Beyond anger and blame: How to achieve constructive conflict

by Allan Rohlfs in the November 14, 2012 issue

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Speak the truth in love," and "see that none of you repays evil for evil," exhorts St. Paul. Which is easier said than done. Consider the situation of a pastor who is told after a worship service, "The next time you preach on that subject, give me a call so I know not to come!" Or consider the situation of a female pastor who gets a prolonged and unwanted hug from a male parishioner. These are the kind of everyday situations that can generate anger and a knot in the stomach. How does one respond to such behavior in truth and love?

The problem is real for all of us and perhaps especially critical for church leaders who interact with a wide variety of people and who are likely to face personal criticism. Pastors are also often called to intervene in problematic situations, and they want to do so without destroying relationships.

There is a way to speak from the heart in the midst of a conflict, a way that fosters constructive conversation and is completely free of the blaming and judging that

invariably derail such exchanges. This is a way of talking in which people identify and express their concerns while pointing toward a solution to the conflict.

The approach is called nonviolent communication (NVC). It was developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg on the basis of his experience mediating school desegregation disputes in the South during the 1960s. Rosenberg, who went on to create the Center for Nonviolent Communication, observed the verbal behaviors that arise in and characterize conflicts. He noted as well that some rare responses move people from bitter disagreement toward a resolution.

NVC recommends that people approach a conflict situation by way of four steps. Significantly, none of these moves are present during most situations of conflict.

When another person does something offensive or objectionable, virtually everyone experiences an immediate physical change. However one was feeling before the offense occurred, now one is ill at ease: tight, tense, with that “knot in the stomach” sensation. This feeling of tightness contains anger or hurt (though at first one may not be fully aware of it). The speech that flows from this anger or hurt is blame and judgment or defensive words (or it could be the opposite: one makes a quick apology to appease the attacker). In any case, one’s immediate sense, regardless of one’s prior relationship with the offender, is that that person is like an enemy.

This instantaneous visceral reaction happens without a sense of choice, and it leads people to voice judgments. One is prone to label the other person as, for example, “rude,” “inconsiderate,” “thoughtless,” “unfair,” “a redneck” or “a socialist.” Or the transaction elicits self-deprecating thoughts: “I’m a terrible person.” The event may even elicit both kinds of reactions—a judgment of the other person and thoughts of inadequacy about oneself. The visceral response resurfaces whenever one is reminded of the event—even decades later.

The four steps of NVC offer a way to change that physical reaction and the speech that flows from it. They offer a way to regard the other person as other than an enemy, and they give one the freedom to respond with care.

The four steps are: 1) naming the behavior that is a problem; 2) naming the emotion you feel when the behavior takes place; 3) naming the need you have that is not being met because of the other person’s behavior; 4) stating in very concrete terms what would you would like the other person to do.

Following the four steps takes conscious deliberate reflection, and sometimes it takes a considerable amount of time. One has to free oneself from the grip of the anger-blame loop of feeling in order to ask oneself the NVC questions, and often this is not easy. It may take a few minutes—or hours or days. Nonetheless, when one is able to do each step, the release one feels from the initial tightness is palpable and unmistakable. And the results are remarkable.

In regard to the first step of naming the behavior, NVC asks us to focus on what is factually true without introducing an opinion, interpretation, judgment, evaluation, summary or inference regarding the behavior. The aim is to state only what one can observe with the senses—what one can see, hear, touch, taste, smell. To say “you were rude” or “you talked too much” or “you lied” is not a statement of fact. All those statements contain judgments or interpretations of the facts. Who is to say what constitutes talking too much? And what strikes one person as rude may be just straightforward speech to someone else.

Let’s take a particular case: Someone walks by your desk and doesn’t say hello or acknowledge you in any observable way. You feel hurt. You could say that the person is rude or self-absorbed, but since according to NVC one only states the facts, the behavior could be named this way: “You walked by my desk and didn’t say hello or acknowledge me.”

Step two is to name the emotion you feel when this behavior occurs. In this step, it’s important to name the emotion precisely, without implying a judgment on the other’s behavior. You might say, “I feel that you are inconsiderate,” but that is making a judgment about the behavior. What you feel is an emotion. Many of the words people that use when they try to talk about their feelings are often accusatory. People talk of being ignored, threatened, attacked, rejected, intimidated, violated, insulted or belittled. Clearly, strong feelings lie behind such words, but those words do not yet identify a feeling; they make a judgment. I may think that the other person is ignoring me when he or she walks by my desk without saying hello, but what I *feel* is probably something like “sad,” “lonely” or “hurt.”

