

The NVC Model: A Map to Your Intentions

With Dian Killian

When coaching clients or leading trainings about Collaborative Communication (NVC), I like to point out that the practice involves two aspects: the skill set—focused on four basic steps, and what I call the *mindset*—the consciousness or awareness—that informs those steps: our desire—for harmony, understanding, collaboration, or greater connection. If you're practicing OFNR by rote—going through “observations, feelings, needs, requests” on automatic, as if paint-by-numbers—then you're not really practicing NVC. This would be akin to thinking that a skeleton makes a human being—when you also need flesh and blood, and a heart. Another analogy I often give is that of using a map: the map helps you get to where you go—it's the means, not the end. Practicing NVC by “rote” can lead to what we call in NVC circles “empathy from hell”—not really empathy or connection at all!

Yet it's compelling for me that the *form* of the model actually reminds us of the intention or mindset. It's all connected: a mimetic, oroborus interdependence of form and meaning. Here are a few examples:

- **It's all happening NOW.** Have you ever noticed how the classical NVC model uses “ing” forms of the verb? (i.e, Are you *feeling*? Because you're *needing*?). This form (called present progressive or present continuous) is used in English when we're talking about something now, in this moment. (Notice that in even describing this in the moment quality, am using an “ing” form.) The very form is reminding us to self-connect, be specific (rather than going into generalization or stories), and to notice what's “alive” in us at this moment.
- **It's about taking RESPONSE-ABILITY.** The NVC model uses “I” statements for a reason: we're taking responsibility—for what we see and hear, and for what our internal response is (feelings and needs). That's why the classical model taglines start with, “When I see or hear... I feel... because.. I'm needing..” It's not about the other person. Have you ever noticed how, in contrast, judgments often start with “YOU”?
- **It's about what's actually HAPPENING.** Unlike evaluations, stories, blame or judgment— that implicitly or explicitly state “I think” or “in my opinion” and are an interpretation of what's happening, in NVC practice we're creating shared reality via stating what we actually see or hear *happening*, our actual experience. That's why the classical model for the first step, Observations, starts with, “When I see..” or “When I hear...” This is reminding us: what are we actually seeing? What are we actually hearing? This is different from the story—what we're telling ourselves *about* it.
- **It's the freedom to say no...and to REALLY MEAN YES.** The key element to the fourth step tag line is, “Are you willing...” The very structure of this question—that it is a question, that it's continuous tense (present tense), and that we are asking about *willingness* all reflects the heart of this step: making a request and being open to hearing “no.” There is a tenuousness beyond even the conditional (“Would you...”) that we normally would use in English. This question, by its very form, invites the person to check in with themselves: How much authentic “juice” do you actually have for what I'm asking? Do you really have the drive—the will—to act on what I'm asking?

- **It's all CONNECTED.** Again, the classic structure of the model is one big sentence: When I see/hear, I'm feeling____ because I'm needing____. This very structure reminds us that it is *our* needs that drive our feelings ("because"...), and that whatever we are feeling and needing, is because of what we're seeing or hearing... (*When* I see or hear...).

How much difference does form make? How does it impact meaning and our experience? Try substituting a few classic NVC lines. For example, **when you read the following out loud, what difference do you notice (including in your body):**

- A) Would you wash the dishes? B) Would you be willing to wash the dishes?
- A) You're angry. B) Are you feeling angry?
- A) You're inconsiderate. B) I'm feeling sad and needing consideration.

How do each seem different to you? How do you notice the difference in your body? How can you use the classical model (the tag lines that start each step) as a way of remembering your intention? And how, once you're connected to your intention, can you let go of the classical vocabulary for each step? Ultimately, this is what supports fluency and ease in practicing NVC...and moving into what some call "street" or colloquial NVC—integrating the mindset, intention, and consciousness of the model so that we can let the classical form drop away. Ironically, perhaps, it's in paying close attention to that classical form— at least in the beginning— that can help us get there. It's like practicing your piano scales and practicing with a metronome until you get the groove and can just do improv. Or knowing you're way well enough—from using the map at first—so you can get there on your own.

Did you find this blog helpful? If so, how? And what topics interest you? I'd love your feedback and input!