Nonviolent Communication for W3C Working Groups

by Claire Rumore & Moses Ma, FutureLab Consulting

CONCEPT

The adoption of NVC as a model for Internet standards working groups is a compelling vision. We believe that a carefully designed variation of NVC would empower working groups and their facilitators to be more effective, by learning how to perceive the emotional reactions and tacit needs of participants in a working group, and to learn the art of making more effective requests. If the facilitator can teach these techniques, it can create a shared basis for connection, cooperation, and effectiveness in the discussion.

An Overview of NVC

Nonviolent Communications (aka NVC) was developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, who has introduced it to individuals and organizations world wide. NVC has been used between warring tribes and in war-torn countries; in schools, prisons, and corporations; in health care, social change, and government institutions; and in intimate personal relationships. Currently, over 200 hundred certified trainers and many more non-certified trainers around the world are sharing NVC in their communities.

So let's start with an overview about what NVC is and what it could do for us. NVC has been described by some as a language of empathy and compassion. This unique interaction technique provides us with the social and psychological tools for more effective communication, based on an understanding of how interpersonal interaction can, both consciously and subconsciously, trigger negative emotions. By learning this technique, it can also help us take greater responsibility for our own reactions.

When we focus on needs, without interpreting or conveying criticism, blame, or demands, our deeper creativity flourishes, and solutions arise that were previously blocked from our awareness. With this depth, conflicts and misunderstandings can be resolved with greater ease. For a working group, when certain members demand to speak more than a 1/N share of the time, we should unpack the needs that are not being met for that member.

Learning NVC is a process similar to learning a new language or skill: step-by-step learning coupled with ample time for practice will lead to growing mastery. While it takes time to develop fluency, any knowledge of a new language makes it more likely that *some* communication can take place. In addition, because NVC invites us to a level of vulnerability and caring that often are not familiar or habitual, full integration of the consciousness underlying this language is likely to require changes in our internal connection to ourselves, and healing of past pain and dealing with internal fears.

This "language" of NVC includes two parts: honestly expressing ourselves to others, and empathically hearing others. Both are expressed through four components – observations, feelings, needs, and requests – though empathic connection fundamentally relies on connection at the level of feelings and needs, hence observations and requests may or may not be articulated. Practicing NVC involves distinguishing these components from judgments, interpretations, and demands, and learning to embody the consciousness embedded in these components in order to express ourselves and hear ourselves and others in ways more likely to foster understanding and connection, to support everyone involved in getting their needs met, and to nurture in all of us a joy in giving and in receiving. The practice also includes empathic connection with ourselves – "self-empathy." The purpose of self-empathy is to support us in maintaining connection with our own needs, choosing our actions and responses based on self-connection and self-acceptance.

The Components of NVC

Observations

Observations are what we see or hear that we identify as the stimulus to our reactions. Our aim is to describe what we are reacting to concretely, specifically and neutrally, much as a video camera might capture the moment. This helps create a shared reality with the other person. The observation gives the context for our expression of feelings and needs, and may not even be needed of both people are clear about the context.

The key to making an observation is to separate our own judgments, evaluations or interpretations from our description of what happened. For example, if we say: "You're rude," the other person may disagree, while if we say: "When I saw you walk in and I didn't hear you say hello to me," the other person is more likely to recognize the moment that is described.

When we are able to describe what we see or hear in observation language without mixing in evaluation, we raise the likelihood that the person listening to us will hear this first step without immediately wanting to respond and will be more willing to hear our feelings and needs.

Feelings

Feelings represent our emotional experience and physical sensations associated with our needs that have been met or that remain unmet (see below). Our aim is to identify, name and connect with those feelings.

The key to identifying and expressing feelings is to focus on words that describe our inner experience rather than words that describe our interpretations of people's actions.

When we express our feelings, we continue the process of taking responsibility for our experience, which helps others hear what's important to us with less likelihood of hearing criticism or blame of themselves. This increases the likelihood that they will respond in a way that meets both our needs.

