Neutral Observation

Observing Without Evaluating

The NVC process typically begins with neutral observation. "Observations are what we see or hear that we identify as the stimulus to our reactions. Our aim is to describe what we are reacting to concretely, specifically and neutrally, much as a video camera might capture the moment. This helps create a shared reality with the other person. The observation gives the context for our expression of feelings and needs, and may not even be needed if both people are clear about the context.

The key to making an observation is to separate our own judgments, evaluations or interpretations from our description of what happened. For example, if we say: 'You're rude', the other person may disagree, while if we say: 'When I saw you walk in and I didn't hear you say hello to me', the other person is more likely to recognise the moment that is described." Evaluations can be received as a judgement or attack, and can provoke a reaction, resistance and counter-attack from the other person.

NVC trainer Dian Killian suggests we can mostly easily make neutral observations "in conversations... by recapping what someone has said, without emotional input. That means not attaching any 'story' to your response... Comments that begin in the first person, i.e. 'I hear you say…' work better than 'You just said…'" For example:

Person 1: "We have to do something about the illegal immigrant problem, because they're taking away our jobs, and people like you don't care."

Person 2: "I'm hearing you say that you're worried about your job security and that other people in this country are ignoring that concern."

Re-capping what we have heard slows the pace of conversation, and forces both sides to reflect and clarify. It does require practice, as Killian point outs: "It's a muscle to develop, because what we usually do when we're disturbed by something is start disagreeing right away."

It can also be instinctive to respond with judgements and diagnosis. Rosenberg gave an example of some teachers he worked with who were having a conflict with their administrator. He asked them: "What does he do that you don't like?" They initially responded by saying: "he has a big mouth", "he talks too much", and "he thinks he's the only one with any intelligence." After some prompting, they described specific behaviours that did not meet their need for efficiency, for instance during staff meetings, regardless of the agenda, the administrator would relate it to one of his war experiences or childhood experiences. As a result, their meetings lasted much longer than scheduled. This is a clear observation without any evaluations mixed in. Here are some more

examples:

Evaluation	Observation
“You are so rude!”	“When you tell me to get lost…”
“You’re selfish!”	“I asked if someone could help me and you carried on with the task you were doing.”
“This place is a pigsty!”	“There are clothes and toys covering most of the floor.”
“When I hear you yelling at Dad…”	“When I hear you and Dad talk like that…”

Making clear, non-judgemental observations can:

- clarify what you are reacting to (what triggered you)
- establish common ground
- separate your interpretations from what actually happened
- be part of taking responsibility for your actions.
