

Recognising Potential ND - Strength-Based Lens vs Deficit Lens

TL;DR · QUICK SUMMARY

- The same trait can be described as a deficit (“can’t focus in meetings”) or a strength (“does their best thinking with space to process”).
- Which lens you use shapes how you manage someone — and how they feel about themselves at work.
- This guide helps you catch deficit framing and reframe it.

A Note Before You Read On

This resource offers general guidance and reflects common experience, not professional, legal, medical or financial advice. It is not a substitute for employment law, HR policy, occupational health guidance, or individual professional assessment. Every person’s experience of neurodivergence is different, so please adapt anything here to your own situation. The Uniquely Wired Network does not accept liability for decisions, actions or outcomes arising from the use of this material. If you need advice specific to your circumstances, please consult a qualified professional (e.g. HR, legal, medical, or financial advisor).

Why This Matters

Language shapes expectations — both yours and the person’s own sense of themselves.

A deficit lens says someone is failing to meet a fixed standard. A strength-based lens asks whether the standard fits the person.

Teams that default to strength-based framing tend to get more from their neurodivergent staff, not less.

What This Might Look Like

Deficit framing:

- “They can’t handle unstructured meetings.”
- “They’re too rigid about their routine.”
- “They’re overly blunt in feedback sessions.”

Strength-based framing of the same traits:

- “They do their best thinking with a clear agenda.”
- “They’re consistent and reliable once a process is set.”
- “They give direct, unambiguous feedback that’s easy to act on.”

What You Can Do

1. Catch deficit language in yourself first.

- Notice when you’re privately describing someone as “difficult” or “too much.”
- Ask what the trait looks like from a strengths angle before deciding how to respond.

2. Match tasks to strengths where possible.

- Someone who hyperfocuses well may thrive on deep, single-thread projects.
- Someone highly detail-oriented may be your best fit for quality checks or audits.

3. Use strength-based language when giving feedback.

- Describe what someone does well specifically, not just generically.
- Frame adjustment requests as optimising performance, not fixing a flaw.

Helpful Phrases You Can Borrow

Reframing feedback to a colleague:

“You give really direct, clear feedback — that’s valuable. Let’s just think together about pacing it so it lands well too.”

Catching yourself mid-deficit-thought:

I was about to say they're 'too intense' about detail — actually, that's exactly why I trust their output."

Quick Tips

- The same trait can be a strength or a deficit depending on framing.
- Deficit language shapes low expectations — strength-based language shapes better ones.
- Task-matching to strengths benefits the whole team, not just the individual.
- Catch your own private language before it becomes spoken feedback.
- Strength-based doesn't mean ignoring real challenges — it means framing them usefully.
- This is a practice, not a one-off mindset shift.

Want to Know More?

- See our companion guide: "Behavioural Indicators" for what to notice before you frame it.
- See "Avoiding Bias and Assumptions" for how unconscious bias creeps into framing.
- See "Team Education Tools" for building this lens across your wider team.

Before You Go

Nobody gets this right every time — the goal is to catch and correct, not to be perfect.

A strength-based lens tends to build better teams, not just kinder ones.