

Group Decision Making
A Nonviolent Communication Perspective

By Ike Lasater

With Julie Stiles

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We've all taken part in groups where decisions were made about what the group will do; perhaps a work team where project goals and tasks were to be decided upon, or a workshop context where different options existed to reach learning goals. We actually engage in group decisions every day; a group can be defined as two or more people, so even in situations that we don't think of as group decision-making—such as deciding which movie to see or where to eat dinner—we are in fact making a joint decision. Group decision-making presents certain challenges to any group and facilitator, whatever the context.

For the most part, the strategies employed to make a group decision fall in three categories. In the “benevolent dictator” (or not so benevolent dictator) model, the group leader or facilitator makes the decision on behalf of the group, deciding for themselves how much they will take into account the desires of group members. Work contexts may fall in this category, and some learning contexts where the facilitator has a set plan for the workshop. Sometimes a “democratic” model is employed, where group members vote on what to do and the majority vote wins. Finally, some kind of consensus model may be employed, often resulting in a discussion where everyone gets to air an opinion and eventually a course of action is decided upon. Some combination of these methods also may be used, such as a lengthy discussion followed by majority vote or facilitator decision.

All of these strategies have drawbacks, and in this article I'd like to present a specific group decision-making process based on Nonviolent Communication that, in my experience, gives the best of all worlds. This process essentially applies the core principles of NVC mediation to making group decisions. First, I'll talk about why we might want to use this type of group process. Then I will describe the group decision-making process and how to do it, either as a facilitator or as a group member lending your skills to the group. I will include some challenges and pitfalls of using this process and how to work with them, as well as changes that might be made in group decisions with high stakes. Finally, I'll make some comments about the opportunities for learning this model presents.

Why Use Group Process?

My own interest in this form of group decision-making comes from a long-standing inquiry into the question, “How can people reach agreements where everyone is in accord?” I place a high value on agreements where everyone is on the same page for a number of reasons. I have found that making sure that everyone’s voice is included produces outcomes I tend to like much better in two ways: the decisions themselves are better formed and the implementation is smoother.

Before learning the process I describe below, my experience with group decisions was sometimes problematic. Whether in work meetings or with my immediate and extended family, I would sometimes reach a point of frustration in decision making and would just push through; I did not know how to include people so I would override them. When working with a team on legal cases, I sometimes tried to operate by edict, but then I didn’t enjoy the process of creating what we were creating. It was far more enjoyable for me when people were contributing and excited about doing their part.

When I joined the Center for Nonviolent Communication board¹ and was in situations with Marshall Rosenberg where we slowed down the process of decision making and sought the contribution of different voices, I noticed the same feelings I had always had—frustration and a sense of urgency that arose from wanting completion and movement. When I was able to simply stay with these feelings and practice self empathy, it allowed me to stay present long enough to experience that a shift often took place in my perception; what I initially perceived the person was saying was completely different than what I eventually learned they were seeking to say. In that shift over and over again I found myself highly valuing what they were bringing to the table; I saw that it would also meet my needs if their contribution were to be included. More and more I began to trust that even if what someone initially presented was challenging for me to hear, if I could understand it and we incorporated it, I was going to end up being a champion of it as well. The group decision making process was not about just accommodating someone else who was being difficult, it was transformed into that person speaking something that was important to me but that I initially was not able to see.

Thus, I have found that making sure all concerns are taken into account results in a

¹ the organization started by Marshall Rosenberg to further his work

decision that ends up meeting more of my own needs. When some people's contribution is discounted, the final decision is often lacking. Being open to including anyone's contribution often results in a much more well-rounded strategy, one that is more likely to meet the needs of all people in the group, not just the needs of one or two.

In addition, with group decisions where some people's opinions are not solicited or their opinions are heard but not honored, the result may be a portion of the group feeling hurt or resentful. They may be frustrated because their approach was not incorporated into the final decision; that frustration affects their participation in the decision made and therefore in the overall tenor of the group. When all the voices are included people are more likely to anticipate that their needs are going to be met by the decision. They will then feel more at choice and agree out of willingness instead of submission. The result? A huge amount of energy is released. The implementation of the decision proceeds more smoothly because all of the energy that might have been tied up in people's resentment is instead directed towards collaborating on a common direction. People have a stake in the decision, and work more effectively to execute it.

