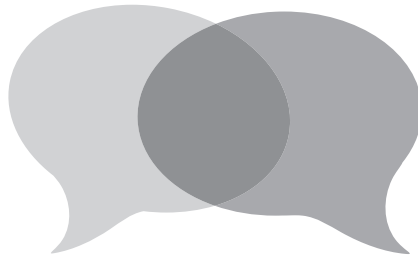


## PART III



### *Practicing Together*



# *Practicing Together*

## **A—Creating a Practice Group**

**W**hen joining or creating a group, it is helpful to be clear about what you hope to gain and what you are willing to give. While most NVC practice groups serve several purposes, one group might agree to focus on developing fluency in using the process while another might emphasize the sense of community inspired by the spirit of NVC. Likewise, one person may want to invest limited time and emotional energy, while another values the group as a major commitment in their life. Such differences can be reconciled and are less likely to lead to confusion and conflict if, individually and collectively, members can bring clarity and honest disclosure of needs in relation to their expectations.

The following are common motivations for joining a practice group:

- To learn or review NVC concepts
- To develop fluency in using the process
- To gain support in one's practice and commitment by belonging to a like-minded community
- To meet needs for empathy and connection
- To develop friendships that are grounded in NVC
- To be inspired and reminded of NVC purpose and consciousness
- To serve life and contribute to the community by sharing NVC through teaching or leadership skills

One way for a single person to generate a practice group is to bring together some people to watch an NVC video such as Marshall Rosenberg's "Making Life Wonderful." Tell the group what's behind your own interest in NVC and in starting a group. Introduce the book and workbook as resources for a group to teach themselves the skills demonstrated in the video.

There are as many ways to structure a practice group as there are those who wish to cultivate and practice NVC consciousness. Suggestions are given here and in the Leader's Guide to assist you in experimenting with structure. A willingness to deviate from "the way we have always done it in the past" may increase the likelihood of more fully meeting the individual and collective needs of your particular group. Remember that by embracing discussions and disagreements about structure you are each affirming your choice to practice the process. Some groups have used this process as a major source of learning while also recognizing that the further along a group is in staying connected to the principles of NVC and mastering NVC skills, the greater the group's capacity to co-create a mutually enjoyable outcome.

To match the curriculum of this workbook, consider forming a group of five to eight members to meet weekly for two-and-a-half hours over the course of at least fourteen weeks.\* You may want to organize a preliminary meeting for people to get to know one another and to agree on basic structure, procedures, and the materials (book and workbook) to be used. At this first meeting, it may be useful to review together *Part I: Using This Workbook*, and sections A-F of *Part III: Practicing Together*.

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**\*NOTE:** Twenty-two weeks is a more preferable length since it allows another eight weeks of practice after the group has completed the basic curriculum. Please note that there have been successful groups that have been as large as twelve, as small as four, have met biweekly, or only for two hours each time.

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A recommended structure to accompany the use of this workbook is the "leaderful practice circle." The circle evokes inclusiveness, balanced participation, and community. Leadership may be rotated so that each member has an opportunity to contribute and to practice facilitating, teaching, and guiding the circle. All members are leaders in that they all take responsibility for the well-being of the circle. The tasks of defining and realizing the purpose, nature, and direction of the circle belong to everyone.

In communities where NVC trainers are available, leaderful circles can benefit by inviting trainers to lead specific parts of the meetings. In this way, members continue to “own” the circle and to rotate overall leadership while being called to practice the art of making clear requests to their guest mentors.

## B—Remembering Our Purpose and Taking Time

By choosing community as our crucible for learning, we are opening ourselves not only to the beauty and power of human connections, but also to the pain of unmet needs triggered by our interactions with one another. To fully appreciate both the joys and the hurts, and to grow from them throughout your time with one another, try to:

### 1. Find ways to remember the purpose of being together.

For example, you might clearly demarcate the time and space you share by:

- a. opening and closing each gathering consciously with a reading, candle, music, story, silence, bell, etc.
- b. creating a “centerpiece” (with a picture, flower, poem, etc.) as a reminder of that place of infinite compassion in each of us, a place where there is no separation of “me” and “them.”

You might also create frequent opportunities for the expression of appreciation (for yourself, life, others, one another, the group, etc.) and for celebration (of miracles and successes, big and small).



### REMEMBER TO TAKE TIME!

### 2. Take time.

We are changing the habits of a lifetime as we learn to speak from the heart. Are we able to welcome our own and one another’s stuttering, stumbling, and silences as signs that we are replacing automatic pilot with conscious speech? When we ask ourselves questions like the following, our words may indeed take more time to form:

- “What am I really reacting to here?”
- “What is the intention behind my opening my mouth now?”
- “What feelings are alive in me in this moment?”
- “What is the need behind my immediate desire here?”
- “Am I making a clear request of anyone?”

We might encourage a slower pace in our gatherings by, for example:

- Including moments of silence as a time for people to connect to themselves.
- Passing a talking stick (or other object) for some parts of the gathering. The person with the stick is offered the circle’s gift of attentive silence without pressure to hurry. Generally, the stick is passed in one direction without interruption or comment from others. Individuals may choose to talk, or hold the stick in silence and pass it on without talking.
- Repeating, paraphrasing, or translating into NVC what one person has said before the next person speaks. This can be especially helpful when more than one person in the group is experiencing emotional intensity. To practice, the group might allot a certain amount of time during a meeting to interact in this way. This can also serve as an effective way to train our ability to listen.
- Taking two full breaths before speaking after the previous person has finished speaking.

### 3. What Might An Individual Do?

As part of your intentional practice, it is as important for you to Remember Your Purpose and Take Time as it is for a group to do the same. Practice taking your time when you are responding to your family, friends, and coworkers.

## C—Leading the Practice Circle

Each member has an opportunity for service and self-expression when offering to the circle his or her own unique way of leading the session. Because leadership is rotated, individuals may feel freer to take risks and explore their varying leadership styles. One leader's tendency toward rigidity and another's toward levity can combine to offer the group balance and diversity over time.

*Leaders serve the circle in four ways:*

1. They uphold the purpose of the circle by creating a space, remembering to slow down, incorporating opportunities to express appreciation, etc.
2. They oversee the group's practical and logistical needs.
3. They plan the structure (schedule of activities, etc.) and guide the group through the process.
4. They put extra effort into familiarizing themselves with the week's curriculum (or the contents of any materials to be covered) so they can be a resource for those who haven't familiarized themselves with it as well as the leader has.

The number of ways in which leaders can work or play with these four areas is infinite. Seasoned leaders will hopefully draw fully from their experiences so the circle may benefit from their facility, insights, and past mistakes. For those new to leading and facilitating, the following "Suggestions and Sample Format for Leading a Circle" can serve as a guideline from which to explore and experiment. Rooted in a consciousness of needs, we might remind ourselves that there is no "right way" to lead a circle, and no wrong way. There is only: my way (today, last month), your way (last week, last year), needs met, needs unmet . . .

