

Listening and Responding in NVC

Now let's practice listening in NVC when certain people speak judgmentally. I would like some people to volunteer their situations so we can all learn from them. If you read what you wrote, we'll see if you answered in NVC or whether some judging language got mixed in. The first question: "What is it that I do that makes life less than wonderful for you?"

Participant A: You appear not to listen.

Marshall: "You appear." Right away I can tell you aren't answering the question in NVC. When you say "you appear," I know a diagnosis is coming up. "You appear to not listen." That's a diagnosis. Have you ever heard one person say, "You don't listen," and the other, "I do too!" "No, you don't!" "Yes, I do!" You see, this is what happens when we start with a criticism rather than an observation. Tell me what I do that makes you interpret me as not listening. I can read the newspaper and watch television while you're talking and still hear you!

Participant A: I'm observing you watching TV.

Marshall: If your partner wasn't listening with NVC, right away he'd hear an attack. But as your partner with NVC ears, I don't hear criticism; I just guess the behavior you are reacting to. "Are you reacting to the fact that I am watching television while you are talking to me?"

Participant A: Yes.

Marshall: "How do you feel when I watch television while you are talking?"

[Marshall adds an aside to participant:] And don't answer, "Not listened to!" That's just a sneaky way of throwing in another judgment.

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Participant A: Frustrated and hurt.

Marshall: Now we're cooking! Could you tell me why you feel that way?

Participant A: Because I wanted to feel appreciated.

Marshall: Classical NVC! Notice she didn't say, "I feel frustrated and hurt because you watch television." She doesn't blame me for her feelings, but attributes them to her own needs: "I feel ____ because I ____." People who judge, on the other hand, would express their feelings this way: "You hurt me when you watch television while talking to me. In other words: "I feel ____ because you ____."

Now the fourth question:

"What would you like me to do to make life wonderful for you?"

Participant A: When you are in a conversation, I would appreciate it if you would look into my eyes, as well as tell me back what you heard me say.

Marshall: Okay. Did everybody hear the four things? "When you watch television while I am talking, I feel frustrated and hurt because I would really like some appreciation or attention regarding what I am saying. Would you be willing to look me in the eye while I'm talking and then afterwards repeat back what you heard me say and give me a chance to correct it if it isn't what I meant to say?"

Now of course, the other person may hear it as criticism and will want to defend himself, "I do listen; I can listen while I am watching television." Or if he heard it as a demand, he may do this, "[Sigh] All right." That tells us he didn't hear it as a request, as an opportunity to contribute to our

well-being. He heard a demand; he may comply, but if he does, you'll wish he hadn't because he'll be doing it to keep you from freaking out. He'll do it not to make life wonderful for you but to keep life from being miserable for him.

Now that's why marriage is a real challenge. Many people were taught that love and marriage mean denying oneself in doing for the other person. "If I love her, I have to do that, even though I don't want to." So he'll do it, but you'll wish he hadn't.

Participant A: Because he'll keep score.

Marshall: Yeah, people like that have computers in their brains: They'll tell you what happened twelve years ago when they denied themselves. It comes back in one form or another. "After all the times I did things for you when I didn't want to, the least you can do is _____!" Oh yeah, that goes on forever; don't worry, they're excellent statisticians.

Role-Plays

Hearing a Demand

Another participant: So how does the NVC-er respond when the person says, "I can listen to you and watch at the same time!"

NVC-er: Are you feeling annoyed because you heard some pressure and you would like to be free from pressure?

Participant: Of course, you're always making demands. My God! Demand this, demand that!

NVC-er: So you're kind of exhausted with demands, and you would like to do things because you feel like it and not because you feel pressured?

Participant: Exactly.

NVC-er: Now, I'm feeling very frustrated because I don't know how to let you know what I would like without you hearing it as a demand. I know only two choices: to say nothing and not get my needs met, or to tell you what I would like and have you hear it as a demand. Either way I lose. Could you tell me what you just heard me say?

Participant: Huh?

Now this is very confusing for people who don't know NVC. They grow up in a world of coercion. Their parents might have thought that the only way to get them to do anything is to punish or guilt-trip them. They may not be familiar with anything else. They don't know the difference between a request and a demand. They really believe that if they don't do what the other person wants, the guilt-trip or the threats are going to come out. It is not an easy job for me as NVC-er to help this person hear that my requests are gifts, not demands. When we do succeed, however, we can save ourselves years of misery, because any request becomes misery when people hear it without NVC ears.

NVC-er: I would like to know how I can ask for what I want so it doesn't sound like I am pressuring you.

Participant: I don't know.

NVC-er: Well, I'm glad that we're getting this clear because this is my dilemma: I don't know how to let you know what I want without you immediately hearing either that you have to do it or that I am forcing you to do it.

Participant: Well, I know how much the thing means to you, and . . . if you love somebody, then you do what they ask.

NVC-er: Could I influence you to change your definition of love?

Participant: To what?

