

Communication that simply works

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In Paris on 1 July 1997, twenty Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, including Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachov and the Dalai Lama, made an appeal to member states of the United Nations to consecrate the first ten years of the next millennium to developing a culture of non-violence. The director general of UNESCO, Frederico Mayor, declared 'We cannot tell something to our children and then continue to do the opposite.'

How then can we learn to 'do' nonviolence?

The model of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a way of learning just this. Originally developed in the USA in the 1960s by Marshall Rosenberg – and used for mediating conflicts arising from racial desegregation of schools – and a tool for civil rights groups and peace activists, the NVC model is now being learned worldwide in a wide variety of contexts: for example, schools in Serbia and Israel, health care services in Sweden, a business school in the UK, and reconciliation work in Sierra Leone.

What is 'nonviolence?'

Nonviolence is connected to the Sanskrit word 'ahimsa'. It does not have the same meaning as 'not violent'. It refers to a quality that a human being can develop in themselves, and which, when present, would allow them, simply by their presence, to cause a room full of raging, wild dogs to fall into gentle playfulness. How many raging wild dogs do you know in

your work area – including yourself? Some are ragingly angry and blameful. Some are ragingly hurt and defending themselves against further wounds. Some are scared and hoping to find safety by either acting aggressively or acting half dead.

Nonviolence, while healing these states, and generating in their place gentleness and cooperation, is not weak or compromising – as Gandhi made clear. It involves being willing to stick your neck out, say what is true for you, and act

on your words while respecting the values and truths of others. Is this within the grasp of people working stressful daily routines within organisations?

The model of NVC is a means of making this shift accessible to anyone. It is actually an astonishing thing – an education in how to relate with compassion, whatever the circumstances.

NVC is the 'how to' of being nonviolent; a simple, profound and 'learnable' model of communication. It can be used whether the people you are communicating with also know NVC or not.

Using the NVC model educates people in how to stay connected to the humanity of each other while communicating – often a surprisingly revolutionary way of interacting. People involved in this process experience what it is to be accurately understood, and feel a welcome warmth of heart that arises from being in touch with another person.

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The quality of connection created by NVC transforms situations where conflict is in the air, so that compassion emerges, and people choose actions that are in harmony with everyone's needs. The NVC model recommends focusing our attention on the observations, feelings, needs and requests present in oneself and others in each moment.

That, and only that!

The model is so simple that it can easily be described and understood at this externalised level of 'knowing what it is'.

Self-development

The internalised level of 'knowing what it is', that comes from living it, takes more time and practice – but brings a new richness to life.

It also takes being open to developing in oneself the three qualities of Lao Tzu, quoted

by Stephen Mitchell (1993):
simplicity, patience and compassion
towards oneself.

Some say that my teaching is nonsense,
others call it lofty but impractical.

But to those who have looked inside themselves, this
nonsense makes perfect sense.

And to those who put it into practice
this loftiness has roots that go deep.

I have just three things to teach:

Simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and
enemies, you accord with the way
things are.

Compassionate towards yourself, you
reconcile all beings in the world.

'Simple in actions and in thoughts'

NYC recommends that we state our observations, feelings, needs and requests as clearly and simply as possible. For instance when stating our feeling, we can just say three words, 'I feel scared,' rather than 'I feel that you are to blame for the way this has come about – you always waste our time, turning up with half completed work. It's just not going to work having you in our team – maybe I'd be better off replacing you!'

It can be surprisingly hard to give up going into long-winded and complex analysis of every situation we are not happy with, and simply state what is going on within us. Even when we know the long-winded way has not led to happy results before. We have been educated to think and communicate in this convoluted way, and have years of practice! But the clarity of the NVC model makes such a change possible, if we are willing to experiment with this simplicity.

'Patient with both friends and enemies'

Learning NVC develops our awareness of the value of being patient in moments of communication – in the sense of taking the time we need to respond as we choose, rather than automatically reacting out of our old habits. Even if this only takes a second, this second can make all the difference. An important element of the model is learning how to listen compassionately to others, whether these others are people we would normally label as 'friends' or 'enemies'.

'Compassionate towards yourself'

Learning NVC develops compassion and can create choice within ourselves and with others. Compassion becomes something we choose to give when we want to be practical and effective, or to be creative and have fun, as well as when we want to be helpful and nurturing. But unless we receive compassion, we will not be able to give it.. It is like mother's milk. Unless a mother is nourished, no milk flows. As our own permanent companion, the teaching NVC offers in developing compassion towards ourselves is a particularly valuable way to be sure to receive compassion daily! Once we are well nourished in this way, giving compassion to others becomes an easy and deeply enjoyable activity.

'Bullying is habitual'

The necessity for organisational power brokers to be human is almost scary. Power without humanity is so dangerous. It is also dangerous on a personal level, as most of us know to our BBC documentary suggested that 50 per cent of people experience being bullied at work. I wondered whether the other 50 per cent are the bullies, because a system of relating that includes several ingredients of what we call 'bullying' – such as labelling people according to our interpretations of them (e.g., stupid, intelligent, nice, disruptive) and then applying punishments and rewards accordingly – is the system our culture actually teaches. It is how we run our schools.