### Suggestions and Sample Format for Leading a Circle

The following section contains suggestions and a sample format for leading a circle that meets for two-and-one-half hours.

For the first meeting you lead, consider using the following suggestions, and on a separate piece of paper:

- make note of the suggested tasks as you complete them
- write down alternative ideas of how to proceed, while addressing the same objectives
- jot down what you plan to say in the circle at a particular step
- or organize your own plan.

### *Before the meeting*

1. Read the chapter and complete the written assignment or whatever material the group has decided to cover.
2. Create a plan for the meeting—what’s to happen, when, and how—or use the sample format as outlined below.

### *On the day of the meeting*

1. Preparing the space  
Arrive fifteen minutes early to arrange the seats in a circle so everyone will be able to see one another. If beverages are being made available, prepare cups, tea, etc., ahead of time. Arrange the centerpiece, wall charts, etc., if you choose to use these. A clock visible to all may be helpful.
2. Greetings  
Welcome each person as he or she arrives.
3. Connect with yourself  
When you are ready to begin, take thirty seconds to connect inwardly, “What do I feel and need right now?” Connect to the purpose behind what you are about to offer to the group. Be simply and fully present for one moment.
4. “Remembrance”  
Gather the group. Dedicate a moment to help us remember who we are and why we are here. Whether it’s the change of seasons



or the bombings of overseas neighbors, focus on whatever inspires you yourself to feel connected to the web of life.

5. Opening the circle

Invite people to “check in” by sharing what is alive for them in this moment. Or, you might ask for a round of response to a question such as, “What kinds of NVC-related insights and experiences did you have this week?” or “Would you share something you would like to celebrate this week?” Indicate how much time you planned for the round; and then mention a general expectation of how much time you’d like each person to take. Go in one direction (clockwise or counter-clockwise). Allow the group to focus attention on each person in turn. Either pass a talking object, or suggest a word, sound, or gesture that allows people to indicate they are complete before the next person begins. Remind participants to connect with their feelings and needs as they speak.

**Example:** “I’d like to open the circle with a round of check-ins. Let’s take twenty minutes for this sharing—about three minutes for each of us. I’ll start and then I’ll pass this ‘Talking Stick’ clockwise. Let’s practice staying connected to our feelings and needs as we speak. And remember, you have the option to talk or just enjoy the silence of holding the Talking Stick until you’re ready to pass it on.”

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**NOTE:** After the round is complete, if you sense that someone who had shared vulnerably may still be carrying intense feelings, you might want to address them, acknowledge their words, empathize with their feelings and needs, or express your sincere reaction.

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Before moving on, briefly state the schedule for the rest of the meeting.

6. Allow about forty-five minutes for the first study or practice session. (This will likely begin about half an hour into the meeting.)
7. Mid-meeting, take a short break if desired.

8. Continue with a second study or practice session for another forty-five minutes. (Use the Leader's Guide for each assignment to plan the study or practice sessions of the meeting.)
9. Feedback, appreciations, and closing (consider allowing twenty to thirty minutes). End the meeting with another "round." You might want a moment of silence to allow people to transition out of the Study or Practice Session. Invite them to connect with any feelings of gratitude that may be inside. Get in touch with any feelings of gratitude you might have for the opportunity of having served the circle in this way today.

When you speak again, ask for feedback about the meeting. If you feel anxious when making this request, try expressing your feelings and needs and any request that might address those needs.

Formally close the circle (whether with words, music, silence, poetry, a joining of hands, or other means of your choosing).

10. Post-meeting details
  - a. Confirm who will be the leader for the next meeting and finalize other practical details.
  - b. Ask everyone to take five minutes to fill out an "Individual Feedback Form" (see Appendix 5) while the meeting's experience is still fresh in their minds.
  - c. Clean up, pack up, farewells, departure.

### *After the meeting*

Take time to ask yourself what you enjoyed and didn't enjoy about leading the circle, what worked and didn't work, and what you would want to do differently the next time. Read over the Individual Feedback Forms that group members wrote for you. Use the reverse side of your own Individual Feedback Form to reflect upon your experience.

If you sense yourself needing some empathy or understanding, you might approach a friend who listens to you well. If your pain is associated with someone's words or behavior that occurred in the circle, consider how you might protect trust in the circle while also meeting your needs for empathy and support.

If you feel joyous, elated, or proud of how you led the circle, find ways to acknowledge your growth and accomplishment. You might want to celebrate it at next week's Opening Circle.

## D–“What We Value in a Practice Group Leader”

Thirty NVC practitioners in Seattle reflected together on the topic, “What do I want in a practice group leader?” Below is a summary of their discussion. If you will be leading a group, use this list to remind yourself of qualities that participants value. You may also use this list as a way to solicit feedback from participants on various aspects of your leadership after a particular session. Do not compare yourself to the leaders being described in the quotes below. They don’t exist.

- **We value leaders who keep our group on task.**  
 “She maintains the focus and is able to track interruptions and bring us back to the point. She starts the meeting at the agreed-on time and keeps track of time.”
- **We value leaders who balance task orientation with an attention to process and who provide a clear structure, but are also able to let it go when that’s called for.**  
 “He covers the agenda without sacrificing the quality of the moment. He stays present and grounded, and sets a tone that fosters a positive atmosphere.” “She is flexible with the process and the structure so as to meet everyone’s needs.”
- **We value leaders who “lead as servant to the group.”**  
 “He is eager to learn from us what we need and is responsive to feedback. The needs of the group is what is important to him.”
- **We value leaders who pay attention to group dynamics.**  
 “She is observant of everyone in the group and of interactions among members. She helps facilitate the process and encourages the group process without taking over or ‘owning’ the group. She knows how to help the group move forward or to stand still.”
- **We value leaders who are aware of safety needs in the group and who create a space that emphasizes inclusiveness.**  
 “He encourages everyone to participate and makes sure each person has the opportunity to speak and be heard. He maintains a balance so the group is not dominated by a few members.” “She maintains a safe emotional environment and draws out the full

participation of those present so that they feel empowered to express themselves and be who they are.”