Needs

Our needs are an expression of our shared humanity. All human beings share key needs for survival. We also share many other needs, though we may experience them to varying degrees and may experience them more or less intensely at various times. In the context of NVC, needs refer to what is most alive in us: our core values and human desires. Understanding, naming, and connecting with our needs helps us improve our relationship with ourselves, as well as foster understanding with others, so we are all more likely to take actions that meet everyone's needs.

The key to identifying, expressing, and connecting with needs is to focus on words that describe shared human experience rather than words that describe the particular strategies to meet those needs. Whenever we include a person, a location, an action, a time, or an object in our expression of what we want, we are describing a strategy rather than a need. The internal shift from focusing on a specific strategy to connecting with needs often results in a sense of power and liberation, as we can free ourselves from being attached to one particular strategy by identifying the underlying needs and exploring alternative strategies.

Feelings arise when our needs are met or not met, which happens at every moment of life. By connecting our feelings with our needs, therefore, we take full responsibility for our feelings, freeing us and others from fault and blame. And by expressing our unique experience in the moment of a shared human reality of needs, we create the most likely opportunity for another person to see our humanity and to experience empathy and understanding for us.

Requests

In order to meet our needs, we make requests to assess how likely we are to get cooperation for particular strategies we have in mind for meeting our needs. Our aim is to identify and express a specific action that we believe will serve this purpose, and then check with others involved about their willingness to participate in meeting our needs in this way. In a given moment, it is our connection with another that determines the quality of their response to our request. Therefore often our requests in the moment are "connection requests," intended to foster connection and understanding and to determine whether we have sufficiently connected to move to a "solution request." An example of a connection request might be: "Would you tell me how you feel about this?" An example of a solution request might be "Would you be willing to take your shoes off when you come in the house?"

The spirit of requests relies on our willingness to hear a "no" and to continue to work with ourselves or others to find ways to meet everyone's needs. Whether we are making a request or a demand is often

evident by our response when our request is denied. A denied demand will lead to punitive consequences; a denied request most often will lead to further dialogue. We recognize that "no" is an expression of some need that is preventing the other person from saying "yes". If we trust that through dialogue we can find strategies to meet both of our needs, "no" is simply information to alert us that saying "yes" to our request may be too costly in terms of the other person's needs. We can then continue to seek connection and understanding to allow additional strategies to arise that will work to meet more needs.

To increase the likelihood that our requests would be understood, we attempt to use language that is as concrete and doable as possible, and that is truly a request rather than a demand. For example, "I would like you to always come on time" is unlikely to be doable, while "Would you be willing to spend 15 minutes with me talking about what may help you arrive at 9 am to our meetings?" is concrete and doable. While a person may assent to the former expression ("Yes, I'll always come on time"), our deeper needs – for connection, confidence, trust, responsibility, respect, or others – are likely to remain unmet.

If someone agrees to our request out of fear, guilt, shame, obligation, or the desire for reward, this compromises the quality of connection and trust between us. When we are able to express a clear request, we raise the likelihood that the person listening to us will experience choice in their response. As a consequence, while we may not gain immediate assent to our wishes, we are more likely to get our needs met over time because we are building trust that everyone's needs matter. Within an atmosphere of such trust, goodwill increases, and with it a willingness to support each other in getting our needs met.

Learning to make clear requests and shifting our consciousness to making requests in place of demands are very challenging skills for most people. People often find the request part to be the hardest, because of what we call a "crisis of imagination": a difficulty in identifying a strategy that could actually meet our needs without being at the expense of other needs. Even before considering the needs of others, the very act of coming up with what we call a positive, doable request is challenging. We are habituated to thinking in terms of what we want people to stop doing ("don't yell at me"), and how we want them to be ("treat me with respect") rather than what we want them to do ("Would you be willing to lower your voice or talk later?"). With time, and a deeper connection to our needs, our creativity expands to imagine and embrace more strategies.

This fourth step is critical to our ability to create the life we want. In particular, shifting from demands to requests entails a leap in focus and in faith: we shift from focusing on getting our needs met, to focusing on the quality of connection that will allow both of our needs to truly matter and ultimately also to be met.

