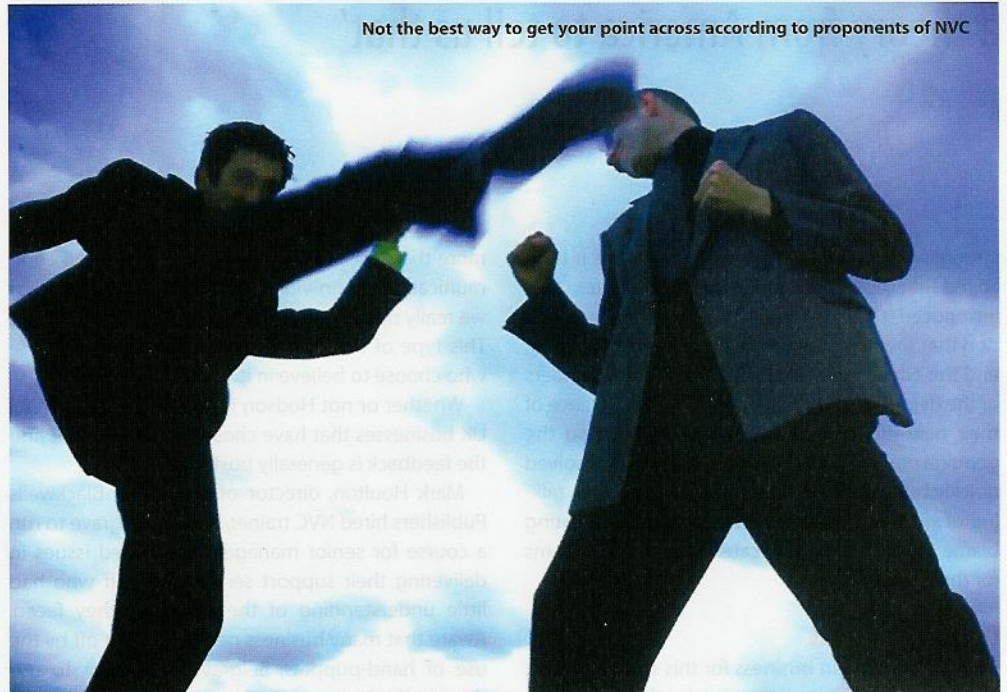


Rules of engagement

Many businesses are taking a new communication tool, non-violent communication, to heart, but are they being conned? **Alex Blyth**



Not the best way to get your point across according to proponents of NVC

How can giraffe and jackal hand-puppets help your customer service agents improve customer loyalty to your business? Well, according to proponents of 'non-violent communication', or NVC, the puppets can be a useful tool in training agents how to speak the language of the heart, how to understand other people, and how to connect with the true needs of those customers.

According to those same proponents, major corporations including Volvo, Siemens, and even traditionally sceptical UK business people at organisations such as National Savings Accounts, *The Sun* and Camden Council have hired NVC trainers. As Enid Moulder, senior consultant at leading firm of behavioural risk consultants, ICAS, says: 'In my experience, NVC is an extremely effective communication tool which can help prevent many of the conflict situations which impact severely on the bottom line, and I believe that most managers would benefit from using it.'

From Rwanda to Serbia

Developed by Dr Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s in response to experiences in his Detroit childhood and dissatisfaction with the then prevailing theories of clinical psychology, NVC is now a worldwide movement that offers training through a network of nearly 100 certified trainers. NVC has been used in

Rwanda to improve communication between Hutus and Tutsis. Training in the language of NVC has been offered to 12,000 Serbian schoolchildren. It has been used in Swedish prisons, as part of a French anti-drug programme and to help countless couples deal with relationship issues. However, very few UK business people are aware of it.

Rosenberg describes his theory as 'a way to get what you want in a way that you won't be sorry for'. He goes on to explain how this can work: 'Typically, people will do what you want them to do for three reasons: you'll reward them if they do, you'll punish them if they don't, or they genuinely want to do it. The key to understanding what other people genuinely want to do is to communicate without blame, criticism or anger, and so truly recognise their needs. Communication is so much more effective if people learn to ask each other what they need, to describe their needs, and to listen to the answers.' In the same way, he believes that organisations can function more effectively if individuals within those organisations are able to communicate needs more clearly to each other.

'I remember working with IBM in Zurich,' he continues. 'A department was arguing over some new software. One half of the department was all in favour of the new package, while the other half wanted to carry on as before. The department was



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struggling to function. After several sessions it transpired that those who preferred the old system had introduced it themselves and wanted some recognition that their system wasn't completely redundant, and the advocates of change were newer members of the department who needed some acceptance of their new ideas. Once both sides understood the genuine needs of the other the dispute was resolved quickly, but up until that point they hadn't been talking of what they needed. They had been allocating blame, getting angry and causing serious problems for the business.'

