

Words That Work In Business

**A Practical Guide to Effective
Communication in the Workplace**

2nd Edition

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Chapter 1



Can I *Really* Use NVC in My Workplace?

Some of you may have had the following experience. Having just emerged from a Nonviolent Communication workshop, full of possibilities and hopes, you feel energized and excited to have meaningful, connected communications. In your enthusiasm to share what you have learned, you go home or back to work, and the first chance you get, you try out something from the workshop. Instead of the powerful emotional connection and intimate response you were hoping for, the person says, “Why are you talking like that?” You feel your excitement fade, your energy sink, and to your chagrin, you find yourself reacting as you normally do instead of in the compassionate, connected way you imagined.

When our initial attempts to practice or share what we have learned are met with a not-so-enthusiastic reception, these experiences sometimes lead us to believe that the new skills will be difficult to apply in certain situations—such as in the workplace. Thus, while you have begun learning about NVC and might already have found its value for yourself, you may have thought something like this: “I can see the value of NVC in my personal life, and maybe some people can use it in their workplaces, but no way at my work! The people in my workplace just wouldn’t be open to it!”

I can understand these thoughts, since I have had them too. When I first began learning NVC, I was working as a trial lawyer.

The last lawsuit I tried (in 1999, just prior to withdrawing from the practice of law and beginning to serve on the board of the Center for Nonviolent Communication) was a United States federal court case in the Central Valley of California. The case concerned the dumping of toxic agricultural chemicals. One of the government witnesses was a well-qualified analytical chemist who had never before testified in court. I knew her testimony because I had taken her deposition, and during the trial I wanted to highlight certain aspects of it to make sure they went into the court record. My cross-examination quickly turned into a painful and unpleasant process. When I would ask a question, she would answer the question—but then take time to unnecessarily restate all the aspects of her opinion that she had already testified to.

In my frustration, I began to use the many techniques I had been trained in as a lawyer to try to control her and get her to stop these long, duplicative explanations. None of these techniques worked. In fact, we found out during a break that she had interpreted my attempts as trying to demean her. With some embarrassment, I report to you that it did not occur to me the whole day to attempt a different way to communicate.

I was distressed about this situation; we were already over our estimated schedule, and I was concerned the judge would cut off the cross-examination if it continued in the same way. That evening, as I pondered what I could do, a small voice in my head said, “You could try NVC.”

Immediately, my response was, “No, not in this situation!” My training and experience in the stilted environment of the courtroom—me at a lectern, the witness in the witness box, the judge on the bench, and a number of opposing attorneys all ready to object to any language that deviated from their expectations—made it difficult for me to see how I could apply the skills I was learning. Nonetheless, in my distress, I began considering how I might go about using NVC. After a time of empathizing with myself, I found myself practicing conversations with the witness in my head.

The following day, the pattern started again, with my questions and the witness’s long, repetitive answers. So I interrupted her, and when I had her attention, I said: “I’m concerned about the time it’s

going to take to complete your testimony. I'm wondering if you would be willing to just answer my questions and save any explanation you have until later. I want to assure you that you will have time to consult with government counsel before your testimony is complete, and that you will be able to provide further explanations. For now, would you be willing to just answer my questions?"

Now, as I was asking this question, my heart was racing. I felt it in my throat. To this day, I am not clear on what I was telling myself that stimulated this reaction. Perhaps I was terrified that someone was going to object, "You can't use NVC in the courtroom!" Of course, no one did. The moment passed, and after looking to government counsel for confirmation, the witness agreed to my request. Though I had to remind her of her agreement a couple times, overall the cross-examination proceeded much more quickly and smoothly.

My intense, physical reaction to attempting a new way of communicating highlights the difficulty that many of us face when trying to shift our behavior within an established environment. We believe the people around us expect us to act a certain way, and often we react to this by confining our behavior and communication within the narrow bounds of our beliefs about their expectations. There is a way out of this.

If you have found that introducing something new to your workplace is fraught with uncertainty and angst, this book is intended for you. The suggestions in this book can be applied to all areas of your life; nevertheless, the focus is on the workplace, as people often feel uncomfortable trying new communication skills with coworkers, managers, and employees. This can particularly be the case when people are not confident that their needs for sustainability and survival will continue to be met in the work situation.

