

Chapter 2



How to Begin: Silent NVC Practices

You may be feeling some trepidation about using Nonviolent Communication in the workplace. Perhaps you imagine that coworkers will respond negatively if you attempt to introduce a new way of communicating. Yet there is almost nothing a person can say or do that cannot be responded to either with empathy or with some form of self-connected expression, or a combination of the two. When you begin to trust that you will predictably have the skills and presence to respond with empathy or expression, you'll have more trust in your ability to interact in ways that are in alignment with your values. Often, however, people see this as a chicken-and-egg problem: How do I get the skills if I'm afraid to use them? How do I use them without having the skills? A powerful way to develop NVC skills is through silent practice. This section covers three silent practices—awareness of blocking connection, self-empathy, and silent empathy—and suggests when and how you might use them.


There are several benefits to silent NVC practice: you can practice in ways less likely to be noticed by others in your workplace; you can practice and develop your skills of self-empathy and silent empathy until you feel more confident trying the out loud skills of empathy and expression; and finally, whatever you do say after silent practice will probably be something you like.

The inner work of NVC can be done without anyone knowing.

Though silent, these practices produce empathic connection with yourself and with others. When connected in this way, you will be a different person, and you will be more likely to enjoy your conduct. In addition, what you say and how you say it will be affected, even though you are not yet intending to use out loud NVC. These subtle changes create a gradual process that will help you transition to using out loud skills with coworkers who might otherwise react to a sudden change in your communication.

Becoming Aware of Blocking Connection

Many of the ways we have learned to communicate result in blocking connection with others. If you intend to use Nonviolent Communication to create connection with yourself or others, we encourage you to become aware, simultaneously, of what you are doing that blocks that connection. To gain this self-awareness, we suggest a two-step process.

First, notice the times when you feel less than connected while speaking with someone. You might notice a vague feeling of discomfort,  realize you do not enjoy what you or they are saying, or feel angry or impatient. (See Example 1 on facing page.)

Second, when you notice you are not feeling as connected as you would like, determine whether either of you are doing any of the following: defending a position, explaining, moralistically judging, diagnosing others, blaming, seeking to punish, or “needing” to be right. Any internal sense of wanting the other to feel guilt or shame also tends to generate disconnection.

Your awareness of blocking connection will come over time as you look at the results from your communication. One thing to watch for is that you do not, in the process of gaining this awareness, continue to block connection by judging or blaming or punishing yourself for not having communicated “right.” In a learning process, there is no “right” or “wrong”; there is only learning—inquiry that leads to trying something else designed to better meet your needs. Likewise, we warn against using your developing awareness to name what those around

you are doing. For instance, if you can, refrain from saying things like “There you go again, defending your position” or “Stop trying to guilt-trip me.” Instead, trust that as your awareness grows, you will be able to use your expanding out loud NVC skills of empathy or expression to respond to what others say.


Awareness is always the first part of a learning process, and the silent practice of becoming aware of blocking connection is crucial for learning to quickly recognize the patterns of communication you hope to change.



Example 1

Karen, your colleague, comes into your office one day to discuss the project you are both working on. She says, “You know, we have this big meeting coming up, and I’m concerned about being prepared for it.” You respond: “Yes, I know I have let some things slip, but I’ve been really overwhelmed between this project and the other things on my plate already. I’ve already put in so much extra time, and partly the holdup is because of Harold not getting the numbers to me on time.” After a couple more exchanges, Karen leaves your office. You realize that the conversation didn’t go as you would have liked. You didn’t feel connected to Karen nor did you feel that she understood your situation. In remembering your response to her initial statement of concern, you realize that defending, explaining, and blaming all slipped easily into your communication.

Using Self-Empathy—Recognizing Your Triggers

We often get triggered while interacting with others. The stimulus may arise from something someone else said, or something we did or said ourselves. Without awareness, a trigger leads us into habitual reaction. From the moment of awareness, however, we can choose to intervene, to create an alternative to the habitual. With time, if we prefer the outcomes from this alternative and continue to reinforce them, we will  develop new reaction habits. The intervention we suggest is self-empathy. (See Example 2 on facing page.)

In self-empathy, we practice the basics of NVC within ourselves—silently. We identify what was actually said or done—the observation of the situation—and distinguish that from our judgment of it. Then we identify how we feel about it, and what need was or was not met by the words or actions. In my work as a trainer and mediator, I use self-empathy all the time. I find it essential for maintaining my sense of well-being and wholeness.

For instance, not long ago I was facilitating a workshop. There had been several joking exchanges between myself and people I knew well from previous workshops. One of the participants who was new to this group then said, “I’m really uncomfortable with all this joking; it’s not at all what I consider to be NVC, and my understanding is that this is supposed to be an NVC workshop.”

As soon as I heard her say this, I immediately noticed that I felt de-energized and that I was thinking thoughts like “Well, you’re a real party-pooper.” Realizing these two things prompted me to ask myself what need I was seeking to meet with a thought like that. What occurred to me was that I wanted to have the freedom to be myself and for that to be OK. I also wanted to have companionship in my fun and play. With this awareness, I felt a shift within me to a sense of compassion in myself and for her. From this shift, I was able to respond to her with care and understanding about what might have prompted her to say what she said.

