Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

The American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg developed Nonviolent Communication, often called NVC, starting in the 1960s. He believed that much of the conflict between people comes from the way we speak: blaming, judging and demanding. NVC offers a simple path of four steps for honest and respectful conversations: observations, feelings, needs and requests. It helps us say what matters to us without attacking, and listen to others without taking offence. Today it is used in families, schools and workplaces around the world.

1. Observations

The first step is to describe what actually happened, as a camera would record it. An observation contains facts, not judgments or labels. Saying that someone is always late is a judgment, while saying that they arrived twenty minutes after the start of the last three meetings is an observation. Rosenberg noticed that when we mix observation with evaluation, people hear criticism and defend themselves. Clear facts give the other person something concrete to discuss.

Example: A parent sees clothes on the bedroom floor. Instead of calling the child messy, the parent starts with an observation: I see three shirts and a towel on the floor. The child hears a simple fact, not an attack, and picks them up.

At work: Dalal, a project manager, is upset because her colleague Tarek keeps arriving late. Instead of saying that he never respects anyone's time, she starts with an observation: you joined the last three Monday meetings twenty minutes after the start. Tarek does not argue with the facts, and he listens.

2. Feelings

The second step is to say how we feel about what we observed. Rosenberg encouraged people to name real emotions, such as worried, frustrated, disappointed or relieved. He warned against words that sound like feelings but actually blame others, such as ignored, attacked or manipulated. These words describe what we think others did to us, not what is happening inside us. When we name a true feeling, the other person can understand us more easily.

Example: When a friend cancels dinner at the last minute, we can express a feeling instead of an accusation: I feel disappointed, because I was looking forward to our evening. The friend understands, apologises and suggests a new date.

At work: Dalal adds a feeling to her observation: I feel worried and a little frustrated. She does not say that she feels disrespected, because that word would blame Tarek. He sees that his lateness has a real effect on her.

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3. Needs

The third step connects the feeling to a need. In NVC, our feelings come from our own needs, met or unmet, rather than from what other people do. Needs are shared by all people, such as respect, rest, safety, support and clarity. Speaking about needs instead of blaming others helps people find common ground. It is much easier to care about a need than to accept criticism.

Example: A tired parent asks for quiet in the evening and explains the need behind it: I need some rest after a long day. The children understand the reason and agree to play more quietly.

At work: Dalal explains her need: I need the whole team at the start, so that we can decide together and finish on time. Tarek realises that the problem is not about him as a person, but about the team's planning.

4. Requests

The fourth step is a clear request for a specific action. A good request uses positive language: it says what we want, not what we do not want. It is concrete and doable, for example a time, a place or an action. A request is different from a demand: the other person is free to say no, and we stay open to their view. If they say no, we try to understand which of their needs stands in the way.

Example: Instead of telling a flatmate to stop being so noisy, a person makes a clear request: would you be willing to keep the music low after ten at night? The flatmate agrees, because the request is clear and polite.

At work: Dalal ends with a request: would you be willing to join on time next Monday, or tell me early if something stops you? Tarek agrees and explains that the real problem is a client call every Monday, so they move the meeting thirty minutes later.

Conclusion

In summary, Nonviolent Communication follows four steps: observations, feelings, needs and requests. Together they turn blame into a clear and honest message: when I see this, I feel this, because I need this, so would you be willing to do this? NVC also works in the other direction, when we listen for the feelings and needs behind other people's words. It is not about being soft or avoiding problems, but about speaking honestly and respectfully at the same time. With practice, difficult conversations become calmer and more productive.

Sources

- Center for Nonviolent Communication: What is NVC? – https://www.cnvc.org/learn/what-is-nvc
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- Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (3rd ed.). PuddleDancer Press.

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