NVC-er: Love is not denying ourselves and doing for others, but rather it is honestly expressing whatever our feelings and needs are and empathically receiving the other person's feelings and needs. To receive empathically does not mean that you must comply—just accurately receive what is expressed as a gift of life from the other person. Love is honestly expressing our own needs; that doesn't mean making demands, but just, "Here I am. Here's what I like." How do you feel about that definition of love?

Participant: If I agree with that, I'll be a different person.

NVC-er: Yeah, that's true.

Stop Me If I'm Talking "Too Much"

Marshall: How about another situation?

Next participant (B): Sometimes people say, "I want you to be quiet; I don't want to listen any more," if they are feeling overwhelmed. In a situation where the other person is talking too much . . .

Marshall: If you're an NVC-er, you don't have the words "too much" in your consciousness. To think that there is such a thing as "too much," "just right," or "too little" is to entertain dangerous concepts.

Participant B: What I heard you and the other trainers telling me last night is that I have to stop once in a while to give the other person a chance to respond.

Marshall: “Have to?”

Participant B: No, not “have to.” I mean “it would be a good idea to.”

Marshall: Yes, you know you don’t have to because there have been a lot of times in your life when you haven’t. [Laughter]

Participant B: Well, I’d like to get some sort of signal from my friend . . .

Marshall: . . . when he’s heard one more word than he wants to hear?

Participant B: Right.

Marshall: The kindest thing we can do is to stop people when they are using more words than we want to hear. Notice the difference: it’s not “when they are talking much.” I say “kindest” because I have asked several hundred people, “If you are using more words than somebody wants to hear, do you want that other person to pretend that they are listening or to stop you?” Everyone but one person replied adamantly, “I want to be stopped.” Only one woman said she didn’t know if she could handle being told to stop.

In NVC, we know it’s not being kind to the other person to smile and open your eyes wide to hide the fact that your head has gone dead. That isn’t helping anybody because the person in front of you becomes a source of stress and strain, and they don’t want that. They want every act and every word coming out of their mouth to enrich you. So when it isn’t, be kind to them and stop them.

Now it took me awhile to get up the courage to test this out because in the domination culture I grew up in, that’s not

done. I remember when I first decided to risk this in a social setting. I was working with some teachers in Fargo, North Dakota, and was invited that evening to a social get-together with everybody sitting around talking about stuff. Within ten minutes, my energy had dropped very low. I didn't know where the life was in this conversation or what people were feeling or wanting. One person would say, "Oh, do you know what we did on our vacation?" and then talk about the vacation. Then somebody else talked about theirs. After listening awhile, I gathered up my courage and said: "Excuse me, I'm impatient with the conversation because I'm really not feeling as connected with you as I'd like to be. It would help me to know if you are enjoying the conversation." If they were, I would try to figure out how to enjoy it myself, but all nine people stopped talking and looked at me as if I had thrown a rat in the punch bowl.

For about two minutes I thought I'd die, but then I remembered that it's never the response I receive that makes me feel bad. Since I was feeling bad, I knew I had on my judging ears and was thinking that I had said something wrong. After I put on my NVC ears, I was able to look at the feelings and needs being expressed through the silence and say, "I'm guessing that you're all angry with me and you would have liked for me to have just kept out of the conversation."

The moment I turn my attention to what the other is feeling and needing, already I am feeling better. With my attention there, I totally remove the other person's power to demoralize or dehumanize me or to leave me feeling like PPPPPT (piss poor protoplasm poorly put together). This is true even when, as in this case, I guess wrong. Just because I have NVC ears doesn't mean I always guess right. I guessed they were angry and they weren't.

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The first person who spoke told me: “No, I’m not angry. I was just thinking about what you were saying.” Then he said, “I was bored with this conversation.” And he had been the one doing most of the talking! But this no longer surprises me; I have found that if I am bored, the person doing the talking is probably equally bored. It usually means we are not talking from life: Instead of being in touch with our feelings and needs in this conversation, we’re getting into some socially learned habits of boring one another. If you are a middle-class citizen, you are probably so used to it that you don’t even know it.

I remember Buddy Hackett saying it wasn’t until he was in the Army that he discovered he could get up from a meal without having heartburn. He had been so used to his mother’s cooking that heartburn had become a way of life. Likewise, most middle-class people are so used to boredom that it’s become a way of life. You just get together and talk from the head; there is no life in it, but it’s the only thing you’ve known. We’re dead and don’t know it.

When we went around our group, each one of the nine people expressed the same feelings I had: impatient, discouraged that we were there, lifeless, inert . . . then one of the women asked, “Marshall, why do we do this?” “Do what?” “Sit around and bore each other. You’re just here tonight but we get together every week and do this!” I said: “Because we probably haven’t learned to take the risk that I just did, which is to pay attention to our vitality. Are we really getting what we want from life? If not, let’s do something about it. Each moment is precious, too precious, so when our vitality is down, let’s do something about it and wake up.”