Yet these work relationships, as much as other relationships, stand to benefit from your NVC knowledge—and we hope your enjoyment of work will increase as a result. We start with the premise that you will be able to use aspects of your NVC skills in the workplace no matter what your skill level. We suggest a set of skills and ways to practice that will build your confidence in your NVC fluency to the point where

you will be able to apply what you have learned even in situations where, right now, you have little trust in ever being comfortable using NVC out loud.

A Few Notes Before We Begin

These pages are designed to deepen the learning you have already begun, with the goal that you can comfortably use your Nonviolent Communication skills in your workplace. Before going into the second chapter, we offer some reminders about NVC that will give context for the rest of the book. In Chapter 2, we will explore practicing NVC silently. This way, you can begin applying your skills immediately, even in situations where you might feel uncomfortable doing so aloud. Chapter 3 explains the cycle of learning and its relationship to mourning and celebration practices. These practices can be especially important as a means of reminding you of your desire to expand your communication skills and of the commitments you have made to yourself to do so. Since practice is key to fully integrating skills into your life, Chapter 4 is devoted to exploring ways to practice that will support your intentions. We see making requests as a crucial part of NVC practice and one that few of us seem to have mastered, so in Chapter 5, we will discuss how to make requests that are more likely to meet your needs. Finally, for when you have begun to solidify your skills and are looking for additional challenges, the last chapter gives examples for dealing with typical workplace issues.

We encourage you to use this book in several ways. If you decide to read it through to the end, we encourage you to take time along the way to experience the practice suggestions. Alternatively, you may want to pick a chapter that discusses a current problem you are facing. For example, if you find yourself in a conflict at work and notice you have judgments about yourself or the other people involved, you might want to go to the enemy image section in Chapter 6, “Suggestions for Addressing Common Workplace Communication Challenges.”

You may be inclined to simply read a book such as this one without practicing anything. To encourage you to practice, boxes

titled “Practice Pause” are placed throughout the text. We hope that these exercises will entice you to stop reading and practice—right then and there—before continuing further. We want the Practice Pauses to remind you that every moment is potentially a practice moment.

There are also examples throughout the text drawn from workplace situations, in which the protagonist (“you”) interacts with a boss, Magna, and two coworkers, Harold and Karen. These examples give additional illustrations of how to work with the language and intention of NVC in real-life situations. Because of limitations of the written word and space, the examples may give a false impression of the real-life process of empathy, and particularly its quality of wandering in your pondering before reaching a point of clarity about needs (one’s own or others’). Thus, we encourage you to get what value you can from these examples without believing that the empathy process will be as quick, easy, or linear as the written scenarios may seem to suggest.

Reminders

In the early stages of learning, Nonviolent Communication can appear to be about word choice and order—in other words, syntax—and we will focus most of our attention on these aspects. While doing this, we would like you to bear in mind that fundamentally NVC is about intention; the syntax is, first, a strategy to remind us of our intention and, second, a way to make our intention more readily heard by others. The underlying intention in using NVC is to connect—for each of us to connect with ourselves and with others. Out of this connection, we can create mutually satisfying outcomes. With our intention clearly in mind, we are freed to adapt the actual words we use to fit in with the situation or subculture we find ourselves in. For example, in this book we will talk about needs in a particular way—typically when attempting to identify a universal human need in one word. In direct communication with another person, however, what is important is the intention to connect; the words are secondary to that end. In these situations, we hope you will use words that have meaning and

resonance for the person with whom you are talking, and that at the same time identify needs (i.e., universal human needs that are not specific to a particular strategy).

At the heart of the intention to connect is being connected—in a visceral, noncognitive way—with yourself, which is to say with your own needs. This is not something most of us are taught as children. We begin as children to form habitual reaction patterns, which become ingrained with time as we continue to react habitually.