- **We value leaders who embody compassion.**  
“He is open, empathic, and patient. He listens carefully without being judgmental.”
- **We value leaders who are playful and have fun leading.**  
“She has a sense of humor and is lighthearted.”
- **We value leaders who show humility, a willingness to acknowledge their own limitations, and the courage to take risks.**  
“He is vulnerable, recognizes his own limits and fears, and is able to ask for help. He is courageous in acknowledging what he doesn’t know. He is willing to move out of the comfort zone into uncomfortable places.”
- **We value leaders who come prepared and who keep their commitments.**  
“He plans for the meetings and is well-organized and takes seriously his commitment as a leader.”
- **We value leaders who bring us back to expressing ourselves in NVC.**  
“She keeps within the process and helps us hear one another’s feelings and needs clearly, especially when friction arises.”
- **Other qualities we value in a practice group leader:**  
Clarity, Authenticity, Honesty, Creativity.

## E—Making Rules

Agreeing on a set of rules for your practice circle can save time and be a source of reassurance that everyone is “on the same page.” If you intend to post rules for your NVC practice group or organization, try the following NVC exercise:

1. Rules are strategies to meet needs—explore and express the need(s) behind the rule.
2. Ask yourselves, “Is this rule a request or a demand?” (Does anyone notice any “should, ought to, supposed to” thinking around it?)

Especially for a group that meets regularly, more satisfaction might be gained through ongoing dialogues regarding feelings, needs, and current requests than through rules—especially if the rules did not evolve out of group discussion of needs. Rules sometimes have the tendency to incline us toward judgment and blame when we encounter someone who has chosen to “break the rule.” And thus, when someone does “break a rule”—for example, by missing meetings—on top of whatever we might be feeling toward that person’s absence, we also experience an additional layer of pain regarding group rules not being respected.

If we have a need around which we are particularly anxious, e.g., confidentiality, rather than counting on everyone agreeing to a “confidentiality rule,” we could try to articulate it: “I am worried about being understood or seen in ways other than I want to be. When I share something about my life in this circle, I get scared sometimes that one of you might tell someone else what I said and they’ll get an impression of me I don’t want them to have. I’d like to hear from the rest of you—do you have such fears too?”

We might request time to explore specific situations that trigger fears such as talking about other people in their absence. What needs are we meeting and what other ways could we meet those needs? How can we cultivate deeper awareness of intention when speaking about others? How can we support one another in living our intentions when talking about others? How can we check in on people’s sense of comfort around this issue as the circle progresses?

It is possible that rules, by their identification with specific strategies, might actually hinder the cultivation of the transformative heart space where miracles take place—where joyously we let go of what a minute ago we thought we “had to have” out of the profoundly transformed realization that there is a superabundance of strategies for all needs to be met.

Of course, rules and laws do play a prominent role in our society. As NVC users, we can translate each one we come across so as to hear the need behind it as clearly as possible. More importantly, we try to stay connected to the need behind our own choice to either behave in accordance with the rule or not. In an NVC community, we know how much we will pay if anyone amongst us hears the group rules as demands, and then—woe—chooses to “follow the rules.”

## F—Inviting Feedback

Clear and accurate knowledge of how our words and actions affect others is a major resource for personal growth and the ability to communicate effectively. NVC stresses taking responsibility for one's own feelings as well as actions. Thus we are clear that our words and actions cannot “make” others feel nor do anything, and that other people's feelings derive from their own met or unmet needs.

However, we are also aware that all of us have tremendous power to contribute to the well-being (or lack of well-being) of others. If we take joy in contributing to life (our own well-being as well as that of others), we value feedback that shows us whether our intention to contribute has been realized. A bloated feeling in the stomach may be feedback from eating a ten-course banquet. Smiles from the delivery people may be feedback from my holding open the door for them. Several toots from the car behind me may be feedback on how I am backing up out of my parking space.

Most of us welcome feedback that confirms that our actions are indeed contributing to life. We may be less eager, however, to access feedback of the “negative” kind if we choose to hear it as judgment, condemnation, or demand. However, a bloated stomach is not a judgment of the banquet, a condemnation of my choice to gorge myself, or a demand never to indulge again. If we remember we always have power of choice and that the source of feedback can never “make” us behave differently, we might be able to appreciate feedback simply as precious information that helps us make more effective decisions. It is helpful to remember that choosing to hear another for the purpose of understanding their position in no way implies alignment or agreement—only a willingness to connect with them in order to accurately understand what is alive in them in this moment.

In an NVC practice group, we all share a commitment to deepen our capacity for compassion, connection, and communication. Belonging to an NVC practice group can be a gold mine for those who value feedback. Be sure to reserve time at the end of each group session for reflection, mutual appreciation, and feedback. Appendices 5 and 6 are individual and group feedback forms used by some practice groups.



## G-Conflicts in the Group

Part of the richness and challenge of working and learning in a group is having our buttons pushed. Most of us will probably experience some tension and conflict in a group that meets over time. Our most important NVC-based task is to move into awareness of what we feel and need when we sense conflict. With this awareness we can make a conscious choice as to how to address our needs in a way most likely to bring us fulfillment.

Whereas we might unconsciously suppress or ignore tension we feel around people in other groups, it sometimes happens in an NVC practice group that we react to unpleasant situations by exposing our fellow group members to every frustration, annoyance, and anger they trigger in us with the assumption that this is “the NVC way.” When we first experience the excitement of connecting with our own needs, we may forget that in the long run we can’t meet our needs at the expense of others. Conflict is surely wonderful grist for the mill, but we can still exercise judgment regarding the timing, the size of the grist, and the power of the mill. A mature practice group may be able to embrace full-blown conflicts that would have overwhelmed its members a few months earlier. We also need to remember that if unresolved conflicts do lead to members leaving, or the group dissolving, that this itself is a crucial moment to practice NVC (see number 11 on page 36).

The following situations involving conflict or dissatisfaction are common in NVC practice groups in some communities. The bold and quoted words come directly from participants. Commentaries follow in regular type. If you are experiencing any of the difficult situations mentioned below, use the words of the group member quoted to help get in touch with your own feelings and needs. The following list may also be used to engender role-play or real-time dialogue in your group.

### 1. Women, Men, and Other Differences

“Sometimes when a woman in the group is talking, I feel miffed because I would like to be enjoying the same level of understanding and catching the nuances that the women in the group all seem to be sharing with one another. I fear that I am losing some vital part

of the conversation. I want to be participating fully while being seen and accepted for who I am and what I know.”

This person expresses his need for inclusiveness—a value that is generally prominent when we participate in a group. He might want to ask himself what he is observing that leads him to think that the women are catching something he is missing. Did he notice glances between certain women? Was there laughter where he could detect nothing funny? By offering this kind of observation, he might help the women become aware of behaviors that may not even have been conscious, but more importantly, he can express his feelings and needs and ask for empathy from the women. If he were able to obtain the reassurance that the women understand and care that he feels lonely and miffed and needs to be included, he may well experience connection and acceptance even if he continues to be perplexed by the humor of certain moments.

