

Difficult Conversations:

Authentic Communication Leads to Greater Understanding and Teamwork

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Abstract

This article offers a practical approach to facilitating difficult conversations. The Authentic Communication model is more than a tool; it is a state of consciousness that helps people communicate honestly and openly. This approach expands emotional intelligence by developing awareness of the connection between feelings and universal human needs. Distinctions between observations and judgments, feelings and thoughts, needs and positions, and demands and requests are clarified. Authentic Communication provides a method of resolving difficult conflicts so that people feel heard. By deepening awareness of needs, we contribute to trust, safety, and improved communication. When people are understood at a deep level, they're able to release their attachment to their positions, explore options and make requests that meet everyone's needs.

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Like the Chinese word for crisis, which combines the symbols for danger and opportunity, difficult conversations can lead to either distress or harmony. We usually anticipate distress because difficult conversations often become emotional, leading us to confront, freeze, bolt, or gloss over the issues. But we could choose to expect harmony instead.

Imagine yourself at a tense planning meeting where the financial director reports, "To compete profitably, we

need to lay off 20 percent of the workforce." The marketing director responds, "That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard. We need to lay *you* off so we can hire new people who are serious about growing the business." Are you ready to add fuel to the fire, would you prefer to crawl under your chair, or do you have the skills to facilitate a conversation that could satisfy everyone in the room?

Minimizing the emotions in such situations might seem like the safest course of action, but in the long run, honesty and direct engagement promise

higher levels of performance by deepening understanding and fostering teamwork. "Many meeting facilitators call for a break when the emotional energy escalates," notes Roger Schwarz, author of *The Skilled Facilitator*, "but savvy facilitators recognize that they have hit pay dirt." (Schwarz, 2000). When a group has tapped the vein of dynamic energy that feeds conflict, they are connecting with issues that are important to them.

Authentic Communication is a practical method of dealing with human conflict that reframes how people

communicate so that strong emotions are not a liability, but an opportunity to discover more satisfying options. This article describes how facilitators can use the Authentic Communication model to honor emotional energy and creatively transform conflict to serve each individual and the group as a whole.

In choosing Authentic Communication—as facilitators or individuals—we may be guided by the spirit of piano maker Theodore Steinway. “In one of our concert grand pianos,” he said, “243 taut strings exert a pull of 40,000 pounds on an iron frame. It is proof that out of great tension may come great harmony.”

Introduction to Authentic Communication

The Authentic Communication model is based on the work of Marshall Rosenberg, author of *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. According to Rosenberg, everything we do or say is an attempt to meet a need. I take graduate courses because I need respect. You write a business plan because you need clarity about creating a better future. In Rosenberg’s model, needs are by definition universal; true of every human being—everyone needs respect or clarity at one time or another. What varies is *how* people choose to meet these needs. Our needs might be the same, but our strategies might be in conflict. For example, two people might need to contribute to the sustainability of organization, but one takes the position “We have to hire more people,” and another believes, “We have to fire

more people.” Rosenberg suggests that understanding each other’s needs can open the door to new visions that can

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satisfy all parties. The key, he says, is to empathize with the needs fully and *then* develop strategies for fulfilling those needs (Rosenberg, 2004).

Before we can empathize with a need, we must be able to identify it. Authentic Communication recognizes that one of the key functions of emotions is to point to our met and unmet needs. If I feel frustrated, my frustration could be a clue that my need for order is not

satisfied. If you feel amused, perhaps that is because your need for humor is met.

In a fast-paced work place, we often tell ourselves that we don’t have time for feelings. But ignoring them, and by extension ignoring our needs, may actually sabotage our productivity. According to Human Resources magazine, “...study after study indicates that employee emotions are fundamentally related to—and actually drive—bottom-line success in a company.” (Bates, 2004, February). By

Four Steps to Authentic Communication

Authentic Communication includes four basic steps—observation, feeling, need, and request—whether we are expressing what is important to us, or receiving another person’s message. In practice, it may sound something like this:

Expressing (communicating your desire to be understood)

1. Observation: When ... (describe your observation)
2. Feeling: I felt ... (your emotion)
3. Need: because I need ... (your need)
4. Request: Would you be willing to ... (specific action)?

