

# Nonviolent Communication For Prison Officers: Building Values-Based Relationships

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## Summary

In this article, we describe an imaginary situation in a prison workshop: one of the inmates throws his pencil across the room. The instructor perceives this as a threat to his authority and tries to re-establish control. The situation quickly turns into a confrontation. We contrast this with what we predict would have happened had the instructor responded from an NVC consciousness.

## Our Starting Point

We start from two premises. Firstly, we believe that part of the function of a prison is to pursue values such as justice, tolerance, respect, humanity and nonviolence. These principles should be at the core of the role of a prison, rather than perceived as an obstacle to effectiveness, and/or a distraction from its "real goals." Secondly, we believe that both prison officers and prisoners value a prison culture in which the emphasis is on establishing order through relationships, rather than the use of force or 'power over'.

### **In *The Prison Officer* (by Alison Liebling and David Price), we read, for example, that:**

"Staff are highly motivated towards, and derive considerable satisfaction from, 'getting relationships right'. They are proud when they manage to 'create a pleasant atmosphere on the spur.'"

Staff seem to find it easier to support this relationship-based approach with prisoners when their own needs are met. They describe their ideal working environment as one in which they are "seen, heard, respected, rewarded." When they experience this, they feel "safe, supported and nurtured."

Moreover, they state that "relationship-building behavior establishes credit" with prisoners. When prisoners were asked what they valued in officers, one said: "You've got to try and develop your interpersonal relationships with others so that you can control an environment without resorting to violence every minute of the day."

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**Another prisoner was reported as saying:**

*"I think you need somebody who is very comfortable with themselves so that they feel secure enough."*

We further suggest that by modeling relationship-based approaches, officers are demonstrating to the prisoners ways of interacting with authority figures and others that could support prisoners restoratively. Prisoners may themselves learn communication skills that will serve them better within prison and upon re-entry to their community.

## The NVC Process

Relationship-based approaches can be explicitly learned as well as 'picked up on the hoof.' We are now going to focus on one learnable process: Nonviolent Communication™ (NVC). This process is already supporting many thousands of people across the world to live more harmonious lives. In the March edition of this journal, we wrote about the impact of Nonviolent Communication on the lives of two prisoners: [Rusty and Walter]. We described Rusty's dialogue with prison custody staff, and Walter's internal dialogue, which later enabled him to survive in his community without resorting to violence. Through their stories, we illustrated the key principles of the NVC process. These are summarized below.

### Key principles of the NVC process

Our **ATTENTION** is directed at what is happening in and around us in the present. Our **INTENTION** is to relate to, and connect with, ourselves and/or others rather than to judge, criticize, blame, etc. It is more likely that we will be able to sustain our relationship and connection with others and ourselves if we remain aware of the following **FOUR STEPS**, whether or not we explicitly verbalize them.

**Observation** - What am I seeing, hearing, feeling and remembering right now?

**Feelings** - What feelings are triggered by my observations?

**Needs** - What met or unmet needs underlie my feelings?

**Requests** - What specific actions can I request of other people or of myself that might help me get my needs met?

In this article, we focus on how NVC might help prison officers strengthen their relationships with prisoners without compromising either security or their own personal safety. We do this by looking at an imaginary incident from two points of view. First, we show how it might have escalated 'violently'. Then we explore how the NVC process, and its underlying beliefs and values, could have transformed the situation so that it proceeded in a 'nonviolent' way.



## An Incident That Escalated

The incident we have described next is set in a training workshop in an adult prison and involves a 'flare up' between the tutor and a prisoner. The left hand column describes the actions of the two protagonists as well as their internal thought processes. The right hand column is the dialogue that we imagine would result. Similar situations could well arise in classrooms in youth offender institutes or in other settings both inside and outside prisons. Whatever the context, we believe that the NVC process provides a practical, easy to learn process to transform such incidents into peaceful, effective dialogue.