Deconstructing Empathy

Expressing our own observations, feelings, needs and requests to others is one part of NVC. The second part is empathy: the process of connecting with another by guessing their feelings and needs. Empathic connection can sometimes happen silently, but in times of conflict, communicating to another person that we understand their feelings and that their needs matter to us can be a powerful turning point in problem situations. Demonstrating that we have such understanding is not the same as agreeing to act in ways that don't meet our own needs.

Connecting empathically with another person is a way to meet our own needs – for understanding, connection, contribution, or others. At the same time, we hope that the empathy would meet the other person's needs as well, and would aid both of us in finding strategies that would meet our needs.

The language of NVC often helps us relate with others, but the heart of empathy is in our ability to compassionately connect with our own and others' humanity. Offering our empathic presence, in this sense, is one strategy (or request) through which we can meet our own needs. It is a gift to another person and to ourselves of our full presence.

When we use NVC to connect empathically, we use the same four components in the form of a question, since we can never know what is going on inside the other. The other person will always be the ultimate authority on what is going on for them. Our empathy may meet other people's needs for understanding, or it may spark their own self-discovery.

In the process of sharing empathy between two people, if both parties are able to connect at the level of feelings and needs, a transformation often happens in which one or both parties experience a shift in intention and attention. This can lead to a shift of needs or generate new reserves of kindness and generosity, or, in seemingly impossible situations, it can open us to remarkable bursts of creative solutions that were unimaginable when clouded by disconnection. Those are moments of deep human connection, satisfaction and hope.

Self-Empathy

Both expression of our own feelings and needs and empathic guesses of others' feelings and needs are grounded in a particular consciousness which is at the heart of NVC. This consciousness is nurtured by the practice of self-empathy.

In self-empathy, we bring the same compassionate attention to ourselves that we give to others when listening to them using NVC. This means listening through any interpretations and judgments we are making to clarify how we are in terms of our feelings and needs. This inner awareness and clarity supports us in choosing our next step: expressing ourselves to others, or receiving them with empathy. This next step is our request to ourselves about where we want to focus our attention.

The practice of NVC entails an intention to connect compassionately with ourselves and with others, and an ability to keep our attention in the present moment – which includes being aware that sometimes in this present moment we are recalling the past, or imagining a future possibility.

Often self-empathy comes easy, as we access our sensations, emotions and needs, to attune to how we are. However, in moments of conflict or reactivity to others, we may find ourselves reluctant to access an intention to connect compassionately, and we may falter in our capacity to attend to the present moment. Self-empathy at times like this has the power to transform our disconnected state of being and return us to our compassionate intention and present-oriented attention. With practice, many people find that self-empathy alone sometimes resolves inner conflicts and conflicts with others as it transforms our experience of life.

How We Could Apply NVC to Our Work

Let us consider an example. Our community has a rule of thumb that *our N participants should speak roughly 1/Nth of the time.* When participants violate that rule of thumb, we can use the observational tools of NVC to unpack the underlying nexus of feelings and needs, to arrive at well formed requests.

So when we observe such behavior, such as people who tend to repeat themselves about the "right" way to implement identity systems, or repeatedly pushing a commercial venture or ICO. As tempting as it is to enter a state of judgment, we need to describe what we see or hear in observation language without mixing in evaluation. The key to identify the feelings and express them, without criticism or blame.

Again, in the context of NVC, needs refer to what is most alive in us: our core values and human desires. Understanding, naming, and connecting with those needs is vital. So with the person who repeatedly pitches their ICO, we can see how worried they are about the success of their business, or that they are from an economically disadvantaged part of the world without access to venture capital, or that they've invested their last penny on this venture and are actually in a state of fear. By acknowledging what is really happening for them, we can use awareness to dissolve the fear and have them express - in a more emotionally compelling manner - their request for others to support that venture or share the URL.