Receiving (checking your understanding of another)

1. Observation: When you ... (describe your observation)
2. Feeling: are you feeling ... (guess the emotion)
3. Need: because you need ... (guess the need)?
4. Request: Would you like (me, him, her, them) to ... (specific action)?

paying attention to feelings and needs, Authentic Communication helps cultivate the sense that “I matter, you matter, we matter,” which can improve relationships, build team spirit and contribute to the growth of the organization.

To see how facilitators might use the Four Steps to Authentic Communication in practice, let us apply them to the scenario mentioned at the beginning of this article. The financial director, Susan, has just suggested laying off 20 percent of the staff; the marketing director, Jack, responded by suggesting Susan be laid off. Noting that Jack seems the most agitated, as the facilitator, you decide to address him first. The conversation below uses the four steps from the “receiving the message” point of view.

You: Jack, when you heard Susan say that we should lay off 20 percent of the staff, (observation), I guess you were pretty alarmed (feeling), because you would like reassurance (need) that the company will grow. Is that accurate? (request)

Jack: Yes, she is clueless! Doesn't she know we are launching two new products this quarter? To have any chance of success, it is crucial that we have adequate staff on board, especially in marketing!

You: Hearing her suggestion to lay off 20 percent of the workforce, (observation), are you really concerned (feeling) because you want to contribute (need) to the success of the two new products and ultimately the life of the company?

Jack: Yes, I care about the company's future—I've been here ten years. But I also care about my job and I cannot do it without adequate staff. The last guy in her position made the same mistake and I ended up paying the price. Sales plummeted! We are still recovering, three years later.

You: So are you worried (feeling) about the company, but also want some understanding about what it takes to adequately market products? You need the staffing and resources to do your job well and feel confident about success. (need) Is that right?

Jack: Yes, that's it.

Having heard Jack's concerns, you now turn to Susan to see that she understands what Jack said. At first, she may need some help; it is not unusual, especially when tempers flare, for one person to hear a message very differently from what the other expressed. If you are not confident that Susan has heard Jack, you can check back with him or share with Susan what you have heard Jack say:

You: Before we go on to hear your concerns Susan, I want to make sure that we have clarity about what Jack has said. Could you tell me what you heard him say?

Susan: I hear him loud and clear. He said that I remind him of my predecessor and that I'm making the same mistakes he did. He thinks I'm screwing up.

You: Thanks Susan. I'm glad I checked. What I heard Jack say is that he needs understanding that to

successfully launch the new product this fall, he needs sufficient staff. He wants to build an effective department and is worried that he won't have the resources to do so. Can you tell me what you just heard me say?

Susan: Jack wants to make sure his department has the resources to adequately market these new products.

You: Right. That's what I understood. Jack, is that what you wanted to express?

Jack: Yes. It's crucial that these new products do well.

Once you feel confident that Susan has understood Jack, you can check with him to see if he is ready to hear what Susan has to say:

You: It's important to me that everyone is understood (need), so I wonder if you are ready to hear where Susan is coming from? (request)

Jack: I'm a little anxious, but ready to listen...

After several rounds of listening to each other in this way, Jack and Susan will come to focus on what they have in common, rather than what sets them at odds. They both care about the life of the company, fear for its future, and want to see it succeed. Having heard each other, they come up with a mutually agreeable solution. Susan agrees to postpone any layoffs in the marketing department for six months, until after they launch the new product line. Jack agrees to new sales targets and acknowledges that if they do not reach their goals, some layoffs may be

necessary. Jack ends the meeting more motivated than ever to market the new line. Susan has a greater understanding and appreciation of the challenges that Jack faces in his department and agrees to get his input for future planning.

It may take several rounds of guessing feelings and needs before both parties feel understood. Once the needs are on the table, you can encourage those involved to make requests that honor each other's needs. Because they both feel understood, each person is more likely to listen to the other's ideas and create strategies that work for everyone.

Practicing Authentic Communication

The language and format of Authentic Communication may sound complex, but it is simply a new way of interacting that focuses on giving and receiving empathy. The process is represented visually in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the four numbered steps represent the response choices we have at each juncture:

1. Stimulus: We can either pass moral judgment or notice our observations.
2. Reaction: We can tune into what we think or what we feel.
3. Awareness: We can decide on a position or explore what we need.
4. Action: We can make either a demand or a request.

