

# Using "Nonviolent Communication" as a Mediator

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## Introduction

I am a mediator and group facilitator primarily working with workplaces, organizations and other large group and community conflicts. For the last two years I've had a new tool in my toolkit that I think would benefit other mediators. I'm excited to be able to share it with you today.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a communication methodology developed by American psychologist and mediator Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. He has written prolifically about the application of his approach in schools, prisons, with families and in international conflict. I recommend as an overview of this work, his book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.

NVC has been of great use to me as I help clients have conversations they haven't been able to hold productively on their own. When I offer workplace communication training, NVC now provides the core of what I teach.

I first learned about NVC several years ago from organizational development consultants and friends. Mediator colleagues had either never heard of it, or had it only vaguely on their radar. This was surprising to me because I have found it to be so relevant to what we're all trying to do. I would love to see it become part of core mediation training.

First, I will provide an overview of what NVC is. Then I'll talk about how I use it

- in pre-mediation interviews
- in the mediation itself
- after the mediation -- in giving clients an approach they can use on their own when I'm not with them

### **What is Nonviolent Communication (NVC)?**

NVC is a way of speaking and listening. It is based on psychological and spiritual principles and approaches from many disciplines including the work of Carl Rogers. While there is nothing brand new here in its individual pieces, the way they come together has struck me as nothing short of radical. It provides an analytical framework for conflict and some language level tools for people to work their way to the root of conflict and then develop strategies to resolve it.

NVC posits that the purpose of communication is to create a common understanding so that information can be exchanged in a way that makes it more likely that all parties will get what they are seeking. It divides communication into two types: that which decreases a sense of common understanding between people (termed "violent") and that which increases it (called "nonviolent"). While the terms "violent" and "nonviolent" were alarming to me when I first heard them, neither has to do with physical violence.

While the purpose of communication is to develop a common understanding with someone, our traditional way of speaking, especially when we feel strong emotions, works against this actually happening. NVC points out that human beings have a tendency, when uncomfortable, to judge and blame someone or something. When cut off in traffic, we might say: "Idiot! What a terrible driver." Or when we spill something on our shirt, we might say: "How careless of me!" Similarly, when we feel happy about something that happens, we also tend to speak in judgments: "You did a great job!" "What a perfect day," "Good boy!"

This kind of communication – whether negative or positive -- is called "violent" within this methodology, because it labels the nature of the action or person that we are responding to as good or bad. The focus is on the external reality.

NVC encourages us to share what is happening within ourselves – our internal reality. It says that our reactions to things are based on our personal needs at the time. When something happens that meets our needs we may have a glad, peaceful or energetic emotional reaction. When something happens (that could even be the exact same event) another person may have a sad, confused or angry emotional reaction because their needs at that time were not met. What differs is the needs and reaction of the person to the needs not being met – not the nature of the external reality.

When communicating at the level of feelings and needs, conflict can be unraveled. The impact of events can be understood. When communicating at the level of judgments, people can stay locked in competing views of reality: what is “aloof” to one person, is “professional” to another. One person’s “discrete” is another’s “secretive.” A wife can find the identical behavior in their spouse “clingy” at some times and “loving” at another. Such judgments are only useful in building common understanding to the extent that they offer clues as to the needs being met or not.

Somewhat disturbing to me, as I first learned this approach, was my discovery that I, and most people, use “violent” language in almost every sentence. This judging and fault-finding habit is one of the factors that leads to escalating conflict. It also encourages us to place responsibility for a situation outside of ourselves thereby reducing our responsibility for our own reactions and our power to make things better.

For instance a person attending a symposium presentation might say it was “great,” “insightful” or “brilliant.” Should another person feel uncomfortable about something in the presentation, they might say it is “badly done,” “unprofessional” or “confusing.”

### **Speaking Nonviolent Communication**

Nonviolent Communication instead encourages people to communicate what is actually going on for them when something is happening they find pleasant or unsettling. It suggests we communicate what we observe, feel, the need that is met or unmet and a request for action. While in a real exchange they may not all be needed or may follow a different order, I’ll present all the parts here in the order they are most often used.

