

Expressing Appreciation in Nonviolent Communication

The Intention Behind the Appreciation

“You did a good job on that report.”

“You are a very sensitive person.”

“It was kind of you to offer me a ride home last evening.”

Such statements are typically uttered as expressions of appreciation in life-alienating communication. Perhaps you are surprised that I regard praise and compliments to be life-alienating. Notice, however, that appreciation expressed in this form reveals little of what’s going on in the speaker; it establishes the speaker as someone who sits in judgment. I define judgments—both positive and negative—as life-alienating communication.

Compliments are often judgments—however positive—of others.

In corporate trainings, I often encounter managers who defend the practice of praising and complimenting by claiming that “it works.” “Research shows,” they assert, “that if a manager compliments employees, they work harder. And the same goes for schools: if teachers praise students, they study harder.” I have reviewed this research, and my belief is that recipients of such praise do work harder, but only initially. Once they sense the manipulation behind the appreciation, their productivity drops.

What is most disturbing for me, however, is that the beauty of appreciation is spoiled when people begin to notice the lurking intent to get something out of them.

Furthermore, when we use positive feedback as a means to influence others, it may not be clear how they are receiving the message. There is a cartoon where one Native American remarks to another, “Watch me use modern psychology on my horse!” He then leads his friend to where the horse can overhear their conversation and exclaims, “I have the fastest, most courageous horse in all the West!” The horse looks sad and says to itself, “How do you like that? He’s gone and bought himself another horse.”

Express appreciation to celebrate, not to manipulate.

When we use NVC to express appreciation, it is purely to celebrate, not to get something in return. Our sole intention is to celebrate the way our lives have been enriched by others.

The Three Components of Appreciation

NVC clearly distinguishes three components in the expression of appreciation:

1. the actions that have contributed to our well-being
2. the particular needs of ours that have been fulfilled
3. the pleasurable feelings engendered by the fulfillment of those needs

The sequence of these ingredients may vary; sometimes all three can be conveyed by a smile or a simple “Thank you.”

However, if we want to ensure that our appreciation has been

**Saying “thank you” in NVC:
“This is what you did;
this is what I feel;
this is the need of mine
that was met.”**

fully received, it is valuable to develop the eloquence to express all three components verbally. The following dialogue illustrates how praise may be transformed into an appreciation that embraces all three components.

Participant: (*approaching me after a workshop*) Marshall, you're brilliant!

MBR: I'm not able to get as much out of your appreciation as I would like.

Participant: Why, what do you mean?

MBR: In my lifetime I've been called a multitude of names, yet I can't recall seriously learning anything by being told what I am. I'd like to learn from your appreciation and enjoy it, but I would need more information.

Participant: Like what?

MBR: First, I'd like to know what I said or did that made life more wonderful for you.

Participant: Well, you're so intelligent.

MBR: I'm afraid you've just given me another judgment that still leaves me wondering what I did that made life more wonderful for you.

Participant: (*thinks for a while, then points to notes she had taken during the workshop*) Look at these two places. It was these two things you said.

MBR: Ah, so it's my saying those two things that you appreciate.

Participant: Yes.

MBR: Next, I'd like to know how you feel in conjunction to my having said those two things.

Participant: Hopeful and relieved.

MBR: And now I'd like to know what needs of yours were fulfilled by my saying those two things.

Participant: I have this eighteen-year-old son whom I haven't been able to communicate with. I'd been desperately searching for some direction that might help me to relate with him in a more loving manner, and those two things you said provide the direction I was looking for.

Hearing all three pieces of information—what I did, how she felt, and what needs of hers were fulfilled—I could then celebrate the appreciation with her. Had she initially expressed her appreciation in NVC, it might have sounded like this: “Marshall, when you said these two things (showing me her notes), I felt very hopeful and relieved, because I’ve been searching for a way to make a connection with my son, and these gave me the direction I was looking for.”

Receiving Appreciation

For many of us, it is difficult to receive appreciation gracefully. We fret over whether we deserve it. We worry about what’s being expected of us—especially if we have teachers or managers who use appreciation as a means to spur productivity. Or we’re nervous about living up to the appreciation. Accustomed to a culture where buying, earning, and deserving are the standard modes of interchange, we are often uncomfortable with simple giving and receiving.

NVC encourages us to receive appreciation with the same quality of empathy we express when listening to other messages. We hear what we have done that has contributed to others’ well-being; we hear their feelings and the needs that were fulfilled. We take into our hearts the joyous reality that we can each enhance the quality of others’ lives.

I was taught to receive appreciation with grace by my friend Nafez Assailey. He was a member of a Palestinian team whom I had invited to Switzerland for training in NVC at a time when security precautions made training of mixed groups of Palestinians and Israelis impossible in either of their own countries. At the end of the workshop, Nafez came up to me. “This training will be very valuable for us in working for peace in our country,” he acknowledged. “I would like to thank you in a way that we Sufi Muslims do when we want to express special appreciation for something.” Locking his thumb onto mine, he looked me in the eye and said, “I kiss the God in you that allows you to give us what you did.” He then kissed my hand.

