

Standardised Conduct

Why services must hear what service users already know

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A system receives the kind of feedback its sequence makes possible. If a service has no safe, ordinary route for conduct feedback, feedback will not disappear. It will travel through anger, distrust, avoidance, peer talk, complaint escalation, disengagement, or open hostility.

The feedback sequence

If a service has no safe, ordinary, anonymous, non-punitive way for people to speak about worker conduct, then feedback will still move through the system. It will simply move through less reliable routes.

By the time the system hears it, feedback may already have been damaged by the only sequence available to it. It may arrive as anger, distrust, sarcasm, avoidance, complaint escalation, ridicule, disengagement, or open hostility. The service may then look at the form of the feedback and say, 'Look how angry they are,' instead of asking a harder question: what did our sequence make unsayable until it came out damaged?

This matters across justice services, addiction services, social work, mental health, housing, community support, and any public-facing service where people are expected to be honest under pressure.

Service users already know which workers help trust and which workers damage it. They know who listens accurately. They know who explains decisions clearly. They know who makes assumptions too quickly. They know who records fairly. They know who twists things. They know who treats people with basic respect. They know who makes people shut down before the appointment has even started.

That knowledge already exists in the service field. The ethical question is whether the service has a disciplined way of receiving it.

Conduct is not just personality

Public-service conduct cannot be left entirely to individual style. Workers are human. They will have different personalities, tones, strengths, humour, pressures, limits, and ways of relating. Fieldethics does not ask workers to become identical, cold, scripted, or robotic.

But public-service conduct cannot depend on whether a person happens to get the 'right' worker that day. Treatment may need to be person-specific. Support may need to be person-specific. Professional style may remain human and varied. But conduct should be system-standard.

That means every service-user-facing worker should be expected to hold the same basic standard when they enter the room. They should receive the person accurately. They should separate observation from inference. They should separate what the person said from what the worker assumed. They should avoid letting irritation, suspicion, fatigue, moral discomfort, or personal dislike enter the record as if it were fact about the person.

They should hold uncertainty honestly. They should explain decisions clearly. They should make honest feedback safer where possible. They should record in a way that is fair to the person and useful to the next professional.

This is not kindness as a bonus. This is public-service reliability.

Feedback should allow quiet correction

The purpose of conduct feedback is not worker-shaming. It is not exposure. It is not punishment. It is not a popularity contest. It is not a route for service users to attack staff without responsibility. The purpose is correction.

A healthy service should be able to receive feedback, notice patterns, support reflection, adjust conduct, and improve the service field without immediately turning everything into blame, defensiveness, grievance, or disciplinary panic.

The better sequence is simple: feedback received, pattern noticed, conduct reflected on, support offered, adjustment made, service field improved.

The weaker sequence is also familiar: feedback received, worker feels attacked, team becomes defensive, service user is labelled difficult, nothing changes.

Fieldethics requires the first sequence. Feedback should create quiet correction before it creates public conflict.

Confidential correction is not cover-up

Quiet correction matters. Not because harm should be hidden, but because early correction prevents harm from repeating until it becomes formal, public, and much harder to repair.

There is an important distinction here. Confidential correction is not cover-up. Cover-up hides harm to protect the institution. Confidential correction receives feedback early so harm does not keep repeating.

A mature service should know the difference. It should be able to correct conduct without humiliating workers, and it should be able to protect workers from unfair attack without dismissing service-user knowledge.

Feedback should not be weaponised against workers. Worker discomfort should not be weaponised against service users. The system has to hold both sides steadily enough that conduct can improve without anyone being publicly reduced to the worst thing said about them.

Anonymous feedback should be structured and pattern-based

Anonymous conduct feedback must be handled carefully. It should never be used to punish a worker based on one comment. It should never become a public ranking system. It should never reduce a worker to the worst thing said about them. It should not allow abusive language to become the standard form of accountability.

But it should exist. A service that wants to improve needs to know whether its own conduct is making honesty easier or harder.