The Process

Group decision making, in the way I understand it, is a form of conflict resolution; people have different strategies for what the group should do based on the needs they are seeking to meet. Thus, it can be seen as one of the contexts of mediation. We teach to four basic mediation contexts: internal, where the conflict is in one's head; interpersonal, in which you are one of the parties; informal, where the conflict is between two or more people and you act as mediator without having been asked; and formal, where you have been asked to mediate. Group decision-making is either in the informal or formal realm; either you are the facilitator or other group leader, or you are not but decide to lend your skills so the group can reach a decision.

Conceptually, as one of the mediation contexts the process of group decision-making is basically the same idea as the mediation model that Marshall Rosenberg offers. The idea is to surface the needs of the parties and find a strategy that will meet those needs. The language we use will be slightly different than the mediation model, and the process is somewhat different as well. The process unfolds in the form of a Hegelian dialectic—you have a thesis, an antithesis, and then find a synthesis. Let me explain with a very simple example.

You are the facilitator for a workshop, and the group is deciding what to do next. Let's say somebody in the group requests to break into smaller groups. As facilitator, you ask the group if anyone is not willing to break into groups to practice. A couple of people respond, saying they aren't ready to do that yet. At this point, you are at the beginning of the group decision making process.

In this process you help the person who made the initial request to break into groups identify what needs they are hoping to meet. Perhaps they are hoping to meet their need for mastery by being able to practice what they have learned so far in the workshop. Next you help the people who did not want to break into groups identify and name the needs that they are expecting will not be met were they to agree. Perhaps they are imagining that their need for understanding will not be met by moving into practice so soon, and would like further demonstration of what the workshop has covered so far.

Now that the needs have been surfaced for both sides, the group can try to find a proposal that would fit the needs of both—the synthesis. It might be a modification of the original proposal, or it might be an entirely new proposal. Perhaps somebody comes up with the request that a demonstration take place in one part of the room, and anybody who wants to go straight to practice break out into groups in another part of the room. Or, if time permits, somebody might request a brief demonstration followed by breaking into smaller groups. In any case, this new proposal, stated as a request, becomes the new thesis. The process repeats until everyone in the group is willing to agree to the proposal on the table.

Thus, in this process we mediate our way towards a decision by carrying a single request—which will likely morph and modify as it travels through the process—until that request is agreed upon by the entire group. The process is one of identifying the needs supporters imagine will be met, then looking for the needs of the people who do not want to agree to the request, specifically what needs they imagine will not be met if the request happens. With those two bits of information—the needs of each side—someone in the group is in a position to formulate a new request to meet all of these needs. Then it becomes an iterative process with the new request as the starting point.

Thus, you can see how this is basically the same structure as a mediation; the needs of each side are identified and named, and then a new solution sought that would meet all of the needs. Since it is in a group there are more people, and with more people the complexity also

increases. With this greater complexity comes the need for more clarity by the facilitator as to what is going on at each step, and greater clarity about her intentions at each step.

Of course this example has been stated in the most straightforward terms simply so you can get a sense of the overall process. In reality, it rarely proceeds in this way, due to a number of challenges and pitfalls.

Challenges and Pitfalls

One of the primary pitfalls that I have seen of group decision making is when someone—usually the facilitator, but sometimes a group member—presents more than one alternative. An example would be if, in the above situation, the facilitator had said, “Ok, would you like to break into smaller groups, or stay in the larger group and see a demonstration?” The key to the approach I am outlining is to always start with a single request and work from there. This helps focus the conversation and makes the facilitator’s job easier. If you start with “Should we do A or B?” people generally start talking about what they like about one or the other of the options, and nothing brings the discussion to the point of decision. Starting with a request—“I request that we break into smaller groups at this time to practice what we have learned”—gives everyone a starting point from which to proceed.

