

DR JACKAL AND MR GIRAFFE

Effective collaboration requires effective communication. But how do we communicate, and how might we communicate in a way that each party's needs are heard, understood and met? One approach is known as non-violent communication. In this article, **Maciej Szczukowski** provides a practical introduction.



KEY POINTS

1. All human beings share similar needs but the strategies used to meet them vary.
2. Hiding one's true emotions and needs may lead to problems.
3. Expressing vulnerability may improve communication.
4. Four elements of NVC are: observations, feelings, needs and requests.

Collaboration in ATC is important, no doubt about it. It creates a community. It distributes resources and responsibilities. It protects from mistakes and bad decisions that we could have made if it were not for the person sitting next to us. When Gordon Dupont listed the famous 'Dirty Dozen' of conditions that may lead to a mistake or an accident, I believe there was a reason that 'lack of communication' got the first place on the list.

During the ATC or cockpit training we undertake, we usually learn that communication should be precise, concise and clear. But beyond the airwaves and coordination in the Ops room or in the cockpit, there always comes time and space for a talk, for a discussion. It may be between controllers during a break, between a trainer and a trainee during a debrief or between all of them and the management. Does 'precise and concise' policy really work here? Does it work in the traditional concept of hierarchy?

At some point, I decided to become a psychologist. For a year now, I have been gathering experience, working with clients in crisis, with emotional problems or being victimised. What is common in such work is that these people desperately need to have their needs heard, then met. When it does not happen, emotions grow, become heavier and may even turn into traumas. In the 1960s, Marshall Rosenberg began to develop a way of communicating called 'non-violent communication' (better known as 'NVC'). He said that every person can either become a Jackal or a Giraffe. The Jackal, a representative of violent communication, is a carnivorous, aggressive and dominant creature that often hides, looking for its next victim. The Giraffe, a non-violent owner of a large heart, represents the compassionate and sincere side of

communication. With its long neck and big ears, it sees and hears more, and thus is aware about the needs of individuals around it. In fact, with that long neck it also cannot hide as 'effectively' as a Jackal and it may be a bit more vulnerable. But is it really that bad?

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One of the purposes of NVC is to improve the exchange of information and, in effect, to resolve differences in respect to the needs of both parties. This is possible when observations are not mixed with interpretations, when one's needs are expressed without judgments or criticism but with authenticity and respect. Only then can conflicts, which are an inseparable part of the process of collaboration, be discussed rather than avoided. NVC also emphasises the importance of responsibility. According to Rosenberg, the Jackal in us fails to accept responsibility for one's actions, concentrating on actions of others ("I had to because he/she..."), external or abstract forces ("He told me to..." or "It was necessary to...") or regulations ("It is the current policy to...").

Such an approach diminishes one's own power of decision and action and 'protects' the Jackal, keeping him in hiding, waiting for the chance for aggressive defence. Rosenberg once shared the story of his work with hospital administrators, who didn't want to present their ideas to the doctors. They were afraid. After some time, Rosenberg found out that the problem was not in fear of communication but in fear of admitting that they were

afraid. He wasn't surprised, knowing how many people cannot even imagine themselves showing their feelings at work. But he was able to convince one of the administrators to take the risk. The administrator communicated in a rational, consistent way, expressing his needs towards the doctors. It worked. He received understanding and support in his initiative. Then he also realised the value of his vulnerability, of becoming a Giraffe. It is understandable that vulnerability may be the biggest obstacle in an environment of high level of power or hostility, as is sometimes the case in a manager-employee relationship. But the literature suggests that it diminishes along with experience and training.

During NVC training, participants usually express that they need a structure (or a checklist, if it helps) of how to become a Giraffe. But the real turning point in learning NVC is the moment when one realises that it is all right to stop proclaiming and start to listen. Then a person is able to create an image of experiences, feelings and needs of the interlocutor. They are able to realise how differently people may see and interpret the reality around them, and thus how much their understanding may vary from what we believe in. Take a radar and non-radar rated air traffic controller. Compare representatives of two different airports. Or ask a controller and then a pilot about the very same situation. You will very quickly notice the differences in perspectives.

