions: What might I be interpreting or assuming?
- Tell or ask?: What does the other person need to hear from me, and what could they work out for themselves?
- Follow-up: What, if anything, should I pay attention to afterwards?

The value of the tool is not in filling in every box perfectly. Its value is in forcing you to distinguish evidence from interpretation and clarity from control before the conversation begins.

Turning broad judgements into useful feedback

One of the easiest ways to improve at AID is to practise converting broad statements into specific behaviour. Many of the phrases used in leadership development sound useful but are too vague to act upon. “You need to be more strategic”, “you need more executive presence”, “you are not collaborative enough” or “you need to take more ownership” may all point towards something real, but they hide the behaviour that actually needs to change.

Take the statement, “You need to be more strategic.” That could mean many different things. Perhaps the person is spending too much time in operational detail. Perhaps they are not connecting their work to wider priorities. Perhaps they are not thinking far enough ahead. Perhaps they are making good decisions but explaining them badly. Until you unpack the phrase, the feedback remains little more than a label.

“In the last three reviews, you spent most of the time explaining operational detail and did not link the discussion back to the two business priorities we had agreed. That meant the senior team struggled to see where the work fitted into the wider direction. In the next review, I would like you to start with the strategic priorities and use the detail to support them.”

The same applies to “you are not collaborative enough”. A stronger version might be:

“In the last two planning meetings, you presented the recommendation after it had already been developed rather than involving the Operations and Finance leads earlier. Both teams then raised concerns that required the proposal to be reworked. What could you do earlier in the process to involve them before the recommendation is fixed?”

Or take “you need more executive presence”. This phrase is particularly common because it sounds sophisticated while often saying very little. A more useful version might be:

“In the executive review, you had strong answers to the questions but gave a lot of background before reaching your main point. Several times the discussion moved on before your recommendation was fully clear. At the next review, I would like you to experiment with leading with the recommendation first and then adding the detail if it is needed.”

The useful question behind all of these is simple:

“What behaviour am I really talking about?”

That question is often enough to turn a vague piece of feedback into something the other person can actually use.

Practising the model

A good way to build this skill is to take common judgemental statements and force yourself to translate them into Action, Impact and Development. There is no single correct answer because each phrase could describe many different behaviours. That is exactly why the exercise is useful. It exposes how much information is hidden inside broad labels.

- You are too negative.
- You need to take more ownership.
- You are not visible enough.
- You are too controlling.
- You are not ready for the next level.
- You need to communicate better.
- You are too slow to make decisions.
- You are not commercial enough.
- You need to be more confident.
- You are not a team player.

For each statement, ask what the person actually did, why it mattered, and what a useful next step would look like. The quality of the feedback will depend far more on those answers than on whether you remember the letters A, I and D.

It is also worth remembering that AID can sound structured and still be poor feedback. “Action: you were unprofessional. Impact: everyone was uncomfortable. Development: you need to be more professional next time” contains all three labels but is still vague, judgemental and difficult to act upon.

“During the supplier meeting, you said “this is a waste of time” while the supplier was explaining the delay. The supplier stopped giving detail after that and the rest of the conversation became noticeably more guarded. In future, if you are frustrated with the pace of the discussion, I need you to challenge the issue without dismissing the person.”

The useful quality check is therefore not whether you have used all three letters. It is whether the Action is observable, the Impact is credible and the Development is appropriate to the situation.

Do not script every sentence

It is tempting to prepare difficult feedback by writing out exactly what you want to say. That can sometimes be useful, especially when the issue is sensitive and you are worried about becoming too vague. But there is a risk that you become so focused on delivering the message correctly that you stop listening to what the other person says.

Good preparation should give you clarity, not rigidity. You should know the Action you want to raise, the Impact that matters, and the Development you hope to explore. You should also know any expectation that needs to be clear by the end. Beyond that, the conversation needs room to move.

The other person may add context you did not know. They may disagree with part of what you have said. They may understand the issue immediately. They may become emotional. They may identify a better solution than the one you had in mind. If you have prepared the structure rather than the script, you are much better placed to respond to what actually happens.

