



Learning How the Matrix Works

In this chapter, you'll begin your exploration of the Matrix and how to use it. The chapter discusses some ideas about how we humans learn and integrate new skills, then presents the twenty-eight skills and asks you to go through an initial process of self-reflection.

The twenty-eight skills in the Matrix are arranged to start with more basic, foundational skills and progress to increasing complexity. For example, the first skill, called **presence**, inspires and energizes all of the other skills or capabilities, while the final skill,

supporting holistic systems, requires one to use all twenty-seven other skills in an interdependent way. We chose this organizational strategy to demonstrate two ideas. First, some skills seem essential. They provide a conceptual and behavioral foundation to build upon. Second, all of the skills support one another interdependently. No skill can stand apart independently.

The Matrix begins with foundational skills and progresses toward skills with increasing complexity and interconnectedness.

Each of the twenty-eight skills will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

Entering the Matrix

Overall, the Matrix is designed to clarify a developmental process. After naming and defining each skill, four columns describe how each skill unfolds through a four-stage progression from unskilled to ever-increasing ability and, finally, integration. We call these developmental stages *unskilled*, *awakening*, *capable*, and *integrated*.

1. ***Unskilled***: Each progression begins with not knowing. This is an observation that one currently lacks awareness of a specific skill that others know and can capably perform. Of course, no one can be conscious of what they do not know, so it's impossible to assess oneself as unconsciously incompetent (which is another way to describe unskilled). I myself find that it is often other people in my life who give me feedback that helps me to recognize and awaken a new skill. Or perhaps I discover the existence of the skill in the course of living. In the Matrix, we call this stage *unconscious incompetence* or *unskilled*. (The Matrix itself may reveal skills you hadn't yet thought to cultivate.)
2. ***Awakening***: Once a skill is understood to exist, one may become aware of not yet knowing how to do it. This is *conscious incompetence*, or *awakening*.
3. ***Capable***: Once effective training and learning occur, one gains the ability to perform the skill with focus and effort. This is *conscious competence*, or *capable*.

4. ***Integrated:*** Finally, when a skill becomes embodied and integrated, the skill recedes into the background under most circumstances. One might catch oneself performing such a skill with ease. It could be said that this is a transformation from skill to consciousness, and thus integration. We call this *unconscious competence*, or *integrated*.

Learning new skills

To illustrate the model of the Matrix with a capability you likely have already developed, consider the skill of **tying shoes**. Consider a four-year-old living in a culture that uses shoes with shoelaces to protect feet and make walking easier. Notice these four observations occurring across time:

1. For most of their life, the child had no awareness of a skill called **tying shoes**, defined as “using the laces on shoes to secure them to one’s feet.” The child is unskilled, or unconsciously incompetent, at this particular skill.
2. Then one day, the child notices that there is such a thing as **tying shoes**, but they do not know how to do it. They have progressed to awakening, or conscious incompetence. “Mommy, can you teach me to tie my shoes?” the child may say. Then they get some training from folks with more experience. “Do this to tie your shoes,” says the helper, offering a demonstration, followed by focused support. This likely includes repeated demonstration and lots of practice, including mistakes and feedback.
3. Eventually, this process results in the child becoming consciously competent (or capable) at the skill. The

child says, “If I really try, I can tie my own shoes! Look, Mommy!” Now, with focused effort, the child can tie shoes! As their capability deepens, they can even tie their shoes under the pressure of trying to get ready for school on time, but it takes concentration!

4. With enough practice, the child becomes able to tie their shoes without any help and with minimal effort, even tying their shoes automatically while engaged in a conversation or other activity. Their skill is now integrated—they are unconsciously competent.

In other words, no matter the skill, a Matrix can be made for it. One simply defines a discrete, observable skill and then describes the different stages of integration. Note however that in this process, we are emphatically *not* making an assessment about any person’s identity or value. Instead we are describing behavior and capability.

The stages of integration in the Matrix are observations of behavior and capability.

Committing to observation, not judgment

Some may wonder if words like *incompetent* or *unconscious*, as used in the Matrix, point to what Marshall would call *observation* or *observation mixed with evaluation*. This is an important key distinction defined in his book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*:

Observation refers to that which can be perceived by the five senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching—and by noticing thoughts, a kind of sixth sense.

Evaluation in this case refers to dualistic moral judgments like right/wrong, good/bad, appropriate/inappropriate, and so forth.

Some words can be used as either an observation (descriptively) or an evaluation. For example, I can use the word *incompetent* to express a moral judgment, like this: “You are a menace to society, a complete incompetent when it comes to driving.” Or, I can use the same word to report an observation, like this: “An infant is incompetent to safely pilot an airplane.” In the Matrix, we intend to use these terms observationally, without any hint of moral judgment.

The following brief definitions are the ones we decided to use in the Matrix. We intend these definitions to point to observation:

Competent: Currently possessing the capability to behave in a specific way. *I am competent to write a sentence in English.*

Incompetent: Not currently possessing the capability to behave in a specific way. *I am incompetent to write a sentence in Mandarin.*

Conscious: Aware. *I am conscious that the wind is blowing.*

Unconscious: Not aware. *I am unconscious of what my blood pressure is right now.*

We also chose to add alternate descriptions for each level of skill development. These descriptions may be less likely to be interpreted judgmentally:

Unskilled: Not possessing the capability to behave in a specific way. *I am unskilled in playing the mandolin.*

Awakening: Becoming aware that a skill exists that one was previously unaware of. *I am awakening to how to enjoy poetry.*

Capable: Able to perform a skill with effort. *I am capable of writing nonfiction.*

Integrated: Able to perform a skill with little or no effort. *I have integrated the skill of speaking English.*

These examples hopefully begin to give you an idea how to use the Matrix to describe skill development for more complex concepts like **presence** and **empathy**. By understanding the differences among the four stages, and practicing your understanding initially with life skills like cooking or repairing a bicycle, you can get more comfortable with thinking about your skill levels at different things.

