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Observing Without Evaluating

OBSERVE!! There are few things as important, as religious, as that.
—Frederick Buechner, minister

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

The 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

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Requesting That Which Would Enrich Life

We have now covered the first three components of NVC, which address what we are *observing, feeling,* and *needing.* We have learned to do this without criticizing, analyzing, blaming, or diagnosing others, and in a way likely to inspire compassion. The fourth and final component of this process addresses *what we would like to request of others* in order to enrich life for us. When our needs are not being fulfilled, we follow the expression of what we are observing, feeling, and needing with a specific request: we ask for actions that might fulfill our needs. How do we express our requests so that others are more willing to respond compassionately to our needs?

Using Positive Action Language

First of all, we express what we *are* requesting rather than what we *are not* requesting. "How do you do a *don't?*" goes a line of a children's song by my colleague Ruth Bebermeyer: "All I know is I feel *won't* when I'm told to do a *don't.*" These lyrics reveal two problems commonly encountered when requests are worded in the negative. People are often confused as to what is actually being requested, and furthermore, negative requests are likely to provoke resistance.

Use positive language when making requests.

A woman at a workshop, frustrated that her husband was spending so much time at work, described how her request had backfired: "I asked him not to spend so much time at work. Three weeks later, he responded by announcing that he'd signed up for a golf tournament!" She had successfully communicated to him what she did not want—his spending so much time at work—but had failed to request what she *did* want. Encouraged to reword her request, she thought a minute and said, "I wish I had told him that I would like him to spend at least one evening a week at home with the children and me."

During the Vietnam War, I was asked to debate the war issue on television with a man whose position differed from mine. The show was videotaped, so I was able to watch it at home that evening. When I saw myself on the screen communicating in ways I didn't want to be communicating, I felt very upset. "If I'm ever in another discussion," I told myself, "I am determined not to do what I did on that program! I'm not going to be defensive. I'm not going to let them make a fool of me." Notice how I spoke to myself in terms of what I *didn't* want to do rather than in terms of what I *did* want to do.

A chance to redeem myself came the very next week when I was invited to continue the debate on the same program. All the way to the studio, I repeated to myself all the things I didn't want to do. As soon as the program started, the man launched off in exactly the same way he had a week earlier.

For about ten seconds after he'd finished talking, I managed not to communicate in the ways I had been reminding myself. In fact, I said nothing. I just sat there. As soon as I opened my mouth, however, I found words tumbling out in all the ways I had been so determined to avoid! It was a painful lesson about what can happen when I only identify what I *don't* want to do, without clarifying what I *do* want to do.

I was once invited to work with some high school students who suffered a long litany of grievances against their principal. They regarded the principal as racist, and searched for ways to get even with him. A minister who worked closely with the young people became deeply concerned over the prospect of violence. Out of respect for the minister, the students agreed to meet with me.

They began by describing what they saw as discrimination on the part of the principal. After listening to several of their charges, I suggested that they proceed by clarifying what they wanted from the principal.

"What good would that do?" scoffed one student in disgust. "We already went to him to tell him what we wanted. His answer to us was, 'Get out of here! I don't need you people telling me what to do!'"

I asked the students what they had requested of the principal. They recalled saying to him that they didn't want him telling them how to wear their hair. I suggested that they might have received a more cooperative response if they had expressed what they *did,* rather than what they *did not,* want. They had then informed the principal that they wanted to be treated with fairness, at which he had become defensive, vociferously denying ever having been unfair. I ventured to guess that the principal would have responded more favorably if they had asked for specific actions rather than vague behavior like "fair treatment."

Working together, we found ways to express their requests in positive action language. At the end of the meeting, the students had clarified thirty-eight actions they wanted the principal to take, including "We'd like you to agree to black student representation on decisions made about dress code," and "We'd like you to refer to us as 'black students' and not 'you people.'" The following day, the students presented their requests to the principal using the positive action language we had practiced; that evening I received an elated phone call from them: their principal had agreed to all thirty-eight requests!