Follow-up matters

Not every piece of feedback needs a formal follow-up. If you tell someone that a particular part of a presentation worked well, there may be nothing else to do. Where the feedback is developmental or corrective, however, follow-up matters because it signals that the conversation was intended to create change rather than simply discharge frustration.

Follow-up does not need to be heavy. It may be as simple as noticing the next time the behaviour appears and commenting on it.

"I noticed you held back in that meeting and brought Priya in before giving your own view. That changed the conversation."

Or:

"We agreed that the report would be in by Friday. It arrived on Monday again, so we need to come back to what is getting in the way."

This is where feedback starts to become part of an ongoing development relationship rather than a series of isolated conversations. The preparation therefore does not end with "what am I going to say?" A better final question is:

"What will I pay attention to afterwards?"

AID, coaching and accountability

Feedback and coaching are often treated as if they are the same thing, but they start from different places. Feedback usually begins with information that you have. You have observed something, noticed a pattern or seen an effect that may be useful to the other person. Coaching usually begins with their thinking. You are helping them explore a situation, make sense of it and decide what they want to do. AID sits somewhere between the two because it can begin with a clear observation and then move into reflection. In that sense, feedback can become coaching without losing the clarity of the original message.

"In the last two meetings, you moved into solutions very quickly and both times we later discovered that the problem was different from the one we first assumed. That meant we spent time solving the wrong issue. What do you notice about how quickly you move from problem to solution?"

The first part is feedback. You are bringing information that the other person may not have noticed. The question then creates space for them to think. You might continue by asking what helps them slow down enough to understand the problem before they start fixing it. At that point, the conversation has moved further into coaching.

This can be particularly useful with experienced people. They may not need you to tell them exactly what to do, but they may benefit from information about an impact that is difficult to see from their own position. Your role is to make the observation clear and then resist the temptation to solve everything for them. There are also situations where coaching is the wrong tool. If a standard has not been met, the person should not have to discover through a sequence of questions that the standard matters. You need to say so.

"The last two reports have arrived after the agreed deadline. That is delaying the consolidated review, so I need Friday to become reliable from now on. What needs to change to make that happen?"

The first part is feedback and accountability. The second part can still invite thought and ownership. This distinction matters because there is a tendency to treat non-directive questioning as inherently better leadership. It is not. Good leadership involves knowing when to create thinking and when to provide clarity.

Accountability is also more than simply giving feedback more firmly. It means setting clear expectations, noticing whether commitments are met, and following up when they are not. Imagine that someone has agreed three times to involve a stakeholder before making a decision and still has not done it. A weak accountability conversation might become, "We have talked about this before. You really need to take ownership." A stronger version would be more specific:

