Observing Without Evaluating

I can handle your telling me
what I did or didn't do.
And I can handle your interpretations,
but please don't mix the two.

If you want to confuse any issue,
I can tell you how to do it:
Mix together what I do
with how you react to it.

Tell me that you're disappointed
with the unfinished chores you see,
But calling me "irresponsible"
is no way to motivate me.

And tell me that you're feeling hurt
when I say "no" to your advances,
But calling me a frigid man
won't increase your future chances.

Yes, I can handle your telling me
what I did or didn't do,
And I can handle your interpretations,
but please don't mix the two.

—Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

T he first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. We need to clearly observe what we are seeing, hearing, or touching that is affecting our sense of well-being, without mixing in any evaluation.

Observations are an important element in NVC, where we wish to clearly and honestly express how we are to another person. When we combine observation with evaluation, we decrease the likelihood that others will hear our intended message. Instead, they are apt to hear criticism and thus resist whatever we are saying.

NVC does not mandate that we remain completely objective and refrain from evaluating. It only requires that we maintain a separation between our observations and our evaluations. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations; instead, evaluations are to be based on observations *specific to time and context.* Semanticist Wendell Johnson pointed out that we create many problems for ourselves by using static language to express or capture a reality that is ever changing: "Our language is an imperfect instrument created by ancient and ignorant men. It is an animistic language that invites us to talk about stability and constants, about similarities and normal and kinds, about magical transformations, quick cures, simple problems, and final solutions. Yet the world we try to symbolize with this language is a world of process, change, differences, dimensions, functions, relationships, growths, interactions, developing, learning, coping, complexity. And the mismatch of our ever-changing world and our relatively static language forms is part of our problem."

> **When we combine observation with evaluation, people are apt to hear criticism.**

A colleague of mine, Ruth Bebermeyer, contrasts static and process language in a song that illustrates the difference between evaluation and observation:

I've never seen a lazy man;
I've seen a man who never ran
while I watched him, and I've seen

a man who sometimes slept between
lunch and dinner, and who'd stay
at home upon a rainy day,
but he was not a lazy man.
Before you call me crazy,
think, was he a lazy man or
did he just do things we label "lazy"?

I've never seen a stupid kid;
I've seen a kid who sometimes did
things I didn't understand
or things in ways I hadn't planned;
I've seen a kid who hadn't seen
the same places where I had been,
but he was not a stupid kid.
Before you call him stupid,
think, was he a stupid kid or did he
just know different things than you did?

I've looked as hard as I can look
but never ever seen a cook;
I saw a person who combined
ingredients on which we dined,
A person who turned on the heat
and watched the stove that cooked the meat—
I saw those things but not a cook.
Tell me, when you're looking,
Is it a cook you see or is it someone
doing things that we call cooking?

What some of us call lazy
some call tired or easy-going,
what some of us call stupid
some just call a different knowing,
so I've come to the conclusion,
it will save us all confusion

if we don't mix up what we can see
with what is our opinion.
Because you may, I want to say also;
I know that's only my opinion.

—Ruth Bebermeyer

While the effects of negative labels such as "lazy" and "stupid" may be more obvious, even a positive or an apparently neutral label such as "cook" limits our perception of the totality of another person's being.

The Highest Form of Human Intelligence

The Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti once remarked that observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence. When I first read this statement, the thought, "What nonsense!" shot through my mind before I realized that I had just made an evaluation. For most of us, it is difficult to make observations, especially of people and their behavior, that are free of judgment, criticism, or other forms of analysis.

I became acutely aware of this difficulty while working with an elementary school where the staff and principal had often reported communication difficulties. The district superintendent had requested that I help them resolve the conflict. First I was to confer with the staff, and then with the staff and principal together.

I opened the meeting by asking the staff, "What is the principal doing that conflicts with your needs?"

"He has a big mouth!" came the swift response. My question called for an observation, but while "big mouth" gave me information on how this teacher evaluated the principal, it failed to describe what the principal *said or did* that led to the interpretation that he had a "big mouth."

