
Moving Goalposts

When expectations are unclear or keep changing

Space to Breathe Therapy | Workplace collection

Each cut may be deniable. The cumulative harm is not.

When the target keeps moving

A deadline moves, a priority changes or a manager asks for a different approach. One change may be understandable. Repeated changes after work has started — or after it is complete — can leave someone unsure what success means. The issue is not change itself, but the frequency, clarity, fairness and impact of changing expectations.

What this can look like

- A report is completed against an agreed brief, then judged against requirements added after submission.
- A worker is told to take initiative, but later criticised for acting without approval.
- An urgent task replaces planned work, yet the original deadline and workload remain unchanged.
- Performance measures change from month to month without clear explanation or a chance to respond.
- Two managers give conflicting instructions, and the employee is blamed for following one of them.

A change is not automatically mistreatment

Customer needs, safety information, budgets and organisational priorities can genuinely change. Look at whether changes are explained promptly, documented fairly, accompanied by realistic time or resource adjustments and applied consistently. Intent should not be assumed from a single incident.

What to notice over time

Look for repeated retrospective criticism, contradictory instructions, disappearing approval points, unchanged deadlines despite expanded scope, or feedback that cannot be connected to an agreed standard. Consider how the organisation responds when the problem is raised.

Quick reflection

Which requirement was agreed? What changed, and when did you learn about it? Was the revised expectation realistic?

The cumulative impact

Confidence and psychological safety

When success cannot be predicted, employees may stop trusting their own judgement. They might seek repeated reassurance, avoid initiative, hesitate to submit finished work or feel that their achievements never count. The result may be reduced psychological safety: asking questions and raising concerns can begin to feel risky.

Emotional, behavioural and physical responses

- Self-doubt: wondering whether you misunderstood an instruction that was never clearly given.
- Hypervigilance: monitoring messages, tone and shifting priorities to anticipate the next change.
- Overcompensating: checking excessively, working longer hours or preparing for every possible outcome.
- Withdrawal: contributing less in meetings or avoiding decisions that might later be criticised.
- Stress responses: fatigue, poor sleep, tension, headaches or difficulty concentrating.

These are possible reactions, not proof of a particular diagnosis or of someone else's motives. Their significance increases when the pattern is sustained and begins affecting wellbeing or work.

Neurodivergence, disability and adjustments

Some autistic employees may find ambiguous or changing instructions especially demanding; some employees with ADHD may find reprioritising and restarting tasks costly in attention and energy. Experiences vary widely. Masking confusion or frustration can add to the strain. A disabled employee may benefit from written instructions, agreed review points, predictable priorities, processing time or revised deadlines. In Great Britain, reasonable adjustments may be legally required under the Equality Act 2010 where the criteria apply.

What can help immediately?

- Ask for the required outcome, deadline, quality criteria and decision-maker in writing.
- Confirm whether a change is a correction to the original brief or genuinely additional work.
- Ask what should be deprioritised when new work is added.
- Request a review point before significant work is completed.
- Keep records factual, proportionate and secure.

A useful distinction

Fact: "The brief agreed on 8 October asked for three sections. On 15 October, after submission, two additional sections were requested without a revised deadline."

Assumption: "My manager wants me to fail." The factual description is easier to discuss and verify.

Practical conversations

Behaviour - Pattern - Impact - Request

Behaviour: Name the particular change or conflicting instruction. Pattern: Explain how often it has occurred. Impact: Describe effects on time, quality, confidence or wellbeing. Request: Ask for a specific workable change.

Script: requirements changed after completion

"I completed the work against the brief agreed on Monday. The new requirements were introduced after submission. This has happened on several projects and makes planning difficult. Could we agree how additional requirements are approved, and whether they change the deadline?"

Script: conflicting priorities

"I have been asked to prioritise the client report and the internal review, both for Friday. I cannot complete both to the required standard within the available time. Which should take priority, and what can be moved?"

Script: after the concern has already been raised

"We previously discussed confirming changes in writing, but the requirements changed again on the last two tasks without an updated brief. Can we agree a written change process and a review date to check whether it is working?"

Preparing for a difficult conversation

- Choose two or three representative examples rather than trying to recall everything.
- Write down the original agreement, later change and practical impact.
- Consider requesting an agenda, written questions or time to process information.
- Ask for a companion or representative where policy or applicable rights allow.
- Follow up with a neutral summary of any agreements and dates for review.

If informal steps do not resolve the issue

Review internal grievance, performance and reasonable-adjustment procedures. Depending on the situation, consider speaking with HR, a trade union representative, occupational health or ACAS. Do not take confidential material you are not authorised to retain. If the concern involves discrimination, seek tailored advice about relevant legal time limits.

Conversation preparation

Write down the change you want to discuss and the practical request you would like to make.

Workplace pattern tracker

Record observable details rather than conclusions about intent. Keep notes securely, respect confidentiality and use this page to identify patterns, not to assume wrongdoing.

Date / task	Original agreement	What changed / evidence	Impact / follow-up

Questions to help interpret your record

- Did requirements change before or after the work was completed?
- Was the reason explained, and was the change applied consistently?
- Were deadlines, staffing or other priorities reviewed?
- What happened after you asked for clarification?

Separate observation from interpretation

What I know happened and what I still need clarified:

For managers and HR

Responses that can minimise concerns

“That is just how projects work”, “You need to be more flexible”, or “Everyone is under pressure” may overlook a recurring process problem. A better response is: “Can we compare the original brief with the changes, understand the impact and agree a clearer process?”

Practical organisational safeguards

- Agree success criteria, ownership, deadlines and approval points at the outset.
- Log significant scope changes and explain their reasons.
- Review capacity and deadlines when work expands.
- Avoid evaluating completed work against standards introduced retrospectively.
- Make feedback specific, timely and accessible.
- Check whether disability-related adjustments remain effective after changes.
- Give staff a safe route to challenge contradictory instructions without penalty.

Organisational review questions

Are different managers setting conflicting priorities? Are targets documented and stable enough to evaluate performance fairly? Are employees given reasonable time to respond to revised instructions? Are change requests distributed fairly? Do performance reviews distinguish missed original standards from later additions?

UK support and further reading

ACAS: workplace problems, grievances, performance and reasonable adjustments — [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk).
Health and Safety Executive: work-related stress and Management Standards — [hse.gov.uk/stress](https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress).
Equality and Human Rights Commission: disability discrimination and reasonable adjustments — [equalityhumanrights.com](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com).
Access to Work: practical workplace support where eligible — [gov.uk/access-to-work](https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work).
Further reading: Amy C. Edmondson, The Fearless Organization; Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, The Burnout Challenge.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

You can be adaptable while still needing clear instructions and fair expectations. Not every change is harmful; repeated unexplained changes deserve attention. Recognising the pattern, recording the facts and asking for workable improvements can help restore clarity and confidence.

Notice the pattern • Listen • Record • Act

Educational information only; not a substitute for individual medical, occupational-health, HR or legal advice.