Conscious Communication
Empathy

"All evaluations are poorly expressed wants."
- Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

Empathy is a connection with another person by expressing what it is that they are feeling and wanting to their satisfaction.

There are several levels of empathy. The easiest is merely to repeat back what the person said. This is a kind of sponging or bouncing back technique:

Someone says: "What a ridiculous idea!"

Sponging: "So you think that's a ridiculous idea."

This technique is limited in that it does not really speak to the heart of what this person is feeling or wanting, and if repeated enough can be experienced as annoying, thus provoking anger. However, it is useful on occasion, used sparingly, to stall for time while getting your wits together.

The next level of empathy involves translating evaluations into wants. Evaluations and judgments can block connection, but when they are translated into wants they can become a doorway to connection.

First we need to know an evaluation when we hear it, to recognize evaluative words and phrases. Then we need to turn the statement around and express the idea as a want:

Someone says: "What a ridiculous idea!"

Translating the evaluation into a want: "You would have liked a more creative idea?"

Note that "creative" is also an evaluative word. At this point, we are focusing on the vision which gave rise to the other person's complaints and emotions. A person's vision may be non-specific and vague, but exploring it can provide an opportunity for connection. This can later lead to problem-solving around the specifics which support their vision.

This process is useful in that it gets the other person to focus their attention on their wants, rather than on the ways they have come to think about the issue. Now the person focuses their attention on the question: "Would you have liked a more creative idea?" They might agree or disagree with this question. If they disagree, they may provide more information, a correction: "No, but let's get serious here."

"Serious" too is an evaluative word, but the correction provides us with more information.

We can interpret the first statement differently now, because it seems she is questioning the usefulness of the original idea.

We could translate again: "So you are looking for a more practical response?"

This process of translation brings us continually closer to the person's underlying wants.

The third level of empathy involves feelings. It is easier in some relationships than in others to talk about feelings, but it is always useful to be aware of them. Often in business and professional situations people are uncomfortable with the familiarity required to express feelings openly. Instead of using words like sad, glad, mad or scared, we might use terminology like concerns, discomfort, skepticism, doubts, etc.

So, we might try: "I'm guessing you might doubt my sincerity when I put forth such ideas?" or "Do you have some concerns about the usefulness of my ideas?"

By asking the questions in this way we are able to hint at what may be the emotions involved.

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Although the emotions will probably not be addressed directly, if the person answers affirmatively, we will have a better idea of what might be going on. Concern is a mild form of fear, and we could guess that there may also be frustration if the person lacks the confidence to address their fear/concern. If we place ourselves in their position, "get into their shoes" as it were, we might recognize the feelings that they are having in this process. If we can connect to these feelings, we have a better chance of connecting to the person.

Instead of being insulted by their remark, arguing or defending our own ideas, we listen to their concerns and try to connect through empathy. If we can make that connection, we will have a much better chance of being listened to ourselves.

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The following charts, Consciously Expressing Ourselves and Consciously Listening to Others, is borrowed from material I received through my involvement with NVC, Nonviolent Communication. I think it is useful just as it is.

Consciously Expressing Ourselves

1. What is the observable behaviour? What am I reacting to?

"When I...(heard, saw, read, imagined, thought, remembered...)..."

2. Making myself vulnerable: What am I feeling and wanting?

"I feel...(sad, glad, mad, scared)...."

"I'm ...(disappointed, thankful, annoyed, worried......)....."

3. Expressing my want or my unmet need: What would I have liked to have happened? And if this had happened, what need would this have fulfilled?

"...because I would have liked....."

"...because I was ....(wanting, hoping, wishing, preferring....)....."

"...because my....(vision, idea, dream.....) ...(was to..., is that....)...."

4. Making my request in positive action language (the grounding statement):

"...and now, I would like...."

" ...to hear if that sounds like a request or a demand."

"...to hear you summarize (or tell in your own words) what you heard me say."

"...to hear how you feel about what I said and your reasons for feeling as you do."

"...to hear your opinion about that."

"...to hear a similar experience of yours that you'd be willing to share."

"...to hear, if you wish that hadn't happened, how you wish it would have happened."

"...to rephrase or clarify what you meant to say."

"...to brainstorm some possible solutions."

"...to know if you would...(be willing to, agree to)....."

Consciously Listening to Others

1. **What is the observable behaviour? What are we reacting to?**

   "Are you reacting to.....?"

   "Are you talking about....?"

   "When you...(heard, saw, read, imagined, thought, remembered...) ..."

2. **Guess the vulnerability: What might the person be feeling and wanting?**

   "Are you feeling...(discouraged, confused, hopeful, impatient)?"

   "I'm guessing that might feel a little...(frustrating, stressful,...)..."

   "It must be rather...(annoying, aggravating, tiring...)..."

   "I can imagine you might be somewhat...(disappointed, worried,...)..."

   "It sounds to me like you're...(displeased, resentful, concerned,...)..."

   "So, was it especially ....(irritating, overwhelming,...)...?"

   "So, it's not just this time you're feeling...(angry, stressed,...) about..., but all the
   other times that this has happened before."

3. **Guessing the want or the unmet need: What would this person have liked to have
   happened? And if this had happened, what need would this have fulfilled?**

   "...because you would have liked....."

   "...because you were ....(wanting, hoping, wishing, preferring) ...."

   "...because your....(vision, idea, dream) ...(was to..., is that....)..."

4. **Guessing their request in positive action language (the grounding statement):**

   "...and now, would you like....

   "...to hear if that sounds to me like a request or a demand?"

   "...to hear me summarize what I heard you say?"

   "...to hear how I feel about what you said and my reasons for feeling as I do?"

   "...to hear my opinion about that?"

   "...to hear a similar experience of mine that I'd like to share?"

   "...me to say how I wish that had happened differently?"

   "...me to rephrase or clarify what I said?"

   "...me to brainstorm some possible solutions?"

   "...to know if I would...(be willing to, agree to...)....?"