Every message, regardless of form or content, is an expression of a need.

— Marshall Rosenberg
Compassionate communication fosters collaboration by establishing workplace relationships rooted in honesty and empathy.

THE WORKPLACE IS RIFE WITH CONFLICT. In fact research shows that 85 percent of employees deal with conflict on some level while 29 percent of employees deal with conflict almost constantly. This workplace conflict comes at a hefty cost. According to a study commissioned by CPP, Inc., U.S. employees spend 2.1 hours per week involved with conflict. This amounts to one full day per month spent managing conflict, costing approximately $359 billion in paid hours (based on an average hourly earnings of $17.95), or the equivalent of 385 million working days. And that is just the toll it takes on the corporation. The human cost is equally great. CPP found that 27 percent of employees have witnessed conflicts that lead to personal attacks, diminishing trust and morale in workplace relationships. And 25 percent of employees have seen conflict result in sickness or absence. Learning to communicate with honesty and empathy can have a significant positive impact on workplace relationships.

This paper presents a communication methodology designed to create better understanding in workplace relationships by cultivating honesty and empathy.
Compassionate communication involves expressing what one sees, feels and needs and making requests that enrich one’s life based off those three elements with honesty while extending these very same elements of communication to others with empathy.

In his book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, author Marshall B. Rosenberg explains, “When we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt, and needed rather than on diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth or our compassion.” Compassionate communication, also referred to as “nonviolent communication,” is a specific framework for the expressing of one’s self with honesty and receiving the self-expression of others with empathy. This four-part framework is as follows:¹

1. **Observations**: The concrete actions we observe that affect our well-being
2. **Feelings**: How we feel in relation to what we observe
3. **Needs**: The needs, values, desires, etc. that create our feelings
4. **Requests**: The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives

The process of nonviolent communication is not a set formula, but rather a framework that can be adapted to situations as well as personal and cultural styles. The framework is an internal process that may or may not be spoken out loud, but involves giving of one’s self in the form of honest self-expression as well as in the form of empathetic receiving. Communication is giving and receiving in a manner that supports the dignity of all parties.

**A FRAMEWORK FOR SELF-EXPRESSION**

Workplace conflict is caused by numerous sources, but the most common cause of conflict in the workplace — almost 50 percent — is due to warring egos and clashes in personalities.² Research commissioned by CPP, Inc., and reported in “CPP Global Human Capital

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Report: Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive” found that the following are additional causes of workplace conflict (listed in the order of prevalence):³

> Stress
> Heavy workloads
> Poor leadership from the top of the organization
> Lack of honesty and openness
> Poor line management
> Lack of role clarity
> Lack of clarity about accountability
> Clash of values
> Poor selection/pairing of teams
> Taboo topics (e.g., office affairs)
> Poor performance management
> Bullying/harassment
> Perceived discrimination

The above causes of workplace conflict can be transformed by utilizing a communication framework designed to get at the root of the conflict with compassion and the intent of fostering collaboration as the objective rather than blaming or shaming.

**Honest self-expression begins with observation.** To observe is to simply identify what is being seen, heard and/or experienced. Observation is not synonymous with evaluation, which is to apply judgment to what is
being observed. In his book, *Nonviolent Communication*, Rosenberg identifies three types of evaluations that are particularly alienating and that foster aggression rather than collaboration: 1) moralistic judgments; 2) comparison judgments; 3) denial of responsibility.

**Moralistic judgments** imply that another person is bad because that person’s value system differs from those of the observer. Moralistic judgments are often framed as insults, blames, put-downs, criticisms or labels. Examples of moralistic judgments include: “He is just lazy;” “She thinks she is too good to do real work;” “He’s arrogant or stuck-up;” “She’s a racist;” etc. This type of language is aimed at finding fault rather than gaining understanding. By judging the person, the underlying reasons for the behavior remain undiscovered, and therefore, the need that is not being met remains undiscovered and misunderstood. Rosenberg explains that, “analyses of others are actually expressions of our own needs and values.” In other words, by claiming another person is lazy, the unmet need of the observer might be the need for assistance; by claiming another person is arrogant, the unmet need of the observer might be to experience acknowledgment for a contribution; by claiming another person is racist, the unmet need of the observer might be to have the dignity and respect of all people acknowledged and valued; etc. Expressing needs in the form of moralistic judgments increase defensiveness while decreasing collaboration.