There are often a number of different ways to proceed with

self-empathy. For instance, in the story above, I could have started with either the observation of what the participant said or the observation of the judgment I heard in my mind. I began with my judgment, to give myself empathy first for having reacted in that way. Alternatively, I might have started with how I felt or with a direct guess about my needs. The point is that my goal was self-connection through the strategy of identifying my needs.



Example 2

In a meeting with the rest of your project team, as you are describing where you are on your part of the project, Harold says, "Let's see if we can keep this part of the meeting to fifteen minutes, shall we?" You leave the meeting angry, thinking that he interrupted you and that his remark was directed at you. As you go back to your office, you close the door and decide to practice some self-empathy. You think, "He interrupted and said I was taking too much time," then realize that thought is a judgment, not an observation. You rephrase it as an observation: "He began speaking when I was speaking, and said . . ." As you reflect more upon your anger, you realize that you also feel hurt, because your need for respect and to be heard in the group was not met. As you get in touch with your needs for respect and to be heard, you feel an opening in your chest, and the heaviness that you've been feeling lifts.

Although there are multiple entry points for connecting with yourself through the process of self-empathy, I am particularly struck by the power of the role of needs. When I shift my perspective from

“He made me sad” to observation and needs language—“When I hear him say that, I feel sad because I need consideration”—I more accurately describe my internal experience in relation to what I perceive occurring outside of me at that moment. The sentence “He made me sad” suggests that “he” is the one with control: he can cause me to feel sad; I am powerless to be other than sad. When I use this language, I give up my power to dictate my reactions—my feelings. On the other hand, when I say, “When I see him do that, I feel sad *because* I need consideration,” I am saying I know why I am sad, and his conduct is only the start of the story, not in and of itself the reason I am experiencing what I am experiencing. The use of “because” reminds me (and others) that I understand my sadness arises out of my needs and my interpretation of his conduct, and it avoids blaming the other person.

Moreover, when I use a language of observations and needs, I communicate what has happened to me as the result of my observation. The “because” leaves open the possibility that others observing the same conduct might have completely different reactions. Haven’t you watched a movie with friends and found that some of you cried, others did not? You watched and listened to the same movie. But because each of us has had different life experiences, each of us views the world from a different perspective.

With my language, I can signal that my internal state—my reactions—are not at the mercy of another person’s conduct. Yes, I am reacting with sadness now. However, that is the result of *my* internal processes. If my sense of internal well-being were dependent upon the other person conforming their conduct so that I would not feel sad next time I saw them under similar circumstances, I would not be particularly hopeful. However, I am hopeful when I think that my sadness results from my interpretations, because I can affect my interpretation process over time. Self-empathy has helped me do just that.

As you begin practicing self-empathy, you may find it helpful to get support from somebody else to help you to formulate your observations, and to identify your feelings and needs, especially if you

are not skilled yet in identifying your needs. Another person can help you meet your need for empathy by guessing your feelings and needs. This can be helpful even if it takes place some time after the stimulus. Working with a person familiar with the process of connecting with needs has another benefit. Through their guesses, you can begin to experience the physiological shift that often takes place when you connect deeply with a need; this shift might be a release, a feeling of opening or lightening, or perhaps simply a deepening of your emotional response.

If you do not have another person to practice with, you can use other techniques to feel that physiological shift. When you have identified what you think might be the need not met in a situation, imagine internally what it would feel like for that need to be met. For example, if the need you identified is consideration, go into a kind of reverie where you imagine that your need for consideration is met; what does that feel like in your body? This is a way of deepening into what it feels like to be in touch with a need. When you are in touch with this feeling, you can then see if any strategies come to mind for meeting it. If none come to mind immediately, pay attention over the next day or so and see if any pop into your mind at unexpected moments. Trust that your mind is working on strategies even when you are not consciously thinking about it.

Practice Pause



Stop reading and check in with yourself right now. What are you feeling? What needs are behind that feeling? See if you can connect with at least one need.

Once you become familiar with your own typical somatic response to identifying your needs, you can use it in your self-empathy practice. This felt sense can be your guide and benchmark for when you have

connected with a need you were trying to meet. Typically, this shift opens up a space for compassion, for yourself as well as for the other people involved.

Self-empathy is particularly powerful when we have the presence to use it in the moment when we realize we have been triggered (or as soon afterward as we can). It can also be used much later, if we find we still have an unwelcome reaction to the event, or even in anticipation of an interaction. If we are anticipating a difficult conversation with someone, we can practice self-empathy beforehand (perhaps again with another's help) to prepare and enter the conversation with the clarity that arises from clearly naming and thereby connecting with our needs. I recommend spending time each day in self-empathy (see Chapter 3 on mourning and celebration in the learning cycle).