The words in green (judgments, thoughts, positions, demands) represent habitual ways of communicating. Unfortunately, this approach often leads

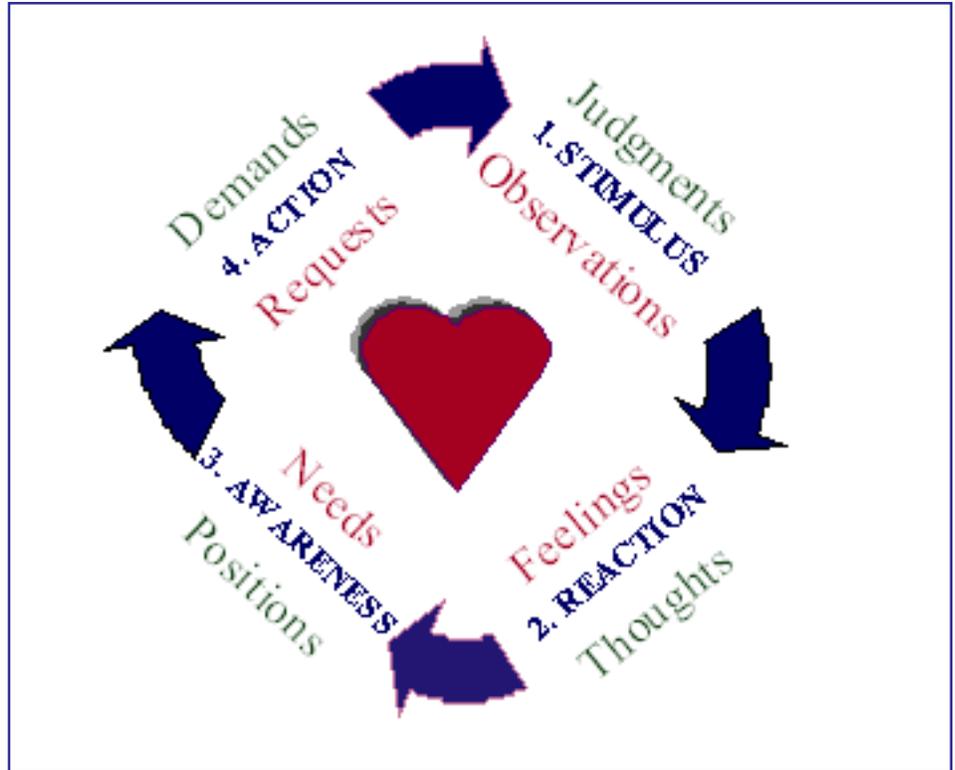


Figure 1. Authentic Communication

Adapted from the work of Marshall Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2004).

people to see those who disagree with them as adversaries. The inner options in red (observations, feelings, needs, and requests) avoid such adversary images by promoting mutual understanding.

Figure 2 provides more information about the alternatives associated with Authentic Communication. “In every situation,” says Charles Jones, a partner in the Center for Sustainable Leadership, “we all have the power to choose between two very different frames of mind: a ‘judgmental’ frame in which we are defensive and closed minded; and a ‘generative’ frame in which we are open and curious.” (Jones, 2005). By consciously choosing a generative frame of mind at each step, we choose language that helps us

understand each other, rather than language that divides or separates us.

Principles of Practice Sharing Observations Instead of Judgments

To practice Authentic Communication we must be especially clear about the distinction between observations and judgments. The statement, “Derek is a poor manager,” at first might sound like an observation. As far as you are concerned, it is a fact: Derek is not doing a good job—anyone who worked with him would agree. But this statement offers no clear observations. All we have is an evaluative word, “poor.” A clean observation, on the other hand, might sound like, “Derek tore up the report,

pounded his fist on the table, and did not say goodbye when he left.” Or perhaps your evaluation comes from more subtle observations, such as “Derek raised his eyebrows when an employee suggested bonuses.” However, we do not know what the raised eyebrows mean unless we check. Perhaps Derek raised his eyebrow because he was surprised that the employee had read his mind. Whenever we state what we have observed, rather than how we interpreted the situation, we reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding and defensiveness and open the door to authentic conversations.