In addition to using positive language, we also want to word our requests in the form of concrete actions that others can undertake and to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing. A cartoon depicts a man who has fallen into a lake. As he struggles to swim, he shouts to his dog on shore, "Lassie, get help!" In the next frame, the dog is lying on a psychiatrist's couch. We all know how opinions vary as to what constitutes "help": some members of my family, when asked to help with the dishes, think "help" means supervision.

A couple in distress attending a workshop provides an additional illustration of how nonspecific language can hamper understanding and communication. "I want you to let me be me," the woman declared to her husband. "I do!" he retorted. "No, you don't!" she insisted. Asked to express herself in positive action language, the woman replied, "I want you to give me the freedom to grow and be myself." Such a statement, however, is just as vague and likely to provoke a defensive response. She struggled to formulate her request clearly, and then admitted, "It's kind of awkward, but if I were to be precise, I guess what I want is for you to smile and say that anything I do is okay." Often, the use of vague and abstract language can mask oppressive interpersonal games.

Making requests in clear, positive, concrete action language reveals what we really want.

A similar lack of clarity occurred between a father and his fifteen-year-old son when they came in for counseling. "All I want is for you to start showing a little responsibility," claimed the father. "Is that asking too much?" I suggested that he specify what it would take for his son to demonstrate the responsibility he was seeking. After a discussion on how to clarify his request, the father responded sheepishly, "Well, it doesn't sound so good, but when I say that I want responsibility, what I really mean is that I want him to do what I ask, without question—to jump when I say jump, and to smile while doing it." He then agreed with me that if his son were to actually behave this way, it would demonstrate obedience rather than responsibility.

Like this father, we often use vague and abstract language to indicate how we want other people to feel or be without naming a concrete action

they could take to reach that state. For example, an employer makes a genuine effort to invite feedback, telling the employees, "I want you to feel free to express yourself around me." The statement communicates the employer's desire for the employees to "feel free," but not what they could do in order to feel this way. Instead, the employer could use positive action language to make a request: "I'd like you to *tell* me what I might *do* to make it easier for you to feel free to express yourselves around me."

Vague language contributes to internal confusion.

Depression is the reward we get for being "good."

As a final illustration of how the use of vague language contributes to internal confusion, I would like to present the conversation that I would invariably have during my practice as a clinical psychologist with the many clients who came to me with complaints of depression. After I empathized with the depth of feeling that a client had just expressed, our exchanges would typically proceed in the following manner:

MBR: What are you wanting that you are not receiving?

Client: I don't know what I want.

MBR: I guessed that you would say that.

Client: Why?

MBR: My theory is that we get depressed because we're not getting what we want, and we're not getting what we want because we have never been taught to get what we want. Instead, we've been taught to be good little boys and girls and good mothers and fathers. If we're going to be one of those good things, better get used to being depressed. Depression is the reward we get for being "good." But, if you want to feel better, I'd like you to clarify what you would like people to do to make life more wonderful for you.

Client: I just want someone to love me. That's hardly unreasonable, is it?

MBR: It's a good start. Now I'd like you to clarify what you would like

people to do that would fulfill your need to be loved. For example, what could I do right now?

Client: Oh, you know …

MBR: I'm not sure I do. I'd like you to tell me what you would like me, or others, to do to give you the love you're looking for.

Client: That's hard.

MBR: Yes, it can be difficult to make clear requests. But think how hard it will be for others to respond to our request if we're not even clear what it is!

Client: I'm starting to get clear what I want from others to fulfill my need for love, but it's embarrassing.

MBR: Yes, very often it is embarrassing. So what would you like for me or others to do?

Client: If I really reflect upon what I'm requesting when I ask to be loved, I suppose I want you to guess what I want before I'm even aware of it. And then I want you to always do it.