Especially when working with groups unfamiliar with NVC, a major challenge is that people in our culture are not trained to make requests. In fact, many people feel uncomfortable being clear about what they want in the first place, much less able to state it as a request that is doable, present tense, and in action language. Sometimes people consider it too revealing, or they have labels attached to asking for what they want, such as “rude” or “selfish.” As a consequence, we tend in this culture to say “Well, one thing we could do is...” or “I think it would be a good idea if...” or even just “Well, how about...?” Not wanting to rock the boat too much, people refrain from doing exactly what would help make group decisions easier—actually stating what it is they want and tying it to the needs it would meet for them. People’s lack of skill in making requests constitutes most of the delay I see in reaching outcomes satisfactory to everyone.

As a facilitator, one of the primary jobs is to help people turn statements such as the above into actual requests. I used to assume that when someone made a suggestion that they were really saying what they would like to see happen; however, when I turned it into a question

and asked them, “So, Jim, is doing X what you would like?” I found that a fair amount of the time, people were in fact not saying what they would like; they were just putting forward an idea that they thought some other people would like. They either wanted something else or just weren’t very clear on what they would actually like themselves. Nonetheless, this is still one of the ways I begin to turn these types of statements into actual requests—I ask the person if what they have suggested is what they would like to request happen.

People can feel very uncomfortable sometimes in being asked this; they are being asked to take a stand on what they want. I have found it helps to make it about me, rather than in a sense demanding clarity from them. I tend to couch the question in terms of my own needs for understanding and clarity, so I might say, “It would really help me here, Jim, if I could understand, when you make that suggestion is that something that you would like?” Even if he says no, someone else might say that it is what he or she wants, so I am still moving the conversation towards the request.

Finding the request in what people are suggesting is important for another reason. There are four main possibilities when someone speaks up: they are clear about what they want, they are clear but are uncomfortable expressing it into the group as a request, they are unclear and wanting support to get clear, or they just want to express an idea to add to the mix and move on. As facilitator it helps to discern, through making guesses, what it is that someone wants back from what they say. Without this, a ping pong affect can happen, where people begin to speak out of a reaction to what someone else said three or four statements earlier, and an increasing number of reactions begin to happen with corresponding frustration. Supporting the clarity of what someone wants back from when they speak decreases the likelihood of this kind of reactive exchange.

The intention of the facilitator or the person assisting this process is key; it is less likely to proceed smoothly if the facilitator is demanding that people have a particular capacity around making requests or clarity about what they want. The process often involves people working towards that clarity. Besides the words used, the intention of the facilitator is also communicated through tone of voice and body language; thus, when I as facilitator respond to someone, I want to be clear within myself as to my intention.

Translating a person’s suggestions about what could happen into a request might be a multi-exchange process, though sometimes you might guess right away exactly what their

request is. For example, let's say you are at a workshop, and you and a group of other participants decide to go to lunch together. Joe says to everyone, "Hey, what do you think of the idea of Thai food?" You decide to informally apply this process so you say to Joe, "I'm keen on Thai food; would you like Thai?" Joe responds, "Yeah, I'd like to have some Thai." You then turn to the other people in the group and say, "Is anybody not ok with Thai?" Mary speaks up and says, "Well, I don't really like some of the spices in Thai, you guys go ahead. I'll find someplace else."

At this point, Mary has presented the antithesis, and you are in a process with her to identify her needs. From what she has said, I would interpret that she has given up getting her needs met in this group and she's going to go off on her own. This might be what happens; I would have no demand that she meet her needs in the group, but I would still want to find out what's going on with her. Perhaps I might say, "Are you suggesting that you'll go to lunch by yourself because that's what you'd like, or would you like to go with us if we went to a restaurant that was more to your liking?" Mary might respond that she would like to go by herself, in which case you return to the other folks; however, if she says something like "Yes, I would like to go to lunch with you, but I would prefer not to go to Thai" I might ask her or someone else if they had a suggestion other than Thai, or might make a suggestion myself. With this new suggestion, I would check with the rest of the group whether they are willing to go. At this point we might agree, or if someone says no, re-enter the process looking for the needs behind the no.