**Comparison judgments** block compassion because they create a belief of inferiority about one person and superiority about another rather than a sense of celebration in the unique achievements and contributions of each person. Comparison judgments are put-downs that create feelings of shame, sadness, depression and an overall sense of not being “good enough.” Comparison judgments are equally damaging when they are self-imposed as when they are imposed by others. An example of a comparison judgment imposed by others is, “This concept lacks vision and inspiration. You clearly do not have the creative chops Lindsey has.” A self-imposed comparison judgment might look something like this, “I feel like such an idiot every time I present in front of clients. My presentation style is elementary and boring compared to Lucy’s.”

**Denial of responsibility** incorrectly places the responsibility of one’s own feelings and/or actions onto another person or entity.

**Denial of responsibility judgments** such as, “You make me feel guilty,” “You make me so mad,” “I’m just doing my job” or “it’s the company policy” incorrectly place the responsibility of one’s own feelings and/or actions onto another person or entity. No one has the power or ability to control another person’s feelings or emotions. Denying responsibility for one’s own feelings or actions implies lack of choice and therefore lack of accountability for one’s own thoughts, behaviors and feelings. This type of judgment is dishonest, void of empathy and compassion and is disrespectful and dishonoring to individuals or groups who may have been harmed by the person’s actions.

In the book *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behaviors* authors Ori Brahman and Rom Brafman present ideas for what causes people to make irrational decisions, which often lead to conflict. One such obstacle is the concept of diagnosis bias. The authors write, “the moment we label a person or a situation, we put on blinders to all evidence that contradicts our diagnosis.” Diagnosis bias is the human propensity for labeling people, ideas or things based off an initial evaluative
judgment and the challenge to reconsider the judgment once it has been made. One reason diagnosis bias can be difficult to overcome is because of confirmation bias — another human tendency to seek out information that confirms one’s initial judgment or preconceived idea. Humans are prone to attributing certain qualities to a person based on their judgments rather than objective data — this is called value attribution. Once a person perceives another as labeled in a particular way (i.e., lazy, arrogant, smart, ambitious, etc.), the tendency is to take that label at face value. Diagnosis bias, confirmation bias and value attribution are obstacles to overcome in order to observe objectively.

Observation with evaluation is often experienced as criticism, which fosters defensiveness, resentment, anger, sadness, aggression and a host of other feelings, all of which alienate people from one another and fail to create collaborative work environments.

**Evaluation:** You never arrive to work on time  
**Observation:** You were late to work 16 times this month.

**Evaluation:** You think you are too good to actually do the hard work.  
**Observation:** You delegated to other team members three times on this project.

**Evaluation:** You think I can just read your mind when it comes to your expectations of my role on the team  
**Observation:** I have not yet received a job description outlining your expectations of me.

**Evaluation:** You are a bully, and everyone knows it.  
**Observation:** You interrupted me and raised your voice above the others in the meeting this morning. Several people commented that yours actions caused them discomfort.

**Evaluation:** You just think your time is so much more important than anyone else’s.  
**Observation:** You failed to show up to three meetings last week and did not call or email to let anyone know you would not be attending.

Rather than using observations as opportunities to judge behavior, compassionate communication uses observations as opportunities to gather information about concrete actions in order to understand how those actions affect one’s own well-being.

**The second step to honest self-expression is identifying and expressing one’s feelings.** Too often in the workplace the idea that “it’s not personal; it’s just business” is deemed an acceptable approach to workplace communication. All business is conducted by people, which means all business is, in fact, personal. Rather than being perceived as a sign that a person cares deeply about his or her work, a person may be ridiculed or even punished for revealing emotions about his or work. Emotions guide thoughts and actions; therefore, seeking to understand the emotions of others and the feelings they choose to express them should be considered a good leadership skill and a smart business practice. Yet, many cultures, including the American culture, subscribe to the belief that the corporate environment is no place to express feelings; however, the long list of common workplace conflicts demonstrates that feelings do matter. They matter greatly. And when feelings are hurt, not honored or left unacknowledged, conflict ensues and collaboration is rendered challenging if not impossible.

