In the workplace

Communicating
so people won’t take offense

Listening
without taking offense

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Nonviolent Communication Santa Cruz
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Part I: 
**Talking so people won’t take offense**

When someone takes offense at something we say, it may happen even if we intend no disrespect. It may happen in response to our choice of words or the subtle attitude we carry. The following pages illustrate suggestions for speaking so there’s no offense taken:

- Make requests instead of subtle demands . 2
- State the reason for the request . . . . 3
- Check for willingness . . . . . . . 4
- Make requests specific . . . . . . 5
- Offer gratitude . . . . . . . . . . 5

Part II: 
**Listening without taking offense**

When we take offense, it’s on account of our habits of thinking---of blaming ourselves and others. We become defensive in order to deflect criticism. These pages suggest ways to overcome defensiveness and not take things personally.

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In today’s workplace we desire collaboration and teamwork. But authoritarian thinking and communicating persist, a legacy from an era when those in charge relied on coercion. “Do it, or you’ll suffer the consequences.” In this pamphlet, we use the image of the jackal to represent beliefs from our authoritarian past that get in the way of non-defensive communication.

We may not notice when we are being coercive in subtle ways. **A subtle demand exists** when there is a **disapproving attitude** with the thought that the other person is “wrong” or “inappropriate” if they don’t do what we want. Our attitude sends the message, “Do it, or you’ll experience my disapproval”.

![Jackal Image]

**That’s not professional.**

**It’s a demand if** we imply that
- **ours is the only “right way” to do it**
- **the person should know better how to do it**

**It’s a demand if** we feel impatient or critical
- **our impatience is a sign that we think the other person should** do it the way we want

**Example:**

*Instead of:* “That’s not professional.”  
*Try:* “I’m concerned that this won’t give you the results you want. Do you want to hear a suggestion?”
Most of us have had the experience in the workplace where we think, “He/she treated me like a child”. Children are often “told” rather than “asked” to do something. If the child asks, “Why?” he might receive the reply, “Because I said so.” The person in authority thinks that he or she is entitled to obedience, on account of that authority.

In a congenial workplace, supervisors don’t look for obedience, they look for collaboration. When we state the reason for our request, we send the message, “Though I may have greater authority in the organization, I treat you as an equal human being. I trust you to understand my needs”.

Instead of: “I need this done by tomorrow.”
Try: “Could you do this by tomorrow because I need it for my meeting in the morning?”

It’s not just supervisors who use entitlement language. Any time we use the word “deserve”, we’re relying on the other person’s sense of obligation rather than their ability to empathize with our needs.

Instead of: “I deserve to get Saturday off.”
Try: “I would like Saturday off because my family is getting together for my mom’s birthday.”

We use “deserve” in order to justify asking. We think, “The justice of my situation compels you to meet my needs.” We may think that our needs matter little to the people around us. But when we are willing to risk making our needs known, we call on the humanity in others.
When I make a request, I want to be sure you’re not hearing a demand or doing it because you feel pressured. If you’re doing it under duress, our working relationship may become strained. And building a quality relationship is what this communication is all about. So, when making requests it’s useful to ask:

“Would you be willing to do _____?” or “I’d like you to do ___. Does that work for you?”

We can often read another’s willingness by their body language and tone of voice. If someone responds to our request with hesitation, it’s best to investigate what the obstacle is. If someone is saying yes out of fear, or because they feel an obligation, he or she may be building up a store of resentment.

Example:
“I’m sensing that you’re not enthusiastic about doing this. I’d like to know what you’re thinking so that we come up with a plan that we’re both happy about.”
Sometimes we think, “Why should I thank him? He’s just doing what he’s supposed to be doing.” Likewise, we don’t think we “deserve” appreciation for what we “have to” do. When we think this way we’re settling for life based on joyless “have-to’s” and “shoulds”.

At work there’s so much opportunity to increase our enjoyment, simply by thanking others for their efforts.

We need to offer gratitude for the sheer enjoyment of it, not to try to get someone to do what we want. If it’s done to increase compliance with what we want, the person will come to see it as manipulation. Then our gratitude will never be trusted as sincere.

People enjoy our thanks even more when we explain why we appreciate it---how their action contributed to us and how we feel about that.

**Example:**
“Thanks for washing the dishes!
I feel more comfortable in the break room when it’s clean.”

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**Make requests specific**

Making requests specific avoids a load of grief. If we make our evaluation too general, e.g., “I’m not satisfied with how this turned out,” and leave out a specific request, the listener may grow defensive. Also, it works best to request a positive action rather than say what we don’t want.