MBR: I'm grateful for your clarity. I hope you can see how you are not likely to find someone who can fulfill your need for love if that's what it takes.

Very often, my clients were able to see how the lack of awareness of what they wanted from others had contributed significantly to their frustrations and depression.

Making Requests Consciously

Sometimes we may be able to communicate a clear request without putting it in words. Suppose you're in the kitchen and your sister, who is watching television in the living room, calls out, "I'm thirsty." In this case, it may be obvious that she is requesting you to bring her a glass of water from the kitchen.

However, in other instances, we may express our discomfort and incorrectly assume that the listener has understood the underlying request. For example, a woman might say to her husband, "I'm annoyed you forgot the butter and onions I asked you to pick up for dinner." While it may be obvious to her that she is asking him to go back to the store, the husband may think that her words were uttered solely to make him feel guilty.

When we simply express our feelings, it may not be clear to the listener what we want them to do.

Even more often, we are simply not conscious of what we are requesting when we speak. We talk *to* others or *at* them without knowing how to engage in a dialogue *with* them. We toss out words, using the presence of others as a wastebasket. In such situations, the listener, unable to discern a clear request in the speaker's words, may experience the kind of distress illustrated in the following anecdote.

We are often not conscious of what we are requesting.

I was seated directly across the aisle from a couple on a mini-train that carries passengers to their respective terminals at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. For passengers in a hurry to catch a plane, the snail's pace of the train may well be irritating. The man turned to his wife and said with intensity, "I have never seen a train go so slow in all my life." She said nothing, appearing tense and uneasy as to what response he might be expecting from her. He then did what many of us do when we're not getting

the response we want: he repeated himself. In a markedly stronger voice, he exclaimed, "I have never seen a train go so slow in all my life!"

The wife, at a loss for response, looked even more distressed. In desperation, she turned to him and said, "They're electronically timed." I didn't think this piece of information would satisfy him, and indeed it did not, for he repeated himself a third time—even more loudly, *"I HAVE NEVER SEEN A TRAIN GO SO SLOW IN ALL MY LIFE!"* The wife's patience was clearly exhausted as she snapped back angrily, "Well, what do you want me to do about it? Get out and push?" Now there were two people in pain!

What response was the man wanting? I believe he wanted to hear that his pain was understood. If his wife had known this, she might have responded, "It sounds like you're scared we might miss our plane, and disgusted because you'd like a faster train running between these terminals."

Requests may sound like demands when unaccompanied by the speaker's feelings and needs.

In the above exchange, the wife heard the husband's frustration but was clueless as to what he was asking for. Equally problematic is the reverse situation—when people state their requests without first communicating the feelings and needs behind them. This is especially true when the request takes the form of a question. "Why don't you go and get a haircut?" can easily be heard by youngsters as a demand or an attack unless parents remember to first reveal their own feelings and needs: "We're worried that your hair is getting so long it might keep you from seeing things, especially when you're on your bike. How about a haircut?"

It is more common, however, for people to talk without being conscious of what they are asking for. "I'm not requesting anything," they might remark. "I just felt like saying what I said." My belief is that, whenever we say something to another person, we are requesting something in return. It may simply be an empathic connection—a verbal or nonverbal acknowledgment, as with the man on the train, that our words have been understood. Or we may be requesting honesty: we wish to know the listener's honest reaction to our words. Or we may be requesting an action that we hope would fulfill our

needs. The clearer we are on what we want back from the other person, the more likely it is that our needs will be met.

The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely it is that we'll get it.

Asking for a Reflection

As we know, the message we send is not always the message that's received. We generally rely on verbal cues to determine whether our message has been understood to our satisfaction. If, however, we're uncertain that it has been received as intended, we need to be able to clearly request a response that tells us how the message was heard so as to be able to correct any misunderstanding. On some occasions, a simple question like, "Is that clear?" will suffice. At other times, we need more than "Yes, I understood you," to feel confident that we've been truly understood. At such times, we might ask others to reflect back in their own words what they heard us say. We then have the opportunity to restate parts of our message to address any discrepancy or omission we might have noticed in their reflection.

