

Nonviolent Communication in the Workplace

Robert Goldman ([linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com/in/robertgoldman/))

Reduced conflict, more understanding, collaboration, trust and positive relationships. If all of these things sound like something you want in your workspace, continue reading to see how this is possible. It is believed that successful companies and startups may have a secret ingredient others are missing: Communication.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), founded by Marshall Rosenberg, is a compassionate way of communicating that helps us get our needs met while fundamentally respecting others. The basic principle of NVC is that everyone has basic human needs, and any time they communicate (particularly in conflict) is an attempt to get those needs met. It helps us move away from automatic responses that may be defensive or judgmental, to clear, concise and compassionate communication.

NVC is made up of four parts: observations, feelings, needs, and requests.

Observations: We simply observe what is happening. Our observations should be specific to time and context. Try to avoid words like always, never, or attach judgment (e.g., right/wrong). In use, observations would be factual and neutral and sound like this- “The last three times we had dinner together, you answered the phone for work.” Compared to – “You are *always* on the phone!”

Feelings: The second part of NVC is feelings. Typically, we want to identify and communicate our feelings, rather than placing blame on the person you are communicating with or interpreting their feelings. Building off the last example where we acknowledged our partner was using their phone during dinner, we could say “I feel disconnected when this happens” vs “I feel like you want nothing to do with me when you are on your phone.”

Needs: NVC also involves the acknowledgement of the needs behind our feelings and understands that conflict may arise as a result of needs being unmet. Our feelings result from how we choose to interpret others’ actions or words, as well as our needs in that moment. Your needs for that moment may be respect, space, support, understanding, etc. Gaining awareness of our needs and how to recognize them can help communicating greatly. It may also help to gain an understanding of the other person’s needs which may not be the same as yours. We might say something along the lines of, “Because I have a need for connection, I feel...”

Requests: At this point you have observed the situation, reflected on your feelings and needs. Now, it is time to put it all together to make a request to the other person to help meet your needs. Compassionate requests are typically concrete and doable and act as an invitation, rather than a demand. After calmly and clearly expressing our feelings and needs, we can say something such as, “Would you be willing to turn your phone off until after dinner.” *

Keep in mind that the other person is not required to accept and follow through with the request—their needs also need to be taken into consideration.

“Conflicts, even of long standing duration, can be resolved if we can just keep the flow of communication going in which people come out of their heads and stop criticizing and analyzing each other, and instead get in touch with their needs, and hear the needs of others, and realize the interdependence that we all have in relation to each other. We can’t win at somebody else’s expense. We can only fully be satisfied when the other person’s needs are fulfilled as well as our own.” – Marshall Rosenberg

Often, when we are trying to communicate, especially if we are tense or upset about something, we tend to jump to accusations towards the other person. This can also be true in the workplace. Conflicts in the workplace are unique to each office, but frequent workplace conflicts stem from:

- Reliance on other team members for projects
- When another colleague is late to complete a joint or time sensitive task
- Disagreement on big decisions (creative, business strategy, etc.)
- We may disagree fundamentally about the next steps we want to take on a big project or how we want to approach a certain strategy.
- Differences in personalities/values
- Sometimes, it may not even be that the other people in the workplace are doing anything wrong, but simply that you do not align with certain values or work ethics.
- Unclear/ambiguous roles
- This often stems from poor leadership or poor communication between supervisors and their employees. Being unsure of what is expected of us on the job and where to put our time and effort can lead to conflict.

What do the above conflicts (which are an incomplete list) have in common? They all stem from breakdowns in communications. We will work with people that have different values and come from different backgrounds than us. Additionally, we will have to rely on other people in a team to get the job done at times. However, this does not mean conflict has to be the result.

Using nonviolent communication in the workplace can decrease the probability of conflict arising and can end conflict before it begins to escalate. Here is what it sounds like to use nonviolent communication and the four steps (observation, feeling, needs and requests) when speaking with someone at work:

- “I’ve noticed you have not handed in your part of this project (*observation*). Since the deadline is next week, this makes me nervous (*feeling*) because I value being timely and maintaining the respect I’ve earned in the company (*need*). Would you be willing to let me know if there is anything you need from me to help you finish the task in a timely manner (*request*)?”
- “When you went through my role with me, I was unclear on the specifics of what is expected of me (*observation*). I feel I would be a more valuable employee to the company if I had specific tasks or guidelines to work off of (*feeling*). It’s important for me to be making successful strides in any position I hold (*need*). Therefore, would it be possible to schedule a time to sit down and discuss opportunities and tasks for me moving forward (*request*)?”