A more difficult problem is the person who cannot stop speaking for longer than necessary (as perceived by others in the group). In this case, the underlying psychological issues have more to do with the need to assert one's value to the world, and to see that need as the trigger to a behavioral pattern. The solution is to urge these people to shift from prognosticator to facilitator. This 1/N rule actually has two sides: the people who take more than 1/N are easy to identify, but the people who take less than 1/N are essentially, hiding or lurking. The result is that they are not participating fully, which drags on the energy of the entire group. In the art of brainstorming, a basic rule is that those who are shy can probably generate better ideas than those who like to dominate the discussion. So one solution is to ask people

who speak too often and for too long, to explicitly support those who do not speak up enough. This allows for the transformation of *bloviators* into *facilitators*. Such an action would enable an inner shift that results in a sense of power and liberation for both parties.

The most important thing is for the group to learn how to make better requests, that aim to identify and express a specific action that we believe will bring the group to greater cohesiveness and self-awareness, with the intent to foster connection and understanding. For example, a poorly request might be: "You talked about your ICO last time, can you stop doing that?" An example of a better request might be "I feel a sense of desperation in your voice, would you be willing to share what you're feeling that is causing you to repeat yourself so often?" The former is a covert demand and will result in curtailed participation. The latter is an invitation to understand the underlying needs and could lead to the group sharing about everyone's needs more.

Here's another example: "I would like you to stop dominating the discussion time with your personal theories" would likely be met with negativity and is frankly not going to work long term, while "Would you be willing to spend 15 minutes with me talking about why you tend to dominate discussion time and what may help you to be more concise?" is more doable. While a person may assent to the former expression ("Yes, I'll try not to dominate the discussion"), that person's deeper needs – for connection, confidence, trust, responsibility, respect, or others – are likely to remain unmet, and they will revert to the unwanted behavior over time, or in some other working group. If someone agrees to our request out of fear, guilt, shame, obligation, or the desire for reward, this compromises the quality of connection and trust between us.

The goal is to find strategies that meet everyone's needs, to continue to seek connection and understanding to allow additional strategies to arise that will work to meet more needs. Learning how to be able to express a clear request, we raise the likelihood that the person listening to us will experience choice in their response. Within an atmosphere of such trust, goodwill increases, and with it a willingness to support each other in getting our needs met.

Learning to make clear requests and shifting our consciousness to making requests in place of demands is therefore the most powerful skill we could develop within the working group. But it isn't easy to do. We are habituated to thinking in terms of what we want people to stop doing ("don't yell at me"), and how we want them to be ("treat me with respect") rather than what we want them to do ("Would you be willing to lower your voice or talk later?"). With time, and a deeper connection to our needs, our creativity expands to imagine and embrace more strategies.

So here is a quick guide to how members of our working group can practice NVC:

1. Observe the situation objectively and without judgment

In other words, notice your own emotional reaction when something happens that makes your eyes roll. You could say, "Excuse me, I believe you're dominating the conversation again and not noticing that you are over the time limit for a share (observation)."

2. State how the observation is making you feel.

Instead of judging, criticizing, or blaming, identify and express how your observation is making you feel. The goal here is not to shame others. Going back to the time limit example, "I noticed you are dominating the conversation again (observation). I'm afraid this might upset others who are following the rule of 1/N time allotment (feeling)."

3. Connect with a need.

Connect the observation and feeling with a need that is not being met. Remember, the reason why people feel unhappy is because there are needs that are not satisfied. Again, in the case of the time limit example, you can say "I noticed you're dominating the conversation (observation). I feel anxious because I'm afraid people will begin to disconnect with you (feeling) because you're repeating yourself. I really support your success (need), but I'd really like to have everyone feel connected in our working group (need).

4. Make a request.

After stating your observation, feeling, and need, it is time to ask specifically and clearly what you need or want from the other person. Avoid saying what you don't want. The goal here is to attempt to motivate the person out of willingness and compassionate giving, instead of fear, guilt, shame or obligation – with an actionable request.

For example, you can say, "I noticed you keep dominating the conversation (observation). I feel anxious (feeling) because we need to keep the group feeling connected (need). Are you perhaps feeling that you are not being heard or respected? What can we do to help you feel that your contribution has been heard and you are having an impact? (request)"

These skills are critical to our ability to create the life we want. In particular, shifting from demands to requests entails a leap in focus and in faith: we shift from focusing on getting our needs met, to focusing on the quality of connection that will allow both of our needs to truly matter and ultimately also to be met. We'll see changes in our personal lives and our relationships, as a result of developing NVC skills.