To make sure the message we sent is the message that's received, ask the listener to reflect it back.

For example, a teacher approaches a student and says, "Peter, I got concerned when I checked my record book yesterday. I want to make sure you're aware of the homework I'm missing from you. Will you drop by my office after school?" Peter mumbles, "Okay, I know," and then turns away, leaving the teacher uneasy as to whether her message had been accurately received. She asks for a reflection—"Could you tell me what you just heard me say?"—to which Peter replies, "You said I gotta miss soccer to stay after school because you didn't like my homework." Confirmed in her suspicion that Peter had not heard her intended message, the teacher tries to restate it, but first she is careful of her next remark.

An assertion like "You didn't hear me," "That's not what I said," or "You're misunderstanding me," may easily lead Peter to think that he is being chastised. Since the teacher perceives Peter as having sincerely responded to her request for a reflection, she might say, "I'm grateful to you for telling me what you heard. I can see that I didn't make myself as clear as I'd have liked, so let me try again."

Express appreciation when your listener tries to meet your request for a reflection.

When we first begin asking others to reflect back what they hear us say, it may feel awkward and strange because such requests are rarely made. When I emphasize the importance of our ability to ask for reflections, people often express reservations. They are worried about reactions like, "What do you think I am—deaf?" or, "Quit playing your psychological games." To prevent such responses, we can explain to people ahead of time why we may sometimes ask them to reflect back our words. We make clear that we're not testing their listening skills, but checking out whether we've expressed ourselves clearly. However, should the listener retort, "I heard what you said; I'm not stupid!" we have the option to focus on the listener's feelings and needs and ask—either aloud or silently—"Are you saying you're feeling annoyed because you want respect for your ability to understand things?"

Empathize with the listener who doesn't want to reflect back.

Requesting Honesty

After we've openly expressed ourselves and received the understanding we want, we're often eager to know the other person's reaction to what we've said. Usually the honesty we would like to receive takes one of three directions:

- Sometimes we'd like to know the feelings that are stimulated by what we said, and the reasons for those feelings. We might request this by asking, "I would like you to tell me how you feel about what I just said, and your reasons for feeling as you do."

After we express ourselves vulnerably, we often want to know (1) what the listener is feeling;

- Sometimes we'd like to know something about our listener's thoughts in response to what they just heard us say. At these times, it's important to specify which thoughts we'd like them to share. For example, we might say, "I'd like you to tell me if you predict that my proposal would be successful, and if not, what you believe would prevent its success," rather than simply saying, "I'd like you to tell me what you think about what I've said." When we don't specify which thoughts we would like to receive, the other person may respond at great length with thoughts that aren't the ones we are seeking.

(2) what the listener is thinking; or

- Sometimes we'd like to know whether the person is willing to take certain actions that we've recommended. Such a request may sound like this: "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to postpone our meeting for one week."

(3) whether the listener would be willing to take a particular action.

The use of NVC requires that we be conscious of the specific form of honesty we would like to receive, and to make that request for honesty in concrete language.

Making Requests of a Group

It is especially important when we are addressing a group to be clear about the kind of understanding or honesty we want back after we've expressed ourselves. When we are not clear about the response we'd like, we may initiate unproductive conversations that end up satisfying no one's needs.

I've been invited from time to time to work with groups of citizens concerned about racism in their communities. One issue that frequently arises among these groups is that their meetings are tedious and fruitless. This lack of productivity is very costly for group members, who often expend limited resources to arrange for transportation and child care in order to attend meetings. Frustrated by prolonged discussions that yield little direction, many members quit the groups, declaring meetings a waste of time. Furthermore, the institutional changes they are striving to make are not usually ones that occur quickly or easily. For all these reasons, when such groups do meet, it's important that they make good use of their time together.

