

NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION : OBSERVATION

You notice you don't like Brad's behavior. You're thinking to yourself: "He's so rude; he always speaks way too long in the meetings and nobody else gets to say anything at all." After some time, you either say something out loud to Brad (or another colleague) or you decide to just keep these thoughts in your head. The shortcoming with this approach is that the mind remains fixated on a judgement—"he's rude"—and nothing changes. You're dwelling; you don't even expect anything to change; nothing ever does change.

Nonviolent Communication, by way of contrast, provides a framework for relating to others in a way that expects and allows for connection, transformation, learning, and growth.

At its core, NVC is characterized by a four stage process: OBSERVATION, FEELING, NEED, REQUEST

"The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. When we combine observation with evaluation, others are apt to hear criticism and resist what we are saying. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations. Instead, observations are to be made specific to time and context." - Marshall Rosenberg

observation guidelines:

1. State *what is* rather than *what isn't* being observed:
- "Brad tilts his head to the right and looks out the window when I speak" vs "Brad doesn't listen to me"
2. Keep the focus on what *you* saw or heard, not your assumptions of what others saw, heard, or chose to do:
- "I did not receive a response to my email by 3 pm" vs "Brad ignored my email"
3. Keep the observation on the specific incidence and *avoid making generalizations about ongoing behaviors*:
- "I checked my inbox and did not see a message from Brad" vs "Brad continued to ignore my request"
4. State observations about someone's behavior, not what you have inferred they are thinking:
- "Brad responded first to every question asked of the team." vs "Brad thinks we don't know anything."
5. Avoid using the verb *to be* without an indication that the evaluator takes responsibility for the evaluation:
- "When I see you give them \$20, I think you are being too generous." vs "You are too generous."
6. Be mindful of distinguishing prediction from certainty:
- "If you don't eat, you won't be able to focus." vs. "If you don't eat, I fear you won't be able to focus."

EXERCISE: OBSERVING JUDGEMENTS

Partner A: First, share a judgement/evaluation you've made recently.
Then, restate this judgement/evaluation with observation language.

Partner B: Reflect back to partner A whether you are still hearing judgement, blame, criticism, or evaluation mixed in with the observation.

Partner A: If necessary, try again to separate the observation from the evaluation.

GETTING FROM COMPLAINT TO CORE VALUE

EVALUATION: "Brad always speaks way too long in the meetings and nobody else gets to say anything at all."

INITIAL FEELING (based on evaluation): angry

NEED: For Brad to stop talking and let someone else get a word in.

We start by letting go of a fixed judgement or evaluation and choose, instead, to re-approach what happened with objective observation as much as possible. Our habitual pattern of communication is to dwell on the feelings that arise from our evaluations and judgements. ("I'm angry because Brad is so rude.") But when we distinguish evaluations from observations, we can then focus on the specific relationship between a given stimulus (observed objectively) and our underlying emotional state.

OBSERVATION: "When I notice Brad speaking longer than the two minutes* allocated for his input,"

FEELING (based on observation): "I feel triggered, reactive, and irritable"

NEED: "because I'm wanting structure, to contribute, and shared reality."

** Stating an observation objectively may also be an opportunity to see that there is a lack of shared reality and/or an opportunity to clarify expectations. In this example, it could occur to the speaker that Brad is possibly unaware of the two-minute speaking rule. In this way, objective observation and decreased interference of judgements expands the range of choices, strategies, and requests available.*

EXERCISE: Connecting Evaluations to Underlying Feelings and Needs

1. Choose an evaluation from the list below.
2. Identify the "initial feelings" that you experience when you've made this evaluation.
3. Identify the underlying "feelings" that you experience based on the observation of the situation.
4. Identify the underlying needs.

EXAMPLE:

1. Evaluation: flaky
2. Initial feelings (based on evaluation): rejected, disliked, unloved, unwanted
3. Feelings (based on observation): discouraged, joyless, frustrated, annoyed, reluctant, angry, disempowered, antagonistic
4. Needs: predictability, dependability, consistency, structure, presence, resonance, shared reality

EVALUATIONS

Aggressive	Fragile	Naive
Arrogant	Greedy	Needy
Bully	Gossipy	Long-winded
Cheap	High Maintenance	Reactionary
Clueless	Hypersensitive	Self-absorbed
Controlling	Idiot	Selfish
Creepy	Insecure	Small-minded
Defensive	Inconsiderate	Stubborn
Demanding	Lazy	Unfocused
Disrespectful	Liar	Victim
Fake	Manipulative	Weak
Flaky	Mean	Young