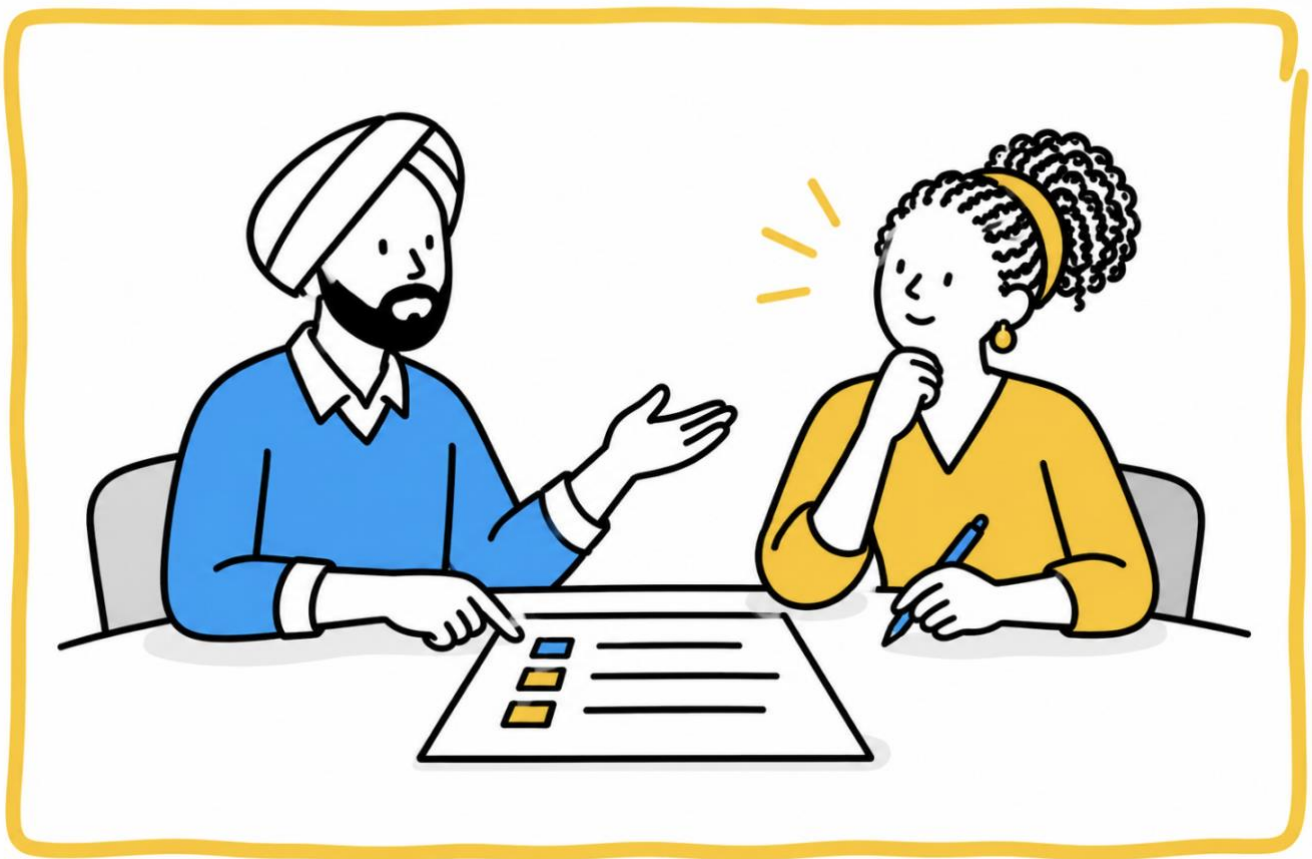
In each of our last three conversations, we agreed that you would involve Operations before the recommendation was finalised. That still did not happen on this proposal, which meant they challenged

the recommendation after the work was complete and the team had to rework it. We have already discussed the expectation, so I need this to change. What will you do differently this time?

The conversation is clear about the repeated pattern. It does not hide behind an open question about whether there is a problem. It also avoids collapsing the issue into a judgement about the person's character.

This is important because accountability becomes weak when leaders repeatedly accept good intentions instead of changed behaviour. The person may explain what happened, agree with the feedback and promise to do something differently. That may be enough after a first conversation. If the same behaviour continues, the next discussion needs to acknowledge that previous commitments have not produced change.

This is where follow-up becomes part of the AID process rather than something separate from it. If Development includes an agreed action, both people need some sense of how they will know whether it happened. The aim is not to create a tracking system around every piece of feedback. It is to make sure that important conversations connect to what happens afterwards.



AID and psychological safety

Psychological safety is sometimes interpreted as creating an environment where people feel comfortable. In practice, a psychologically safe team may have many uncomfortable conversations. People challenge assumptions, admit mistakes, raise concerns, disagree with senior colleagues and receive feedback that is sometimes difficult to hear. The issue is not whether the conversation feels comfortable. It is whether people can engage in it without unnecessary interpersonal threat.

AID can help because it reduces some of the things that make feedback feel personal. Describing an observable Action is less threatening than making a judgement about somebody's character. Explaining the Impact makes the reason for the conversation clearer. Development creates a route forward rather than leaving the person with a negative evaluation and no sense of what to do with it.

This does not mean that using AID automatically creates psychological safety. A perfectly structured piece of feedback can still be delivered with contempt, sarcasm or a desire to humiliate. Equally, a leader can use very warm language while avoiding the issue entirely. The model helps with clarity, but the quality of the relationship and the intent behind the conversation still matter.

A useful way to think about this is that good feedback combines candour with dignity. Candour means saying what needs to be said. Dignity means treating the other person as someone capable of understanding, responding and developing. If either disappears, the conversation becomes weaker. Candour without dignity can become attack. Dignity without candour can become avoidance.