*Instead of:* “I don’t want any more lost checks”

*Try:* “I would like you to develop a plan of how to track the checks. Does that work for you?”
Why do we take offense? Why do we react defensively when we think someone is “rude” to us? And how can we increase our ability not to take offense? After all, there are times when we don’t get upset--someone is impatient with us and we don’t take it personally. We may think, “They’re having a bad day”. Our non-defensive reaction has two elements, which we illustrate on the following pages:

**Self-empathy** First, we notice that we have an inner critic, who is always ready to echo the criticism we hear from outside us. Then we relax as we notice that the criticism, both from within and without, doesn’t fit with our deeper understanding of our intentions.

**Empathy for the other person** We can see that they are in distress, and can’t find another way to express their needs in the moment.

Self-empathy is often the hardest to do, especially if we believe that there is something about the criticism that is justified. That’s when we need to know how to forgive ourselves. We can’t respond non-defensively to another person when we are locked in guilt.
Step 1) Watch the Jackal Show

Watching the “Jackal Show” is noticing our angry or hurt feelings and judgements with acceptance, not shame. We’re not used to doing that, especially if we were trained to suppress our “ugly” thoughts. But without noticing the Jackal Show, especially our self-blame, we won’t really understand what’s bothering us.

Example:
Someone says to us: “That’s not the way to do it.”

Notice blame outward:
“What a jerk! How rude! (disrespectful, arrogant, etc.)”

Notice Blame inward:
“Did I mess up again? Maybe I don’t have the aptitude for this work.”

When you become conscious of the thought, the thought loses power over you.
We ask ourselves, “What am I feeling and what am I needing?” If the Jackal Show tells me I’m defending myself from thinking I’m “in the wrong”, I need to get back in touch with my self-acceptance. For a moment, I let this person’s impatient attitude get me off track. I remind myself of my good intentions. “I’m doing the best I can.” “I didn’t mean any harm.”

Additional needs when feeling defensive may be:

understanding---It might be important for me for the person to understand my intentions

connection---I might want to resolve this misunderstanding so that our positive relationship is restored.

hope---My jackal may be telling me that there’s little chance I’ll be understood. I need to get in touch with hope---in my ability to communicate, and in the other person’s capacity to understand.

trust that I’ll be OK---My jackal may be telling me that I’m fighting for my basic security, when the stakes are actually much lower than that.

relaxation---I may need to lower my stress level through rest or play

empathy---My jackal might be stuck in resentful thoughts about being treated badly. I need to understand why this person acted the way they did.
When something we did results in negative consequences, we’ve been trained to punish ourselves with guilt. Self-forgiveness moves us past self-blame over spilled milk to getting a towel to wipe it up. Self-forgiveness has two elements:

1. We empathize with our reasons for doing what we did. We were trying to meet our real, legitimate needs.

2. We regret that the way we went about it had undesired consequences. At the time, that way seemed like the best way to meet our needs. We acted from habits of thinking that we learned from our culture. And now we can learn something that works better.

Example: (internal dialogue) “I feel guilty that I didn’t return that phone call. What need was getting in the way of doing it? ...I know. I felt awkward about our last conversation and I wanted to avoid feeling that way again. Only, not returning the call doesn’t really work for me---or that person. Now I realize that I can use self-empathy to work through the awkward feelings.”

When we treat ourselves kindly enough to understand why we did something, we shift from feeling guilty to feeling regret about how things turned out. We think, “I wish I knew then what I know now.” Marshall Rosenberg notes, “Regret helps us learn from what we have done, without blaming or hating ourselves.”
We can usually quickly defuse a tense situation by guessing what the other person is wanting. We refuse to hear criticism or blame about ourselves. We only hear a *need* behind their words. And we can guess at the *specific request* they are lacking.

**Example:**

*Someone says:* “This work is unacceptable!”
*Our response:* “Were you wanting more detail?”

Of course, we’re only able to respond this way if we’re feeling good about ourselves. If not, our inner jackal tells us that such a response is submissive---that it submits to humiliation. The jackal wants us to defend our dignity in the face of this “disrespect” by firing back, “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” or, “So do it yourself!” We need to tell our jackal that our dignity is not at stake.

The other person may not trust that other people care about their needs. So they believe that they need to be demanding in order to get their needs met. Our power lies in our ability to translate what we hear by guessing at the need behind the demand. We may or may not choose to guess their need out loud. We might simply guess at a specific request that might satisfy that need.

**Example:**

*Someone says:* “I want you to do it right”
*Try:* “Are you wanting me to add more to this section?”