Useful questions might include:

- Did you feel listened to accurately?
- Did the worker treat you with basic respect?
- Did the worker explain decisions clearly?
- Did the worker make it easier or harder to be honest?
- Did the worker seem to make assumptions before hearing you properly?
- Did anything in the worker's tone, language, or response make you less likely to disclose honestly next time?
- Did the worker separate what you said from what they assumed?
- Did the interaction make support feel more usable or less usable?
- Did you leave the interaction more regulated, less regulated, or unchanged?
- Did you feel the record would fairly reflect what happened?
- Would you feel safe raising a concern with this worker again?

These questions are not about whether a worker is liked. They are about whether conduct supports trust, disclosure, safety, record reliability, decision reliability, and service usability.

That is not gossip. That is service knowledge.

Do not judge the quality of service-user knowledge only by the form it takes after the system has failed to receive it safely.

The signal still matters

Sometimes feedback appears in unacceptable forms. A person may be abusive. A group may mock a worker. A comment may be written somewhere it should not be written. A service may need to respond to that behaviour. Abuse, intimidation, and vandalism are not acceptable.

But stopping the expression is not the same as understanding the signal. If repeated hostility gathers around a particular worker, setting, team, process, or interaction style, the service should ask whether there is a pattern underneath the expression.

The question is not only: why are service users being disrespectful? It is also: what feedback has the service failed to make safely sayable?

The visible behaviour may need challenged. The hidden information may still need heard. Do not only punish the form of feedback. Ask why the system had no safer route for the feedback to travel.

Workers need support too

Fieldethics does not blame individual workers for every conduct failure. Good conduct requires conditions.

Workers need manageable caseloads, reflective supervision, emotional support, training, clear expectations, and leadership that treats conduct as infrastructure. If workers are exhausted, unsupported, unsafe, under-trained, or left to absorb impossible levels of distress, conduct will degrade. That is also a system problem.

The answer is not worker-shaming. The answer is conduct discipline plus worker support. A service cannot demand steady conduct from workers while giving them chaotic conditions. But a service also cannot use worker pressure as an excuse to ignore how service users are being received, interpreted, recorded, and treated.

Both truths have to be held at the same time. Workers need support. Service users need reliability. The system is responsible for building the conditions where both are possible.

Policy is not enough

Public services do not only need better policy. They need a service field capable of changing the conduct through which policy becomes practice.

A national strategy can set the aims. A framework can set the language. A report can set the promise. But if the conduct remains inconsistent, reactive, defensive, shaming, or dependent on individual worker style, the same problems continue under updated terminology.

Policy sets the promise. Conduct decides whether the promise reaches the person.

That is why conduct feedback matters. Not because workers are the enemy. Not because service users are always right. Not because anonymous feedback is perfect. But because a system cannot improve conduct it has no disciplined way of hearing about.

The immediate Fieldethics move

A service could begin tomorrow by asking:

- How do we know whether our user-facing conduct is making honesty safer or harder?
- How do service users tell us when a worker's conduct is damaging trust?
- Do we have a safe anonymous route for conduct feedback?
- Do we look for patterns, or only respond when something becomes a complaint?
- Do we treat conduct as infrastructure?
- Do we support workers to improve without shame?
- Do we protect service users from being dismissed as 'just angry' once feedback has already been forced into anger?

These questions do not require a whole new treatment model. They do not require a national restructure. They do not require another slogan. They require services to take conduct seriously enough to hear what service users already know.

Fieldethics begins there: make honesty safer earlier, receive feedback before it becomes rupture, correct conduct quietly where possible, protect workers from shame, protect service users from dismissal, and build public services where the promise can actually reach the person.

Policy sets the promise. Conduct decides whether the promise reaches the person.

Publication note

This note deliberately does not name any worker or specific service. It is intended as a practical Fieldethics standard for public-service conduct, anonymous feedback, quiet correction, and accountable service improvement.