Distinguishing Feelings from Thoughts

When I work in an organizational culture where people think they have to check their feelings at the door, I sometimes show a video of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King giving his “I have a dream” speech. When people see the way King trembles while delivering his now-famous words, they experience how full emotional expression enhances the connection between the speaker and the listener. Feelings reveal a person’s deepest needs, desires, and values. When we recognize feelings in others, it leads to better understanding and collaboration; when we acknowledge them in ourselves, we foster self awareness.

Because so many of us have become accustomed to ignoring our feelings—not only in business but also in our personal relationships—they may not be easy to recognize. The two lists below suggest the rich range of feelings that may arise when our needs are or are not being met.

Examples of Feelings When Our Needs Are Met

Amazed	Energized
Optimistic	Appreciative
Engaged	Relaxed
Calm	Confident
Delighted	Encouraged
Excited	Happy
Hopeful	Inspired
Relieved	Surprised
Thrilled	Trusting

Examples of Feelings When Needs are Not Met

Afraid	Disgusted
Outraged	Angry
Embarrassed	Overwhelmed
Annoyed	Envious
Sad	Bored
Frustrated	Shocked
Concerned	Hurt
Stressed out	Confused
Impatient	Uncomfortable
Disappointed	Irritated
Uneasy	Discouraged
Nervous	Worried

Someone who is unaccustomed to identifying and articulating feelings can easily confuse them with thoughts or evaluations. How often have you heard “I feel manipulated” or “I feel like leaving” or “I feel that this conversation

Components of Authentic Communication	
	Observations differ from judgments. Observations are what you would see and hear in a videotape, not what you judge, assume, evaluate, interpret or diagnose.
	Feelings are different from what you are thinking. They are emotions or gut reactions, not interpretations of what someone is doing to you.
	Needs are universal values. They are not about figuring out what others should do. They are core non-negotiables, rather than strategies for getting satisfaction.
	Requests are the strategies for getting needs met. They are very different from demands: requests involve asking for what you need, not insisting on or demanding what you want.

Figure 2

is going nowhere”? These are all examples of the word “feeling” being used to describe what someone is thinking. “Manipulated” is not a feeling; it is what I *think* someone is doing to me.

Whenever someone says, “I feel that...”, “I feel like...”, or “I feel as if...” you are about to learn what they think, not what they feel. As a facilitator, when you hear someone express a feeling that implies an action happening outside of the body—for example, “I feel rejected”—you can help translate that statement into a genuine internal feeling. “I feel rejected” may become “I feel disappointed or sad.” To translate, simply ask, “How do you feel when you think someone is rejecting you?”

Language Often Mistaken for Feelings

Abandoned	Abused
Attacked	Belittled
Betrayed	Bullied
Coerced	Discounted
Dismissed	Harassed
Ignored	Intimidated
Manipulated	Marginalized
Misunderstood	Neglected
Patronized	Provoked
Rejected	Threatened

Develop Awareness of Needs before Strategies

According to the Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef, all humans, across culture and history, share nine basic needs: subsistence, protection/security, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity/meaning and

freedom. (Max-Neef, 1992). However, the language used to describe needs varies from one organization to another, as the list below shows. Some of these needs may resonate more strongly with you than others.

Needs or Values Often Expressed in Organizations

- Accomplishment
(Mastery/Growth/Progress)
- Choice
(Autonomy/Individuality/Freedom)
- Community
(Acceptance/Belonging/Collaboration)
- Connection
(Relationships/Appreciation/Care)
- Contribution
(Service/Impact/Results)
- Creativity
(Authenticity/Ingenuity/Inspiration)
- Fun
(Humor/Play/Balance)
- Harmony
(Aesthetics/Order/Peace)
- Meaning
(Identity/Purpose/Awareness)
- Order
(Efficiency/Structure/Clarity)
- Proficiency
(Competence/Success/Achievement)
- Respect
(Consideration/Integrity/Trust)
- Security
(Safety/Stability/Protection)
- Sustainability
(Subsistence/Continuation/Hope)
- Understanding
(Learning/Consideration/Clarity)

There are many more words that describe basic needs—which we sometimes refer to as values, wants or

desires. We invite more clarity when we distinguish between needs and the thousands of strategies that we might choose to meet them. Team members often entangle themselves in challenging conversations by insisting on a position or strategy without first

When we insist on a solution before we have explored everybody’s needs, our plans are more likely to run into trouble. When we understand everyone’s needs first, the resulting solutions are more likely to be effective and satisfying for all involved. We get buy-in and cooperation that result in long-term productivity.

understanding each other’s needs. Susan and Jack, for example, were at odds because they had different positions (hiring and firing) for needs that were actually quite similar (accomplishment, proficiency, security or sustainability). When we insist on a solution before we have explored everybody’s needs, our plans are more likely to run into trouble. When we understand everyone’s needs first, the resulting solutions are more likely to be effective and satisfying for all involved. We get buy-in and cooperation that result in long-term productivity.