Participants' actions and reactions	What was actually said
<p>A prisoner is in a training workshop, feeling fed up and wanting some attention. He picks up a woodwork pencil and throws it across the room. The Tutor is aware of his past relationship with that prisoner and of all the times when an incident like this has 'gotten out of hand'. These memories lead him to interpret the prisoner's action as a challenge to his authority; he feels fear and foreboding; his heart rate increases and his hands become clammy. These reactions come through in his tone of voice, his posture and his choice of words.</p>	<p>TUTOR: Hey, you ... don't throw stuff like that!</p>
<p>The prisoner has a mixture of reactions: he is pleased now to have created a diversion, and is aware of his peers watching him. Simultaneously he remembers the many times when others were telling him 'what to do' and interprets what the tutor has said as criticism and as an attempt to control him. His heart rate increases and he gets a surge of adrenaline. He feels resentment and adopts an attitude of bravado. He too expresses his reactions through words and tone of voice and body language.</p>	<p>PRISONER: Who do you think you're talking to, you ***** !!!</p>
<p>The tutor's initial interpretations are confirmed; his feelings intensify; added to this, he now hears the prisoner's words as rude and feels animosity. He consciously attempts to restore his authority.</p>	<p>TUTOR: I won't have language like that in my workshop!</p> <p>PRISONER: You want me to punch your lights out instead?</p>
<p>The prisoner interprets this as a challenge, and probably feels excitement. At this point, he experiences himself as in a dilemma. Following through on his threat to hit the tutor would be a step too far, and yet he does not want to lose face with his peers. He can see only one option. With a backward grin at the other prisoners, he walks out, slamming the door behind him.</p>	<p>PRISONER: Screw this - I'm off!</p>
<p>The tutor now feels sick and uptight. He is also wondering what to say to the rest of the class right now and how later to mend his relationship with the prisoner.</p>	



## Changing The Outcome By Using NVC

If the tutor had internalized the NVC process and developed skills in using it, we predict this interaction would have taken a different course.

Firstly, he would have directed his attention to the present instead of getting trapped in the pain of memories of the past. Secondly, he would have checked that his intention towards the prisoner was to relate and connect rather than to issue commands and exert power and authority. With his attention and intention thus focused, he would have taken a moment to separate his observations—what he was seeing and hearing in the workshop, and what he was remembering at that moment—from interpretations that he might be making based on his previous encounters with the prisoner.

He would then have turned his awareness to feelings and needs—his own and those of the prisoner. He would have been able to remind himself that throwing the pencil across the room was the prisoner's way of expressing feelings and needs, rather than a personal attack on the tutor. If he had had the presence of mind to respond from this NVC consciousness immediately the pencil was thrown, his internal dialogue might have gone something like that reported below.

### Instructor's internal response to the initial incident

TUTOR (internally): My heart's beating. My hands feel clammy. I feel sick with foreboding and frightened. What's going on here? OK, I see. I am remembering other times when this guy and I have had a dust up and how it usually ended, and I'm wanting a different outcome. And I'm interpreting him as attacking me whereas he's simply doing it as a way of expressing his feelings and needs.

OK, let's get myself back into the present. Check body posture; get my feet firmly on the ground; take a couple of deep breaths.

What actually happened? He threw a pencil.

What am I feeling? I feel concern.

And my needs? I'm needing safety and order. I wish he would tell me directly, rather than throw something.

What's going on for him? I guess he's fed up and wanting a change of some kind.

In an experienced practitioner, this would have taken no more than a few seconds. The relationship between this alternative dialogue and the four steps of the NVC process is described next.



## Four steps of the NVC process

How the tutor used the four steps of the NVC process in his alternative internal dialogue

### Observations

(Note the complexity)

- Saw the prisoner throwing the pencil.
- Sensed his heart beating faster and his hands becoming clammy.
- Remembered the times when he and the prisoner had had other confrontations and the way they had usually ended.

### Feelings

- He feels sick with foreboding and fear.

### Needs/values/would like

- Wanting a different outcome from the last time.
- Wanting to get himself into the present (i.e. needing present awareness as opposed to reliving past pain).

### Requests

(In this case, he is making implicit requests to himself to meet his need for awareness in the present.)

- Check body posture; put feet firmly on the ground; take a couple of deep breaths.

What the tutor says next reflects his desire to relate to the prisoner, rather than to criticise or punish him. He asks out loud:

“Prisoner, are you wanting to do something different right now?”