Steps three and four involve naming the need you have and identifying an action that would be satisfying to you. “When you walk by my desk and do not say hello, I feel sad because I need contact and connection with people. If you’re willing, I’d like you to say something to me.”

A premise of NVC is that all human behavior is an attempt to meet a human need. At this very moment, you, the reader of this essay, are seeking to meet a need, perhaps for information, for help or for entertainment. A need is something that sustains human life or enriches it.

From the perspective of NVC, another person's behavior is not the cause of one's own feelings. Rather, we feel as we do because the other person's behavior did not meet a need that we have for sustaining or enriching life. By identifying our own unmet need when we're hurt or angry, we become connected to the forward movement of life—that is, we focus on what gives us life and what gives us abundant life. In this case, I focus on my need for contact and connection with people.

If we understand all behaviors as attempts or strategies to meet a need, then we are in a position not only to recognize our own needs but to see the behavior that is offensive to us as reflecting the other person's attempt to meet some need of theirs. When we understand another's need, we see them as a human being like us rather than as an enemy.

A person who plays music at a particular volume is meeting his need for entertainment, but his behavior (playing the music at a high volume) does not meet my need for quiet. His need for entertainment is completely honorable, however. It is his strategy for meeting that need that we object to.

Let's take another example, this time from family life. Let's say you come home from the store with a dozen doughnuts that you leave in the kitchen as you go off to do some work in the yard. An hour later you enter the kitchen and find that there are no doughnuts left in the box.

If you are not using NVC, you might enter the family room where the others are gathered and say, "Does anyone ever think of anyone besides themselves around here? I was kind enough to bring home treats for the family—couldn't you have left one for me? Couldn't you have given a little thought to me?"

To which a family member replies, "The doughnuts didn't have your name on them. Why didn't you say you wanted some?"

You: Are you so thoughtless that you can't think about others unless they put their names on things?

Family member: It’s your fault, not ours. And you’re trying to put the blame on us.

Now let’s imagine how the conversation might go if informed by NVC:

You: Hey everyone; I’m so disappointed and sad. I was looking forward to having a doughnut and there are none left. In the future I’d like to have an agreement that before anyone takes a last piece of a treat or a dessert they inform the rest of the family and ask if everyone who wanted one got one.

Family member: Sounds all right, but what if no one else is around?

You: You want to know the procedure for checking?

Family member: Yeah, I don’t want to wait for hours for everyone to show up.

You: It sounds like you’re willing to check with others, but not if no one’s home.

Family member: Yeah.

You: Well, if it’s a special treat, like someone’s birthday cake, I’d like you to either wait or call the rest of us. Otherwise, I’m OK with you just asking whoever’s around. How do you feel about doing that?

Family member: I guess that would be all right. I’m sorry you didn’t get any doughnuts.

This conversation indicates another aspect of NVC. It begins by identifying and expressing one’s observations (of behaviors), feelings, needs and requests (the four steps)—which is NVC’s definition of honesty—but it also seeks to elicit the other person’s observations, feelings, needs and requests, which is NVC’s definition of empathy. One makes guesses about the other’s needs, feelings and requests and checks with the other person on whether one has guessed accurately. If at least one party in the conversation is proceeding in this way, then it’s more likely that the conversation will move toward a meeting of mutual needs because an attempt is being made to identify and include what each person needs for an enriched life.

Seeking to meet both our own needs and those of the other person is the enactment of love and the aim of NVC. According to NVC, needs are never in conflict; conflict is over strategies to meet needs.

We don’t always know what needs other people are trying to meet, nor how they are feeling, nor what they want. Often their behavior and words (“What a bunch of selfish slobs”) don’t convey the underlying feeling, need or request or even the behavior they are reacting to. Therefore we have to employ empathic conjecture in order to continue the conversation. We can guess aloud regarding the other’s feelings and ask if our guess is correct, standing ready to be corrected. (“When you walked by my desk earlier and did not say hello, were you feeling anxious because you needed to get to a meeting?”)