There are several things leaders do unintentionally that increase the threat in a feedback conversation. They surprise the person with a long list of issues, use labels that feel like character judgements, speak on behalf of everyone else, exaggerate consequences, or make the conversation feel like a verdict rather than an exchange. Small changes can make a significant difference. You can be specific about the event rather than generalising about the person. You can distinguish what you observed from what you inferred. You can explain why the issue matters without inflating the consequence. You can leave room for the other person's perspective. And you can be clear where the expectation is fixed rather than using questions that feel manipulative.

This does not remove all discomfort, nor should it. Useful feedback often creates a moment of discomfort because the person is seeing something about their behaviour that they had not fully recognised. The goal is not to eliminate that feeling. It is to make sure the discomfort comes from the information rather than from the way the person is treated.

Even well-delivered feedback can produce a strong emotional response. Someone may become quiet, angry, tearful or defensive. This does not automatically mean the feedback was wrong or badly delivered. Sometimes the most useful thing you can do is allow a little space. The important thing is not to panic and immediately withdraw the feedback, but also not to push ahead as though nothing has happened.

If the person becomes defensive, return to the evidence rather than escalating the judgement. "Which part of what I have described do you see differently?" is usually more useful than arguing about whether they are being defensive. If they are upset, you may need to slow the conversation down and come back to Development later. Good feedback is not about controlling the other person's emotional response. It is about staying clear and respectful enough that the conversation can continue productively.

Strong relationships can create their own feedback problem. When people know and trust each other well, they may assume they can be more casual, vague or abrupt because the relationship will absorb it. Sometimes it will. But trust is not a reason to lower the quality of feedback. "You know what I mean" is rarely as useful as a clear description of what happened and why it mattered.

The best high-trust relationships often make feedback easier because people can be more direct without assuming hostile intent. AID can support that by keeping the directness useful rather than careless.

Feedback as development, not just correction

One of the most important shifts in feedback culture is moving away from the idea that feedback is mainly what happens when someone gets something wrong. If people only hear "Can I give you some feedback?" when there is a problem, the phrase itself becomes a warning.

Feedback becomes much more useful when it is also used to reinforce strengths, sharpen good performance and help people adapt as their responsibilities change. For a strong performer, the feedback may not be about fixing a weakness at all. It may be about recognising that something that works in one context will need to evolve in another.

"Your ability to get into the detail is one of the reasons the team trusts your judgement. In the executive review, though, you stayed in the detail for too long and the discussion never really got to the decision. As your role becomes broader, I think the challenge is going to be deciding when to stay close to the detail and when to step back from it."

That is still AID. The Action is observable. The Impact is clear. Development is about adapting a strength rather than correcting a failure.

These conversations are often some of the most valuable feedback senior people receive because they help them see how existing habits need to change as the context changes. What made someone successful at one level may become less useful at the next. A strength such as attention to detail, decisiveness, independence or strong personal expertise may need to be used differently when the role becomes broader and more interdependent.

AID can help because it gives you a way to talk about that shift without turning it into a judgement about whether the person is capable. You can stay close to what they are doing now, explain how the impact is changing, and explore what development looks like in the new context. This also helps move feedback away from the language of weakness. Development is not always about fixing something broken. Often it is about increasing range.

Building a feedback habit

The real value of AID appears when it becomes part of everyday leadership rather than a technique reserved for difficult conversations. If feedback only happens when something has gone seriously wrong, it will always feel heavier than it needs to.

Small, timely feedback is usually easier to hear and easier to use. You notice a behaviour, explain why it helped or hindered and create a short conversation about what happens next. Sometimes that conversation lasts two minutes. Sometimes it becomes something deeper. The important thing is that the feedback happens close enough to the event to remain useful.

Over time, this creates a different pattern. People hear feedback about what is working as well as what is not. They become more used to discussing impact without treating every comment as a judgement of competence. Leaders become better at noticing behaviour rather than waiting until frustration has accumulated. Development becomes part of the work rather than something separated from it.

A useful feedback culture is not one where everybody constantly comments on everybody else. That can quickly become exhausting. It is one where relevant observations can be raised without unnecessary drama, discussed with enough openness to learn from them, and then turned into action where action is needed.