At this point the prisoner may well reply with another statement that the tutor could interpret as provocative. However, we predict that providing the tutor chooses to stay with the awareness that the prisoner’s words or actions stem from feelings and needs, as opposed to interpreting them as a personal attack, the situation will not escalate.

Our description shows the tutor having the presence of mind to choose a nonviolent response right at the outset. However, a violent response early on does not preclude the choice of a more empathic one at any later point, thereby changing the course of events. Suppose the tutor did not regain his presence of mind until after the Prisoner had slammed the door on his way out. Even at this ‘late’ stage, the tutor could pay attention to his own feelings and needs, thus giving himself some empathy. This would enable him to re-establish his relationship with the rest of the group, and later to restore his relationship with the prisoner.

We chose a comparatively minor incident to illustrate the possibilities that NVC has to offer in preventing escalation. Had the initial trigger been more serious (for example, if the prisoner had thrown a hammer, or had struck the tutor or a fellow inmate), the protective use of force might have been a vital and immediate strategy. In NVC terms, what would have been critical in this instance is that force would be used with the intention to protect, not to punish or take revenge. The ability to respond in this way would depend both on the implementation of control and restraint training and a nonviolent consciousness. The former would provide the effective means; the latter would inform the intention.



## Shifts In Thinking

On the surface, NVC is a simple process. It is encapsulated in the four-step framework of observations, feelings, needs, and requests and informed by having our attention in the present with the intention to relate empathically. However, this apparent simplicity belies its profundity and transformational qualities. To realize this power, NVC asks us to make some fundamental personal shifts, such as:

- **Adopting a world view that sees whatever anyone does as stemming from their feelings and needs.**

This does not mean that we advocate NVC as the worldview, nor are we taking a position on whether or not certain people are 'evil'. What we do believe is that when we choose to see people's actions, including our own, as strategies for meeting needs, something shifts. We contrast this with what happens when we label people as criminal, evil, etc.: this we see as a static view of people in the world that militates against change.

- **Recognizing that no one can 'make' us feel anything.** The same stimulus will trigger different feelings in different people, so we cannot say that 'X' event causes 'Y' feelings. We believe it is more accurate to say that the stimulus event triggers feelings in us according to whether our needs are or are not being met.
- **Understanding that we all have similar basic needs.** When we focus on needs, we are better able to relate to other people, whoever and wherever they are. We tap into fundamental humanness in each other.
- **Keeping our attention focused on the present.** If we ignore what is going on for us in the present moment, and revert instead to former experiences, we lock ourselves into habitual reactions based on past pain.
- **Adopting the nonviolent consciousness by looking for underlying feelings and needs.** If we are aware of when we are in danger of 'violent' responses-i.e., those characterized by blame, judgment, criticism or a desire for revenge-we can transform this thinking into the 'nonviolent' alternative.

## Predictions

We began this article with a statement of our wish to see the pursuit of values as intrinsic to the way prisons work. We would like to see these values realized day by day in the relationships between staff and prisoners, as exemplified in the Tutor's alternative internal dialogue described above. When NVC informs practice, we predict that the prison community would suffer from fewer incidents and that individuals would enjoy enhanced relationships. As people become more aware of feelings and needs, and increasingly act from this awareness, so they will experience less stress and feel more alive. We know ourselves that NVC takes time and commitment: we also celebrate the clarity, honesty, trust and connection that we experience when we use it.

Throughout this article, the male pronoun includes the female pronoun.

Ref: Liebling, A. and Price, D. (2001) *The Prison Officer* Leyhill, 2001



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From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of conflict, violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, the NVC process helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional or personal relationships.

The NVC process is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

International peacemaker, mediator, author and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg spends more than **250** days each year teaching the NVC process, including some of the most impoverished, war-torn areas of the world. More than **180** certified trainers and hundreds more teach this life-enriching process in **35** countries to approximately **250,000** people each year.

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The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) is an international nonprofit peacemaking organization whose vision is a world where everyone's needs are met peacefully. CNVC is devoted to supporting the spread of Nonviolent Communication training and consciousness around the world.

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