Learning to connect at the level of needs is a way to step out of these habitual ways of reacting, yet is something that generally takes time and practice to develop. As we identify, time and time again, the needs that were and were not met by our actions, particularly in situations where we reacted habitually, space opens within us to act differently in the future. In this way, in continually returning to being present and connecting with needs, we alter how we relate to ourselves and others. We contribute to creating a world more in alignment with our values.

When we make it a practice to connect with our needs, we shift into learning mode. For example, let's say you react habitually to a coworker's remark. Afterward, you realize that your reaction was not in harmony with your values. At this point, you might inquire into the need you were seeking to meet by your reaction, as well as what needs of yours were not met. The natural result of this inquiry is the question, "How might I do it differently next time to better meet my needs?" This entire inquiry we encourage you to do without a sense of judgment, punishment, blame, shame, guilt, anger, or depression: instead, simply realize what needs were and were not met, and seek new ways to better meet them. When you do this often, you create a cyclical learning process of becoming aware, mourning and celebrating your conduct, and building on what you liked or shifting away from what you didn't like, all in order to meet your needs (see Chapter 3 for more on this learning cycle). Soon, you begin to remember in the moment and try new choices, and then you learn from those choices. The natural consequence of this process is learning skills that are in alignment with the intention to meet your needs and the needs of others.

This is not the process I learned during childhood and socialization into the adult world. I was implicitly taught how to analyze who was at fault, and thus who was to be blamed and punished. I learned how to protect myself from criticism, avoid punishment, and redirect blame. The results of this not-very-conscious process of blame and shame determined how I felt. My learning was how to avoid being blamed and punished; thus, I learned to avoid what I did not want. This process did not help me learn what would enable me to flourish and thrive or how to create the life I wanted. In making the shift to connecting with needs, I identify the needs that I yearn to be meeting and therefore liberate my mind to do what it does well, which is to sift through the patterns of experience to identify strategies that might meet my needs. I enter a cycle of learning how to create what I want.

Thus, from my perspective, the core of being able to use NVC in the workplace is not only developing the skills and practicing, but also learning to choose new possibilities based on a connection with needs instead of repeating deeply rooted habitual patterns. By being connected with our own needs, our intention is clarified moment by moment.

The specific syntax you learn with NVC was designed to help you uncover your intention and remember it in the moment. I've found in my own experience and in working with others that there is a stage of learning in which using the basic NVC sentence can be extremely valuable (see Appendix A for examples). I call this the *training wheels sentence*: "When I hear . . . , I feel . . . , because I need . . . Would you be willing to . . . ?" My hypothesis is that people who skip this stage take longer to really embody the perspective-altering potential of NVC, if they ever do. This may be because they have not ingrained the basic distinctions that using the training wheels sentence over and over again seems to cultivate. The four basic NVC distinctions that I am referring to are Observations versus judgments, Feelings versus evaluations masquerading as feelings, Needs versus strategies, and Requests versus demands. These distinctions are embedded in the structure of the training wheels sentence, and thus using the sentence prompts awareness of them. Practicing the training wheels sentence

is the only way I have found to get these basic distinctions at a deep level, as the sentence encourages us to focus on each of the four parts of communication—Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests.

When these distinctions are embodied, and you are clear that your intention is to connect (with yourself or another person), the specific words you use become less important. On the other hand, people often report early on that they are using all the “right” words, but are not getting the results they expect—this may be because they are not yet consistent in their intention.

The premise of NVC is that when you focus on connection with yourself and others, you will be meeting your needs while, at the same time, others in your world are meeting their needs. We often believe that if we can analyze a situation properly, then we will get what we want. NVC suggests instead that when we are connected to needs, all of us can be in the process of meeting our needs.

NVC is simple, but not easy. At least, that is my experience, and others have reported the same. In the beginning, it is particularly difficult to remember these new ideas in the moment. Since NVC is as much a consciousness—a way of thinking about and approaching our communication with others—as it is a set of skills, adults socialized into mainstream culture find there is much “unlearning” that happens as we begin to integrate the NVC we have learned. In the moment when we are communicating with someone, our old learning is initially going to be stronger than our new learning. The goal of this book is to show you some ways to strengthen your new learning so you can incorporate NVC into all parts of your life, and in particular, your work life.