How DIDs could empower NVC

Finally, this working group could return the favor, by helping to drive the adoption of NVC through the design and development of decentralized technologies to support the usage and viral promotion of NVC. The concept is simple: by creating a verifiable claim/credential for moderation and facilitation training,

using NVC as a pilot training system, users could be verified for facilitation and moderation roles in online communities. This would also provide the CCG community with a vested interest in making NVC work with the CCG and RWOT working groups. The PR advantages of this type of partnership would be significant.

In essence, we would create decentralized framework for reputation in facilitation and moderation. Reputation is an essential component of social and business networks, because it serves as an optimizing influence on such systems. If we intend to optimize online communities, there is no better way than to support the adoption of training in online moderation and the facilitation of online collaboration.

Because reputation is generally a difficult problem in a decentralized environment, primarily due to the use of pseudonyms to create an incentive to misbehave without paying reputational consequences. If the SSI community wants a good pilot test to verify interoperability of claims and credentials from different DID vendors, this would be a great concept. Plus, we can promote outcome tracking to test whether facilitation by credentialed facilitators actually works. Finally, it is possible to tokenize this system with behavioral incentive cryptocurrency as well.

There are a number of design principles that apply to decentralized reputation systems, which could be used to help govern the design and operation of a verifiable credential for NVC facilitators . This actually blows down to a reputation management requirement:

Reputation is complex. Reputation in the real world is a complex and non-linear attribute. But at the end of the day, it is a measure of probability of a success. Thus, this system should aim to collect data about the use of NVC, to see if it actually works or not.

Reputation is transitive. This means that a reputation rating has to be modified or weighted by the party providing the reputation rating. If the provider of a reputation rating itself cannot be trusted, then that rating must be weighted by the probability of that source being inaccurate. Therefore, the design requirement is to accurately track the reliability of a certification based on the reputation of the certifier or reviewer.

Reputation is a narrative. Since reputation varies with time, it is dynamic and always changing. Thus, reputation requires hearing the full story before rendering judgment. What this means is that this is an opportunity to collect reviews and testimonials, and bring that narrative into the mathematical values we will establish to express reputation.

Reputation exists in the context of community. Any given context will have specific factors for what is important in determining reputation. Thus, in this case, the community that determines a testimonial should be reflected in the reference. If this is a negotiation between two warring nations, the testimonial should hold greater weight than if it's a small disagreement in an online forum discussing trivial matters.

Reputation in the virtual and real world are linked in a complex manner. This would be a unique opportunity to explore a facilitation reputation that (i) connects to the real world, (ii) is dynamic and self-healing so it can conform to and align with a growing organization's living and changing culture, and thus be dynamically modifiable by participants in an organic manner, and (iii) explore the use of tokenized incentive systems that measure those linkages.

Reputation is a dynamic social process, not a static formula. For example, eBay has the most simple model possible, but at the same time, it's the most effective online reputation engine in the world. They did not over-engineer it, but instead, allowed it to be organic and adaptable.

This proposal addresses a particularly human use case: dispute resolution. As a result, it is an extremely rare opportunity to develop a technology that could later inform and guide the evolution of smart contracts that embed dispute resolution at their core. And so, our design goal is to understand both the computer programming and human interaction requirements fully, to design against the goal of managing the nuances and complexities of online disagreements and how to resolve and adjudicate disputes in a positive manner. The solution needs to be based not only on disciplines like game-theoretic models of computational trust – but on the psychology of humans in disagreement and the healing of dysfunctional relationships, which should help to build stronger and more effective online communities in the future.

Identity is what makes us human. It's a uniquely human concept. Disagreements are also innately human. This project would allow us to explore what it means to be human, and how to transcend humanity to what lies beyond.

For more information about the ideas contained in this white paper, please contact the authors, Claire Rumore at claire.rumore@futurelabconsulting.com or Moses Ma at moses.ma@futurelabconsulting.com.