

## **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT**

**Volume 6, Number 1, Nov 2005**

# **Nonviolent Communication and Ombuds Work**

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**U**niversities are the perfect vessel for brewing conflict. The combination of thousands of young adults away from home for the first time discovering who they are, mixed with overworked professors passionate about usually quite narrow fields of discipline, administrators who struggle to keep an increasingly complex bureaucracy functional, all leavened with constant financial crises, cooks up into a rich stew of friction where conflict freely bubbles up.

I should not have been surprised. But until I took on the position of University Ombudsperson, I was unaware of the extent and the depth of the conflicts within the university. I did not realize I had colleagues who went home each night and cried because of their interpersonal conflicts at work.

Most the people I see as a University Ombudsperson are in distress. They may be frustrated, angry, frightened or desperate, but they rarely bother to contact me unless they are feeling considerable pain. Shortly after taking the position at Humboldt State University, I began looking for tools that would better help me serve the people I see. Despite my former experience as a psychiatric nurse and my courses in conflict resolution through the Institute of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ISADR), I longed for skills that could help me address some of the emotional pain my people experience.

I discovered that Nonviolent Communication (NVC), created by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D, outlined a model that was uncomplicated yet deeply powerful. I can use the tools for a variety of purposes: enhancing active listening, offering empathy, relieving emotional distress, coaching complaints and requests, and full-out mediation. I also can teach individuals and groups how to use the NVC skills on their own. Nonviolent Communication's elegantly simple model can be quickly sketched to others, although like any new behavior approach, takes awhile to fully assimilate.

The NVC model comprises of four components: observations, feelings, needs and requests. [1] The first component is making clear observations without evaluations. This sounds easy but most of our descriptions are freighted with judgments. "He's so unreasonable about my grade," says a student. "I told him I have a learning disorder." Or one faculty member talks about another: "She's rude and hysterical. I can't work with her."

NVC advises us to separate out the behavior from the judgment by focusing on what a camera might record: The above student statement might be translated: "I told him about my learning disorder but when I asked for more time on the exam, he said no." This approach not only removes evaluation, but it offers much more specific information. The faculty statement might be more effectively expressed as: "When I brought up the subject of retirement at the committee meeting, she started breathing heavily then left the room."

Not only is it easier for people to hear us when we use neutral, non-judgmental language, but also we can often begin to see our situation in another light. As ombudsman, I can assist people by reframing their judgments into observations.

The next component of NVC is identification of feelings [2], separated from thoughts. Most of the people I see in the

ombuds office are in a charged emotional state: they usually are angry, often frightened and the feelings of sadness and hopelessness also frequently come up. Reflecting the client's feelings can be an important part of active listening, especially when the person has not identified feelings him- or herself.

NVC teaches us to discern true feelings from thoughts. Often we use the words "I feel" when we mean "I think" or "I believe." Statements like "I feel our department is in a real mess," or "I feel that financial aid doesn't care about students," do not express feelings at all. They are statements of beliefs.

When I listen to the story of someone who is not in touch with his or her feelings, I can try to guess them. "Are you feeling upset about the personnel conflicts in your department?" or "Do you feel frustrated by the policies in financial aid?"

Sometimes thoughts more deeply conceal themselves as in statements like "I feel intimidated by my professor." This statement is more an interpretation (and a judgmental one at that) of the other person's behavior (intimidating) rather than our own feeling response. Again, I try to reframe: "Are you feeling nervous and a little scared when the professor talks in a loud voice." If someone balks at my attempts to deal with their feelings directly, I might back off expressing them out loud but keep an inventory in my head because this identification is an excellent route for my connecting with them empathetically.

Perhaps the most important function of discerning feelings in NVC is to help us identify the universal human needs [3] that are not being met in the situation. Connecting with needs is the third component of Nonviolent Communication and where the deep work of the system occurs. The type of needs that we are talking about here are those that most everyone agrees are basic to all humans including physical nurturance, safety, understanding, acceptance, respect, warmth, celebration, mourning and autonomy. When these needs are not met, unpleasant emotions are provoked, and our tendency often is

to blame others. "Judgments, criticisms, diagnoses and interpretations of others are all alienated expressions of our needs," writes Marshall Rosenberg [4]. Usually others do not enjoy hearing our criticism and as a result our indirect attempts to meet our needs backfire, making matters worse.

