

We Can Work It Out

**Resolving Conflicts
Peacefully and Powerfully**

*A presentation of Nonviolent
Communication™ ideas and their use by*
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We Can *Work It Out*



Introduction

For more than forty years, I've mediated in a wide variety of conflicts between parents and children, husbands and wives, management and workers, Palestinians and Israelis, Serbians and Croatians, and warring groups in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Burundi, Sri Lanka, and Rwanda. What I've learned from dealing with conflicts at all these levels is that it is possible to resolve conflicts peacefully and to everyone's satisfaction. The likelihood of conflicts being resolved in this fulfilling way is significantly increased if a certain quality of human connection can be established between the conflicting parties.

I've developed a process called Nonviolent Communication™, which consists of thought and communication skills that empower us to connect compassionately with others and ourselves. My colleagues and I are extremely pleased with the many different ways that people are using Nonviolent Communication in their personal lives, work settings, and political activities.

In the following pages, I'll be describing how the process of Nonviolent Communication supports efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. The process can be used either when we ourselves are directly involved in conflict, or when we are mediating the conflicts of others.

When I am called into a conflict resolution, I begin by guiding the participants to a caring and respectful quality of connection among themselves. Only after this connection is present do I engage them in a search for strategies to resolve the conflict. At

that time we do not look for *compromise*; rather, we seek to resolve the conflict to everyone's complete satisfaction. To practice this process of conflict resolution, we must completely abandon the goal of *getting people to do what we want*. Instead, we focus on creating the conditions whereby *everyone's needs will be met*.

To further clarify this difference in focus (between getting what we want and getting what everyone wants), let's imagine that someone is behaving in a way that's not fulfilling a need of ours and we make a request that the person behave differently. In my experience, that person will resist what we request if they see us as only interested in getting our own needs met, and if they don't trust that we are equally concerned with meeting *their* needs. Genuine cooperation is inspired when participants trust that their own needs and values will be respectfully addressed. The Nonviolent Communication process is based on respectful practices that foster genuine cooperation.

Using Nonviolent Communication to Resolve Conflicts

The Nonviolent Communication practices that support conflict resolution involve:

- a) expressing our own needs;
- b) sensing the needs of others regardless of how others are expressing themselves;
- c) checking to see if needs are accurately being received;
- d) providing the empathy people need in order to hear the needs of others; and
- e) translating proposed solutions or strategies into positive action language.

Defining and Expressing Needs (Needs Are Not Strategies)

It has been my experience that if we keep our focus on needs, our conflicts tend toward a mutually satisfactory resolution. Keeping our focus on needs, we express our own needs, clearly understand the needs of others, and avoid any language that implies wrongness of the other party. The following are some of the basic human needs we all share:

Autonomy

- to choose one's dreams, goals, and values
- to choose one's plan for fulfilling one's dreams, goals, and values

Celebration

- to celebrate the creation of life and dreams fulfilled
- to celebrate losses: loved ones, dreams, etc. (mourning)

Integrity

- authenticity
- creativity
- meaning
- self-worth

Interdependence

- acceptance
- appreciation
- closeness

Interdependence continued

- community
- consideration
- contribution to the enrichment of life (to exercise one's power by giving that which contributes to life)
- emotional safety
- empathy
- honesty (the empowering honesty that enables us to learn from our limitations)
- love
- reassurance
- respect
- support
- trust
- understanding
- warmth

Physical Nurturance

- air
- food
- movement, exercise

Physical Nurturance continued

- protection from life-threatening forms of life: viruses, bacteria, insects, predatory animals, etc.
- rest
- sexual expression
- shelter
- touch
- water

Play

- fun
- laughter

Spiritual Communion

- beauty
- harmony
- inspiration
- order
- peace

Unfortunately, I've found that very few people are literate in expressing needs. Instead they have been trained to criticize, insult, and otherwise communicate in ways that create distance among people. As a result, even in conflicts for which resolutions exist, resolutions are not found. And instead of both parties expressing their own needs and understanding the needs of the other party, both sides play the game of who's right. That game is more likely to end in various forms of verbal, psychological, or physical violence than in peaceful resolution of differences.

Since needs are such a vital component of this approach to conflict resolution, I'd like to clarify what I'm referring to when I talk about needs. *Needs*, as I use the term, can be thought of as resources life requires to sustain itself. For example, our physical well-being depends on our needs for air, water, rest, and food being fulfilled. Our psychological and spiritual well-being is enhanced when our needs for understanding, support, honesty, and meaning are fulfilled.