AID supports that because it is simple enough to use in ordinary conversation. You do not need to announce the model. You do not need to say, "Let me give you some AID feedback." You simply notice what happened, explain why it matters and help the other person decide what to do with it. When that becomes habitual, the model has done its job.



AID feedback: a practical field guide

AID is simple enough to remember, but good feedback depends on the quality of the thinking underneath each stage. Before you start the conversation, it is worth slowing down just enough to get clear on what happened, why it matters and what kind of movement you want afterwards.

Start with Action. Stay close to what you actually saw or heard, rather than moving too quickly into judgement. If you find yourself using words such as defensive, negative, careless, arrogant or unprofessional, pause and ask what the person actually did that led you to that conclusion. A useful test is whether a camera or microphone could have captured it. “You interrupted twice while Sarah was explaining the issue” gives you something concrete to discuss. “You were dismissive” is already an interpretation.

Then think about Impact. The behaviour matters because it had some kind of consequence, and that consequence is what gives the feedback relevance. It may have affected a result, a customer, another person, the wider team, a handover, a relationship or the individual’s own credibility. Try to stay close to what you know. “The meeting ran 20 minutes over because we had to revisit the numbers” is stronger than “everyone probably thought you were unprepared”. If you are not certain about the impact, say so. “My concern is that this may have reduced the client’s confidence” is more credible than presenting an assumption as fact.

Development is about what happens next. Sometimes that means reinforcing something that worked well. Sometimes it means changing a behaviour, developing a capability, repairing something that has been damaged or trying a different approach. The important question is not simply “what should they do differently?” but “what kind of movement is needed here?”

The balance between telling and asking matters as well. Tell more when the standard is clear, the behaviour must stop, the person lacks important information, or ambiguity would be unhelpful. Ask more when the person has useful experience, several solutions could work, or you want to build reflection and ownership. Often the strongest conversation combines both.

“I need the report submitted by Friday lunchtime. What is getting in the way and what will you change to make that happen?”

The expectation is clear. The route towards it is still open.

Before the conversation, a few simple questions are usually enough:

- What did I actually observe?
- Why does it matter?
- What am I assuming?
- What does this person need to hear from me?
- What could they usefully work out for themselves?
- What needs to continue, change or develop?

During the conversation, stay close to the evidence and listen carefully to what the other person actually disagrees with. They may dispute the facts, your interpretation, the impact, the standard or the proposed way forward. Those are different disagreements and they need different responses.

Afterwards, pay attention to what happens next. Not every piece of feedback needs formal follow-up, but important Development usually does. If the behaviour changes, reinforce it. If it does not, return to the previous conversation rather than starting again as though nothing was agreed.

The most common mistakes are usually simple ones: Action becomes a judgement, Impact becomes speculation, Development becomes an instruction disguised as a question, or too many issues are raised at once. Positive feedback can also be too vague, with “great job” replacing any explanation of what worked and why.

The model itself remains straightforward: what happened, why does it matter, and what happens next? The quality comes from how carefully you answer those three questions.

Practising AID

The easiest way to become better at AID is not to memorise more theory. It is to take the kind of feedback people commonly give and force yourself to make it more specific. Many familiar leadership phrases sound useful until you try to act on them. “You need to be more strategic”, “you need to take more ownership”, “you are not collaborative enough” or “you need more executive presence” may all point towards something real, but they hide the behaviour that actually needs attention.

This is why practice matters. The aim is not to find the one perfect AID sentence. It is to get better at asking what sits underneath a broad judgement, what impact you have actually observed, and what kind of Development would be useful.

Take the phrase “you need to take more ownership”. On its own, this tells the other person almost nothing. Ownership could mean making decisions without waiting for approval, following through on commitments,

raising problems earlier, taking responsibility when something goes wrong, or involving other people before a decision is made. Before giving the feedback, you need to work out what behaviour you are actually describing.

"In the last two project reviews, you identified the delivery risk but waited until I asked what you were going to do about it before proposing a next step. That means the issue is still coming back to me for direction rather than being moved forward by you. Next time you raise a risk, I would like you to come with your recommendation for what should happen next."

Now the feedback is specific enough to use. It does not require the other person to guess what "ownership" means to you.

The same is true of a phrase such as "you are too negative". There may be a genuine issue, but "negative" describes your interpretation of the person's behaviour. What are they actually doing?