A classic NVC statement could look like this:

“When I hear you talk about the changes you’ve made in your mediation practice, I feel energized because I have a need for stimulation regarding my own practice. Would you be willing to have coffee sometime to compare notes?”

Let’s look at those four parts separately:

#### **Observation:** *“When I see (hear, notice) ...*

An observation is a description of the event or action that precipitated the reaction in the speaker. It contains no words of evaluation or judgment but rather describes things much as a video camera would. This may be quite familiar to you as it is recommended commonly for manager-employee feedback conversations; it is the same idea as the first step in Rick Ross’s Ladder of Inference as described in Peter Senge’s *Fifth Discipline Workbook* p. 243.

**Feeling:** *“I feel ....”*

Here we share a one word statement of our internal emotional state. Words like “happy” “angry” “sad” “confused” “hopeful” describe feelings. NVC has put together a list of about 120 feeling words. (See note at end for source.) There are lots of expressions that may look like feelings, but aren’t. For instance, we commonly say things like: “I feel we should end the meeting now” or “I feel that people are quite hardworking in this office.” These are not feelings but rather preferences or analysis. Whenever “think” can be substituted for “feel” and the sentence still makes sense, it is a thought and not a feeling that has been expressed. There are also a lot of words, like “ignored,” “attacked,” “injured,” that might seem like feelings, that are in fact interpretations and judgments about what someone else is doing to us. The actual feelings in these situations may be “upset” or “sad” or “frightened.”

**Need:** *“...because I have a need for .....*

NVC invites us to share what fundamental human needs are alive for us at this moment. NVC has compiled a list of about 100 needs, including: accomplishment, hope, community, companionship, connection, peace etc. When needs are met or not met, feelings arise within us.

Here it is important to distinguish between needs and strategies to achieve needs. While in regular speech we may say “I need a bath,” in NVC we would see a bath as a strategy to meet a fundamental need like “relaxation” or “health.”

For me, identifying needs was the hardest part of NVC when I started. I was pretty sure I didn’t have any needs most of the time. Yet once I was able to name them, I recognized they were the motivation for everything I did. Naming needs has also been useful to me in working with groups because it requires a positive expression of what is wanted.

**Request:** *“Would you be willing to ....?”*

The final step in NVC is to make a request – a strategy or idea for action that could take a step toward meeting the need that has just been expressed. As will be familiar to mediators, requests are expressed in positive language (what is wanted rather than a statement using “not”). Requests work best when they are specific and doable. The part that is new to me here is that requests are made from a belief that there are many ways that needs can be met and you only want the others to accede to a request if it also meets their needs.

So using Nonviolent Communication, our first person attending a symposium presentation might say: “I feel delighted as I sit here listening because this meets my need for humour and information.” The other person might say: “I’m frustrated because my need for information is not met with this 20-minute treatment of this subject.” Both these are nonviolent statements because they state their needs met or not met and they

take personal responsibility for the feelings that they experience as a result. There is no labeling or judging of things outside of themselves.

### **How I use NVC in Conflict Resolution**

I am attracted to this NVC approach because it provides simple language tools that I use and which I can assist my clients to use which align with what I am trying to do as their mediator.

#### *The Blind Men and the Elephant*

One of the things we help our clients understand is that there are many points of view. We need to hear and understand them in order to develop strategies to resolve the conflict.

I tell clients the Sufi tale of the blind men and the elephant. This is the story in which five men, who cannot see, encounter an elephant for the first time and are trying to determine its nature. Each man can reach only one part of the animal. As you might expect, they develop radically different views of the kind of animal that it is, depending on whether they are touching the trunk, a leg, an ear, the tail etc.

I point out that the men all have valuable information about their part of the animal, but if they only use that information to make a conclusion about what kind of animal it is, they will all be wrong.