In a group where we perceive ourselves as “minority,” we can (after expressing our needs) make specific requests for behaviors that we think would support our needs for inclusiveness or respect. For example: “Would you be willing to use words other than ‘sexist’ to describe what you are reacting to?” In a diverse group, our need for inclusiveness can still be met even if we never “get” what all the others who share a common background might be “getting.” What will make a difference is whether we achieve the trust and reassurance that a significant number of those present (and that could be just one person) hear our pain and sincerely care about our needs to be fully included, accepted, and respected.

## 2. Practicing vs. Talking About a Situation

“I get frustrated each time we agree to do role-plays and then end up talking about the situations people bring up. I am confused as to why this happens.”

After acknowledging this concern openly to the group, we may want to review Section K, *Suggestions for Structuring a Role-Play*, to make sure that everyone in the group is clear about the purpose and process of role-playing. If the group continues to find itself talking about the

situation rather than practicing, it could be that the central person (whose life situation it is) is in a great deal of pain and needs empathy before being able to carry on a role-play. In this case, we can either move into an “unrealistic scenario” whereby the central person receives empathy from the other party (see Section K, *Suggestions for Structuring a Role-Play, #2*), or stop the role-play and switch to an empathy session (see Section J, *Suggestions for Structuring an Empathy Session*).

Here’s an example of what one might say to address the situation:

“I’m concerned that we might be talking about this scenario rather than practicing it. I wonder if it would be helpful, (name of central player), if you could be more fully heard and understood about the situation before we engage in this role-play? How would you feel about just relaxing into an empathy session and having us focus on listening and reflecting back your present feelings and needs around this past situation?”

### 3. Structure: Tight or Loose?

These things occur:

- people arrive late . . .
- then they socialize with one another . . .
- the facilitator starts the check-in twenty minutes after agreed-upon time . . .
- people give their thoughts and opinions on various subjects more-or-less NVC-related—most often less . . .
- they talk at length (more words than I’d like to hear) and about stuff I have no interest in . . .
- the check-in takes forty-five minutes . . .
- the facilitator seems to go with the flow (It seems we just go with whoever wants to talk about whatever) . . .

“I get frustrated because I want to be devoting my time here to practicing NVC.”

This speaker values group time and wants it mindfully used in service of the original purpose for which the group was formed: “practicing NVC.” Before expressing himself to the group, he might want to clarify for himself what he means by “practicing NVC,” and be open to other members’ definitions. After he communicates his frustration and need, and receives empathy and understanding, he may want to hear how others have experienced the triggers he mentioned. He may discover, for example, that someone who has been arriving late was also frustrated with the tardiness, or why someone would prize the forty-five-minute check-in more than any other activity of the meeting. It may be helpful to engage in a Reflective Round (See Section I, *Forms of Group Interaction*) repeatedly until all needs and feelings regarding this subject have been heard, and only then begin to explore solutions. If agreements are made at the end of the discussion, end with another Reflective Round, in which all members express their feelings about the agreements and what needs of theirs are met by agreeing to them.

#### 4. “Real-Time” Interactions vs. Planned Practice, Getting Angry Before Getting to the Anger Chapter, and More on Structure

As mentioned in the section *Creating a Practice Group*, while all members may share basic reasons for coming together, we may place different values on different aspects of our NVC group experience. Some people value “real-time” interactions, whereas others want to focus on practice through role-plays, exercises, assignments, etc. Many of us, like the person below, want to balance and include both:

“I feel anxious and torn when I hear people expressing pain, sometimes during check-in, because I want us to take time to empathize and I also want us to complete the check-ins to get to the rest of our planned practice session.”

It is helpful for a group to openly acknowledge this as an ongoing tension—and one that can call forth different responses as the group grows in its mastery of NVC. We refer jokingly to the problem of “getting angry before getting to *Expressing Anger Fully*” when using this chapter-a-week curriculum. Until the NVC process (two parts and four components) has been covered, it may be helpful for a group to

limit interactions about real-time situations to a specific part of the session, e.g., check-ins. This ensures that the group spends more time practicing and learning NVC than discussing opinions, past experiences, theories, and personal situations. Once all the basics of the process have been covered (by the eighth week), the group will be able to incorporate Empathy Sessions. As individuals achieve greater NVC fluency, more and more of the session may consist of unstructured real-time NVC interactions.

In any group we commonly find some members who want more structure and some who want less. It is helpful, if I want more structure, to be able to express often—and with specificity—how I appreciated the structured exercise that the group just completed. Likewise, if I appreciate less structure, I could make a conscious effort to specify ways in which I benefited from an opportunity to interact in real time.

## 5. Following Through on Group Agreements

“I get frustrated when we had agreed to incorporate a time for feedback at the end of every session, but only twice in these many meetings has the session’s facilitator alerted us in time to do this. I want to be able to count on things happening as we all agreed.”

If this person is clear that she values not only reliability, but also learning and connection—which she hopes to receive through regular feedback—she can address these distinct sets of needs separately with the group. As always, she will want first to be received and to know that her needs have been understood. Then other members might express how they have experienced the lack of feedback. Then separately, the lack of follow-through can be addressed in the same way. It is only after everyone’s feelings and needs regarding each issue have been heard that the group would then launch into strategies and solutions.

## 6. When We Want Our Energy and Commitment to Be Matched by Others

“When I see someone miss over three quarters of our meetings and arrive without having read the book or done the assignment, I feel frustrated because I would like to see more commitment and

contribution on their part. I want to belong to a group where we are mutually supported by one another's commitment and efforts. (I am also confused and would like to understand why someone who participates so little still wants to be part of our circle.)”

It is easy for us to assume that someone's repeated absence and lack of preparation reflect a lack of interest without checking it out with the person. The lack of participation by other members may trigger discouragement, self-doubt, and frustration in us, especially if we ourselves are striving hard to live up to our commitment (because maybe not all our own needs are being met in the group). It would be useful to stop and find out from them whether their absence is related to needs of theirs not being met in the group (hence their lack of enthusiasm in participating) or to other circumstances. We might, for example, get an altogether different response such as:

“Even though I've been only making meetings once a month, this circle is a huge thing to me. The support and learning I get here are like an anchor for the rest of my crazy life. I am so exhausted when I get here after work and the long drive that I don't arrive very energetic, and I know this sounds crazy, but I can't tell you how much I appreciate just being able to soak up the peace and compassion I feel in this room. And about those assignments, I've been a little embarrassed to say this, but I'm not a book person. I mean, I don't really read much, and that's not how I learn—through books, that is. But I remember nearly everything I hear, so it helps me just listening to you guys do the exercises here. I can understand you really want to see everyone putting in, and I do want to do my share. I'd like to know what I could do to contribute even if I can't make it to every meeting until I get that job transfer.”