Making Requests, Not Demands

People speak because they want something. Usually, they want action, to connect with others, or simply to be heard. Too often, however, people fail to make their request clear and expect others to figure them out. When using Authentic Communication, we learn to listen for implied requests. Sometimes we help someone craft their request by saying something like, “It sounds like you need progress. Do you have a request?” If the person is unclear about what request would meet their needs, we can guess: “It looks like you need collaboration and action. Is your request to create an action plan together?”

As facilitators we can help people distinguish between requests and demands. “Do it my way,” is more likely to invite submission or rebellion than teamwork. Alternatively, when people ask for what they want and are obviously willing to revise their positions, their requests invite creativity. When groups recognize they have a full range of choices, they generate more options.

Dealing with Resistance

Not everyone is open to communicating, however—authentically or otherwise. Bringing unwilling adversaries to the table can be the most difficult part of the facilitator’s process. And yet, Rosenberg has successfully facilitated unimaginable conflicts with rival gangs, warring tribes of Hutus and Tutsis, estranged family members and management and labor unions, among others (Rosenberg, 2004).

One way to get people to start talking is by using the model yourself, by listening to each of them empathically, ideally when both parties are in the same room, but separately if necessary. When the facilitator empathizes with the feelings and needs of both sides, they become more self-connected and more willing to understand each other. Here is an example of how this might sound in the workplace:

Shaun: No way am I talking to that jerk.

You: Are you angry because you need respect?

Shaun: No. I want nothing to do with him. I’ll never get respect, so what’s the use?

Shaun: So, are you frustrated because you need a work environment where you can be productive?

Shaun: I want recognition for how hard I work.

You: So you’d like some appreciation for your contribution?

Shaun: Yes, I do great work and he just picks it apart.

You: You sound discouraged. Is it because you need freedom to work in your own way?

Shaun: Exactly! I’m tired of being micro-managed.

You: So, it sounds like you want more autonomy and choice?

Shaun: (Silence) Right. Now that I realize how important my freedom is, I want to discuss this and I also want to find out why he seems so worried.

People in conflict intuitively know they won’t be able to communicate well

as long as they sit in judgment. When you empathize with them, they become more aware of their needs, and they feel more hopeful about communicating their desires to others.

Benefits of Authentic Communication Enhancing Leadership

Today’s leaders who want to develop an engaged workforce need to pay attention what people care about. According to Steven Bates, of *Human Resources* magazine, roughly half the workers in America show up and “do what is expected of them but do not go the extra mile.” (Bates, 2004, p. 44). Carol Kinsey Goman of Kinsey Consulting Services explains why: “Employees want to commit to companies, because doing so satisfies a powerful and basic human need to connect with and contribute to something significant.” (Bates, 2004, p. 46). In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner note, “Leaders find the common thread that weaves together the fabric of human needs into a colorful tapestry. They seek out the brewing consensus among those they would lead. ...They watch the faces. They get a sense of what people want, what they value, what they dream about.” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 149-150). By connecting with what energizes others, leaders attune to what inspires their employees, helping them to contribute more meaningfully.

Authentic Communication can help. By providing a framework for people to

express honest feelings in the work place, we build awareness of what people need. Honesty does not have to be brutal. Instead of equating authenticity with blurting out our cruelest thoughts, we can use honest dialogue to build awareness of what we need. Open dialogue is not about determining who is right and who is wrong, or claiming higher moral ground. We can cultivate openness and inclusion by encouraging each person to express their passion, although not at the expense of other stakeholders. By encouraging people to listen to needs—before exploring the strategies used to fulfill them—Authentic Communication opens new perspectives that lead to personal growth, organizational effectiveness, and win-win solutions.