The people in my mediations have found this a useful metaphor to remind them that they don't really know what another's experience is. And wisdom about the situation will come from hearing all perspectives on a problem. As mediators we work with people to move them past their assumptions about what is happening to an understanding of what's actually going on for others.

I see NVC as structuring an "understanding the elephant" approach to every communication. The movement from "violent" to "nonviolent" parallels what I'm trying to do in mediation. NVC encourages us to share what is happening within ourselves – the impact of events on us -- rather than our judgments. While we encourage people in mediation to suspend their judgments, this approach provides a guide of what they should share instead. We know as mediators that things shift for parties when they understand the usually unintended negative impacts of their actions. NVC brings this process to the level of language.

#### Pre-mediation interviews

*Coaching to express honestly:* In pre-mediation interviews, a client will often present negative judgments about another. The person usually knows that this kind of expression is going to provide an obstacle to communication: "I can't call her a passive-aggressive

control freak because it will only get her madder,” the client might say. I agree with the them – judgments tend to elicit defensiveness. I say that there is a way that the truth of what is going on for them can be expressed in a form that is more likely to be heard. Then together we explore what the impact is on themselves and we may come out with a statement like: “When you comment on what time I arrive at the office each day, I feel annoyed and sad because trust is important for me within our office.” In this way I guide clients as to how to express themselves with complete honesty but without judging or blaming, thus increasing the likelihood that they will be heard.

*Encourage curiosity and doubt rather than certainty about another’s motives:* Using the understanding the elephant metaphor I will ask if they know what needs the boss may have in the situation. What is it that makes her behavior logical to her?

*Strategize about productive ways to receive hard-to-hear judgments:* I can also coach clients in responding to aggressive messages without taking them personally, responding in kind or giving in. NVC guides us to use the judgmental language, which may come our way, as clues to the person’s feelings and needs.

#### In the mediation:

*Structuring the conversation:* I sometimes use NVC concepts to structure a mediation agenda. Needs and strategies to meet needs are what the group will find useful to have identified. I’ll have people in a group tell their view of events. As we go, I’ll flipchart the needs as they are expressed and the strategies to meet the needs as they are proposed. Once the group recognizes and understand the needs, they are usually ready to move to the next step of deciding what action they will take to resolve the issue.

*Reframing:* NVC also serves as one of my prime reframing tools in a mediation or a facilitated session. I’ll hear a judgment made and check out with the person if they are feeling x, because y need wasn’t met in the situation.

*Keeping me curious:* NVC assists me in guiding my focus and keeping me curious when I might slip toward judgment. It aids me in modeling the curious, positive pro-active stance they will need to solve their problem.

#### After the mediation

It is not unusual for mediation clients to ask for some assistance so they can have the kind of conversation they had during the mediation on their own. I’ll recommend Marshall Rosenberg’s books. Some clients may have me back to do training in this approach.

The structured aspect of NVC is useful in this regard as people can engage in as much of it as is useful to them. So whether it is making an observation without a judgment, developing more feelings or needs literacy, practicing responding with curiosity to what one formerly would have considered an attack, there are many aspects and applications of this approach.

I'm happy to be able to give clients an approach they can use on their own. NVC is effective when only one person knows the process, so clients can use it with others in their organizations or at home without the people they are interacting with having gone through the training.

## **Conclusion**

I've been studying NVC for about 18 months. It has changed how I speak and listen especially when I'm in conflict with someone. I have enjoyed bringing it to clients in mediation and communication training as it has helped them relate to each other more effectively. I look forward to NVC being integrated in mediation training and becoming a common approach for mediators. I believe it has potential to strengthen our efforts in conflict resolution.

Thank you.

## **For More Information:**

- Marshall B. Rosenberg Ph.D.  
*Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (PuddleDancer Press, 2003)
- Centre for Nonviolent Communication [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org). This site contains the first chapter of *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. It also has feelings and needs lists, and information about its use around the world, training and other ways to learn more.
- Contact me: [christine@peringer.ca](mailto:christine@peringer.ca)