So let's move on to practice!

Recognizing strengths and edges

The twenty-eight different skills of the Matrix are listed in the Self-Assessment Practice Worksheet presented here. The left-hand column names each skill, without defining it. For your first exercise, feel free to use *your* definition or understanding of the words. I've found that the way I define these skills has changed over the years as I continue my training in NVC, and I believe it's important to honor the life experience that brings you to this moment.

The three columns to the right of the worksheet offer you the opportunity to quickly assess your understanding, strengths, and edges of each skill.

Here's the exercise: Read the name of each skill in the worksheet, and notice how your body responds. If you feel confused, befuddled,

hazy, then check the box labeled “I don’t know.” On your first self-assessment, many of the words and concepts may not be familiar to you, and it’s likely that most of your checkmarks will be in this column.

When exploring the Matrix, notice how your body responds.

If you notice a sense of confidence, openness, self-appreciation, or gratitude when you read the skill, then check the box in the “Strength” column. Check this box even if you think you could be more skillful than you are right now.

If you notice a sense of eagerness, curiosity, wonder, despair, sadness, or longing, check the box in the “Edge” column. This is a skill you’d like to have more of!

Note that, depending on context, a skill could be both an edge *and* a strength. For example, when I am well-fed, rested, and feeling happy, I may enjoy unconscious competence with my skill of **empathy**. On the other hand, I may notice a distinct edge around **empathy** when I’m feeling the stress of receiving a difficult message from a loved one.

When you’ve completed the worksheet, move on to the next section of the chapter.

PRACTICE SELF-ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

SKILL	I DON'T KNOW	STRENGTH	EDGE
Presence			
Observing			
Feelings Awareness			
Self-Acceptance			
Taking Ownership of One's Feelings			
Needs Consciousness			
Reconnecting to Self & Recovering From Reactivity			
Request Consciousness & Making Requests			
Mourning			
Empathy			
Dissolving Enemy Images			
Discernment			
Living Interdependently			
Honest Self-Expression			
Facilitating Connection			
Patience			
Responding to Others' Reactivity			
Openness to Feedback			
Beneficial Regret			
Flexibility in Relating			
Transforming Conflict			
Gratitude			
Open-Hearted Flow of Giving & Receiving			
Cultivating Vitality			
Sharing Power			
Transcending Roles			
Awareness of Response-Ability			
Supporting Holistic Systems			

Reflecting on your experience

Now that you've tried out an initial self-assessment with the practice worksheet, take some time to reflect on what you learned. Consider writing about your experience. I've provided a few writing prompts to start with. When you finish, go on to the next section.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. How do you feel, right now? What sensations or emotions do you notice?

2. What needs did you satisfy by doing the self-assessment? For example: learning, growth, clarity, acceptance, peace of mind. Feel free to use your own words to describe your needs.

3. Are you mourning any unmet needs? If so, which ones?

4. Is there anything else about the exercise you'd like to reflect more deeply on?

Looking ahead

Congratulations! You have begun your journey!

If you chose to do the practice worksheet, you have established a trailhead for your trek along your chosen pathways. After working with the Matrix for a while, you might find that returning to your first practice sheet will help you understand and celebrate your progress.

As you continue to work with the Matrix, you will likely become more aware of each of the skills. You'll become aware of how and when using each skill comes with ease, and when access to a skill seems like an impossible dream. As with learning anything new, consider cultivating gentleness, patience, and an intention to practice.

*To support learning,
cultivate gentleness,
patience, and an
intention to practice.*

Next, I offer you some choices for which direction to head next on your journey. I love that NVC reminds me of my power to choose! Here are some choices to consider:

- Finish reading the book, chapter by chapter, then return to this page.
- Read through the entire Matrix, presented skill by skill in Chapter 2.
- Read and meditate upon the Matrix. Take as much time as you like to contemplate how the skills live in your experience and what they mean to you.
- Choose one skill you consider a strength, and write in your journal some celebrations of how you've used that strength in your life. (See Chapter 3 for more about strengths and edges. See Chapter 4 for journaling prompts.)

- Choose an edge you would like to work on and follow the instructions in Chapter 4 to begin your practice. (Look to Chapter 3 for more clarification about strengths and edges.)
- Take a walk or find another way to cultivate your vitality!
- Fulfill the request that's emerging from your needs right now!
- Something else!

Appreciating new beginnings

Thinking back on that day when I first encountered Marshall Rosenberg, a wave of gratitude and inspiration washes over me. On that day, I discovered that I had something in common with you and with every single person on the planet, and that I could therefore connect with anyone. I began understanding that universal human needs could become a key to unlocking conflict in my own life and also support my mission of helping others navigate the painful disconnections that cried out for mediation. As I put what I learned into practice, I also learned that NVC consisted of a set of skills that anyone can learn. And that these skills could be our best chance, as a society, to undo the harms that have been done to one another and to our planet.

*NVC skills are skills
anyone can learn.*

Now, as you contemplate your next steps, I invite you to join me in Marshall's mission to "make life more wonderful" by practicing and integrating the skills and consciousness of NVC.