I view self-empathy as the fundamental practice of NVC. Even if you did no other practice, consistently meeting your need for empathy would be life-changing in and of itself. You can increase your adeptness in self-empathy, as a key silent practice, by using it at work in a myriad of situations. Practice self-empathy silently when in meetings, when you find yourself triggered or upset at an interaction, when you realize you are not connected with your own needs, and in anticipation of, during, and after difficult conversations with coworkers, managers, or employees. As you use self-empathy, notice any changes in your thought process and in how you feel.

Using Silent Empathy—Understanding Your Coworkers

In general, when we are in pain and our thoughts are awlirl, we are not able to empathize with others until our need for empathy has been sufficiently met. Hence, self-empathy is an important first step in integrating Nonviolent Communication; once we are connected with ourselves, then we will be more interested in and curious about the other person. (See Example 3 on facing page.) At this point our attention and focus turns to them, and the question that



typically arises is some version of “What is going on with them?” If we ask this question before having met our own need for empathy, our minds will typically jump to analyzing the other person’s “wrongness” with thoughts like “None of this would have happened if he hadn’t been such a jerk.” When we are full of empathy, however, the question becomes “Which needs of theirs are they seeking to meet?” This inquiry leads right into the practice of silent empathy.

Example 3



Because you now feel lighter due to your connection with your own needs, you begin to wonder about what happened in the meeting. Was Harold really directing his comment at you? What need might he have been trying to meet in saying, “Let’s see if we can keep this part of the meeting to fifteen minutes, shall we?” As you think back, you realize that Harold might have been meeting his need for consideration of his time and for integrity around agreements about time commitments. As you realize this, you experience a release of your antagonism toward Harold and you feel more accepting of him.

The process of silent empathy is the same as the process of self-empathy, except that you are internally inquiring about another person instead of yourself. You can use the four components of Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests to ask yourself what might have been going on from the other person’s perspective, and we suggest you pay particular attention to needs. Essentially, you are guessing what is going on with the other person without checking those guesses with them. Silent empathy can be used as a precursor to out loud empathy,

but it can also be used simply as a way to connect with the other person through the needs you imagine they might have been meeting.

In doing silent empathy, you keep your focus on what needs the other person might be trying to meet, without going into analyses of their behavior. It is not as important to be right as it is to be aware that the other person is acting to meet their needs just as you are, and to connect with those needs instead of with your judgment about people's strategies for meeting their needs. Even though this process happens without the other person's awareness of it, if you practice keeping your focus on needs, you might notice that your own energy shifts. You will be a different person, and hence will act and speak out of this shifted sense of self. Others will respond to this shift regardless of whether your internal guesses as to their needs are correct.

Practice Pause



Think back to your most recent interaction with someone, however brief. What need might that person have been trying to meet with their words or actions?

Silent empathy can be done regarding any interaction with another person, while you are having the conversation or afterward. While you are learning, we suggest practicing with any actions or words you hear from others, whether directed at you or not, and whether you find them enjoyable or triggering. In doing so, you will gain skill and facility in staying connected with needs and in guessing what needs others might be seeking to meet by their actions. Silent empathy can also be used at work during meetings, in anticipation of a meeting, or in mourning or celebrating after a meeting as part of the learning process. (See Example 4 on facing page.)



For example, when I am in a meeting, I stay with silent empathy to the extent I am able to. When I get stimulated by something I or someone else says or does, then I go back to self-empathy, because I'm no longer connected with other people's needs. Once I've reconnected to myself sufficiently, I'm able to listen for what the person is really saying, what I imagine their reason is for saying it, and what the need is that they're seeking to meet. What I like about switching back and forth this way, between silent empathy and self-empathy, is that even if I don't say anything directly using NVC—Observations, Feeling, Needs, Requests, either in the form of empathy or expression—I am a different person than if I'm thinking judgmental thoughts. I'm coming out of a different energy. A person will react to me differently because of my body language, the words I use and how I use them, the pacing, pressure, and energy that's in my voice. My entire demeanor will be different as a result of doing these practices of self-empathy and silent empathy in the moment.

In summary, thus far we suggest using NVC in your workplace through awareness of how you are blocking connection, and through using self-empathy and silent empathy whenever possible. As you begin to practice these skills, you will probably find yourself reviewing situations, focusing on what else you might have done, and solidifying your intention to do things differently next time. If so, then you are now in the learning cycle, which we will look at in more depth in the next chapter.

Example 4



You have another meeting with your team, two weeks later. You realize going into the meeting that you have preconceived ideas of how the meeting will go, based on your experience meeting with these folks for the last six

months. You don't like the feelings, thoughts, and actions that result from these judgments. This time, you decide to try using your silent empathy practice to change your experience during the meeting. You pay attention carefully for when you are triggered by Harold or someone else. As soon as you notice it, you use self-empathy in the moment (alternately paying attention to the meeting) to reconnect with your needs. You might write on your notepad what was said or done that triggered you, how you feel about it, and what need of yours is not met. Having reconnected with yourself, you switch to silent empathy—to guessing what might be stimulating the other person, what they might be feeling, and what need they are seeking to meet. During the rest of the meeting, you find yourself shifting to self-empathy and silent empathy whenever you realize you've been triggered.