I knew members of one such group that had been organized to effect change in the local school system. It was their belief that various elements in the school system discriminated against students on the basis of race. Because their meetings were unproductive and the group was losing members, they invited me to observe their discussions. I suggested that they conduct their meeting as usual, and that I would let them know if I saw any ways NVC might help.

One man began the meeting by calling the group's attention to a recent newspaper article in which a minority mother had raised complaints and concerns regarding the principal's treatment of her daughter. A woman responded by sharing a situation that had occurred to her when she was a student at the same school. One by one, each member then related a similar personal experience. After twenty minutes I asked the group if their needs were being met by the current discussion. Not one person said yes. "This is what happens all the time in these meetings!" huffed one man, "I have better things to do with my time than sit around listening to the same old bullshit."

I then addressed the man who had initiated the discussion: "Can you tell me, when you brought up the newspaper article, what response you were

wanting from the group?"

"I thought it was interesting," he replied. I explained that I was asking what response he wanted from the group, rather than what he thought about the article. He pondered awhile and then conceded, "I'm not sure what I wanted."

And that's why, I believe, twenty minutes of the group's valuable time had been squandered on fruitless discourse. When we address a group without being clear what we are wanting back, unproductive discussions will often follow. However, if even one member of a group is conscious of the importance of clearly requesting the response that is desired, he or she can extend this consciousness to the group. For example, when this particular speaker didn't define what response he wanted, a member of the group might have said, "I'm confused about how you'd like us to respond to your story. Would you be willing to say what response you'd like from us?" Such interventions can prevent the waste of precious group time.

In a group, much time is wasted when speakers aren't certain what response they're wanting.

Conversations often drag on and on, fulfilling no one's needs, because it is unclear whether the initiator of the conversation has gotten what she or he wanted. In India, when people have received the response they want in conversations they have initiated, they say "bas" (pronounced "bus"). This means, "You need not say more. I feel satisfied and am now ready to move on to something else." Though we lack such a word in our own language, we can benefit from developing and promoting "bas-consciousness" in all our interactions.

Requests versus Demands

Our requests are received as demands when others believe they will be blamed or punished if they do not comply. When people hear a demand, they see only two options: submission or rebellion. Either way, the person requesting is perceived as coercive, and the listener's capacity to respond compassionately to the request is diminished.

> **When the other person hears a demand from us, they see two options: to submit or to rebel.**

The more we have in the past blamed, punished, or "laid guilt trips" on others when they haven't responded to our requests, the higher the likelihood that our requests will now be heard as demands. We also pay for others' use of such tactics. To the degree that people in our lives have been blamed, punished, or urged to feel guilty for not doing what others have requested, the more likely they are to carry this baggage to every subsequent relationship and hear a demand in any request.

> **To tell if it's a demand or a request, observe what the speaker does if the request is not complied with.**

Let's look at two variations of a situation. Jack says to his friend Jane, "I'm lonely and would like you to spend the evening with me." Is that a request or a demand? The answer is that we don't know until we observe how Jack treats Jane if she doesn't comply. Suppose she replies, "Jack, I'm really tired. If you'd like some company, how about finding someone else to be with you this evening?" If Jack then remarks, "How typical of you to be so selfish!" his request was in fact a demand. Instead of empathizing with her need to rest, he has blamed her.

> **It's a demand if the speaker then criticizes or judges.**

Consider a second scenario:

Jack: I'm lonely and would like you to spend the evening with me.

Jane: Jack, I'm really tired. If you'd like some company, how about finding someone else to be with you tonight?

Jack: *(turns away wordlessly)*

Jane: *(sensing he is upset)* Is something bothering you?

Jack: No.

Jane: Come on, Jack, I can sense something's going on. What's the matter?

Jack: You know how lonely I'm feeling. If you really loved me, you'd spend the evening with me.