Once a proposal has been stated as a request, another pitfall as facilitator is to say something like "Is this ok with everyone?" In asking this, you are going to find out who is ok with the proposal, but those aren't the people you want to talk to. You want to talk with those who are not willing to agree to that proposal and find out how their needs might be better met. The phrasing I've heard Marshall Rosenberg and others in the NVC community use is "would those who are not willing to do this indicate that by a show of hands." This is a little awkward for people when they first hear it, especially if they don't understand the purpose. Some people interpret it as being confrontational, or feel vulnerable and exposed because they think they will be judged for preventing forward movement. Educating the group as to why you want to know who is not ok with the proposal can be helpful, especially when people have not yet experienced that it is actually a gift to the group to raise concerns. Typically, if there's one person whose needs are not going to be met then there are probably others who may not have been willing to

say so. A facilitator does not need to use the exact phrasing I mentioned above, but in some way will want to find out who is uncomfortable agreeing to the request and identify the needs those people imagine will not be met if that strategy happens.

Since I'm aware as facilitator that people are sometimes uncomfortable speaking up when they are not ok with a request, I usually look at each person (in a smaller group) and try to check through body language whether they are ok with it or not. I'm not always right, since it sometimes takes awhile for people to get clear or become aware that they're not satisfied. Ultimately, however, I depend on people to speak up. I try to encourage this through strategies such as requesting that people speak up in whatever way they can, and letting everyone know that I'm committed to support people to communicate their request and that I trust that we can work something out that we will all like. Even so, it is often an iterative process, particularly in longer workshops, for people to overcome cultural training and realize that they can make requests to better meet their own learning needs. A facilitator committed to making group decisions in this way learns to walk some fine lines: between welcoming requests and leaving space for them while also meeting needs for movement and closure; between caring about people's needs being met and honoring their learning process yet not taking care of them in a way that isn't doable and doesn't end up working for anyone.

The Time Issue

I often hear people expressing frustration at how much time it takes to make a decision as a group, and sometimes despair and hopelessness about being able to reach a result they would like in a time frame that seems practical. Often, I think, this frustration may stem from past experiences with group decision-making that is based more on a consensus-building model, where it sometimes seems that endless discussions occur with little movement made toward a decision. The model I present does, obviously, take more time than a dictatorial decision making process, or even a democratic one. When it is done skillfully, however, it can actually take very little time, as it is not based on an endless round of hearing everyone's opinion; instead, it can be a spare process directed always toward the final decision. In my experience using this process, even in situations where I have used it without saying I'm using it, I have not received any feedback that it takes more time; in fact, in my perception, it actually took less time because the

group is always moving forward with a request.

In situations where a group is making a decision jointly, it often takes time because no one has the awareness or skill to bring the group to closure in a way that people are satisfied, and discussions then take on a circular and redundant nature. The more versed the facilitator or the group is in the process, of course, the more quickly it can proceed. It always takes more time to do something when we are learning it than it does when we have some level of skill and mastery. I have seen this process used with groups of people who know NVC and I am quite hopeful about being able to use this approach in a timely, practical way as people gain more experience utilizing it.

If I'm in a workshop situation, then I am often teaching the method as I'm using it, and then it does take more time; it takes longer because I slow the process down to name the steps or point out what I am doing along the way. If people complain in this setting I remind them not to confuse how much time it takes to do it then with how much time it takes outside of the learning context when someone has confidence and ease with the process.

Overall, my reaction to the idea that it takes too much time to allow for a process that acknowledges and builds into the decision the needs of everyone involved is, "Is that really true?" Even when comparing it to the methods we are more familiar with in this culture that take less time at the outset, I think we do not then account for all of the time taken in the consequences of not having done this kind of process. If people do not feel included, it is likely to come out in other ways; they sabotage the decision, they express their unhappiness or frustration and undermine the morale of the group, or they find ways to not go along with it. These consequences are more far-reaching than taking a little more time at the outset to make a decision that people are invested in.

