

# Compassionate Communication: Four-Step Framework

*Based on the Non-Violent Communication model. This is a structure that is grounded in observing situations objectively, respecting each participant, and recognizing their needs, before addressing the area of conflict.*

Marshall Rosenberg's four steps give conflict a shape — a sequence that slows reactive communication and creates room for genuine understanding. The steps are not a script; they are an orientation. Each step can be practiced in speaking or in listening. Together they move a conversation towards recognition and connection.

## **1. Observation — What did I actually see or hear?**

State the specific, concrete event — stripped of interpretation. Not “you were rude,” but “you left the meeting without responding.” Rosenberg called evaluation mixed with observation the root cause of most communication breakdown. Kahneman's research confirms why: our first reading of a situation is almost always faster and more distorted than we realize. The discipline of observation is the discipline of slowing down.

*Try: “When I [saw / heard]...”—Test: Could this be recorded on video? If so, it is an observation. If not, it is an evaluation.*

## **2. Feeling—What am I feeling in response?**

Name a genuine internal state — not a faux feeling that smuggles in a judgment. “I feel dismissed” is a thought about what someone did. “I feel hurt and confused” is a feeling. The distinction matters because true feelings point inward, toward your own unmet needs — and that is where the conversation needs to go. Neuroscience confirms that naming an emotion (“affect labeling”) measurably reduces its intensity, making reflective response possible.

*Try: “I feel ...”— Test: Substitute “I think.” If that still makes sense, it's a faux feeling. Return to the feelings list and go one layer deeper.*

## **3. Need— What need of mine is alive here?**

Needs are universal and belong to no one. They are never about what another person does or doesn't do: connection, respect, clarity, autonomy, safety. When you can name the need underneath the feeling, two things happen: your own inner state becomes legible to you, and the other person is more likely to hear you — because needs are harder to argue with than demands or judgments. This is where conflict transforms: not in changing positions, but in revealing the human needs beneath them.

*Try: “... because I need...”— Test: Is this a universal human value, or a strategy requiring a specific person to act? Needs contain no names and no verbs.*

## **4. Request—What would I like, right now, that could help?**

A request is specific, positive (what you want, not what you don't want), and genuinely open to a “no.” That last quality is what distinguishes a request from a demand. Gottman's research shows that how we make requests — not the content of them — largely determines whether they are heard. A request made with genuine openness invites the other person into partnership. A demand, even a softly spoken one, creates resistance. Sometimes the only request is to be heard: “Would you be willing to tell me what you understood me to say?”

*Try: “Would you be willing to ...?”— Test: Could the other person reasonably say no without consequence? If not, it is a demand. Rephrase until the answer could freely be no.*

### **Full Template**

*“When I [observation] ... I feel [feeling] ... because I need [need] ... Would you be willing to [request]?”*

**When Listening:** Apply the same four steps empathically — listening for the observation, feeling, need, and request beneath what the other person is saying, even if they are not yet saying it in those terms. You can offer this back: “It sounds like when [observation] ... you felt [feeling] ... because you needed [need]?” That question, offered with genuine curiosity, is often the most powerful move in any conflict.