

Four Questions to Ask Yourself Before Important Conversations

With Oren Jay Sofer

There is a saying in many spiritual traditions, “Only speak if you can improve upon the silence.” Personally, there are plenty of times when I’d rather simply be quiet. There’s also a time and a place to speak up—when we need to set limits, seek support, protect what we love, mourn, celebrate, or connect.

Before having an important conversation or sitting down to write, I’ll often take a walk to connect with myself. I’ll feel the air on my skin, look out at the water, and listen inwardly to sense what’s worth saying. Once I’ve discerned that there is something to say, here are four questions that I’ve found helpful to consider.

I. What's My Intention?

Intention is where we’re coming from inside, the heart quality that drives our words and actions. It’s about how we want to show up rather than the outcome we’re seeking. Being conscious of our intention helps ensure that our actions are aligned with our values.

Intention shapes nonverbal communication and therefore the felt sense and tone of a conversation. If I bring up some small detail around the house, my partner immediately can sense the difference in my tone of voice if I’m blaming her inside or if I’m sincerely motivated to work together.

There are many helpful intentions we can have in a conversation—to come from the heart, to collaborate, to be patient, to stay open to new perspectives, to be curious, to lovingly hold our ground. One of the most powerful and transformative intentions is the **genuine intention to understand**, which can build trust, good will, and mutuality—all essential conditions for connection and teamwork.

Practice: Before an important conversation, take time to choose a clear intention. Summarize your intention in a word, phrase or image. Focus all of your attention on that mental representation of your intention, letting its meaning and significance become imprinted on your mind. During the conversation, return to that image, word or phrase as often as needed to remind yourself of how you want to engage.

II. What Needs Am I Trying to Meet?

At the heart of Nonviolent Communication is an awareness of needs: the deeper core motivating factors in a situation. When we’re clear about what needs we are trying to meet by speaking (and whose), we can make choices about how to engage that are more likely to address the key concerns.

A family member recently canceled a trip to come visit. We’d been planning it for some time and I was looking forward to seeing her, so I felt disappointed when she told me it would be too much for her to come. It was the kind of situation that could have turned into a painful argument.

I was able to recognize that I wanted understanding for the impact her choice had on me, and at the same time for her to feel understood and supported in her decision to prioritize self-care and time with

her aging partner. Reflecting on these needs made it easier for me to speak from my heart and stay focused on what mattered—hearing each other—without getting side-tracked by my thoughts or judgments.

Practice: Before speaking, reflect on what needs you are trying to meet by expressing yourself. Are you wanting to be understood? To inquire? To support teamwork? To act with integrity? Are there any needs in the other person(s) you can take into account that would affect what you say or how you approach things?

III. What Do I Want The Other Person to Know or Understand?

Before learning NVC I often focused exclusively on what I wanted to say, without considering what it was I wanted the other person to hear. This tendency overlooks the relational aspect of dialogue, while placing my attention on the other person helps me to hone in on the precise message I want to send. When I know what I want someone else to understand (about my experience or a situation), it's easier to find creative ways to send that message.

Practice: Before an important conversation, take some time to reflect on what you'd like the other person to know. If the conversation went exceedingly well, what would they understand differently? How does this help you hone in on the message you want to send?

IV. How Can I Say It In A Way They Are Most Likely to Hear?

The final question takes the relational side of a conversation a step further by considering what the other person can actually hear. Do they have the capacity to take in what you want to share? Are you speaking their “language”?

This isn't about being nice, tamping down my vitality, or numbing my authenticity to make others feel comfortable. It's about using skill to create the conditions for an effective connection. If I would like to be understood, then it's in my own best interest to take the time and effort to speak in a way that the other person can take in.

Practice: Find different ways of expressing what's true for you. Run them by a friend or colleague first for feedback. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and imagine how it would be to hear each version. Which is most likely to get you the understanding you want? Which brings up the least amount of defensiveness, while still expressing your truth?

Many conversations move too quickly to reflect on all four of these questions in the moment. If you consider them one at a time before important conversations, it becomes easier to bear them in mind on the fly, in the flow of ordinary conversations. Over time, I've found that each particular question will come to the front of my awareness at different moments, when it's most helpful.