Because American culture does not value the expression of feelings, most people have an underdeveloped “feelings vocabulary,” meaning most people literally do not have the language to describe their feelings. And the language that does exist is often “feelings prohibitive.” Expressing feelings in the workplace is often perceived as weak and unprofessional. Yet, Rosenberg explains, “Expressing vulnerability can help resolve conflicts.” Dr. Brené Brown, University of Houston researcher and professor and author of numerous books including *Daring Greatly*, asserts, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.” Vulnerability and attention to
Vulnerability and attention to feelings is core to connecting with others, and therefore, it is a critical aspect of compassionate communication and workplace collaboration.

1. Blame one’s self. To blame oneself is to receive the negative message and accept the judgment as accurate and assume responsibility for it. Assuming another person’s judgment to be accurate can cause great damage to one’s self-esteem.

2. Blame others. Rather than assume responsibility for the speaker’s negative judgment, this option blames the speaker. Blaming others is an inherently defensive approach that seeks to find fault with the speaker and assumes no responsibility for how one’s actions may have played a role in that opinion — regardless of how evaluative it may or may not be. This approach tends to create feelings of anger.

3. Sense one’s own feelings and needs. This option requires self-reflection in order to gauge one’s own feelings and explore the needs that may be creating them. This approach helps achieve clarity about one’s underlying needs and can potentially generate ideas for how these needs can be satisfied appropriately.

4. Sense others’ feelings and needs. This option requires reflecting on the feelings and needs of the speaker in order to gauge that person’s feelings and explore the needs that may be creating them. This approach helps achieve clarity about the underlying needs of the speaker and can help to surface ideas about how to satisfy those needs.

The third step to honest self-expression is taking responsibility for one’s feelings and expressing the needs at the root of them. While other people’s actions may serve as a catalyst for feelings, all people are responsible for how they choose to receive and experience another person’s actions. Rosenberg outlines four ways in which people can choose to respond to the negative messages:

Compassionate communication requires that one accept responsibility for his or her feelings by acknowledging the needs, desires and expectations that are at the root of them. One has the greatest chance of having one’s needs met when those needs are expressed with vulnerability — openly and honestly.
The fourth step to honest self-expression is to request action to help fulfill one's needs, desires and/or expectations. When making a request to have a need met, use positive action language. This means asking for what is desired rather than what is not desired. This may sound obvious, and yet it is an area in which people often struggle. For example, a corporate CEO became frustrated because he believed employees were not paying attention to his presentation during a meeting because they were on their computers. He had overheard that some people were multitasking — emailing and conducting other work-related business. At the next company meeting, he asked his assistant to send out a companywide email informing everyone that the meeting was a “no technology meeting.” This created much dissatisfaction and conflict because many people use their computers for taking notes. They felt this rule actually inhibited their ability to pay attention and participate in a way that best met their learning needs. What the CEO actually wanted was full participation. But what he asked for prohibited some people from doing so without the use of technology.

Positive action language uses affirming language that inspires others to meet the need with understanding and compassion. The CEO may have received more active participation, had he made the following request: “I have a lot of important information to share with you at our company meeting. Please come to the meeting attentive and prepared to receive this information in whatever way best meets your learning style.” The first request inspired anger and lack of participation; the second request utilizes clear, positive action language that would have inspired cooperation.

Positive action language may not always be enough. The person requesting the need has a responsibility to ensure the request is accurately received. Oftentimes a person will make a request by expressing his or her feelings. For example, “I am feeling frustrated that you left the conference room in disarray. Now we have to meet in a disorderly room.” Embedded in that “feeling statement” may or may not be a request for the person to clean up the conference room right now. If the speaker assumes the request is obvious, but the receiver of the message did not hear a request, conflict ensues. Expressing feelings along with a specific request for action is more likely to result in the need being met.

