

## SUBROUTINE/NVC: Common Objections and Clarifications

The following subsections have the form of a claim followed by a couple of objections. Perhaps you have some of your own to add ...?

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The 4-step protocol (SUBROUTINE/NVC) is a great way to structure difficult conversations

- The 4 steps are too mechanical – you end up sounding like a robot
- Conversations are too complex to capture in 4 steps
- ...

A big advantage of the SUBROUTINE/NVC approach is that you can use it with anyone

- How so? If I tell a bouncer at a club that he's hurt my feelings, he's likely to break my arm!
- What about my Aunt Lucy? She hasn't been able to separate fact from fiction from fairies for the past 20 years!
- ...

If you can explain your needs well, people will generally try to help you meet them

- Nonsense. If what I need is in conflict with their needs, then they are not going to help me meet mine!
- But needs, especially in a professional context, are essentially interests. And the interests of a buyer and their supplier can never be compatible, for example.
- ...

A well-formulated request usually provokes a positive response

- No it doesn't. If I ask my daughter to get out of the shower, she won't do it no matter how I ask.
- But the clarity of a request does not guarantee that there will be a positive response
- ...

In difficult conversations, it's crucial to be 100% truthful: describing the real situation, real feelings and real needs

- Being completely truthful makes you too exposed. In a professional situation, for example, there may be confidentiality to protect
- But the truth can be hurtful, especially in difficult conversations
- ...

Empathy is the foundation stone of successful confrontation and the SUBROUTINE/NVC protocol facilitates empathy

- But a 4-step protocol encourages the exact opposite of empathy by reducing a conversation to steps that a computer could follow!
- Surely empathy can't be shown simply by following the 4-step protocol to make a request?
- ...

## Clarifications

I believe that most, maybe all, of the above objections arise from an incomplete understanding of NVC. At the same time, they are extremely useful, since addressing leads us to explore the more subtle aspects of the practice.

The 4-step protocol (SUBROUTINE/NVC) is a great way to structure difficult conversations

- The 4 steps are too mechanical – you end up sounding like a robot
  - *The intent of the simple, 4-step presentation is to provide an easy-to-understand framework. Once I've got past the stage of initial practice, I can use the framework without having to go step-by-step. Having said that, I may still want to fall back on the 1-4 process in cases of high stress!*
- Conversations are too complex to be captured in 4 steps
  - *Indeed, a complete conversation cannot be captured in 4 steps. We cannot simply go "1-2-3-4-bingo!" to resolve an issue. Rather, the 4 steps serve to initiate a conversation by establishing a channel of communication and get things on track. They also support the ensuing discussion, by separating concerns (situation/observations, feelings/problems, wants/needs).*

A big advantage of the SUBROUTINE/NVC approach is that you can use it with anyone

- How so? If I tell a bouncer at a club that he's hurt my feelings, he's likely to break my arm!
  - *Well, for starters, he's not hurt your feelings – you are the one responsible for your feelings ☺. Secondly, I adapt what I say to the situation and to the person I'm talking to, but "adapt" does not mean "abandon the approach". I can imagine saying to a bouncer, for example: "Ok, I get it that there's a dress code and that my jeans don't fit it (SITUATION). But the love of my life just went in there (PROBLEM/FEELINGS) and I've gotta tell her where I'm at (NEED). Can you just help me get a message to her or something? (REQUEST)"*
- What about my Aunt Lucy? She hasn't been able to separate fact from fiction from fairies for the past 20 years!
  - *Ok, you've got me there. In this case, maybe you should drop the first 3 steps and concentrate on the request, to understand her view of things (however crazy) before asking for anything.*

If you can explain your needs well, people will generally try to help you meet them

- Nonsense. If what I need is in conflict with their needs, then they are not going to help me meet mine!
  - *The idea is to get down to fundamental needs that everyone shares. For example, "I want to do my job as well as possible" is expressing a need that very many people will share. By talking in these terms, I encourage others to look for ways to simultaneously satisfy their needs and mine (i.e. to look for solutions, rather than to simply defend their position)*
- But needs, especially in a professional context, are essentially interests. And the interests of a buyer and their supplier can never be compatible, for example.
  - *This objection only makes sense if the context is very narrow: if nothing other than price is taken into account, for example. But if the supplier's main concern is to consistently provide the best/most reliable product/service (a common need, arising from sound business considerations) then (a) this can easily be understood by a buyer and (b) this could also be in the buyer's interest. But even if (b) does not apply, at least I am somewhere on the road to mutual understanding.*

## A well-formulated request usually provokes a positive response

- No it doesn't. If I ask my daughter to get out of the shower, she won't do it no matter how I ask.
  - *A "well formulated" request is not usually as ambitious as this. In using NVC, I first try to establish mutual understanding, rather than attempt to get my own way immediately.*
- But the clarity of a request does not guarantee that there will be a positive response
  - *"Well formulated" does not just mean "clear". Rather, it depends on the quality of the first three steps of the protocol (in order to be well understood) and on the choice of a receivable request. For example, I can ask someone to explain their motives, ask them to playback what they think I meant or to give their reaction to it, ask for an idea or a suggestion, ask permission to explain something or to ask questions ... the possibilities are endless. However, so are the possibilities for ill-formed requests: asking someone to immediately change their mind, to see my point of view, admit they were wrong, give up something, and so on. All these types of request are unlikely to get me far, especially at the start of an encounter.*

## In difficult conversations ,it's crucial to be 100% truthful: describing the real situation, real feelings and real needs

- Being completely truthful makes you too exposed. In a professional situation, for example, there may be confidentiality to protect
  - *« 100% truthful » does not mean « reveal everything"! Rather, NVC teaches us to endeavor to describe situations, problems/feelings and wants/needs as accurately as possible. This is a big challenge and it's one of the reasons that NVC takes practice.*
- But the truth can be hurtful, especially in difficult conversations
  - *Judgements, projections, rules, assumptions ... all these things can be very hurtful, for sure, and that is why eliminating them is a key part of NVC practice. But if the truth is inconvenient and I avoid it, there's a good chance that I'll put off a problem for later. There's also a risk that people will find out the truth in some other way, in my absence.*

## Empathy is the foundation stone of successful confrontation and the SUBROUTINE/NVC protocol facilitates empathy

- But a 4-step protocol encourages the exact opposite of empathy by reducing a conversation to steps that a computer could follow!
  - *The "steps" are really 4 aspects of communication to be recognized separately, and they can occur and reoccur in any order. When someone is trying to express themselves to me and I am listening with empathy (which is not so easy), it helps if I can quickly recognize when they are revealing a particular feeling or need, for example. The more practiced I am at recognizing these things, the easier I will find it to be truly empathetic. Feelings aren't always announced with a "I feel that ...", any more than needs come systematically in the form, "I need ..." ☺*
- Surely empathy can't be shown simply by following the 4-step protocol to make a request?
  - *No, it can't, but NVC is much more than that. Once I have kicked off an open, frank discussion by using the 4-step protocol, then empathy becomes critical to what follows. At this point, rather than using the protocol to express myself, I use the NVC reference points to help understand the other person's viewpoint with respect to the situation, problems/feelings and wants/needs.*