Dealing with Reactions

When leading a group decision making process that attempts to incorporate as many points of view as possible, the facilitator can expect to encounter some resistance and reactions, especially in a group not accustomed to this method of decision-making. Being aware of these and having some idea of how to respond when they come up will help a facilitator feel more at ease in trying out this process.

A common response in the midst of a process is someone expressing frustration about the amount of time it is taking to reach a decision. Expressions of frustration unfortunately (and ironically) often end up delaying the decision process even further. Recently, I was in a group decision making process with about 80 people; there were a number of people in the group who were fairly fluent with this approach and four of us were taking on a joint facilitation role to move through it. As I was tracking it, we were very close to reaching an agreement that no one would object to, and a man spoke into the group, saying; “My request is that we make a decision yes or no in the next two minutes.” This statement was delivered with a lot of intensity and frustration.

My first reaction was that his statement was not a request since it is not doable. In order to make a decision in the next two minutes, we would all need to agree to do so, which would start a whole new group process. Even if we agreed to make a decision in two minutes, the two minutes would then already be gone, and we still would not have an agreement on the original issue.

I have seen many examples like this, where often the outburst of frustration comes right on the verge of some kind of closure. The person has been holding onto it—from their perspective—for much longer than they’re able to, and therefore they become willing to go against the cultural norms about revealing themselves and expressing frustration into a public forum. Often they really want closure, they want to be done with the process and move on. It may well be that all of the recent proposals have been within their range of acceptability, so they are doubly frustrated as the changes seem inconsequential to them. When frustration is voiced into the room without a doable request, however, it tends to stimulate other people to voice their own irritation; thus, the very thing the person wants—a decision—is delayed even further, triggered by their own expression of frustration.

Nearly always, I first respond to outbursts of frustration with some form of empathy out loud for the person. I may also express something, but only after I’ve guessed what they are frustrated about and what needs of theirs are not met. In my initial empathic statements I try to meet them with a similar level of energy and intensity to their expression and then through the statement, particularly when I guess their need, I begin to drop the intensity incrementally. This kind of non-verbal communication seems to help people feel met where they are, and then lowers the level of energy. My statement might sound something like; “So when you say that are you

just feeling frustrated because you are fed up at this point and want to have some kind of resolution, some decision, and any decision would be better than what you are living through right now? Is that what's going on for you?" If I have guessed correctly or they say something that indicates I have a clear sense of where they are, I might then choose to express my concern, ending with a request; "So my concern is that by saying what you're saying it's going to have the paradoxical effect of taking longer than you'd like. And I would like to support you in getting closure—I also want closure—so I wonder if you'd be willing to hold on to what you have to say further about this for five minutes, and if you're not satisfied that we're making the kind of progress that you'd like that you'd raise it again then, is that something you'd be willing to do?"

Sometimes empathy is all that is needed, the person feels they have been heard and they settle back into their chair and you just move to the next person, tracking where you were in the process before that person spoke. Another way I might reach closure with someone who just wanted empathy without expressing my own concern would be to say, "I wonder if you want anything specific back from anyone in the group, or is it enough for you just to have said this?" Of course, if they are very frustrated in this case they might say "Yeah, I want a decision!" Wanting a decision is not really a request, it's more their dream, kind of in between a request and a need; it isn't a specific, doable, present tense action that the group or any person in the group can deliver. I would meet that again with empathy; "You'd really like to have a decision here so that you can have a kind of relief (or any of a number of needs that I might guess they were coming from: so you can have closure, or you can have the forward movement you'd like, or you can get to what is really important for you in why we're here today which is....), is that right?" Depending on their response to this, I would be at another choice point; I could check whether they are satisfied or whether they want some specific action.

What is most important as facilitator about these kinds of exchanges is reaching closure with the person expressing frustration, so their expression does not end up triggering a whole series of other expressions of frustration from others in the room. It might anyway, but it is much less likely to if people have heard the need behind the frustration. When others hear only the energy of the statement, then all sorts of judgmental responses are likely to get unleashed, but if people hear the need behind it and a specific request that is doable, present tense, and in action language, it reduces the likelihood that others in the room will be triggered.