As I'm defining needs, all human beings have the same needs. Regardless of our gender, educational level, religious beliefs, or nationality, we have the same needs. What differs from person to person is the strategy for fulfilling needs. I've found that it facilitates conflict resolution to keep our needs separate from the strategies that might fulfill our needs.

One guideline for separating needs from strategies is to keep in mind that needs contain no reference to specific people taking specific action. In contrast, effective strategies—or what are more commonly referred to as wants, requests, desires, and “solutions”—do refer to specific people taking specific actions. An exchange between a husband and wife who had just about given up on their marriage will clarify this important difference between needs and strategies.

I asked the husband what needs of his were not being fulfilled in the marriage. He responded, “I need to get out of this relationship.” Since he was talking about a specific person (himself) taking specific action (leaving the marriage) he was not expressing a need as I define needs. Instead he was telling me a strategy that he was thinking of taking. I pointed this out to him and suggested that we delay talking about strategies until we had really clarified both his needs and the needs of his wife. When they were able to clarify their needs, both saw that there were other strategies besides ending the relationship that could meet their needs. And I’m pleased to say that in the two years since that time, they’ve developed a relationship within the marriage that is very satisfactory to both.

Many people find it difficult to express needs. This lack of “need literacy” creates problems when people want to resolve conflicts. As an example, I would like to tell you about a husband and wife whose attempts to resolve conflicts had led them to visit physical violence upon one another.

I had been working in the husband’s workplace offering some training, and at the end of the training, the husband asked me if he could talk to me privately. He tearfully expressed the situation between his wife and himself, and asked if I would meet with them to support them in resolving some of their conflicts. The wife agreed, and so I went there that evening.

I began by saying: “I’m aware that you’re both in a lot of pain. I would suggest that we begin with each of you expressing whatever needs of yours are not being fulfilled in the relationship. Once you’ve understood one another’s needs, I’m confident we can explore some strategies to meet those needs.”

What I was asking them both required a literacy of expressing needs and an ability to understand one another’s needs.

Unfortunately, they weren't able to do as I suggested. They didn't have the literacy. Instead of expressing his needs, the husband said, "The problem with you is that you're totally insensitive to my needs." Immediately his wife responded by saying, "That's typical of you to say unfair things like that."

Another time I was working within a company that had a very disturbing conflict for more than fifteen months that was creating morale as well as productivity problems. In this conflict there were two different factions within the same department. The conflict involved which piece of software to use. There were strong emotions involved. One faction had worked very hard to develop the software that was presently in use, and they wanted to continue its use. The other faction had strong emotions tied up in a new piece of software.

When I met with this group, I started in the same way as with the husband and wife. I asked both sides to tell me what their needs were that would be better fulfilled with the software they advocated. As in the situation with the husband and wife, I didn't receive a clear expression of needs. Instead, each side responded with an intellectual analysis that the other side received as criticism.

A member from one faction said, "I think that if we continue to be overly conservative, we could be out of work in the future, because to be progressive requires that we take some risks, and dare to show that we are beyond old fashioned ways of doing things." A member of the other faction responded, "But I think that impulsively grabbing for every new thing that comes along is not in our best interest." They told me that they had been repeating these same analyses of one another for months, and getting nowhere. In fact, they were creating a lot of tension among themselves.

Like the husband and wife, they didn't know how to directly express their needs. Instead they were making analyses and were being heard by the other side as critical. This is how wars are created. When we're not able to say clearly what we need and only know how to make analyses of others that sound like criticism, wars are never far away, whether they are verbal, psychological, or physical wars.

Sensing the Needs of Others (No Matter How They Express Themselves)

The approach to conflict resolution that I am describing requires not only that we learn to express our needs, but also that we assist others in clarifying their needs. We can train ourselves to hear needs being expressed through the messages of others, regardless of how others are expressing themselves.

I've taught myself to do this because I believe that every message, whatever its form or content, is an expression of a need. If we accept this assumption, we can train ourselves to sense what needs might be at the root of any particular message. Thus, if I ask someone a question about what they have just said, and they respond, "That's a stupid question," I choose to sense what the other person might need as expressed through that particular judgment of me. For example, I might guess that their need for understanding was not being fulfilled when I asked that particular question.

Or, if I request that someone talk with me about some stress in our relationship and they say, "I don't want to talk about it," I might sense that their need is for protection from what they imagine might happen if we communicate.