Again, our language can complicate our identification of true needs. We often hear people say things like "I need you to turn in your papers by 5 p.m." In fact, this instructor is expressing a preference or maybe even a requirement but not a universal need. Identifying needs is akin to discovering interests in interest-based negotiations, but I find the use of needs both more flexible and more precise. If someone finds the use of word "need" uncomfortable, then I substitute "want" or "belief" or "value" but I am still talking about the values shared by all humans.

Identification of needs is crucial because they can lead to specific remedies. For example, students who complain about a grade in a course may have very different unmet needs. One might have a need for fairness and justice, while another has a need for mourning their lack of commitment to the course. The remedy for the first might involve clarifying the instructor's rubric for grading while the second student might just need to talk out her frustration about her choices.

The final component of NVC is requests: clear, positive, doable requests that would meet our needs. It is important that we are making pure requests and not demands, since most of us do not enjoy having others demand things of us. It is also important that we ask for something in the positive rather than the negative. Therefore, "I want the instructor to stop ignoring me," could be rephrased "I want the instructor to call on me when I raise my hand at least once a week." That leads to the next point: the request should be "doable," reasonably possible to execute. In a classroom of 30 students, being called on once a week might be very reasonable, but in a class of 300

students it might be extremely difficult. This example highlights a critical role for the ombudsperson: helping to advise people what actions are possible or not. It is also useful for them to consider that their requests might be denied because they conflict with the needs of other people. A student may request a make-up exam but the instructor may consider that request a violation of her own value of fairness to other students.

A core principle of NVC is that when everyone's needs are clearly identified, an environment is created where all needs can be met. But that does not mean that everyone gets what they originally asked for. In a scenario where a student's request to turn in assignments late conflict with an instructor's need for integrity and consistency in grading, the student may end up with some other concession from the instructor that satisfies both of them. Or the faculty member might make no concessions at all, but when negotiations are handled with compassion, the student eventually may feel satisfied because other needs of theirs are being met: recognition, understanding and respect.

The goal of the four components of NVC is that we connect with each other compassionately. When we do, we create less violence for ourselves and others and enmeshed conflicts are less likely to arise. When I can connect with people who come to me, they are more likely to feel heard and satisfied, even if I can not change the system for them.

I have introduced Nonviolent Communication to departments and student groups wanting communication tools. Most people do not know how to talk candidly with others, especially if there is a disagreement or a chance of one. If students have a complaint they want to make to the president of the university, Nonviolent Communication offers an approach where they will be more likely to be heard: they would focus on non-judgmental observations, express clear needs, identify their

values and needs and finally make a request that the President might be able to meet.

I have also successfully added NVC instruction to the Communication Protocol process outlined by Larry Hoover [5] ([Conflict Management in Higher Education Report, Vol. 4, No. 1, October 2003](#)). Larry points out that people usually want anyone who has a problem with them to handle it by talking to them directly. I agree and I think the reason that often does not happen is that we do not know how to approach other people when we have a complaint or problem. Nonviolent Communication can help. Beginning with the observation, then identifying feelings and needs, and ending with a do-able request is a clear and simple process.

I have found Nonviolent Communication to be a rich resource in my ombuds work as well as in my personal life. An added benefit is that when I am able to connect with people compassionately at a deep level, I seem to suffer less from burn-out or overwhelm. Nonviolent Communication meets many of my needs for connection, service and education. For an example of what this kind of communication might look like in action, see the linked [sidebar transcript](#).

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[1] Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D., Puddle Dancer Press, 2003. Also see Center for Nonviolent Communication website:  
<http://www.cnvc.org/index.htm>

[2] The CNVC website offers a compact list of feelings:  
<http://www.cnvc.org/feelings.htm>

[3] For a partial list of needs, see the CNVC website:

<http://www.cnvc.org/needs.htm>

[4] Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D., Puddle Dancer Press, 2003, p.52.

[5] "Communication Protocol" by Larry Hoover, Conflict Management in Higher Education Report, Vol. 4, No. 1, October 2003; [http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition4\\_1/hoover4\\_1a.html](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition4_1/hoover4_1a.html)

[6] For additional resources, check out the Puddle Dancer Press website: <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/>