One of the things I particularly like about this model of group decision making is that it is

completely internally consistent; that is, no matter what happens, it can be utilized in the context of the model. For instance, let's stay with this example of someone expressing frustration about the amount of time the process is taking. I might empathize and express by saying; "I hear that you'd like us to move faster and get to some kind of resolution; my concern is that I don't know a way to make this faster other than to use a dictatorship or rule of the majority, and is that what you would like? I'm perfectly happy to use either of those strategies if that's what we decide to do as a group." That person might say, "Yeah, I just want you to make a decision." I can then turn this into a request and give it back to the group, "John's upset, he'd like a decision and some movement, one way of doing that is for me to take the information I have thus far and for me to make the decision, is there anybody who would not want that to happen?" This becomes the new request we are working with. If I was ok with this and no one in the group objected, then I might just make the decision; we would have made a group decision about how the decision would be made. Most likely, however, someone in the group will say, "No, I don't want that," and if John gets frustrated about it, I might respond with what needs of mine would not be met in making the decision without including this other person. Thus, the process is holographic—no matter what someone says it is possible to empathize, find out what the request is, and take it back to the group for a group decision.

In a learning situation it probably would not meet my need to support other people in learning experiences for me to be the dictator, but conceptually I am fine with the idea of choosing a dictator, as long as it is a group decision. Group decision making is not always necessary or even beneficial; if I work for the fire department, I don't have a problem listening to the fire chief when I get to the fire. I don't want a group decision making process at that time—it is not appropriate. What I do want is to be in a world where I am part of a group that decides how the decision will be made; if I'm included in that then I am much more confident that I'll be ok in dealing with being the dictator or the person dictated to. I want to be part of deciding what process I'm submitting myself to.

Using the Process in Groups Unfamiliar with NVC

Applying this process when there's at least one or two others in the room familiar with it is easier and more fun, but not necessary. When others in the room have a similar mental map

and the skills to support members of the group in clarifying what they want when they speak into the room and to track the process, there's a sense of camaraderie and support. When I've been in groups where someone else is facilitating the process, I've found that even being silent in a certain way is supportive to the facilitator; my being able to track the process and speaking only at times that support the movement of the request and that are consistent with getting my needs met is a contribution.

It is entirely possible, however, to do this process with people who do not know NVC, who do not know the skills of making requests or surfacing needs, and who are not aware that you are even using a particular process. For example, I was in a book group for a number of years. I felt dissatisfied with the way we chose books; it felt chaotic and confusing, we bounced off of each other until reaching a haphazard group decision, and about a third of the books I was dissatisfied with. We typically chose the next book towards the end of our last meeting on the current book, and I decided to apply the process to that decision without educating the group about what I was doing. I found that I could shorten the time it took to make the decision, and people were satisfied with it. I never got any sense from people or any feedback that they felt pushed or manipulated, or even that they were aware that I was using any kind of process.

To use it in this context, it helps to simply make it more colloquial. To use the example of the book group, let's say that Dave makes a suggestion of a book, I might say "Is there anybody who doesn't want to do Dave's idea?" or, in a small enough group, I will sometimes use the question in the affirmative, "Are we all ok with Dave's idea?" Mike responds with, "Well, I was thinking of Y." I would clarify whether Mike was actually asking us to do book Y instead of book X. If so, now we have two books and we are in a mediation process, looking for what needs Mike and anyone else liking his suggestion are hoping will be met through that book, and the needs Dave and anyone liking his suggestion are hoping will be met. None of this has to be in the language of "needs" though; the inquiry simply revolves around why people are excited about each book, what interests them about it, why they are not so keen on the other book, and what they are imagining they are going to get out of the book they are advocating. In surfacing these on each side, I'm surfacing needs, just doing it in colloquial language, and as each person speaks I would mirror it back, using statements like "Just so I can be clear..." "Let me make sure I'm getting this..." "Am I getting what you want us to understand on that..." I found in doing this that the conversation would continually move, and there might even be a third book suggested. I

never knew where the conversation was going to end up, but we were always moving with one request and then at some point we would come to a decision.

