



NVC & coaching: a very quiet collision

I sometimes describe synergy as two diverse ideas coming together with explosive impact. But, equally that might be used to describe war. Here are some thoughts on the very non-violent collision between Non Violent Communication (NVC) and coaching... or I might say, Non Violent Coaching.

Coaching

A quick look at Google™ reveals 332 million search returns for the topic of coaching. So, I will not add significantly to the words written on that topic. What I will emphasise on the topic of coaching are two things. Firstly, that I believe it must be built on a foundation of fearless trust. This concept might also be referred to as psychological security, which was identified in a study within the Google organisation to be the single most important criteria for functional teamwork. If you have experienced dysfunctional

teamwork, a dysfunctional relationship or found yourself in a dysfunctional workplace, ask yourself honestly... was there a deep level of trust? It is highly likely that trust was either absent, superficial and most probably combined with fear.

Secondly, in a coaching environment both the coach and coachee must have faith that the right ideas will come from the coachee. The coach has a role to help unlock those ideas and put words around them. But, in most cases the coach will resist influencing the situation heavily with ideas or opinions of their own. There is also heavy weight support in the literature for this belief that what the coachee needs to do is known somewhere inside themselves... they might just need the coach to help them look for it. For example, in his book "Client Centered Therapy", Carl R. Rogers wrote about the deep trust that a psychotherapist must have in the ability of the client (or patient) to heal themselves as the basis

of their therapeutic work together. Erich Fromm in “The Art of Loving” wrote eloquently about different types of love, for example brotherly love, which I relate to a peer to peer coaching context. It is no coincidence that I choose to quote two psychotherapists when talking about coaching. I do this very consciously because I see several parallels between the two disciplines and I believe that they can, and do, sometimes overlap and learn from each other.

So, in my view, coaching is a collaborative, interdependent engagement between two independent people and synergy is the intended outcome. There might be transparent goals, an agreed framework and declared “no-go” areas, but despite that, exactly where that coaching will go can not be predicted. For a deeper insight into the ideas of independence / interdependence and synergy that I am referring to here, try Stephen R. Covey’s timeless masterpiece “the Seven Habits of highly effective people”.

Nonviolent Communication, NVC

Does NVC simply mean we communicate without kicking and punching people violently? Or we don’t shout and swear at other people? Well... yes, and more. Nonviolence in this context also means avoiding aggression to other people’s feelings, ideas, beliefs, needs, purpose and values. It describes a method for creating a psychologically safe environment for communication and being. Creating a safe place to thrive, similar to the workplace that the Google research mentioned above describes. Done well, NVC binds people together with a feeling of trust and connection. People feel heard and respected even when “otherness” clearly exists.

The phrase NVC is attributed to Marshall B. Rosenberg through his book “Nonviolent communication, a language for life”, and other works. Always full of modesty and humility, Rosenberg

credited his ideas to a greater natural wisdom when he said: „All that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries about consciousness, language, communication skills, and use of power that enable us to maintain a perspective of empathy for ourselves and others, even under trying conditions.“ Many other celebrated writers have expounded near-NVC ideas with different focus. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish also advocate similar principles in their best seller “How to talk so kids will listen and listen so that kids will talk”. And, Thomas D’Ansembourg has added to the near-NVC library with his very readable “Being Genuine, stop being nice, start being real”.

I see NVC at two levels. The outer process, where methods and techniques are generally well agreed by various NVC sources, perhaps with some minor differences in emphasis, and the inner underlying attitude. Similar to Forrest Gump’s mother in the well loved Tom Hanks film, I often say “NVC is as NVC does”. What I mean here is that living the values of NVC in daily life can be achieved without a deep knowledge of the techniques. It is simply the way some people are. Manifesting NVC can be done without adherence to the classical language or process. On the other hand, I have experienced NVC spoken in a textbook fashion but I have not felt in any way connected to the person using it and did not perceive their underlying motivation or attitude to be respectful, nonviolent and non-judgemental. If this point needs further reflection, try Thich Nhat Hanh’s book “Living Buddah, living Christ”. For the TLDNR (too long, did not read) try this... Live the spirit of the bible every day in addition to reading the bible. Live a grounded Buddhist lifestyle hourly, in addition to talking about the teachings of the enlightened Siddhartha.

So, clearly there are many references to the NVC process in books and on the internet, but in my own words and understanding, there are four key steps.

1) Make an “observation” or objective sensory perception transparent and own it as your own. “I see that your head held towards me, your mouth is turned up at the edges, the skin around your eyes crinkle and your eyes light up... it looks like a smile”.

2) Express which “emotions” this observation makes you experience. “I feel inner warmth, happiness and joy (when I see your face smile and move in that way)”.