For example, “I am feeling frustrated that you left the conference room in disarray. Can you please clean it up now?” The feeling is expressed and accompanied by a concrete request. Now the receiver of the message has an opportunity to express empathy and meet the underlying need. Alternatively, a request may sound like a demand if it is not accompanied by the speaker’s feelings and needs. For example, “The conference room stinks to high heaven!” The person sending this message may be assuming the receiver of the message will remember that he or she was supposed to clean up the conference room, forgot to do so, but is being asked to do it right now. However, without the feeling statement and the specific request for action, this “request to have a need met” is likely to cause confusion, frustration and a catalyst to conflict.

The clearer a request is, the more likely it is to be positively addressed. To ensure a request has been accurately understood, the speaker may want to ask the receiver of the message to reflect back what was asked. Sometimes simply asking, “Does that make sense?” is enough to determine if the message was accurately received. But usually, a more detailed answer is necessary to gain clarity regarding whether or not the receiver understood the entirety of a request. Collaboration and goodwill can be instilled by providing an affirming statement of appreciation as well as additional clarifying statements to the listener while assuming responsibility for any confusion or lack of clarity. The goal is to engender collaboration. Graciousness goes a long way to accomplishing that.

The following is an example of what honest self-expression might look like in action. Last month you were late to work 15 times (observation). When you are late, I feel resentful because your absence causes me extra work, and I also fear others will grow resentful of you which will impact the morale of the team (feeling). I need to be valued in the workplace and to know my contributions
are positively experienced. I also need to ensure I am fostering an environment where others can experience that as well (needs). Can you help me understand why you are frequently late so that we can develop a plan to work together in a way that meets both our needs (request)? I want to make sure I am communicating effectively. Do you mind reflecting back to me what I just expressed (request for reflection)? Thank you. I can see you understand me, and I appreciate your willingness to work together in creating a positive relationship (expressing appreciation).

A final note regarding the process of honest self-expression: Seek out honest feedback from the listener. Collaboration — the action of working with someone to produce or create something — is by definition a shared experience. Bringing the listener, or receiver of messages, into the process by requesting feedback deepens the collaboration, increases opportunities for growth, enhances opportunities for developing trust and opens doors to new ways of experiencing the relationship with that person. Consider inquiring how the listener is feeling; what the listener is thinking; and whether the listener would be willing to take a particular action. Seeking honesty and requesting honesty is an important aspect of fostering compassionate communication in the workplace.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RECEIVING WITH EMPATHY

Communication is a process of sending messages (self-expression) and listening (receiving the self-expression of others). Receiving with empathy is hearing what others observe, feel, need and request with a respectful understanding of what they are experiencing. Empathy is the birthplace of human-to-human connectivity and is at the heart of human security. In order to exercise empathy, one must shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about a person and his or her ideas and actions. Approaches to compassionate listening include the following:

> Keeping an open heart
> Being sincere
> Exercising curiosity
> Exercising patience
> Staying with the person and the problem

Receiving with empathy is listening to understand. No matter what the person may express and regardless the attitude or tone the person may take in order to self-express, compassionate listening is focused only on what the other person observes, feels, needs and requests and doing this without judgment or evaluation.

Empathy calls for extending one’s full focus on simply understanding what the other person is experiencing and needing and allowing that person as much time and space as necessary to fully self-express. Being fully present is a skill one must practice and be in constant self-awareness of. The following behaviors are indicators that one has slipped out of listening and in to behavior that is often mistaken as listening:

> Giving advice — The “listener” provides instructions or directions on how to move forward or how to avoid this situation from happening in the future.
> One-upping — The “listener” offers examples of how something even worse happened to him or her.
> Educating — The “listener” offers a teaching moment to show what can be learned from the problem.
> Consoling — The “listener” offers emotional support and assures the person the problem was not his fault.
> Storytelling — The “listener” offers a “this reminds me of a time” story or an example of how this same problem has been experienced by others.
> Shutting down — The “listener” offers words of advice intended to stop the other person from talking such as “cheer up” or “don’t feel so bad.”
> Sympathizing — The “listener” offers “petting” language such as “oh honey” or “you poor thing.”
> Interrogating — The “listener” takes on the role of intelligence gathering in order to gather all the details.
> Explaining — The “listener” provides self-justifying actions regarding the problem such as “I would have called but …” or “you know, I had no idea about …”
Listening with empathy is not listening for one’s own intellectual understanding; rather, it is holding space for that person to fully self-express and giving that person the gift of understanding and compassion for what he or she may be feeling, needing and requesting.