How to use NVC? Its model is based around four basic elements:

1. Observations
2. Feelings
3. Needs
4. Requests

Observations are facts that can be acknowledged by all parties. They are not interpretations. **Feelings** reflect inner emotional states. They are also not interpretations and exclude the influence of suspected motive of the other party. Therefore in NVC one can be angry or sad but should not "feel like she/he did...". **Needs** mirror the basic qualities required to lead a satisfying life. These needs can be for safety,

belonging, compassion, freedom, etc. And finally **requests** are doable, specific positive actions based in present time (*"I'd like you to express your opinion on the new procedures and what can be improved in them?"* rather than *"You are obliged to report deficiencies in the procedures."*). It is important to remember: when a request is not allowed to be answered with a refusal, or its denial is punished, it becomes a demand. We don't want that. (see Table 1.)

I remember when, a few months ago, while working Ground Control position, I heard an 'evaluation' by an airline pilot, unhappy with the fact that I had sequenced him after an aircraft with a shorter taxi time. Knowing my reasons for the decision (off-block time, taxi speed, intersections used, estimated time of landing of the traffic arriving for a crossing runway, routings, etc.), I just acknowledged the pilot's observations and expressions. In most situations, such as this one, we usually tend to get upset but accept them as reality. But an extra step allows almost anyone to do something more about it; to try to put oneself in others' shoes and invite others to do the same. Although it may seem a bit intimidating at first, it can also be very helpful.

Minutes passed. I observed the symbol of the aircraft on the radar screen and when the mode C read-out reached around flight level 200 I called my colleague from approach control. Seconds later, the pilot was back on my frequency writing down my telephone number. The next day we talked for about half an hour. For me, it was an example of NVC in action. Exchanging

Table 1


| How I am (expressing oneself) | How you are (listening to others) |
|---|---|
| OBSERVATIONS | |
| When I see / hear / remember ... | When you say / see / hear ... |
| FEELINGS | |
| ... I feel / am (emotions). | ... (do) you feel / are you (emotions)? |
| NEEDS | |
| Because I need / it is important for me ... | Because you need / it's essential for you ... |
| REQUESTS | |
| Would you (be willing to) ... ? | Would you like me / us to ...? |

| 'Common' communication | Non-violence communication | |
|--|----------------------------|--|
| <p>You delayed us!</p> <p>It is unprofessional!</p> <p>Please note that there are no needs or request therefore I don't know what am I expected to change</p> | OBSERVATIONS | |
| | ATCO: | When you say I am unprofessional ... |
| | Pilot: | When you delay me in a sequence ... |
| | FEELINGS | |
| | ATCO: | I feel discomforted and frustrated. |
| | Pilot: | I am surprised and upset. |
| | NEEDS | |
| | ATCO: | Because it is important for me to create trust between ATC and the crews. |
| | Pilot: | Because it is important for me to have a sense of equality between airlines. |
| | REQUESTS | |
| | ATCO: | Would you be willing to listen to the reasons of such sequencing? |
| | Pilot: | Would you be willing to inform me about reasons of sequencing when it is different than normally expected? |

Table 2

observation and listening to our feelings we quickly learned our needs, with a request, on one side, to better inform about sequence reasoning. And on the other side to trust my decisions, which usually involve analysis of many elements, many of which are not visible to pilots' eyes. Today I recognise this pilot's voice and hear it often. But now, I can tell, it sounds different, regardless of the number in departure sequence. (see table 2)

Observations, feelings, needs and requests are inevitable elements of our lives. It is the first NVC assumption that all human beings share the same needs, but meet them differently. And respecting one's own needs, being a Giraffe oneself, is crucial (it is not by chance that "In case of a sudden drop of cabin pressure you should put your

own mask on first and then help your child"). In the demanding environment of an Ops rooms or a cockpit, there may not always be time for discussions. Also, with our rating training we expand our potential but, at the same time, we narrow our perception, concentrating on a designated part of the whole system. Meanwhile the equality within the team guarantees better quality of collaboration. Therefore would you be willing to invest your time in studying NVC and sharing your experiences with it? During the TRM session maybe. Or during the lunch break. 

Recommended reading

Rosenberg, M.B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life* (2nd edition). Puddle Dancer Press. (Available in over 30 languages.)



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