Again, instead of empathizing, Jack now interprets Jane's response to mean that she doesn't love him and that she has rejected him. The more we interpret noncompliance as rejection, the more likely our requests will be heard as demands. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the more people hear demands, the less they enjoy being around us.

It's a demand if the speaker then lays a guilt trip.

On the other hand, we would know that Jack's request had been a genuine request, not a demand, if his response to Jane had expressed a respectful recognition of her feelings and needs. For example: "So, Jane, you're feeling worn out and needing some rest this evening?"

We can help others trust that we are requesting, not demanding, by indicating that we would only want them to comply if they can do so willingly. Thus we might ask, "Would you be willing to set the table?" rather than "I would like you to set the table." However, the most powerful way to communicate that we are making a genuine request is to empathize with people when they don't agree to the request.

It's a request if the speaker then shows empathy toward the other person's needs.

We demonstrate that we are making a request rather than a demand by how we respond when others don't comply. If we are prepared to show an empathic understanding of what prevents someone from doing as we asked, then by my definition, we have made a request, not a demand. Choosing to request rather than demand does not mean we give up when someone says no to our request. It does mean that we don't engage in persuasion until we have empathized with what's preventing the other person from saying yes.

Defining Our Objective When Making Requests

Expressing genuine requests also requires an awareness of our objective. If our objective is only to change people and their behavior or to get our way, then NVC is not an appropriate tool. The process is designed for those of us who would like others to change and respond, but only if they choose to do so willingly and compassionately. The objective of NVC is to establish a relationship based on honesty and empathy. When others trust that our primary commitment is to the quality of the relationship, and that we expect this process to fulfill everyone's needs, then they can trust that our requests are true requests and not camouflaged demands.

Our objective is a relationship based on honesty and empathy.

A consciousness of this objective is difficult to maintain, especially for parents, teachers, managers, and others whose work centers around influencing people and obtaining behavioral results. A mother who once returned to a workshop after a lunch break announced, "Marshall, I went home and tried it. It didn't work." I asked her to describe what she'd done.

"I went home and expressed my feelings and needs, just as we'd practiced. I made no criticism, no judgments of my son. I simply said, 'Look, when I see that you haven't done the work you said you were going to do, I feel very disappointed. I wanted to be able to come home and find the house in order and your chores completed.' Then I made a request: I told him I wanted him to clean it up immediately."

"It sounds like you clearly expressed all the components," I commented. "What happened?"

"He didn't do it."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"I told him he couldn't go through life being lazy and irresponsible."

I could see that this woman was not yet able to distinguish between expressing requests and making demands. She was still defining the process as successful only if she got compliance for her "requests." During the initial

phases of learning this process, we may find ourselves applying the components of NVC mechanically without awareness of the underlying purpose.

Sometimes, however, even when we're conscious of our intent and express our request with care, people may still hear a demand. This is particularly true when we occupy positions of authority and are speaking with those who have had past experiences with coercive authority figures.

Once, the administrator of a high school invited me to demonstrate to teachers how NVC might help them communicate with students who weren't cooperating as the teachers would have liked.

I was asked to meet with forty students who had been deemed "socially and emotionally maladjusted." I was struck by the way such labels serve as self-fulfilling prophecies. If you were a student who had been thus labeled, wouldn't it just give you permission to have some fun at school by resisting whatever was asked of you? When we give people labels, we tend to act in a way that contributes to the very behavior that concerns us, which we then view as further confirmation of our diagnosis. Since these students knew they had been classified as "socially and emotionally maladjusted," I wasn't surprised that when I walked in, most of them were hanging out the window hollering obscenities at their friends in the courtyard below.

I began by making a request: "I'd like you all to come over and sit down so I can tell you who I am and what I'd like us to do today." About half the students came over. Uncertain that they had all heard me, I repeated my request. With that, the remainder of the students sat down, with the exception of two young men who remained draped over the windowsill. Unfortunately for me, these two were the biggest students in the class.