Bolstering Facilitation Skills

In his book, *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, Steven Covey writes, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (Covey, 1990). Facilitators who are skilled in the use of Authentic Communication can use their understanding of needs to help people fully understand each other, and transform so-called negative behavior into opportunity and teamwork.

When facilitators face intense conflict, focusing on needs helps them remain grounded. If emotionally triggered, connecting to their own feelings and needs, even if only for a moment, can restore their ability to help others in conflict. Authentic Communication can also help facilitators receive others’ frustration,

complaints, and rebellion as gifts. Instead of hearing an outburst as a judgment, for example, they listen for the unmet needs simmering just below the emotions. Instead of seeing people

Although trained to be unbiased, facilitators can foster understanding by supporting all sides simultaneously. That does not mean they become chameleons; instead they create opportunities for each member of the group to be fully understood.

as whiners, they recognize them as people who are hungry to get their needs met. When a group member is furious, they ask themselves, “What unmet need is the driving force?” Although trained to be unbiased, facilitators can foster understanding by supporting all sides simultaneously. That does not mean they become chameleons; instead they create opportunities for each member of the group to be fully understood.

In practicing Authentic Communication, however, engaging people’s hearts is far more important than sticking to the model. “Empathy is heart connection – honoring whatever is alive or most present, either silently or out loud,” says Jeff Brown, a facilitator and trainer for the Center for Nonviolent Communication (Brown, 2005). The four steps of Authentic Communication—observations, feelings, needs and requests—are simple enough for anyone to use, but mastery of the process requires a radical shift in consciousness. Whenever individuals or groups are judgmental, facilitators can help them shift their

consciousness to a generative state of mind by building their awareness of their own and others’ needs.

As soon as we begin seeing needs as gifts, we can begin helping people

become energized, communicate authentically, and engage wholeheartedly. The power of Authentic Communication is that it makes it easier for people to feel understood. That, in turn, generates new visions or possibilities, fosters team spirit, and enhances organizational success.

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Comparison with Focused Conversation Method

The Authentic Communication model shares many similarities with the Focused Conversation Method developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). With both methods, facilitators are skilled in creating safe space for all participants to be heard and reading the energy of the group.

	Authentic Communication	Focused Conversation Method
1.	Observations	Objective (facts, sensory impressions, information)
2.	Feelings	Reflective (personal reactions, associations, emotions, images)
3.	Needs	Interpretive (meaning, values, significance, purpose, implications)
4.	Requests	Decisional (resolution, action, future directions, next steps)

The similarities of each stage are striking:

- Observations and Objective focus on observable data
- Feelings and Reflective explore personal reactions and emotions
- Needs and Interpretive generate awareness of what's important, has meaning, or has value.
- Requests and Decisional produce action and resolution

The differences between the two approaches:

Authentic Communication	Focused Conversation Method
Greater emphasis on connection than on using the model.	Stronger adherence to structure and the process
Consensus builds from understanding individual needs at a personal level	Consensus builds from understanding what's important to the group at a macro level
Facilitator reads the energy of the group and the conversation flows from what is most alive in the present	Facilitator orchestrates the event, articulates intended outcomes, and plans questions in advance
Individuals use more than one step of the model each time they speak	The group explores all aspects of each stage before moving on to the next stage
Facilitator is intimately connected to all participants, and values each person's needs	Facilitator takes a neutral stance and serves as a dispassionate referee
The model is simple to remember, yet takes more practice to embody	The language sounds more difficult, but the process is easy to apply quickly

The Authentic Communication model is more than a tool; it is a state of consciousness that helps people communicate honestly and openly. In practice, Authentic Communication expands my effectiveness as a facilitator because I can deepen awareness of needs, which contributes to trust, meaningful connections and improved communication. When people are understood at a deep level, they're able to release their attachment to their positions, explore options and make requests that meet everyone's needs.

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Center for Nonviolent Communication: <http://www.cnvc.org>

The Center for Nonviolent Communicationsm is a global organization whose vision is a world where all people are getting their needs met and resolving their conflicts peacefully. In this vision, people are using NVC to create and participate in networks of worldwide life-serving systems in economics, education, justice, healthcare, and peace-keeping.

Growing Compassion: <http://www.GrowingCompassion.org>

Growing Compassion offers teleclasses and events for learning to live and communicate more authentically. Practicing the language of compassion by phone helps people learn to listen empathically and express honestly.