Or, you may discover that the other people indeed have not been feeling enthusiastic about attending the circle, in which case we remind ourselves quickly, “It's not about us. It's about needs.”—needs of theirs that are met by being elsewhere, or needs of theirs that haven't been met by their being here.

## 7. Members Who “Dominate”

“Just about every week I see the same two people getting more air time than others. On occasion I have heard them raise their voices and talk louder than someone else who was just beginning to speak. I feel disappointed because I want everyone to have equal opportunity to speak and be heard. I want to be learning from everyone.”

Many of us experience situations where certain people speak much more than we enjoy hearing. In our frustration and helplessness, unable to meet our needs for mutuality or connection, we may end up labeling the other person as “domineering,” “insensitive,” “exhausting,” etc. In the chapter on *The Power of Empathy* in the book, there is a section that demonstrates how we might interrupt speakers rather than pretend to be listening to them.

In a practice group we may be uncomfortable with one person taking substantially more airtime even if we enjoy what she is saying, because we so value balanced participation. Since people who are perceived by others as “talking too much” aren’t necessarily aware when their behavior falls into that category, they may appreciate some form of explicit feedback: raising a hand, for example, when we begin to feel uncomfortable and want the floor to be passed on. We might also consider structuring in more balance through the use of the Round, or a Talking Object (see Part III, Section I, *Forms of Group Interaction*), or we might even experiment with the game of talking-tokens, in which we all start off with an equal number of tokens and release one every time we take the floor.

## 8. “Doing NVC” as an Obstacle to Connection

“At times when I see people ‘doing NVC’ by parroting the process, I feel annoyed because my need is for authentic connection rather than correctness.”

When we perceive ourselves being addressed through NVC formulas rather than through a living application of NVC concepts, it might be helpful to remember to stay connected to the concepts as they live within us. Remember once again that any form of anger like irritation

or annoyance is likely to have its origin in “should thinking.” While there is nothing “wrong” about thinking that way, we are much more likely to experience the authentic connection we hope for when we are able to translate such thinking into feelings and needs.

We are more likely to stay stuck in annoyance and conflict when we believe our feelings are caused by the actions of another like, “I feel annoyed because you are parroting the process.” It benefits us to examine the feeling of annoyance to see if it is grounded in some thinking of how “authentic connection ‘should’ sound.” Take a moment to re-center—a slow deep breath, etc. By spending a moment to get clearer about what is going on in you at a deeper level, you will be more open to hearing what is going on in the other person in relation to authentic connection. It may well be that the speaker also values authentic connection, and is relying on the process as the best means to establish connection.

If you are in some pain from seeing yourself being given “formulaic empathy,” you might acknowledge it in this way: “I hear the conscious effort you are making to empathize with my position. I realize I’m experiencing difficulty in staying present and want what to me is a deeper sense of genuine connection between us. Would you be willing to work with me on that by expressing what you just said in a different way? What I really need to hear right now is, ‘xxxxx?’” Or, you might make a clear and doable request for honesty—for the other person to reveal what is going on in her in that moment. Take your time. Remember the energy from which you want to come, and your desire for her to respond to you only from her heart—willingly and without fear of consequences.

Oftentimes in moments of uncertainty, those who practice NVC refer to the steps of the process as a literal road map to point them step by step to the place of the heart. When we are willing to hear and see another person’s intention rather than focus on their “stiff attempts to practice NVC,” we may come to recognize how both our hearts share the same intention and desire for connection.



## 9. “Nice Yet Boring” Meetings

“I feel disappointed with the often ‘nice yet boring’ quality to our meetings. It doesn’t meet my need for authentic connection.”

Oftentimes it only takes one person to introduce something “real” in the circle for the group culture to deepen in intimacy and authenticity. If we are willing to be that person, we might first consider expressing our need, and then requesting feedback as to whether, when, or how other members would be willing to receive something we’d like to risk sharing.

Alternatively, we might initiate a dialogue on the subject, “Thinking about our meetings over the last four months, I sometimes feel disappointed that we don’t seem to have touched any issues that generate strong feelings for us. I would like more depth and authenticity in our connection. May I hear from each of you how you have experienced this aspect of our gatherings?” Explore what fears might be preventing members from sharing more openly, and especially the needs behind the fears. Take time to empathize with each person before trying to decide how the group might change in a way that addresses the need for authenticity, as well as the other needs expressed.

## 10. A Lone Dissenter

“One person is unwilling to go with what the rest of us want, and says she will only practice in a particular way. I feel worried because I want cooperation and more consideration for what large numbers of people in the group want. And then, when I see how much of the group time and energy has been spent dealing with what this person wants, I start to feel resentful because I want to be spending time on the curriculum, and also to be enjoying a more fun, harmonious group atmosphere.”

The pain in such a situation may be especially intense for one or more members of a practice group because we are constantly reminded of the importance of everyone’s needs being met. Some of us are fearful of falling into behaviors we condemn, such as “tyranny of the majority,” “stigmatizing,” etc. We may thus feel depressed, hopeless, and frustrated—seeing ourselves stuck between either submitting to the will

of a single person or asserting the power of the majority in ways we ourselves abhor.

Here we need to take a big breath, let it out, and recall the difference between needs and specific ways of meeting those needs. (Review the distinction between *need* and *request* in the NVC process. Requests consist of strategies that we hope might meet a need.) Can we let go of problem-solving for the time being, focus on nurturing empathy and connection in the group, and trust that when hearts connect, solutions will emerge? To truly connect will require us to share our frustrations—how hopeless we feel when we perceive no way out of our dilemma, how deeply we value inclusion and respect, how much we care about everyone’s needs being met, etc.—and then invite the other person to express the feelings and needs triggered by her position as a “black sheep.”

If we are able to offer one another empathy for the pain of this division in the group, we will be ready—out of that place of connection and compassion—to return and explore the original issue. We might agree to try some new strategies, or we might agree that, for all of us, the need for learning could best be met by the one person’s joining a different learning situation. (See below, *When Someone Leaves*.) We can come to recognize that it is possible to disengage without disconnecting, to separate physically without putting each other out of our hearts.

## 11. When Someone Leaves or the Whole Group Dissolves

When a group loses a member or completely dissolves, it is common for everyone to feel pain, perceive failure, and exercise blame and self-blame. Thus it is a particularly crucial time to practice NVC. It would be helpful to remember that we can make conscious choices as to how we terminate a particular form of relationship. We can celebrate partings by openly acknowledging our differences, our pain, and unmet needs, really devoting time to empathizing fully with one another, and also to expressing what we did appreciate during our time together. We can grieve our disappointments and still sincerely wish one another well as we move along different paths of engagement. Our work is to keep our hearts open to one another even while we choose different forms to meet our respective needs for learning, community, etc.