When I pointed this out, a second teacher offered, "I know what he means: the principal talks too much!" Instead of a clear observation of the principal's behavior, this was also an evaluation—of how much the principal talked. A third teacher then declared, "He thinks only he has anything worth saying." I explained that inferring what another person is thinking is not the same as observing his behavior. Finally a fourth teacher ventured, "He wants to be the center of attention all the time." After I remarked that this too was an inference—of what another person is wanting—two teachers blurted in unison, "Well, your question is very hard to answer!"

We subsequently worked together to create a list identifying *specific behaviors,* on the part of the principal, that bothered them, and made sure that the list was free of evaluation. For example, the principal told stories about his childhood and war experiences during faculty meetings, with the result that meetings sometimes ran twenty minutes overtime. When I asked whether they had ever communicated their annoyance to the principal, the staff replied that they had tried, but only through evaluative comments.

They had never made reference to specific behaviors—such as his storytelling—and they agreed to bring these up when we were all to meet together.

Almost as soon as the meeting began, I saw what the staff had been telling me. No matter what was being discussed, the principal would interject, "This reminds me of the time … " and then launch into a story about his childhood or war experience. I waited for the staff to voice their discomfort around the principal's behavior. However, instead of Nonviolent Communication, they applied nonverbal condemnation. Some rolled their eyes; others yawned pointedly; one stared at his watch.

I endured this painful scenario until finally I asked, "Isn't anyone going to say something?" An awkward silence ensued. The teacher who had spoken first at our meeting screwed up his courage, looked directly at the principal, and said, "Ed, you have a big mouth."

As this story illustrates, it's not always easy to shed our old habits and master the ability to separate observation from evaluation. Eventually, the teachers succeeded in clarifying for the principal the specific actions that led to their concern. The principal listened earnestly and then pressed, "Why didn't one of you tell me before?" He admitted he was aware of his storytelling habit, and then began a story pertaining to this habit! I interrupted him, observing (good-naturedly) that he was doing it again. We ended our meeting by developing ways for the staff to let their principal know, in a gentle way, when his stories weren't appreciated.

Distinguishing Observations From Evaluations

The following table distinguishes observations that are separate from evaluation from those that have evaluation mixed in.

Communication	Example of observation with evaluation mixed in	Example of observation separate from evaluation
1. Use of verb *to be* without indication that the evaluator takes responsibility for the evaluation	You are too generous.	When I see you give all your lunch money to others, I think you are being too generous.
2. Use of verbs with evaluative connotations	Doug procrastinates.	Doug only studies for exams the night before.
3. Implication that one's inferences about another person's thoughts, feelings, intentions, or desires are the only ones possible	She won't get her work in.	I don't think she'll get her work in. *or* She said, "I won't get my work in."
4. Confusion of prediction with certainty	If you don't eat balanced meals, your health will be impaired.	If you don't eat balanced meals, I fear your health may be impaired.
5. Failure to be specific about referents	Immigrants don't take care of their property.	I have not seen the immigrant family living at 1679 Ross shovel the snow on their sidewalk.
6. Use of words denoting ability without indicating that an evaluation is being made	Hank Smith is a poor soccer player.	Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games.
7. Use of adverbs and adjectives in ways that do not indicate an evaluation has been made	Jim is ugly.	Jim's looks don't appeal to me.

Note: The words *always, never, ever, whenever,* etc. express observations when used in the following ways:

- Whenever I have observed Jack on the phone, he has spoken for at least thirty minutes.
- I cannot recall your ever writing to me.

Sometimes such words are used as exaggerations, in which case observations and evaluations are being mixed:

- You are always busy.
- She is never there when she's needed.

When these words are used as exaggerations, they often provoke defensiveness rather than compassion.

Words like *frequently* and *seldom* can also contribute to confusing observation with evaluation.

