

# Awareness

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In this paper, we will examine the role Nonviolent Communication can play in conflict prevention and resolution. We will focus on practical implications for Awareness Teams in activist setups and events.



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>APA</b>	American Psychological Association
<b>FFF</b>	Fridays for Future
<b>NVC</b>	Non-Violent Communication

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Non-Violent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a communication process created by psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg.

Rosenberg believes that every communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is a form of exchange and negotiation between partners and that we can perform these exchanges with or without compassion.

NVC assumes that compassionate communication yields different results than uncompassionate communication and that these differences have a significant impact on both individual and societal levels.<sup>1</sup>

Or, as Paul Watzlawik put it, "One cannot not communicate."<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Awareness

Awareness in the context of a social setting means being attentive to situations where a person's boundaries and sense of security are crossed,

Awareness work is based on the understanding that spaces are created differently by people who are in them. We always want to treat each other respectfully so that everyone feels as safe as possible, and we want to be attentive and sensitive to individual boundaries and needs.

Awareness work is always partisan, and boundary crossings are defined by those affected themselves.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.3 Research Question & Method

This paper will examine the use of NVC for conflict resolution. To do this, we will evaluate the case of an Awareness concept in activist settings and events.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of this paper is to establish whether NVC is a valuable tool for conflict resolution and awareness in group settings.

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<sup>1</sup>See *Rosenberg, M. (2015): Nonviolent Communication.* [8]

<sup>2</sup>*Watzlawik, P. (1972): Pragmatics of Human Communication.* [11]

<sup>3</sup>See *Fluid (2022): Fluid Awareness Konzept.* [4]

<sup>4</sup>See *McCombes, S. (2019): What is a Case Study.* [5]

## 1.4 Gender-neutral Pronouns

Our society is becoming more open, inclusive, and gender-fluid, and now I think it's time to think about using gender-neutral pronouns in scientific texts, too. Two well-known researchers, Abigail C. Saguy and Juliet A. Williams, both from UCLA, propose to use the singular they/them instead: "The universal singular they is inclusive of people who identify as male, female or nonbinary."<sup>5</sup> The aim is to support an inclusive approach in science through gender-neutral language.

In this paper, I'll attempt to follow this suggestion and invite all my readers to do the same for future articles. Thank you!

If you're not sure about the definitions of gender and sex and how to use them, have a look at the definitions<sup>6</sup> by the American Psychological Association.

## 1.5 Climate Emergency

As Professor Rahmstorf puts it: "Without immediate, decisive climate protection measures, my children currently attending high school could already experience a 3-degree warmer Earth. No one can say exactly what this world would look like—it would be too far outside the entire experience of human history. But almost certainly, this earth would be full of horrors for the people who would have to experience it."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Saguy, A. (2020): Why We Should All Use They/Them Pronouns. [10]

<sup>6</sup>See APA (2021): Definitions Related to Sexual Orientation. [1]

<sup>7</sup>Rahmstorf, A. (2024): Climate and Weather at 3 Degrees More. [7]

## **2 Nonviolent Communication**

### **2.1 Philosophical Background**

Let's have a look at Marshall Rosenberg's philosophical background.

Rosenberg was heavily influenced by Carl Rogers' person-centered approach, particularly the belief in people's inherent capacity for empathy and growth. This shapes NVC's emphasis on creating conditions for authentic human connection.

The term "nonviolent" directly references Gandhi's concept of ahimsa (non-harm). Rosenberg adopted Gandhi's belief that violence stems from thinking that makes enemies of people, and that actual change comes through compassionate understanding rather than force.

### **2.2 Concepts**

NVC assumes humans are naturally compassionate and that violence (physical or verbal) is a learned behavior that occurs when we don't know how to express our needs effectively.

Drawing from humanistic psychology, NVC assumes that all humans share the same fundamental needs (e.g., safety, autonomy, connection, meaning, etc.), though we may have different strategies for meeting them.

Influenced by general semantics, Rosenberg also believed that how we use language shapes our consciousness and relationships. "Life-alienating" language creates separation, while "life-serving" language fosters connection.

NVC rejects punishment-based thinking and instead emphasizes understanding the needs and feelings behind actions. This reflects a more restorative than retributive approach to conflict.

### **2.3 Jackal and Giraffe**

In NVC, Marshall Rosenberg used the metaphors of a Jackal and a Giraffe to illustrate two fundamentally different ways of communicating and thinking.

Rosenberg chose the Jackal as a symbol for life-alienating communication because it's a scavenger, representing communication that "feeds on" judgment and criticism.

For life-serving communication, he chose the giraffe, because it has the largest heart of any land animal and can see far because of its height, representing communication from

the heart with a broader perspective.

NVC teaches people to recognize when they're in "jackal mode" and consciously shift to "giraffe consciousness" - moving from judgment to curiosity, from demands to requests, and from blame to understanding needs.

## 2.4 Communication Steps

The four steps of Nonviolent Communication form the core process for expressing yourself and receiving others empathically.