Assisting a Group When Not the Facilitator

If you are not the designated facilitator of a group, but have the interest and some sense of being able to help the group make a decision, then you essentially are putting yourself in the position of unofficial facilitator. This can sometimes lead to people reacting with irritated responses like “who put you in charge?” When in this situation, though I tend to follow the same process overall as when I’m the facilitator, I am even more careful to connect with my own needs internally.

Before speaking up, I track what’s going on and identify those things that are not meeting my needs or where I have something to offer that would better meet my needs and the needs of others in the group. I try to name what is prompting me to enter into the discussion at this moment, which will change over the course of the discussion; the awareness of identifying why I’m doing what I’m doing returns me to present awareness. Since entering into the discussion in this way might be seen as rude or arrogant, when I do speak I enter into the discussion in a way that attempts to connect me to the people I’m communicating with. My strategy to do so is usually to reveal what’s going on for me that is motivating me to say what I’m about to say; I connect people to my needs.

For example, if Jim had been speaking and saying more than I could track, I might enter in by saying “It would help me to follow what you’re telling us if I had some sense of what you wanted us to do with what you have said.” If he seemed to be finished, I might enter in by saying, “Jim, it would help me to understand and to actually help you get what you want if you’d tell me what you would like, is there anything you’d like back from me or someone else now?” I keep in mind the distinctions around a request (doable, present tense, and action language) and if a request is made that is not in this form, I help shape it, doing so in a way that has no judgment or criticism of the person because they haven’t put it in that form.

Each interaction I have with the group ends in a request unless I’m asked for specific information, otherwise, my contribution to the discussion is always to end with a request and to be clear what I want and what need it would meet. In revealing myself and why I’m intervening,

I do so in short phrases, not long explanations; for example I might start with phrases like, “I’m curious” “I’m interested” or “This would help me” and then after a person responds, thanking them with phrases like “Thanks, that’s a big help” or “I appreciate that, that’s a support for me to hear that from you” or “I welcome hearing that.” These short phrases are a way to connect, but only if they are true for me. I do not recommend using them if they are not true, as people very quickly hear it if they are being used as a technique.

Higher Stakes Conflicts

The examples I’ve been using are pretty low-stakes situations; however, there are plenty of contexts in which the model I’ve been discussing could be used to affect group decisions that have considerably higher stakes. Community groups often come together to try to resolve issues in the neighborhood. Political town meetings happen where people are encouraged to voice concerns about policies that officials are attempting to enact. Recently in the San Francisco Bay Area town meetings were being held in various areas to discuss the potential aerial spraying of pesticides (specifically, synthetic pheromones) over urban areas in an attempt to eradicate the apple moth, purportedly a threat to the state’s agricultural economy. With reports of negative health affects from previous aerial spraying in other areas, needless to say, the stakes, and the emotions, ran high.

In these cases, adapting the model to more closely follow the mediation model might be helpful. Usually, in lower stakes cases, I focus on simply identifying and naming the needs of each side. However, in a case where emotions are likely to be higher, it would probably help to get needs reflected back by one or more people on each side.

For example, let’s say you have been asked to facilitate a meeting of stakeholders involved in a conflict around the use of a piece of coastal land. The proposal under discussion would allow ATV’s recreational use of a strip of land with a sand dune ecosystem. People representing an environmental group are present and against the proposal. You help them surface the needs they imagine would not be met were the proposal to go through, perhaps needs for beauty, a peaceful place to enjoy nature, and the well-being of endangered plants and animals in the fragile dune ecosystem. You request members of the group in favor of the proposal to reflect these needs back. As facilitator, you might then help the group in favor of the proposal surface

their needs, and request members of the environmental group to reflect those needs. Asking people to reflect back needs helps make sure that each side is heard to their satisfaction by the other side.