Business benefits

NVC can be used in business for this sort of conflict resolution, but its proponents claim that it can also be used in the recruitment process to help interviewers and interviewees gain a clearer understanding of each others' needs, in line management to help to reduce hierarchy-related conflicts, and in customer service to help meet customer needs more accurately. However, many remain unconvinced by the claims of NVC. Rosenberg, to his credit, is the first to point out the limitations of his theory in its application to business: 'NVC is only relevant to companies that have a life-serving purpose. If you are determined to sell something that no one needs then NVC won't help at all.'

Others criticise what is perceived as a naïve belief that needs are always reconcilable. Rosenberg refuses to accept that a manager might have needs that diverge irreconcilably from those of his staff: 'We tend to confuse needs with strategies for achieving those needs. For example, a woman who is feeling in need of more love from her husband might say that she needs to be taken out to expensive restaurants more often. He might reply that he lacks the finances to do this and their needs might seem irreconcilable, until she expresses her real need, and they discover that love is more important than expensive restaurants to both of them.'

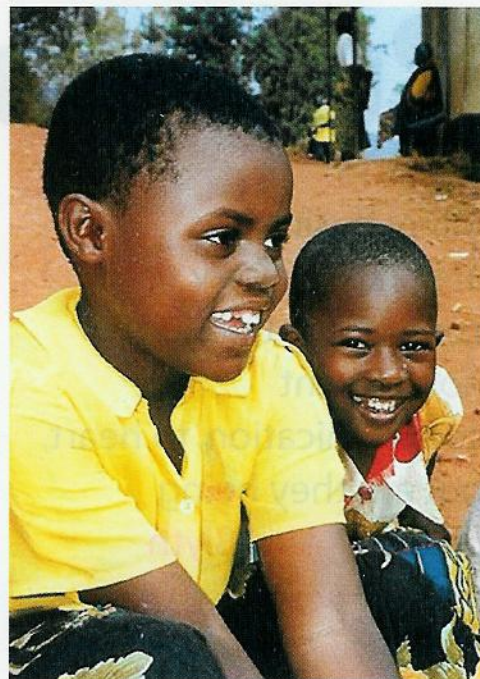
Philip Hodson of the British Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy remains unconvinced: 'The name "non-violent communication" is little

more than packaging. We all know that good communication is non-violent and I'd question whether we really need a theory from America to tell us that. This type of theory is usually only useful for those who choose to believe in it.'

Whether or not Hodson is right, there are several UK businesses that have chosen to believe in it and the feedback is generally positive.

Mark Houlton, director of finance at Blackwells Publishers hired NVC trainer, Bridget Belgrave to run a course for senior managers who faced issues in delivering their support services to staff who had little understanding of the pressures they faced. Aware that many business people are put off by the use of hand-puppets, Belgrave chose not to use them in this instance. Houlton was highly impressed by NVC: 'The course was very successful. It gave delegates a tool that they could use immediately and that was also appropriate to a business setting. We found that, even when there was a high degree of initial scepticism, delegates were won over by the practical usefulness of the technique.'

Look out for those giraffe and jackal hand-puppets, as they may be appearing in a training session sooner than you think.



NVC has been used in Rwanda to improve communication between the Hutus and the Tutsis

Useful contact and publications

Centre for Non-violent Communication:
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Non-violent Communication – A Language of Life
by Marshall B Rosenberg ISBN 1-892005-03-4.

Case study: finding a new way to communicate

Since 1999 Hanna Savanna has been running NVC courses for a multinational IT company at its headquarters in Finland. She has primarily focused on helping recruitment, personnel and customer services staff to identify conflicts and resolve them.

She charges an average of €100 (£61) per delegate for a one-day course in which she spends the morning explaining the theory of NVC and the afternoon putting it into practice through a series of role-plays. She believes NVC has the real potential to improve businesses and says: 'I've never come across another type of training that helps very different people really connect to each other. For instance, I recently had two women in the same session. Despite working in the same department they refused to speak to each other. After doing some role-plays the two women were able to understand a more life-serving method of communication and began to discuss each other's needs.'

The benefits of the training are difficult to quantify as they relate to intangible elements of business performance such as communication and cooperation, but the feedback from those who have been on her courses has been good. 'Hanna showed me a new way of communication,' said one participant. 'It started me thinking about mistakes I have made in the past when communicating with others and gave me some ideas on how I could deal more positively with family, friends and colleagues.'