Receiving with empathy is listening for feelings.
Listening with empathy is listening for what a person feels rather than what a person thinks. For example, a person may say, “I just feel Sally is being really aggressive with me about the deadline. She needs to back off!” What this person thinks is that Sally is being overly demanding. But what this person may feel is scared that she will not meet Sally’s expectations and that the team or project will fail because of it. By listening for the feeling behind the “thinking,” one is able to begin to get at the root of the conflict.

Receiving with empathy requires paraphrasing.
Listening for the feeling behind the thinking requires a bit of guesswork. Paraphrasing helps to uncover whether or not the listener accurately understood the speaker’s feelings. Reflecting back what was understood gives the speaker the opportunity to affirm that the listener understood the feeling correctly. If not, it provides the speaker the opportunity to continue to self-express and clarify. It also provides the added benefit of giving the speaker the experience of reflecting on his or her own self-expression and perhaps delving deeper into the thinking and perspectives expressed. Paraphrasing can take the form of questions in order reveal the speaker’s understanding as well as to elicit any corrections the speaker may want to offer. For demonstration purposes, the following examples relate to the employee who was habitually late for work:

1. **Question that reflects what others are observing** — “Are you reacting to the how many meetings I was either late to or failed to attend last week?”

2. **Question that reflects what others are feeling and the needs behind their feelings** — “Are you feeling scared that my absences might cause the project to fail, and you want to ensure that you and the team are not blamed for the project’s failure?”

3. **Questions that reflect what are requesting** — “Are you wanting me to assure you that I will attend the remaining meetings, and that I will work late to make up for lost time so the project is successful?”

Paraphrasing is helpful when messages are emotionally charged, the message is complex or the possibility of not understanding is high or is an established precedence in a particular relationship.

These types of paraphrasing questions require a bit of guesswork on the part of the listener in order to engage the process of deeper understanding while inviting corrections for what was not understood accurately and demonstrating authenticity in one’s desire to understand. Paraphrasing is helpful when messages are emotionally charged, the message is complex or the possibility of not understanding is high or is an established precedence in a particular relationship. Paraphrasing could be perceived as condescending if it is unnecessary. Therefore, only paraphrase when doing so contributes to increased compassion and empathy as well as a deepening of understanding.

Receiving with empathy seeks to understand and honor the feelings and needs the speaker is experiencing. It is a process of discovering the request the speaker may have even when that person does not have the communication acumen to make the request.

**CONCLUSION**
Compassionate communication is life affirming and, therefore, does not condemn or punish a speaker who does not have the skills to communicate effectively, efficiently or compassionately. Receiving with empathy
teaches compassion by modeling it one interaction at a time. Changing the way we communicate in the workplace doesn’t happen overnight. But putting forth a concerted effort to implement compassionate communication will render positive results that will incentivize continued practice. However, receiving formal training in dispute resolution and compassionate communication can transform the workplace, increase productivity, and foster more collaborative, trusting and empathetic relationships — all of which enhance team-building and employee engagement.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An international speaker, peace-building trainer and mediator, Robyn works with individuals, corporations and nonprofit organizations in discovering the root causes of their conflicts so they may transform their relationships and create new and productive paths forward individually and as teams. She also works with community leaders and political and governmental leaders to develop grassroots efforts for building sustainable peace in areas of historic conflict. In this capacity, she has been featured in news outlets internationally. Robyn is an adjunct professor at Southern Methodist University and Bay Path University.

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ENDNOTES


3  Ibid.


9  Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.
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