With this understanding in mind, let’s compare two more conversations, one that proceeds without regard to the NVC model and one that utilizes it. In this situation, a pastor is seeking to address an ongoing power struggle between two parishioners. The struggle threatens to become central to the life of the congregation when both women seek to be elected to the church council. The pastor seeks out one of the antagonists.

Pastor: June, have you thought about the impact on the congregation of your running for church council opposite April?

June: What do you mean?

P: You two have been fighting each other for years, and that fight has turned off other members from serving on committees.

J: Well, it’s April who is always copying me whenever I try to do something good for the church. You should talk to April.

P: I intend to do that, but you are also a part of this situation.

J: That’s not true. Ever since I organized the Advent potluck five years ago and had a huge turnout, April’s been jealous and has been trying to outdo me. I can’t believe that you’re accusing me of doing something wrong. I’m not to blame. April is!

P: I’m not blaming you; I’m trying to address a problem in which you’re involved.

J: You are blaming me and you have no call to do it. You should be welcoming my contribution, not criticizing me.

P: I’m not criticizing you. I’m trying to address a problem.

J: I can’t believe you’d say this to me. After all I’ve done for the church and for you and your family. Why, I’ve had you over for dinner many times, particularly last year after your father died. I can’t believe how ungrateful you are now.

Now let’s imagine how this might go if the pastor spoke following the steps of NVC.

Pastor: June, I’m worried [he states a feeling/emotion] when I see your name up for church council along with April’s [he names a behavior]. I’m especially worried because this is happening just after April started a scholarship fund last year—which came one month after you organized a memorial fund for your son. You organized the Advent potluck, and then she organized the church picnic. Both of you announced to the congregation how many attended each event. I perceive a tension in the congregation because they sense a competition between you two.

I want other people to want to participate in the council [need], and I fear [feeling] that others interested in serving on the council will pull back when they see both your names being nominated, because they don’t want to be caught in the middle of a conflict. I’d like you to withdraw your name and resubmit it for next year’s elections [request]. How would you feel [request for immediate feedback] about doing that?

June: I don’t see why I should do that. Why ask me and not April? Are you taking her side?

P: [Empathizing before responding] When you hear me ask you to withdraw, are you feeling anxious because you need equal treatment [guessing at behavior, feeling and need]?

J: Well, it certainly seems like you’re taking her side.

P: Would you like me to explain my reasons for asking you and not April [guessing at a request]?

J: If you can!

P: I’m glad [feeling] to do that and glad that you asked. I worried [feeling] that this request would be difficult for you to hear and I’m happy [feeling] that at least one answer may be of help to you [need met].

J: Well, I’m glad you are glad, but you still haven’t told me why.

P: [Tells reasoning] I plan to talk to April too about what's going on between you and to ask her if she's willing to have a conversation with you and me. I hadn't planned to ask April to withdraw simply because she hasn't been on the council before and you have. How do you feel about that reasoning [request for feedback]? And would you be willing to have a conversation with April and also with me [request for future action]?

J: If April is willing to talk, I'll meet. I'm not letting her get up on me.

P: [Empathizing] You're really angry [feeling] with April because you see her as acting principally to get attention, and you want her to be honest about her intentions [need]—is that correct?

J: That's exactly what she's doing.

P: So you'd like me to confront her [guess at request] regarding this pattern in which you do something for the church and then she does something similar, is that right?

J: Yes. Then we wouldn't be in this mess. I'm only trying to do good.

P: [Empathy] You simply want to contribute [need] as you have been doing.

J: That's right.

P: I'm pleased [feeling] to have this talk and to hear your feelings because I've been very uncomfortable [feeling] and haven't known what to make of this situation. This helps me understand [need] part of it and also helps me connect [need] with you. I wanted that. So if you're willing, I'd like to arrange a meeting with you and April to talk about this. Is that still something you're willing to do [request]?

J: I'll come.

P: [Empathizing] Sounds like it's not something you're comfortable doing [feeling], but you are willing if it will help?

J: You got it.

The aim of NVC is to enable one to make the best connection possible with another person. The activity of expressing one's observations (of behavior), feelings, needs and requests and eliciting the same from the other is the best method for making this connection. NVC calls this speech the language of the heart. It embodies a mind-

set and a language that have the power to transform conflicts and lead to mutual understanding.