Evaluations	Observations
You seldom do what I want.	The last three times I initiated an activity, you said you didn't want to do it.
He frequently comes over.	He comes over at least three times a week.

Summary

The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. When we combine observation with evaluation, others are apt to hear criticism and resist what we are saying. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations. Instead, observations are to be made specific to time and context, for example, "Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games," rather than "Hank Smith is a poor soccer player."

NVC in Action

"The Most Arrogant Speaker We've Ever Had!"

This dialogue occurred during a workshop I was conducting. About half an hour into my presentation, I paused to invite reactions from the participants. One of them raised a hand and declared, "You're the most arrogant speaker we've ever had!"

I have several options open to me when people address me this way. One option is to take the message personally; I know I'm doing this when I have a strong urge to either grovel, defend myself, or make excuses. Another option (for which I am well-rehearsed) is to attack the other person for what I perceive as their attack upon me. On this occasion, I chose a third option by focusing on what might be going on behind the man's statement.

MBR: *(guessing at the observations being made)* Are you reacting to my having taken thirty straight minutes to present my views before giving you a chance to talk?

Phil: No, you make it sound so simple.

MBR: *(trying to obtain further clarification)* Are you reacting to my not having said anything about how the process can be difficult for some people to apply?

Phil: No, not some people—you!

MBR: So you're reacting to my not having said that the process can be difficult for me at times? Phil: That's right.

MBR: Are you feeling annoyed because you would have liked some sign from me that indicated that I have some problems with the process myself?

Phil: *(after a moment's pause)* That's right.

MBR: *(feeling more relaxed now that I am in touch with the person's feeling and need, I direct my attention to what he might be requesting of me)* Would you like me to admit right now that this process can be a struggle for me to apply?

Phil: Yes.

MBR: *(having gotten clear on his observation, feeling, need, and request, I check inside myself to see if I am willing to do as he requests)* Yes, this process is often difficult for me. As we continue with the workshop, you'll probably hear me describe several incidents where I've struggled … or completely lost touch … with this process, this consciousness, that I am presenting here to you. But what keeps me in the struggle are the close connections to other people that happen when I do stay with the process.

Exercise 1

OBSERVATION OR EVALUATION?

To determine your proficiency at discerning between observations and evaluations, complete the following exercise. Circle the number in front of each statement that is an observation only, with no evaluation mixed in.

1. "John was angry with me yesterday for no reason."

2. "Yesterday evening Nancy bit her fingernails while watching television."

3. "Sam didn't ask for my opinion during the meeting."

4. "My father is a good man."

5. "Janice works too much."

6. "Henry is aggressive."

7. "Pam was first in line every day this week."

8. "My son often doesn't brush his teeth."

9. "Luke told me I didn't look good in yellow."

10. "My aunt complains when I talk with her."

Here are my responses for Exercise 1:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "for no reason" to be an evaluation. Furthermore, I consider it an evaluation to infer that John was angry. He might have been feeling hurt, scared, sad, or something else. Examples of observations without evaluation might be: "John told me he was angry," or "John pounded his fist on the table."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
3. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "good man" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be:

"For the last twenty-five years, my father has given one-tenth of his salary to charity."

5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "too much" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Janice spent more than sixty hours at the office this week."

6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "aggressive" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Henry hit his sister when she switched the television channel."

7. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.

8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "often" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Twice this week my son didn't brush his teeth before going to bed."

9. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.

10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "complains" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "My aunt called me three times this week, and each time talked about people who treated her in ways she didn't like."

The Mask

Always a mask
Held in the slim hand whitely
Always she had a mask before her
face—

Truly the wrist
Holding it lightly
Fitted the task:
Sometimes however
Was there a shiver,
Fingertip quiver,
Ever so slightly—
Holding the mask?

For years and years and years I
wondered
But dared not ask
And then—
I blundered,
Looked behind the mask,
To find
Nothing—

She had no face.
She had become
Merely a hand
Holding a mask
With grace.

—Author unknown