## 12. Mixed-Level Participants

Practice groups that include both newcomers to NVC and more seasoned practitioners may find it helpful to recognize a tension characteristic of mixed-level groups. Seasoned practitioners have likely witnessed and been inspired by the beauty and power of NVC interactions. Their own experience may well have taught them the pitfalls of common social behaviors such as analyzing, complimenting, story-telling, sympathizing, diagnosing, etc. When they see the group engaging in such behaviors, they may feel worried and frustrated because they would like NVC to be learned and practiced in a way that reflects NVC principles and understanding. Then when they do make suggestions to the group, they may be additionally frustrated to find themselves unable to convey these in a way that is heard and appreciated by those who have not yet personally experienced the effects of NVC. In fact, they may notice their suggestions trigger insecurity and resentment in the group, especially in the circle-holder working hard to lead the particular session.

Mixed-level groups might benefit from inviting the most seasoned among them to lead the circle, at least through Assignment 8 (by which time all participants will have hopefully learned the basics of the NVC process). This provides an opportunity for the experienced practitioner(s) to apply their NVC skills and serve the group in ways that are most likely to be appreciated by others.

The following are two dialogues that address “NVC Old-timers” who find themselves in a practice group with newcomers to NVC. The first dialogue is between the Old-timer and a friend—another seasoned practitioner who is not part of the group. The second dialogue is between the same Old-timer and a participant in the practice group who is fairly new to NVC.

**Old-timer:** *I've been feeling kind of frustrated a bunch of times at my practice group . . .*

**Friend:** *Oh, is it someone in your group who is new to NVC?*

**Old-timer:** *Yeah. Two or three times now I've seen something happen and I say, "If we want to do it in NVC, here's how you'd say it . . ." And the response I get back is, "No, don't tell me. You can do it that way, but I want to do it this way."*

**Friend:** *So I can see you're feeling a bit frustrated because . . .*

**Old-timer:** *Right! I've been studying and practicing for two years and I've made lots of mistakes and have at least a little bit more understanding and insight than when I started, and I'd like to be able to share these . . . to offer what I've learned to a group where most everyone is new to NVC . . .*

**Friend:** *So are you sad that your need to contribute in that way isn't being met?*

**Old-timer:** *I am . . . I'm sad. Also, I'm kind of angry.*

**Friend:** *Angry? Like when you hear how they respond to your trying to help?*

**Old-timer:** *Yes, I'm noticing I'm feeling somewhat angry . . . guess that means I must have some old "should" thinking going on in my head.*

**Friend:** *How about ferreting out those "should-thoughts?"*

**Old-timer:** *Oh yes, the "should-thinking" . . . Let's see. I guess I'm thinking, "They should listen to me. They should believe me, they should be able to see my intentions and know that what I am saying will help them."*

**Friend:** *Ummm, so to translate the "should-thinking" into needs . . .*

**Old-timer:** *(Silence. Then:) Yeah, I need to contribute, maybe to be trusted, and understood better. (Long silence)*

**Friend:** *Do you still feel angry?*

**Old-timer:** *Uhn-uh. No. I feel . . . I guess hurt.*

**Friend:** *Do you feel hurt because you want your intentions to be seen and appreciated? And what you offer to be received?*

**Old-timer:** *That's right. I want to be received, to be trusted and appreciated . . . (Silence as Old-timer stays present to feelings inside.)*

**Friend:** *I wonder if you also feel some discouragement because you want to be able to communicate your intentions in a way that is better understood?*

**Old-timer:** *Yeah, I feel disappointed with myself. I want to be more effective, more competent in applying this language of NVC. I want some reassurance that after two years I can communicate my intentions so I'm understood.*

**Friend:** *Well, maybe you're doing it right now. Am I getting what you want to communicate?*

**Old-timer:** *Yes, yes, you got it.*

**Friend:** *Then maybe you can do the same with the new folks. I see one of them from your practice group coming right now.*

**Old-timer:** *Yikes!*

**Friend:** *Yikes? I wonder if that translates in classical NVC into: "I feel scared; I would like more confidence than I have, and my request to myself is to go ahead and try it."*

**Old-timer:** *Uh . . . yes. Well, here goes . . .*

#### *Dialogue between Old-timer and the Newcomer:*

**Old-timer:** *Oh, hi. I've been meaning to talk to you. At the practice group a couple of times now, when I've suggested, "In order to say it in NVC, why don't you . . ." I heard you answer back something like, "No, I don't want to do it that way," or "I don't know that what you are saying is true . . ."*

**Newcomer:** *Yeah, it's real annoying when you tell us what to do! Like you're the only one who knows how to do it right. Okay, so you've been studying for two years, but that doesn't mean the rest of us don't know anything. I mean, a lot of us have been practicing compassion and communication, and . . . sure, yeah, you might know some things but I know other stuff.*

**Old-timer:** *So, am I hearing that you feel frustrated because you would like to be addressed differently—in a way that shows recognition for what you have learned, for what you know, and for the efforts you are making?*

**Newcomer:** *That's right. I'm trying to do the best I can, and I feel annoyed when someone interrupts and tells me I gotta do it this way, or I gotta do it that way. I mean, I want to learn NVC, of*

*course, that's why I'm in a practice group. I want to benefit from the more experienced people, but I don't want to be told I'm wrong, you're right, now do this, now do that!*

**Old-timer:** *So you want to be offered choices, to hear there might be another way to do something, and to be given the opportunity to choose. Perhaps you also want respect for the choices you make? I mean, rather than being told, "Here is the right way," so do it!*

**Newcomer:** *Absolutely! Thank you, thank you! I see now that I have been hearing a demand from you. Sort of like, this is the right way, and if I don't do it your way, I'm stupid, stubborn, resistant, and in addition, dismissive and disrespectful toward you.*

**Old-timer:** *Wow! So are you really needing to trust that I am offering in a way that has no strings attached . . . an offer that is respectful of your choice to either use or not use my coaching, based on your learning style or particular learning needs for that moment?*

**Newcomer:** *That's exactly it. If I could trust that that's the spirit in which you are offering help, then I would probably be a lot more receptive to your suggestions . . . and probably even really appreciate some of them!*

**Old-timer:** *Mmmm. Yeah, I'd really enjoy that. In fact, that's what I started to talk to you about.*

**Newcomer:** *Right. I bet you were feeling upset because you really enjoy contributing and want to do it in a way that is appreciated. Would you be willing to let a Newcomer offer you some NVC empathy?*

**Old-timer:** *I'd love it! . . . and . . . uh . . . would you be willing . . . ahem . . . to let me coach you on doing it?*

## **H—Embracing Conflict: Reminders**

**1. Slow down. Slow down again.**

**2. Ground yourself in PRESENT moment feelings and needs.**

For example, two seconds ago as you were listening to someone talk, you might have felt exasperation. This moment, opening your mouth, you feel scared . . .