"Excuse me," I addressed them, "would one of you two gentlemen tell me what you heard me say?" One of them turned toward me and snorted, "Yeah, you said we had to go over there and sit down." I thought to myself, "Uh, oh, he's heard my request as a demand."

Out loud I said, "Sir"—I've learned always to say "sir" to people with biceps like his, especially when one of them sports a tattoo—"would you be willing to tell me how I could have let you know what I was wanting so that it wouldn't sound like I was bossing you around?"

"Huh?" Having been conditioned to expect demands from authorities, he was not used to my different approach. "How can I let you know what I'm

wanting from you so it doesn't sound like I don't care about what you'd like?" I repeated. He hesitated for a moment and shrugged, "I don't know."

"What's going on between you and me right now is a good example of what I was wanting us to talk about today. I believe people can enjoy each other a lot better if they can say what they would like without bossing others around. When I tell you what I'd like, I'm not saying that you have to do it or I'll try to make your life miserable. I don't know how to say that in a way that you can trust." To my relief, this seemed to make sense to the young man who, together with his friend, sauntered over to join the group. In certain situations, such as this one, it may take awhile for our requests to be clearly seen for what they are.

When making a request, it is also helpful to scan our minds for the sort of thoughts that automatically transform requests into demands:

- He *should* be cleaning up after himself.
- She's *supposed* to do what I ask.
- I *deserve* to get a raise.
- I'm *justified* in having them stay later.
- I have a *right* to more time off.

When we frame our needs with these thoughts, we are bound to judge others when they don't do as we request. I had these self-righteous thoughts in my mind once when my younger son was not taking out the garbage. When we were dividing the household chores, he had agreed to this task, but every day we would have another struggle about getting the garbage out. Every day I would remind him, "This is your job," and "We all have jobs"—with the sole objective of getting him to take out the garbage.

Finally, one night I listened more closely to what he'd been telling me all along about why the garbage wasn't going out. I wrote the following song after that evening's discussion. After my son felt my empathy for his position, he began taking out the garbage without any further reminder from me.

If I clearly understand
you intend no demand,
I'll usually respond when you call.
But if you come across
like a high and mighty boss,

you'll feel like you ran into a wall.
And when you remind me
so piously
about all those things you've done for me,
you'd better get ready:
Here comes another bout!
Then you can shout,
you can spit,
moan, groan, and throw a fit;
I still won't take the garbage out.
Now even if you should change your style,
It's going to take me a little while
before I can forgive and forget.
Because it seems to me that you
didn't see me as human too
until all your standards were met.

—"Song from Brett" by Marshall B. Rosenberg

Summary

The fourth component of NVC addresses the question of *what we would like to request of each other to enrich each of our lives.* We try to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing, and remember to use positive action language by stating what we *are* requesting rather than what we are *not.*

Each time we speak, the clearer we are about what we want back, the more likely we are to get it. Since the message we send is not always the message that's received, we need to learn how to find out if our message has been accurately heard. Especially when we are expressing ourselves in a group, we need to be clear about the nature of the response we are wanting. Otherwise we may be initiating unproductive conversations that waste considerable group time.

Requests are received as demands when listeners believe that they will be blamed or punished if they do not comply. We can help others trust that we are requesting, not demanding, by indicating our desire for them to comply only if they can do so willingly. The objective of NVC is not to change people and their behavior in order to get our way; it is to establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone's needs.

NVC in Action

Sharing Fears About a Best Friend's Smoking

Al and Burt have been best friends for over thirty years. Al, a nonsmoker, has done everything he can over the years to persuade Burt to give up his two-pack-a-day habit. In the past, when Al had tried to get him to quit, Burt had often accused Al of judging him.

Aware during the past year of the increasing severity of his friend's hacking cough, Al finds himself bursting out one day with all the energy and life that had been buried in his unexpressed anger and fear.