This ability to sense what people need is crucial in mediating conflicts. We can help by sensing what both sides need, put it into words, and then we help each side hear the other side's needs. This creates a quality of connection that moves the conflict to successful resolution.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. I often work with groups of married couples. In these groups, I identify the couple with the most long-standing conflict, and I make a rather startling prediction to the group. I predict that we will be able to resolve this long-standing conflict within twenty minutes from the point at which both sides can tell me what the other side needs.

Once when I was doing this with a group, we identified a couple married for thirty-nine years. They had a conflict about money. Six months into the marriage the wife had twice overdrawn the checkbook, and the husband had taken control of the checkbook and wouldn't let her write checks from that point on. They had been arguing about this for thirty-nine years.

When the wife heard my prediction she said: "Marshall, I can

tell you this, that's not going to happen. I mean, we have a good marriage, we communicate quite well, but in this conflict, we just have different needs about money. I don't see how it can possibly be resolved in twenty minutes."

I corrected her by saying that I hadn't predicted we'd resolve it in twenty minutes. "I predicted resolution within twenty minutes after both of you tell me what the other person needs." She said, "But Marshall, we communicate very well, and when you have been talking about something for thirty-nine years, you certainly understand what the other side needs."

I responded, "Well, I've been wrong before. I certainly could be wrong in this situation, but let's explore. Tell me then, if you know what his needs are, what are they?"

She said, "It's very obvious, Marshall. He doesn't want me to spend any money."

The husband immediately reacted by saying, "That's ridiculous."

It was clear that she and I had a different definition of needs. When she said he didn't want her to spend any money, she was identifying what I call a strategy. Even if she was right, she would have been accurate about his desired *strategy*, not about his *need*. As I define needs, a need contains no reference to specific actions such as spending money or not spending money.

I told her that all human beings have the same needs, and I was certain that if she could get clear what her husband's needs were, and if he were clear about her needs, we could resolve this. I said: "Can you try again? What do you think his need is?"

And she said: "Well, let me explain, Marshall. You see, he's just like his own father." And then she told me how his father was reluctant to spend money. I stopped her and said: "Hold on now. You're giving me an analysis of why he is the way he is. What I am asking is to simply tell me what need of his is involved in this situation. You're giving me an intellectual analysis of what has gone on in his life."

It was very clear that she didn't know how to identify his need. Even after thirty-nine years of talking, she still didn't have an idea what his needs were. She had diagnoses of him, she had an intellectual awareness of what his reasons might be for not wanting her to have the checkbook, but she didn't really understand his needs in this situation.

So I asked the husband: “Well, since your wife is not in touch with what your needs are, why don’t you tell her? What are your needs that are being met by keeping the checkbook yourself?”

He said: “Marshall, she’s a wonderful wife, a wonderful mother. But when it comes to money, she’s totally irresponsible.”

Now again, notice the difference between the question I asked him, “What are your needs in this situation,” and his response. Instead of telling me what his needs were, he gave me a diagnosis that she was irresponsible. It’s that kind of language that I believe gets in the way of resolving conflicts peacefully. At the point where either party hears themselves criticized, diagnosed, or intellectually interpreted, I predict their energy will turn toward self-defense and counter-accusations rather than toward resolutions that meet everyone’s needs.

I pointed out to him that he was not really in touch with what his needs were and I showed that he was giving me a diagnosis of his wife instead. Then I again asked him, “What are your needs in this situation?” He couldn’t identify them.

So even after thirty-nine years of discussion, neither person was really aware of the other person’s needs. Here was a situation where my ability to sense needs could help them out of conflict. I used Nonviolent Communication skills to guess the *needs* that the husband and wife were expressing as judgments.

I reminded him that he had said his wife was totally irresponsible about money (a judgment), and then I asked, “Are you feeling scared in this situation because you have a need to protect the family economically?” When I said this, he looked at me and said, “That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Of course he didn’t say exactly that! But when we sense what a person needs, I believe that we’re getting closer to the truth, closer to what people are trying to say. I believe that all analysis that implies wrongness is basically a tragic expression of unmet needs. If we can hear what a person needs, it’s a great gift to them because it helps them to get connected to life.

Now, I happened to guess right in this situation, but it didn’t require that I guess right. If I had been off, at least I was focusing his attention on needs, and that helps people get more in touch with their needs. It takes them out of the analysis and gets them more connected to life.