Using guilt-, shame- and fear-inducing tactics to get people to 'cooperate' or to work harder is tragic. It destroys people's self-esteem and creates enormous suffering, physical ill-health, and

mental anguish. The 'bullying' culture is like a constant background noise. We can live without noticing its effects – and without noticing that we are perpetrators too, in subtle ways. It erodes our joy in life. It diminishes our will to live fully, to contribute and to cooperate.

Cooperation is natural

Marshall Rosenberg (1998) sees generosity and a desire to cooperate and contribute as natural human states. Not habitual, but natural. Again and again, over thirty years, he has noticed that when people using NVC get the empathy they need for what is going on in them, their wish to cooperate and contribute to others emerges.

Endless research on the growing levels of violence in society — at work, at home, on the streets, in schools, wherever — points to the need for greater self-awareness and more empathic communication. Daniel Goleman (1996) has given us frightening examples of what happens when people are not able to articulate and listen to others at the level of their hearts.

However, tested methods for actually making the changes we want to make are harder to find. Knowing that we want to do things differently is not enough. We need to know how — and have the courage to support attempts to teach and learn 'how to' methods, rather than to commission more research.

The power of heart connections

One of the effects of using NVC that people find hard to imagine is the increased power people experience. Even if we think it would be nicer to be more human at work, we don't do it because

people so often associate being human with being weak or ineffectual.

Yet, when people communicate at the level of the heart, the bond created allows those connected to work together in a powerful, enjoyable and creative way. We are used to seeing this when a personal relationship is working well, but it can be surprising to think of heart connections in the workplace. I believe we are entering a new phase in our culture where we will discover how to have heart connections with people with whom we do not intend to have a personal relationship — such as many of the people we work with. I predict an outcome of applying NVC in the workplace would be that people discover they can feel supported, understood, strengthened and nurtured in quite a new way in their work relationships.

Synergy

Work environments that disconnect people from their hearts will be running on only a fraction of their power and creativity. Opportunities for real synergy is nil. Synergy requires people to be fully connected — both with themselves and with each other — with their strengths and weaknesses accepted.

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Of course, some people do operate this way naturally. They can be spotted by

the way their effectiveness and creativity happens in harmony with others. When things go well for them, that means they go well for the people around them too.

Through conflict to harmony

Seeking harmony doesn't mean avoiding conflict! NVC is well known for its success in the field of conflict resolution. Conflict arises again and again between individuals, between groups — organisations, teams, departments, tribes — and within a person. Conflict is a sign of authenticity being expressed, of life trying to happen.

The NVC approach to mediation and conflict resolution is to use the NVC process as a means of transforming any violent energy into life energy that contributes to harmonious growth and development. Then conflict becomes one stage in a creative process from which everyone involved benefits.

NVC supports organisational change

Personal habits need to change if organisational cultures are to become more humane. NVC facilitates a two-way communication flow across the boundaries of hierarchical structures. The observations, feelings, needs and requests of anyone in the organisation would be heard clearly by all, enrich the perspective of those with executive power, and increase satisfaction that employees and clients feel with the organisation.

Bandler and Grinder (1975) noted in the early days of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) that great therapists, from whichever school, used certain

language structures that support change. They called the language structures they identified 'well-formed for therapy'.

I believe NVC offers a language that could be called 'well-formed for organisational change'.

New interdependence

NVC is very well suited to flattened organisations of self-managed teams built on equal respect and multi-directional communication. Just as the flat structure might look new in many organisations — businesses, government, schools, families — so the unfamiliar way of communicating needed to live the system needs to be learned.

As Uri Merri (1995) has put it:

Increased interdependence and interconnectivity intensifies uncertainty. The quality of relationships needs to match the degree of interdependence —more mutually responsible, cooperative and empathic. If not, uncertainty increases, conflict, crisis, and domination ensue.

The next millennium

The reality of the interconnectedness of all life becomes more apparent to us each day. It is shifting the perspective of humanity as a whole.

John Alexandra (1996) is one of many saying we are in transition from 2,000 years of dualistic, exclusive, me-or-you thinking to the next paradigm of inclusive, cooperative, me-and-you living. Educational tools like NVC are essential to help our present generations, whose lives are spanning this turbulent time of a fundamental shift in attitudes and orientation to life.

A practical tool serving a deep intention

To learn to relate with this non-violent, compassionate quality takes more than mechanically learning another tool. It takes connecting with a deep intention to live in a more human world. Wouldn't it be something if the results of each moment of our communication were as beautiful and growthful as what in these words taken from a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis:

I said to the almond tree
'Sister, speak to me of God,'
and the almond tree blossomed.

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Web site for the Center for Nonviolent Communication:
www.cnvc.org

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