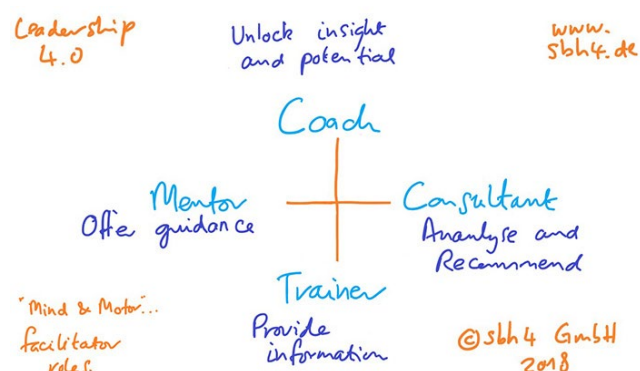
3) Identify “needs” which that emotion has fulfilled (or has left unfulfilled). “I feel joy inside me because I have needs for connection, light heartedness and fun (which seeing you smile in that way both awaken in me and fulfil)”.

4) Make a negotiable request. “Would you be willing to let me take a photograph of you smiling in that way, so that I can look at it at moments when we are separated and re-live the feeling of connection that exists between us in this moment?”. The key here is that the request must both be negotiable and deliverable. It must be a “reasonable ask”. And above all, an “ask”. If it comes over as a “tell”, then the magic will very quickly be lost and we will crash out from the NVC world, and perhaps trigger a rebellious authoritative conflict reaction as we land with a painful bump.

In some situations, only some of the four steps may be required. For example, if the purpose is to build connection, reach out an olive branch of peace or commiserate in a moment of mourning then simply step 1 or step 2 or a combination of 1 and 2 might be sufficient. And when the other person is feeling extreme sadness or stress, to make any kind of request might be insensitive, intrusive or unwelcome. Sometimes, in situations of tension, distress and sadness the fewer words we use, the better we might be heard. I sometimes describe these cases as “holding”, “digging out of a hole”, or “running from”.

And, in many situations, the whole NVC process from 1 to 4 above can flow in a much more spontaneous, natural, fluid, way using every-day conversational language... “Hey darling, I love that smile, makes me feel great! Can you hold it whilst I get the camera? I would love to put that picture in my office to remind me of you when I am at work, OK?”. And, if they wait for an appropriate confirmation before getting the camera... I would regard that as “nonviolent”. If they just take the picture anyway without mutual agreement... I might consider it to be “violent”.

In some cases, this conversational language works fine for me. But, it might leave some NVC purists cringing... “Um, you say ‘great’... well, no, that’s not a ‘feeling’, try again”. Or... “Uh? Where exactly was the need identified and what was it?”.



To sound a more serious note in favour of a robust NVC process, this simplified approach is unlikely to be sufficient in the realms of coaching, negotiation, conflict resolution and mediation... where a clear strategy for needs fulfilment will also need to be confirmed. I refer to these cases more as “goal oriented” or “running to”. In these cases both the need itself and the negotiable request must at some point be articulated. Otherwise, talks are just talks, without any tangible actions to make some progress to the destination. After all, the generally accepted goal of “peace talks” is peace, not talks.

And, the NVC process can also be used to reflect another's position... "When I hear you say you want to quit your desk job and become an actor, I feel curious to know more. I would love to find out what is behind that idea because I want to explore if you are sure that this is indeed the best, or only path for you to take. Can we try to identify some of your needs that might be met if you made that step? Would you perhaps be fulfilling a need to express yourself, explore a range of emotional experiences and engage in a creative activity with other people? Have you considered other ways to meet those needs in your life? Would you be willing spend a few minutes right now to articulate some alternative ideas to meet those needs?" And this, in my opinion, is now going in the direction of a coaching conversation. Questions have been asked. Ideas have been heard. Strategies to meet the needs might be explored. Perhaps clarity will be achieved. But it is all done in a context of nonviolence to core personal inner values, meaning: strategies to meet needs might be discussed but the needs and feelings themselves have neither been challenged, nor judged.

So, if strategies are to be explored, which is a typical goal of coaching and my other "goal oriented" cases above, then the full NVC process, or most certainly steps 3 and 4 must be involved. Because the needs will form the foundation to explore suitable strategies for needs fulfilment and without declaration of the needs the strategies will have no foundation and no meaning.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the essence of NVC is respect for the otherness of the other's position. The phrase nonviolent is used to mean that an opinion is not "violently" forced onto another and the other's opinion is acknowledged, might or might not be agreed with but is certainly not "violently" judged. It stays out there simply to be looked at as "their opinion" and need not be ingested and then either digested or spat out. So, I'm OK and you're OK, even if we do not agree. It has a foundation in empathy, not sympathy. So, understanding and reflecting the other person's need, opinion or emotional state is the basis for arriving at a mutually acceptable negotiated outcome. For this reason, I believe that NVC is well suited to a coaching environment, where the primary role of the coach is not to bring additional ideas and input but to help unlock or clarify the ideas that exist within the coachee.

The empathic connection between the coach and coachee that can be built through effective NVC is also an excellent foundation for fearless trust and therefore will also ground the coaching in a safe place where the coachee feels free to explore new ideas and revise or reject old ones. And, furthermore it can be the foundation of creating a great and psychologically safe place to work. Coaching and NVC, a very impactful collision!

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