At a point when the needs of both sides have been named and reflected back and, either through asking or through feeling a shift in the room, it is apparent that both sides are satisfied that they have been heard, you might ask whether anyone has a suggestion for a proposal that would meet all the needs stated. As a facilitator in a workshop, I am often willing to offer a proposed strategy that I suspect would be a synthesis of the needs; however, in conflict situations I am loathe to offer my own suggestions and instead seek to have them surface from the participants themselves. When a suggestion is made, the facilitator would help frame it as a doable, present tense, action language request, and then start the process over again, seeing if anyone is not willing to proceed with that proposal, surfacing the needs, and so on. In group decisions with higher stakes, it can be even more important that people feel heard and understood by those with whom they disagree, without this it is unlikely that they will collaborate to find a solution. Following the mediation model more closely can lead to the kind of mutual understanding that facilitates collaborative resolutions.

Learning Opportunities

If you are using this group decision making process in an NVC learning context such as a workshop, as I mostly do, the use of this process can itself become a learning for the group. A facilitator can integrate a type of commentary that is interwoven with the doing of the process in such a way that participants can be aware of what is happening as they are participating. In order to do this, I would incorporate an education piece at the beginning letting people know the model I am working from. In doing so, I'm both letting them know that there is a method to my madness, and letting them know what that method is so they can follow along as we go through the process. While in the midst of the process then, I would call for pauses to step out of the process and comment on what is happening. These pauses could happen at all points along the way; for example, I might say "Now at this time notice we are surfacing the needs of those who imagine their needs won't be met by the proposal." At another point I might make a comment like "I want you to see that right now we are looking for a strategy that would meet all the needs

we have named” or “What I’m doing now is trying to help turn the beginnings of this alternative proposal into something that is doable, present tense, and in action language.” Providing these kinds of “supertitles” throughout the process would allow participants a meta-view of what is happening, and weave together the actual doing of the process with a learning awareness.

The use of this process also becomes a learning opportunity for individuals. At times I’ve witnessed the individuals who are most active in the process experiencing personal shifts of perspective and understanding. Everybody has the opportunity to see their own reaction to what’s going on and use that as a time to practice self-empathy and silent empathy. People also sometimes experience how their reaction can block or contribute to blocking the very outcome that they want. Sometimes I see people be so triggered that, even though the option that is on the table is one that they want, they speak out of their frustration and irritation, voicing their pain as a problem with the process, not realizing that if they would just be quiet, there would very quickly be agreement on the very thing they are saying they want. They have completely lost track of their goal in their pain, and in fact are hindering the process. People often get immediate feedback from others in the group, and get to see how their actions are counter to what they are saying they want. In my own learning through taking part in group processes, I would often see how my contributions to the group were not in fact moving us closer to a decision. The process provides everyone the opportunity to stay present to what’s happening and to look closely at what it is they want and whether their actions are congruent.

Conclusion

What I present here is just one model of group decision making, which I offer because I like the results that I have experienced in using it. I don’t use it all the time, and I’m not wedded to it or suggesting that it’s the only process that works. It is a capacity and an awareness that can be helpful, and it’s always a choice to use it. It can be used in any situation but does not have to be. I have used this process in unusual situations where others do not know NVC, nor do they know that I’m using a process, such as with my book group. However, I did not continue to try to intervene in the book group’s decision making consistently; in fact, I learned to quite enjoy the chaos that ensued as we tried to choose our next book! I have also, however, witnessed and experienced that chaos in group decision-making where the results are far from fun, where

instead of a satisfactory decision, frustration and even greater conflict and unease are generated.

Similarly, many of the decisions made on a societal level are being made without hearing and taking into account the needs of all stakeholders, resulting often in poor policies that are then implemented half-heartedly. My experiences using the model I have presented give me hope. Even in groups as large as 90 people, we have been able to cycle through this process, each time improving upon proposals through their refinement based on needs that are surfaced by members of the group, eventually reaching agreement. This model is one way that the decisions affecting us can be made as a group, where the decision reflects the needs of all involved and thus, everyone can be working together.