**3. Focus on empathy and connection.**

**4. Ask for help.**

For example, “Would you be willing to help me formulate my observations?”

**5. Continue to empathize until everyone affirms that their feelings and needs have been understood.**

**6. ONLY then explore solutions.**

“How do we see things happening differently in the future? Will there be changes in behavior on my or someone else’s part?”

**7. Celebrate our peacemaking**

Acknowledge: our intention, courage, patience, perseverance, compassion, plain hard work, etc. Remind ourselves why we do this work and what is happening in the world in this moment.

## I—Forms of Group Interaction

With an increase of participants in a dialogue, the potential for disconnection among them may also increase. In a leaderful NVC group the only guideline for a free-flowing discussion is for each person to remain aware of their own needs and values—free from moral judgments—and to take responsibility for fulfilling those needs. Of course these needs may include offering, as well as receiving, empathy for the sake of understanding, clarity, and connection.

Appendix 7 is a chart of the NVC process that may be used to track our interactions in relation to the two parts and four components of NVC. The following description of various forms of group interaction is offered for those groups that wish to experiment with structure.

### 1. Round

The Round creates a space for each person in turn to receive the attention of the group. Going around in one direction, speakers take turns and indicate when they are complete. There is no direct response to the speaker, although whoever has the floor may of course address anything that had been said earlier. When a speaker is complete, she or he gives a signal to pass on the turn. Anyone may pass without speaking or, on occasion, choose to receive the group's silent empathy before passing on their turn.

When starting a Round, the group might consider whether to specify:

- a. How much time to devote overall.
- b. The time allowance for each individual (and how and from whom time reminders are to be given).
- c. Subject matter, e.g., “Something meaningful in my life today,” “My vision for this organization,” “An NVC experience or insight,” “Challenges I have as a teacher,” etc.
- d. A word or gesture that a speaker uses to indicate completion.
- e. Whether to go around once, or to continue until everyone passes and wishes to say nothing more.



## 2. Reflective Round

In this variation of the Round, before taking his or her own turn, the person who comes after a speaker reflects back to the speaker's satisfaction what the speaker has just said. Speakers might clarify and repeat something if they are not satisfied that they have been fully understood. However, the purpose would be to clarify, not add to what they have already said. The Reflective Round is useful in slowing down the group process and supporting each person's need to be fully heard.

## 3. Talking Object

An object symbolic of group intentions is placed in the center of the circle. Anyone wishing to speak picks up the item to "claim the floor." The speaker may make requests of anyone in the group in order to address her needs. She continues to hold the item while others are responding to her request. Holding the item reminds the group and whoever is speaking that it is still her requests that are being addressed on the floor. When she has finished, she returns the item to the center and waits until others have had a turn before picking it up again.

## 4. Traffic Director or Facilitator

One person or a succession of persons is chosen by the group to direct group traffic or facilitate the meeting by doing some or all of the following:

- a. Determine whose turn it is to speak.
- b. Reflect back in NVC what the speaker said, or request specific individuals to translate what was said (to support the group's ability to hear one another's feelings, needs, and clear requests).
- c. Guide the flow of discussion, interject, and ask for specific responses from specific individuals.
- d. Articulate main points, decisions, and direction to bring coherence and cohesiveness into discussion.

## 5. Free Flow With Reflection

There is no “turn setting” in a free-flow interaction—we trust that each person is willing and able to address his or her own needs as they arise. As in the Reflective Round, however, before speaking, each person first reflects back to the satisfaction of the previous speaker what the previous speaker just said. This process encourages a group to slow down, listen carefully, and receive each speaker before moving on.

Speakers who are not satisfied with the reflection they receive may clarify themselves. Their intention, however, is to clarify rather than expand upon their original statements. The process bogs down if the speaker and reflector engage in a back-and-forth dialogue. If, after a couple of tries, the speaker is still dissatisfied with the reflection, the reflector might request another member of the group to carry on. When the speaker is finally satisfied, the floor returns to the original person who had wanted to speak next.

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### **NOTE: MAKING CLEAR REQUESTS IN A GROUP.**

No matter what form a group interaction takes, group process is greatly enhanced when speakers are aware of their intentions and are able to make clear and present requests each time they address the group. NVC offers the following suggestions to help a speaker specify what she would like from the group:

- a. **Clarify who you want to respond by naming a specific person or persons.**

*Example: I would like Jeanine and Harold to tell me . . .*

*Example: I would like anyone who would care to tell me . . .*

*Example: I would like two (three, four, etc.) of you to tell me . . .*

- b. **Clarify the action you are requesting.**

*Example: would like Jeanine and Harold to tell me (specify input wanted from them) . . .*

*Example: I would like (specify people you are wanting to respond) everyone present to (specify action) raise your hand if you*

(specify what you want the action to signify) *agree to end our meeting at 5:00 PM.*

When you are asking several people to take turns responding to you, it may be helpful to clarify the order in which you want them to respond:

**Example:** *I would like to hear from each of you your reasons for being here. I would like to start on my left and go around the group clockwise.*

- c. **Signal when your requests have been fulfilled to your satisfaction and you are ready for someone else to take the floor.**

**Example:** *I am finished.*

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## **J—Suggestions for Structuring an Empathy Session**

An “Empathy Session” allows a member to receive genuine, in-the-moment empathy for a meaningful live situation, while providing clear roles for others within a structured NVC practice activity. Consider the following suggestions while developing your own structure and guidelines. You may notice that as your circle matures over months and years, earlier established (and more rigid) guidelines might increasingly give way to a spontaneous flow.

Prior to beginning, consider taking a moment to reconnect with the heart: slow down, and re-presence yourself. One way is to stop, breathe, and consciously reflect on the energy we wish to cultivate. A guided imagery recited by a group member, a song, or a moment of silence can remind us of our intention to stay with empathy, compassion, clarity, or requests that demonstrate respect for *all* concerned, including oneself. It can help set the tone and ground us in heart energy as we focus on “preparing to do something.”

1. **Decide on the length of the Empathy Session.** You might try fifteen minutes of empathy with five minutes for processing afterwards.