"In the last three planning meetings, when a new idea was proposed, your first response was to explain why it would be difficult or why it might fail. Several times the group then moved away from the idea before exploring whether it could work. I want you to keep raising risks, but I would like you to first help the group explore the possibility before moving into what could go wrong."

Notice that the Development is not "be more positive". The person's ability to see risk may be valuable. The issue is when and how they are using that strength.

This distinction becomes particularly important with feedback about leadership qualities. "You need more executive presence" is a good example because it can mean almost anything. One person may need to become more concise. Another may need to challenge more confidently. Another may need to stop filling silence. Another may need to speak earlier in senior meetings rather than waiting until the discussion is almost over.

"In the executive review, you had strong answers to the questions, but you gave a lot of background before reaching the recommendation. On two occasions the discussion moved on before your main point was fully clear. At the next review, try leading with the recommendation first and then adding the detail if it is needed."

The label has disappeared. In its place is something the person can work with.

The same approach can be used with "you are not collaborative enough":

"On the last two proposals, you developed the recommendation before involving Operations and Finance. Both teams then raised concerns late in the process and the work had to be reworked. What could you do earlier to bring them in before the recommendation is fixed?"

Or with "you need to communicate better":

"In the last project update, you shared a large amount of detail but did not clearly state what decision you needed from the group. We used most of the meeting discussing the background and left without making the decision. Next time, start by being explicit about what you need from the audience."

The important move in all of these examples is from a broad evaluation to a specific behaviour. Once you have that, Impact and Development become much easier to work with.

Try it yourself

Take a few common pieces of feedback and imagine what might sit underneath them:

- You are too controlling.
- You need to be more confident.
- You are not commercial enough.
- You are too slow to make decisions.
- You are not visible enough.
- You are difficult to work with.
- You need to think more strategically.
- You are not a team player.

For each one, resist the temptation to simply make the wording nicer. Instead, ask what somebody would actually have to do for you to reach that conclusion. What did you see or hear? What happened as a result? What would useful Development look like? There may be many valid answers.

“On the last project, you reviewed every client email before it was sent and asked the team to check with you before changing any part of the delivery plan. Several people then waited for you to make decisions they already had enough information to make themselves. I would like you to be clearer about which decisions genuinely need your involvement and which decisions the team can make without you.”

“In the last two senior meetings, you had a clear recommendation when we discussed the issue beforehand, but in the meeting you introduced it by saying “I might be wrong” and “this is only an idea”. The recommendation then received much less attention than the evidence behind it deserved. I would like you to state your recommendation more directly and then invite challenge afterwards.”

“On the last two supplier issues, you asked for more information after we already had the criteria we had agreed were needed to decide. Both decisions were delayed by several days and the team was unable to move forward. What information do you genuinely need to decide, and what are you looking for once that threshold has already been reached?”

Again, the aim is not to produce a perfect script. It is to make the feedback grounded enough that the person understands what they are being asked to examine.

Spotting weak AID

It is also useful to practise recognising feedback that uses the AID labels but still misses the point. A model can give the appearance of structure without improving the quality of the conversation.

Action: You were unprofessional. Impact: Everyone was uncomfortable. Development: You need to be more professional.

Technically, all three stages are present. In practice, almost nothing useful has happened. “Unprofessional” is still a judgement. “Everyone was uncomfortable” may be an assumption. “Behave more professionally” gives the person no clear idea what to change.

“During the supplier meeting, you said “this is a waste of time” while the supplier was explaining the delay. After that, the supplier gave much shorter answers and stopped volunteering detail unless we asked for it directly. If you are frustrated with the pace of the discussion, I need you to challenge the issue without dismissing the person.”

The difference is not the acronym. It is the quality of the thinking behind it. This gives you a useful three-part test whenever you review your own feedback:

- Is the Action something the person can recognise?
- Is the Impact something I can reasonably support?

- Is the Development clear enough to create movement?

If one of those is weak, adding more words usually does not solve the problem.

Practising positive feedback

It is worth practising positive feedback in the same way because vague praise is just as common as vague criticism. Take “great job in the meeting”. That may be encouraging, but it offers little learning.