Al: Burt, I know we've talked about this a dozen times, but listen.

I'm scared your damned cigarettes are going to kill you! You're my best friend, and I want you around for as long as I can have you. Please don't think I'm judging you. I'm not—I'm just really worried.

Burt: No, I hear your concern. We've been friends for a long time …

Al: *(making a request)* Would you be willing to quit?

Burt: I wish I could.

Al: *(listening for the feelings and needs preventing Burt from agreeing to the request)* Are you scared to try because you don't want to fail?

Burt: Yeah … you know how many times I've tried before … I know people think less of me for not being able to quit.

Al: *(guessing at what Burt might want to request)* I don't think less of you. And if you tried and failed again, I still wouldn't. I just wish you'd try.

Burt: Thanks. But you're not the only one…. It's everyone: you can see it in their eyes—they think you're a failure.

Al: *(empathizing with Burt's feeling)* Is it kind of overwhelming to worry about what others might think, when just quitting is hard enough?

Burt: I really hate the idea that I might be addicted, that I have something that I just can't control …

Al: *(Al's eyes connect with Burt's; he nods his head. Al's interest and attention to Burt's deep feelings and needs are revealed through his eyes and the silence that follows.)*

Burt: I mean, I don't even like smoking any more. It's like you're a pariah if you do it in public. It's embarrassing.

Al: *(continuing to empathize)* It sounds like you'd really like to quit, but are scared you might fail—and how that would be for your self-image and confidence.

Burt: Yeah, I guess that's it…. You know, I don't think I've ever talked about it before. Usually when people tell me to quit, I just tell

them to get lost. I'd like to quit, but I don't want all that pressure from people.

Al: I wouldn't want to pressure you. I don't know if I could reassure you about your fears around not succeeding, but I sure would like to support you in any way I can. That is … if you want me to….

Burt: Yes, I do. I'm really touched by your concern and willingness. But … suppose I'm not ready to try yet, is that okay with you too?

Al: Of course, Burt, I'll still like you as much. It's just that I want to like you for longer!

Because Al's request was a genuine request, not a demand, he maintained awareness of his commitment to the quality of the relationship, regardless of Burt's response. He expressed this awareness and his respect for Burt's need for autonomy through his words, "I'll still like you," while simultaneously expressing his own need "to like you for longer."

Burt: Well, then, maybe I will try again … but don't tell anyone else, okay?

Al: Sure, you decide when you're ready; I won't be mentioning it to anybody.

Exercise 4

EXPRESSING REQUESTS

To see whether we're in agreement about the clear expression of requests, circle the number in front of each of the following statements in which the speaker is clearly requesting that a specific action be taken.

1. "I want you to understand me."
2. "I'd like you to tell me one thing that I did that you appreciate."
3. "I'd like you to feel more confidence in yourself."
4. "I want you to stop drinking."
5. "I'd like you to let me be me."
6. "I'd like you to be honest with me about yesterday's meeting."
7. "I would like you to drive at or below the speed limit."
8. "I'd like to get to know you better."
9. "I would like you to show respect for my privacy."
10. "I'd like you to prepare supper more often."

Here are my responses for Exercise 4:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the word *understand* does not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me what you heard me say."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is clearly requesting a specific action.
3. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *feel more confidence* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to take a course in assertiveness training, which I believe would increase your self-confidence."

4. 4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *stop drinking* do not express what the speaker wants, but rather what he or she doesn't want. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me what needs of yours are met by drinking, and to discuss with me other ways of meeting those needs."
5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *let me be me* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me you won't leave our relationship—even if I do some things that you don't like."
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *be honest with me* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me how you feel about what I did and what you'd like me to do differently."
7. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is clearly requesting a specific action.
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *get to know you better* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to meet for lunch once a week."
9. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *show respect for my privacy* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to agree to knock before you enter my office."
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *more often* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to prepare supper every Monday night."