



Don't get mad, get communicative

A new communications methodology takes the conflict out of conflict resolution, writes Domini Stuart

If you're putting together a job description, you'll almost certainly make "excellent communication skills" a priority. Yet, according to Pat Stanley, a corporate trainer who specialises in communication in the workplace, a business built around genuinely good communication is very difficult to find.

"Good communication is the key to harmony and success," she says. "When it doesn't exist, the problems are far reaching – high absenteeism, high turnover, poor self-esteem and increased stress just to name the more obvious. Poor communication is also a major cause of anger. In extreme cases, these can lead to physical violence. And, sadly, they are on the increase."

Reacting to pressure

"People tend to revert to conflict under pressure," says Art Burroughes, a counsellor and facilitator who trained in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) with its founder, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. "The problem is that, these days, many people feel under pressure most of the time."

In his corporate workshops, Burroughes takes a very different approach from traditional conflict resolution practices.

"The devil is definitely in the difference and, with NVC, that difference is an absolute willingness to accept that the other person has his or her own feelings and needs," he says. "When you enter into these they start to respond in a way which just won't happen if you take a traditional negotiation stance. Here, the focus is fighting for your rights. Even when you're talking about a win-win situation, the implication is that there's something to lose. NVC is about trusting that our own needs will be met – that we can find a solution that works for everyone without any emotional stuff getting in the way."

Building empathy

Anna Parker and her partner run a car rental business in Byron Bay, New South Wales. They are committed to the principles of NVC and, for them, building the skills is an ongoing process.

"We're refining systems all the time – constantly looking for ways to improve communications amongst our staff, and between staff and customers," says Parker. "NVC helps us to develop some form of empathy...to establish rapport. It also helps in overcoming judgment – the naming and labelling that stops good communication in its tracks."

NVC's observation model encourages us to look for the truth in what we see hear and feel rather than simply reacting.

"Labels are really just assumptions," continues Parker. "When you dismiss a customer as a tyre kicker or an idiot, you simply don't know enough about them. Empathy means tuning in to both your own feelings and those of other people, and recognising that both of you have underlying needs.

"Sometimes you have to use your intuition, sometimes you need to ask. When you do, the outcome can be surprising. For instance, someone you have judged to be difficult might have just found out that a family member has had an accident and need to ruin a car in order to get to hospital."

Parker has found her staff to be very accepting of NVC. "It helps them with their job, and they often tell me that it also helps at home," she says. "In any relationship, it's easy for one partner to feel blamed or judged, and the other to react accordingly. NVC encourages us to look beneath our reactions for our feelings, and beneath our feelings for whatever needs are not being met. This level of empathy can be quite a miraculous thing."

NVC has also influenced the way Parker runs her business.

"If one of my staff is feeling sad, angry or frustrated, I acknowledge that their needs are not being met – but I take my own needs into account at the same time. For instance, I need respect, and for us all to work in a respectful environment. If an employee can't do that, I'll suggest they move on. I'm definitely setting better boundaries for myself."

"NVC stops us from being attached to a particular strategy," says Burroughes. "We tend to shrink things down to thoughts like 'I have to have this to prove that I'm respected and appreciated'. It's actually much more helpful to move back from that and look directly for our actual needs - in this case, respect and appreciation.

"Once these needs have been named, something organic happens and things start to settle - even in situations where at first it seems inconceivable that we could ever find resolution."

Breakout box

What is Nonviolent Communication?

Nonviolent CommunicationSM (NVC) is sometimes referred to as compassionate communication. Its purpose is to strengthen our ability to inspire compassion from others and to respond compassionately to others and to ourselves.

Advocates believe that NVC helps reframe how we express ourselves and hear others by focusing our consciousness on what you we observing, feeling, needing, and requesting.

NVC teaches us to make careful observations free of evaluation, and to be very specific about behaviours and conditions that are affecting us. We learn to hear our own deeper needs and those of others, and to identify and clearly articulate what we want in a given moment. When we focus on clarifying what we are observing feeling and needing, rather than on diagnosing and judging, it is said that we discover the depth of our own compassion.

Through its emphasis on deep listening—to ourselves as well as others—NVC fosters respect, attentiveness and empathy, and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart. The form is simple yet, according to its adherents, powerfully transformative.

Founder and director Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg provides Nonviolent Communication training around the world, working with educators, managers, mental health and health care providers, lawyers, military officers, prisoners, police and prison officials, clergy, government officials and individual families. He is also active in war-torn areas and economically disadvantaged countries, offering Nonviolent Communication training to promote reconciliation and peaceful resolution of differences. Israel, Palestine, Ireland, Russia, Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Serbia, and Croatia are examples of countries where Nonviolent Communication is being utilized by teams of peace activists.