“When the client challenged the recommendation, you did not immediately defend it. You asked what was driving their concern and then summarised what you heard before responding. That changed the tone of the discussion and helped us understand that their real concern was implementation risk rather than the recommendation itself. That was very effective.”

You could stop there. Or, if you want to make the learning more explicit, ask what helped them stay curious rather than moving straight into defence. The same principle applies to feedback such as “good leadership”, “excellent presentation” or “you handled that well”. Ask what the person actually did that made you reach that conclusion, and then explain the impact. Positive feedback becomes far more useful when the person can identify the behaviour worth repeating.

Building your own examples

One of the best ways to embed AID is to work with real situations rather than invented ones. Think back over the last few weeks and identify three moments: one where somebody did something that helped, one where a behaviour created a problem, and one where you noticed something but chose not to say anything.

For each situation, ask yourself what the Action really was, what Impact you observed and what kind of Development would have been useful. Then consider whether you would have needed to tell, ask or combine both.

You may notice something interesting when you do this. Often the hardest part is not Development. It is getting Action clear enough in your own head. Once you stop using labels and identify what actually happened, the rest of the conversation becomes much easier to construct.

That is a useful sign that the model is doing its job. AID is not primarily a set of sentences to use with someone else. It is a way of improving the quality of your own thinking before you speak.

Bringing it together

AID is useful because it is simple, but the simplicity can be deceptive. Action, Impact and Development are easy to remember. The harder part is the quality of judgement underneath them. You need to know what you actually observed, separate that from the story you are telling yourself, explain why the behaviour matters without exaggerating the consequence, and then decide what kind of movement is appropriate. Sometimes that movement is a clear instruction. Sometimes it is a question. Sometimes it is simply reinforcing something that worked.

Used well, AID helps you avoid two common extremes. The first is feedback that is so vague that the other person is left guessing what you really mean. The second is feedback that is so judgemental that the conversation becomes more about defending identity than examining behaviour. AID gives you a middle ground where you can be specific without becoming personal, direct without becoming unnecessarily harsh, and developmental without avoiding accountability.

The model also helps because it forces you to slow down your own thinking. It asks you to distinguish between what happened and what you inferred, between impact and speculation, and between a fixed

expectation and an open question. Those distinctions matter because many difficult feedback conversations go wrong before they begin. The problem is not usually that the leader lacks courage. It is that the message has not been thought through clearly enough.

This is why the most useful question before giving feedback is often not “how do I say this?” but “what am I actually trying to help the other person see?” Once that is clear, the wording usually becomes easier.

AID also becomes more valuable when it is not reserved for difficult conversations. If people only hear structured feedback when something has gone wrong, they will naturally associate feedback with correction. The same model works just as well for recognising strengths, reinforcing effective behaviour and helping strong performers adapt as their responsibilities change.

Over time, that changes the role feedback plays in the relationship. It becomes less about judgement and more about noticing. Less about retrospective criticism and more about helping people see patterns they may not be able to see for themselves. Less about telling people what is wrong and more about creating enough clarity for something useful to happen next.

The three questions remain simple:

- What happened?
- Why does it matter?
- What happens next?

The quality comes from how carefully you answer them.

Final reflection

Before your next feedback conversation, pause for a moment and ask yourself what you want the other person to leave with. Do you want them simply to know what you think, or do you want them to understand what happened and why it matters? Do you want compliance, reflection, learning or some combination of the three? Are you clear about what is non-negotiable and what is genuinely open to discussion? Have you separated what you observed from what you assumed? And perhaps most importantly, are you giving the feedback because it will help the other person or the work, rather than simply because you want to get something off your chest?

Good feedback is not about delivering a perfect message. It is about creating enough clarity, honesty and movement for the conversation to be useful. That is what AID is for.

Further reading

If you want to go deeper, the most useful next step is to compare AID with other feedback approaches and think about which model best fits the situation rather than treating one framework as universally right. The wider skill lies in knowing what kind of conversation you are having, what the other person needs from you, and how much structure, challenge and reflection the situation requires.

Feedback models hub: <https://andiroberts.com/executive-coaching/feedback-models-hub>

AID feedback model: <https://andiroberts.com/feedback/aid-feedback-model>

Use of AI: AI was used to craft the images based on my hand-drawn image style.