2. Decide how many Empathy Sessions you would like to include in today's meeting. If there are more members than sessions, decide when you will have further Empathy Sessions so that everyone will have an opportunity to receive empathy.
3. Decide who will be the Speaker. Often a member who is experiencing urgency around a painful situation will volunteer. Or, it could be someone who has not had a chance to be Speaker yet.
4. The Speaker is urged to speak about a situation that does not involve anyone in the circle, and is minimally likely to trigger pain in anyone present.
5. Reassure the Speaker that she or he will have the full allotted time, and that when Listeners interrupt, the intention will not be to "take the floor away" from the Speaker, but to reflect back and make sure that the Speaker's words have been accurately received.
6. The Speaker is urged to pause often to give Listeners an opportunity to reflect back. Marshall Rosenberg suggests a forty-word limit! While most of us, especially when we are in pain, may go beyond forty words, it is useful to remember to offer words in smaller chunks if we want our Listeners to fully hear everything we are saying.
7. Speakers may choose to practice NVC or they may choose to express themselves in habitual ways, entrusting the work of NVC translation to the Listeners. The primary objective of Empathy Sessions is to provide practice in deep listening and verbalizing empathy. For this practice, do not encourage Speakers to struggle to "speak NVC." The role of Listeners in this activity is to listen, not to coach the Speaker in expressing herself in NVC.
8. Decide on who will take the role of Timekeeper.
9. Decide whether you would like one person to be the active Listener (who reflects back) or to have the whole group participate, taking turns verbalizing empathy to the Speaker. Relying

on the whole group means everyone is an equally active participant; it may also offer the Speaker a wider opportunity to be fully understood. However, Speakers may experience distraction, because it is sometimes difficult to sustain fluid transitions when different people take turns verbalizing empathy. A third alternative is for the Primary Listener to exercise the choice—each time when the Speaker pauses—to either empathize or to pass it onto the group. This little bit of added direction on the part of a Primary Listener is often enough to make the process sufficiently smooth to include the active participation of more people.

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**NOTE:** If more than one person is offering empathy to the Speaker, a competitive tone can sometimes enter the circle, with each Listener trying to “get it right” (accurately guessing the Speaker’s feelings and needs). Then we need to remind ourselves that empathy is not about accuracy, but about the quality of our attention.

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10. Timekeeper: Begin the session with a thirty-second silence to allow the Speaker to become focused. Listeners, use this moment to connect with your intention to be fully present, to listen with your whole being.
11. Listeners attend fully to the Speakers and their words, while sensing the feelings and needs beneath the words. Your objective is to be totally present, not to “figure out” what the Speaker is feeling and needing nor to “get it right.”
12. When the Speaker pauses, the Listener will reflect back verbal empathy. Listeners may also interrupt the Speaker in order to reflect back—especially if they are getting more information than they can take in at one time, or if they are not clear about what was just said.
13. Listeners, try to empathize verbally, translating what the Speaker is saying into observations, feelings, needs, and requests. We reflect back in an asking (rather than telling) way: Is this what you were observing, feeling, needing, and

requesting? (Speakers are always their own authority on what they saw [heard, etc.], feel, need, or request.)

**Example:**

**Speaker:** *My boss keeps putting me down . . .*

**Listener:** *So you've heard your boss say things about you, or to you, that haven't been meeting your need for respect?*

**Speaker:** *Yeah, he says things to me, like yesterday he said . . . I don't even know as much as the fellow who came in from the temp agency . . .*

**Listener:** *Hearing him say that . . . do you feel upset and want some acknowledgment . . . some appreciation for what you've done at the office?*

**Speaker:** *(continues on)*

14. Listeners: Help Speakers stay connected to the feelings and needs they are experiencing in the present moment even though they are describing a past situation.

**Example:**

**Speaker:** *I am really upset at my boss and the other department heads for pulling this one on us. It's just like when I was a kid, I remember my father would spring these surprise moves on us. Once he told us two days before the moving van arrived, that we were relocating to Canada! I mean, two days! And then I found out he had signed the job contract half a year earlier!*

**Listener:** *So when you remember how your father waited to tell you about the relocation, do you still feel angry and hurt because you want your needs to be taken into consideration around decisions that affect your life?*

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**NOTE:** The listener in the example above is reflecting back observation, feeling, and need, but not a request. During Empathy Sessions, we avoid focusing on problem-solving unless (or until) the Speaker makes such a request in the closing round.

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15. Timekeeper: Let the circle know when the time is nearly up (e.g., “We have three minutes left.”). Make another announcement when the time is up. If the Speaker is in the midst of expressing intense feelings, or if you sense a lot of unfinished pain in the circle, you (the Timekeeper) might ask if the Speaker would like to receive a minute of silent empathy before the group moves into closing the Empathy Session. Everyone then remains fully present with the Speaker (who no longer speaks), while continuing to sense the feelings and needs behind the Speaker’s silence. The Timekeeper indicates the end of one minute.
16. Finish the Empathy Session with two rounds. When scheduling an Empathy Session, plan an additional five minutes to cover the two closing rounds.
  - a. The Speaker begins the first round by making any request he or she might have of the group. Oftentimes when we have allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, we may want to know afterwards how others feel about what we shared. Or the Speaker may make a request for advice, opinions, information, etc., from the group to address the issue that was expressed. Go around in a circle so that each person has an opportunity to respond to the Speaker’s request.
  - b. Close with a second round where each person expresses insights, feelings, etc., regarding the process just completed or about their own role in the Empathy Session. This may also be an opportunity for offering appreciation to one another for the learning and sharing that were received.

## **K—Suggestions for Structuring a Role-Play**

1. Participant A defines the situation by stating:
  - a. Her own role: “I’m a temporary employee at a research lab.”
  - b. The role she wants Participant B to take: “You’re my immediate supervisor.”
  - c. The time or place of dialogue, if relevant: “It’s 6:00 PM Friday as I am ready to leave work.” and then,

- d. Gives Participant B his first line (or first two lines): “So my boss says to me: ‘Have you finished the report? I’d like to see it completed before we start the Monday morning meeting.’”

Participant A: Offer further background information only if crucial for the other person to play his role. State the information briefly in one or two sentences. Avoid describing the situation, its history, or your experience of it. (Spend group time practicing a situation rather than explaining a situation.) If, during the role-play, Participant B is not playing to the role you want, simply cue him in: “No, you wouldn’t say that. You’d probably say ‘xyz.’”

2. Usually, Participant A practices speaking and listening empathically while Participant B speaks in a habitual manner. However, if Participant A experiences a lot of pain around the situation, she may find herself getting stuck in the role-play without being able to empathize with Participant B.

In this case, it may be helpful to first enact an “unrealistic” scenario where Participant B, transformed into an NVC communicator, empathizes with Participant A. When the latter senses herself ready for the switch (and she may not during this role-play), start again, this time with Participant B playing the role realistically, using habitual speech.

Another alternative is for Participant A to play the role of the non-NVC speaking supervisor, and hear how another person might play herself as someone fluent in NVC.

You may find it helpful to set a time limit for each role-play and to have a timekeeper. Be sure to allow opportunity at the end for both Participant A and Participant B to express what “worked,” “didn’t work,” and what they learned. Observers of role-plays often have insights to offer as well.