These steps are:

1. Observation without evaluation. Observations are what we see or hear that we identify as the stimulus to our reactions
2. Feelings. Feelings represent our emotional experience and physical sensations associated with our needs that have been met or that remain unmet
3. Needs. Our needs are an expression of our most profound shared humanity, our core values, and our most profound human longings
4. Request. We make requests to assess how likely we are to get cooperation for strategies we have in mind for meeting our needs

As an example, this is how it could sound in a real-world example:

- When I see dirty dishes left in the sink overnight (observation)
- I feel frustrated (feeling)
- because I need order and cooperation in our shared space (need).
- Would you be willing to either wash your dishes after eating or let me know if you'd like help creating a dish-washing schedule that works for both of us? (request)

## 2.5 Enhancements

Together with Adventus Art we added two more steps to the process:

6. Personal responsibility. We offer to take personal responsibility for our needs
7. Appreciation. We appreciate the person and the situation

## 3 Conflicts

### 3.1 Definition

Conflict as a social phenomenon is a complex aspect of human interaction that extends far beyond individual disagreements.

Generally speaking, a conflict emerges when two or more parties perceive their interests, values, needs, or goals as incompatible or mutually exclusive. It's an inherent feature of social life, arising wherever people interact.

Potential structural sources of social conflict are:

- Resource competition
- (Gender) Role conflicts
- Value differences
- Power imbalances<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 Scenarios

In social groups, gatherings, or events, there are a couple of possible conflict scenarios:

- Miscommunication
- Disagreements
- Inappropriate/harassing behavior
  - Offensive pictures (e.g., in online meetings)
  - Unwanted (physical) contact
  - Misogyny and other forms of hate speech
  - Mansplaining
  - Any other forms of (White) male dominance behavior

For the remainder of this paper, we will focus on inappropriate or harassing behaviour.

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<sup>8</sup>See *Omelaenko, N. (2021): Conflict As A Social Phenomenon. [6]*



### 3.3 Code of Conduct

A key step in dealing with conflict is to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior up front clearly.

The most common way is to create a clear and unambiguous Code of Conduct.<sup>9</sup>

The Code of Conduct should cover:

- A clear and detailed definition of expected behaviour, beyond the "Be excellent to each other"
- A clear and detailed definition of unacceptable behavior, such as unwanted contact or unsolicited communication
- The consequences of unacceptable behavior, such as removal from the event
- Instructions on where and how to address grievances

Most large social events, such as conferences or festivals, now have a clear Code of Conduct and set boundaries on acceptable behavior.

### 3.4 Awareness Team

But even with a Code of Conduct defined, conflicts will arise.

To deal with conflicts, Awareness-Teams could be created. In the next chapter, we will explore the concept of Awareness-Teams and consider what a team might look like.

To prevent and resolve conflicts, the Awareness-Teams themselves must be able to engage and communicate without resorting to violence. The practice of nonviolent communication is an excellent basis for the work of Awareness-Teams.

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<sup>9</sup>See *Ruby Berlin e.V. (2017): Berlin Code of Conduct*. [9]

## 4 Awareness-Team

### 4.1 Implementation

To support the Code of Conduct and assist with conflict resolution, many large events and organizations employ Awareness-Teams.<sup>10</sup>

The roles and responsibilities of the Awareness-Team are laid out in an Awareness-Concept. This concept should be agreed upon in advance and preferably enjoys majority support.

Responsibilities could include the following tasks:

- Code of conduct enforcement
- Safe space maintenance
- Incident response at gatherings
- Accessibility and inclusion support
- Harassment and discrimination prevention
- Anti-bullying initiatives
- Sexual assault prevention

The role of the team is twofold: it should create Awareness before problems occur and respond to incidents after they happen.

A key capability for the team member is the ability to de-escalate a conflict situation by communicating effectively and nonviolently.

The effectiveness of an Awareness-Team depends heavily on organizational support, a clear mandate, appropriate training, and genuine commitment of the organization to creating safer, more inclusive environments.

### 4.2 Real-World Example & Safe Word

One of the first event agencies to embrace Awareness for their concerts and festivals was FKP Scorpio.

They ensured that Awareness-Teams were on-site and visible, and also introduced Safe Spaces as safe environments for anyone seeking help.

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<sup>10</sup>See *FFF (2021): Awareness OG Leitfaden*. [2]

To further support this, and make access even simpler, FKP Scorpio introduced a code phrase, "Where is Panama?", that would signal staff that the person needs immediate support, without alerting bystanders or the perpetrator.<sup>11</sup>

Rumours have it that the phrase was chosen as a reference to the children's book "The Trip to Panama" by Janosch.

Over the years, this concept has spread through most events.

A similar idea is behind the international Signal for Help that alerts to violence at home.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

The mindset and practice of Non-Violent Communication are key capabilities for anyone involved in Awareness Work.

A deep understanding of the shared humanity of all of us, the knowledge that all living beings strive for happiness, will make sure that the Awareness-Concept is sound and that the work of the Awareness-Team will be successful and beneficial.

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<sup>11</sup>See *FKP Scorpio (2023): Wo geht's nach Panama*. [3]

## 5 Summary

Non-Violent Communication, or Compassionate Communication, is a great tool to support awareness and conflict resolution processes in groups.

Based on its fundamentally humanistic approach to human interaction, NVC provides practical guidelines for establishing appreciative communication, which can help prevent conflicts from arising and support defusing conflict situations.

We found that an awareness team educated in NVC can greatly benefit large social gatherings and groups, and we can recommend exploring the concepts behind NVC further.

May all beings have happiness and its causes!

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