Nafez's expression of gratitude showed me a different way to receive appreciation. Usually it is received from one of two polar positions. At one end is egotism, believing ourselves to be superior because we've been appreciated. At the other extreme is false humility, denying the importance of the appreciation by shrugging it off: "Oh, it was nothing." Nafez showed me that I could receive appreciation joyfully, in the awareness that God has given everyone the power to enrich the lives of others. If I am aware that it is this power of God working through me that gives me the power to enrich life for others, then I may avoid both the ego trap and the false humility.

Receive appreciation without feelings of superiority or false humility.

Golda Meir, when she was the Israeli prime minister, once chided one of her ministers: "Don't be so humble, you're not that great." The following lines, attributed to contemporary writer Marianne Williamson, serve as another reminder for me to avoid the pitfall of false humility:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

The Hunger for Appreciation

Paradoxically, despite our unease in receiving appreciation, most of us yearn to be genuinely recognized and appreciated. During a surprise party for me, a twelve-year-old friend of mine suggested a party game to help introduce the guests to each other. We were to write down a question, drop it in a box, and then take turns, each person drawing out a question and responding to it out loud.

Having recently consulted with various social service agencies and industrial organizations, I was feeling struck by how often people expressed a hunger for appreciation on the job. “No matter how hard you work,” they would sigh, “you never hear a good word from anyone. But make one mistake and there’s always someone jumping all over you.” So for the game, I wrote this question: “What appreciation might someone give you that would leave you jumping for joy?”

A woman drew that question out of the box, read it, and started to cry. As director of a shelter for battered women, she would put considerable energy each month into creating a schedule to please as many people as possible. Yet each time the schedule was presented, at least a couple of individuals would complain. She couldn’t remember ever receiving appreciation for her efforts to design a fair schedule. All this had flashed through her mind as she read my question, and the hunger for appreciation brought tears to her eyes.

Upon hearing the woman’s story, another friend of mine said that he, too, would like to answer the question. Everyone else then requested a turn; as they responded to the question, several people wept.

While the craving for appreciation—as opposed to manipulative “strokes”—is particularly evident in the workplace, it affects family life as well. One evening when I pointed out his failure to perform a house chore, my son Brett retorted, “Dad, are you aware how often you bring up what’s gone wrong but almost never bring up what’s gone right?” His observation stayed with me. I realized how I was continually searching

We tend to notice what’s wrong rather than what’s right.

for improvements, while barely stopping to celebrate things that were going well. I had just completed a workshop with more than a hundred participants, all of whom had evaluated it very highly, with the exception of one person. However, what lingered in my mind was that one person's dissatisfaction.

That evening I wrote a song that began like this:

*If I'm ninety-eight percent perfect
in anything I do,
it's the two percent I've messed up
I'll remember when I'm through.*

It occurred to me that I had a choice to adopt instead the outlook of a teacher I knew. One of her students, having neglected to study for an exam, had resigned himself to turning in a blank piece of paper with his name at the top. He was surprised when she later returned the test to him with a grade of 14 percent. "What did I get 14 percent for?" he asked incredulously. "Neatness," she replied. Ever since hearing my son Brett's wake-up call, I've tried to be more aware of what others around me are doing that enriches my life, and to hone my skills in expressing this appreciation.

Overcoming the Reluctance to Express Appreciation

I was deeply touched by a passage in John Powell's book *The Secret of Staying in Love*, in which Powell describes his sadness over having been unable, during his father's lifetime, to express the appreciation he felt for his father *to* his father. How grievous it seemed to me to miss the chance of appreciating the people who have been the greatest positive influences in our lives!

Immediately an uncle of mine, Julius Fox, came to mind. When I was a boy, he came daily to offer nursing care to my grandmother, who was totally paralyzed. While he cared for my grandmother, he always had a warm and loving smile on his face. No matter how unpleasant the task may have appeared to my boyish eyes, he treated her as if she were doing him the greatest favor in the

world by letting him care for her. This provided a wonderful model of masculine strength for me—one that I’ve often called upon in the years since.

I realized that I had never expressed my appreciation for my uncle, who himself was now ill and near death. I considered doing so, but sensed my own resistance: “I’m sure he already knows how much he means to me, I don’t need to express it out loud; besides, it might embarrass him if I put it into words.” As soon as these thoughts entered my head, I already knew they weren’t true. Too often I had assumed that others knew the intensity of my appreciation for them, only to discover otherwise. And even when people were embarrassed, they still wanted to hear appreciation verbalized.

Still hesitant, I told myself that words couldn’t do justice to the depth of what I wished to communicate. I quickly saw through that one, though: yes, words may be poor vehicles in conveying our heartfelt realities, but as I have learned, “Anything that is worth doing is worth doing poorly!”

As it happened, I soon found myself seated next to Uncle Julius at a family gathering, and the words simply flowed out of me. He took them in joyfully, without embarrassment. Brimming over with feelings from the evening, I went home, composed a poem and sent it to him. I was later told that each day until he died three weeks later, my uncle had asked that the poem be read to him.

Summary

Conventional compliments often take the form of judgments, however positive, and are sometimes intended to manipulate the behavior of others. NVC encourages the expression of appreciation solely for celebration. We state (1) the action that has contributed to our well-being, (2) the particular need of ours that has been fulfilled, and (3) the feelings of pleasure engendered as a result.

When we receive appreciation expressed in this way, we can do so without any feeling of superiority or false humility—instead we can celebrate along with the person who is offering the appreciation.