

**Skill Building and Personal Growth**  
**Through NVC Mediation Triad Practice**

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With Julie Stiles

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When we are involved in a personal conflict, it can be difficult to step outside of our own point of view and gain a larger perspective on what is happening. Nonetheless, this is exactly the approach that can help bring about a shift in how we are in the conflict. In teaching Nonviolent Communication (NVC) mediation using an experiential three-chair model, I began to realize that a method for making this shift was right in front of me. Since I, along with John Kinyon, have written more generally in another article about using the three-chair model in our NVC mediation trainings (see [The Three-Chair Model for Learning NVC Mediation](#)), this article will focus on the practical application of the model; how you can use this type of triad practice both for your own skill development as well as gaining greater understanding of a personal conflict you are involved in.

In trainings that I do currently, one of my requests at the end of the training is that each person arrange with two other people to do triad practice once a week for a month following the training. In this way, I hope that people will solidify the learning they began in the workshop, but also see that they can continue to grow and learn using their own resources. This article is intended to give some practical suggestions on how to set up an ongoing learning program using the three chair model among at least three people, and in particular designed around using a real conflict that a member of the group is experiencing. In this practice, the idea is to use one situation for an extended practice time that is broken into three mediation sections; each person rotates chairs so that by the end of the session, each person has sat in each chair and played each part in the conflict.

In using the three-chair model in this way two levels of learning are happening simultaneously. For the initiator, the person who brings in the conflict, there is a personal level of self-understanding and clarity around the situation that they bring in to put into the three chairs. The initiator and the other two people are also practicing and learning mediation skills. When you meet as a group over a period of time, either in person or over the phone once a week or every other week, you can rotate from session to session who initiates and gains both the skill practice and the gift of expanded understanding that often results.

When first beginning this type of triad practice, I recommend allocating about an hour and a half for the whole process. This includes about 15 minutes to meet and greet each other, connect, and check in with how people are showing up for the session. Set aside about the same amount of time at the end for final thoughts and discussion. That leaves an hour for the actual triad practice, 20 minutes for each person in each position of the triad.

## Setting Up

At the beginning of the practice time, the first thing that needs to happen is for the group to agree on the subject matter of the triad practice. Since we're assuming in this case that the practice is being used for self-development as well as skill building, ideally one of the group—the initiator—brings in a current conflict that is personal to her and that she wants greater understanding, openness, and compassion about. This conflict serves as the topic for the entire hour-long practice.

In setting up the subject matter, the initiator can explain what her relationship is to the person she is in conflict with and one or two sentences the person actually says. Often, since this is a real conflict, the initiator wants to explain everything the other person does and how they do it, giving all of her judgments about the person and the situation; these are not generally supportive to the person who is going to begin by inhabiting the role. What is helpful is the relationship and a couple of sentences of what the person has said (or what the initiator imagines he or she might say).

One assumption people sometimes get caught in when using real conflict situations in role-playing practice is that they are supposed to play their part as the real person would. I do not suggest this at all. First, it is not doable; even if they knew the person it wouldn't be possible and in most cases, they do not. Second, I have found that it is actually not necessary for the role-play to work. Instead, we suggest that people take the information they get from the initiator and then inhabit the role for themselves, playing it however it comes up in them. We use the subject matter and the starting point that the initiator brings in, and then play the part as a kind of improvisation.

It's generally easiest in the first round for the initiator to play herself as one of the disputants, and to be the one to speak first. Since it is her conflict, she knows the most about it,

and everything she says can be added information for the other disputant, as well as providing the mediator with the richest material to begin with. After the initiator and subject matter are agreed upon, the other two participants agree who is going to start as the mediator and who is going to play the other disputant.

The other agreements made prior to beginning the first round are also made at the beginning of each subsequent round, when the group rotates between chairs. First, the mediator asks for an agreement around the level of challenge he or she would like to be met with. An inexperienced mediator will want a low level of challenge; once people become more comfortable in the mediator chair, the challenge can be increased in a number of ways, which we will describe later.

Right before beginning the mediation, we suggest that the mediator do self-empathy out loud and for the disputants to support the mediator, empathizing with the needs the mediator speaks from. If the mediator, at any point during the mediation, begins to feel disconnected, agitated, or distressed, or notice that they're having judgments about one of the parties, it is time for a self-empathy break. The mediator can say something, like "I'm going out of role," or make some physical signal, such as a time out sign or putting their hand on top of their head. They do their self-empathy out loud, with or without support from the others, depending on their choice, and then go back into the mediation once they've reconnected with themselves.

## Mediating and Rotating

After doing self-empathy, the mediator begins the mediation, with the initiator going first. The mediator uses the five-step NVC mediation model as the practice template to track the mediation. Starting with the initiator, the mediator empathizes and surfaces the needs that person is speaking from, then asks if the second person is willing to reflect those needs. The mediator continues by asking the second disputant what they'd like to be heard about, and then asks for reflection from the first person. These are the first four steps of the model.

In any role-play, of course, it takes varying amounts of time to get through these four steps, and since in this case you are switching roles after a set period of time, you might switch roles one or even two times and still be somewhere in the process of these four steps. When it's

time to switch roles, you “bookmark” where you are in the mediation and the next mediator will begin from that place.

In one way or another, make sure you include time for feedback for each mediator. We find it is best to receive feedback as close in time as possible, and usually suggest that time for feedback is included in the 20 minutes allotted for each position and given before switching chairs. That way, people remember their reactions and can more accurately give feedback based on the role they just inhabited.

When you switch chairs, the initiator most commonly moves into the role of the second disputant and the second disputant now becomes the mediator. Since there’s a new mediator, you re-establish the agreement regarding how much challenge the mediator wants, and have the mediator do empathy out loud, and then jump back into the mediation at the place where you left off.

Thus, the whole session would proceed as follows: the group agrees on the subject matter and decides who will be the first mediator. The first mediator requests the level of challenge they want and does self-empathy, and then begins the mediation with the initiator. Someone keeps track of time, and stops the mediation in time to allow three to five minutes of feedback. Then you switch chairs, the new mediator requests the challenge level and does self-empathy, and starts right back in on the mediation where the group left off. After the allotted time that mediator receives feedback, and the group rotates chairs one more time, with the initiator now in the mediator’s chair. This person again requests a level of challenge and does self-empathy, and goes right back into the mediation.

Sometimes by this point the mediation is beginning to move into the request or resolution stage, the last stage of the mediation model. This is an added benefit of this kind of extended practice session. Often people report that they do not get as much experience in the resolution stage as they would like in practice settings; this is one way to set up a practice that is more likely to get to this stage. The more time you stay on one topic, the more likely you will get to discussing resolutions, and one or more people will be able to practice mediating this stage.

### Increasing the Challenge

When people first begin to sit in the mediator’s chair, it is often more than enough challenge to just empathize and try to surface needs from each person and ask for reflection.

After some practice, however, people find that they are more comfortable in the mediator's chair and more skilled at the basic level, and are ready for more challenge. There are a number of ways to increase the challenge when your group reaches this point.

One way is to begin playing with more options in mediating. In using the basic five-step model, the mediator has various choice points; each step in the model actually marks a place where the mediator can choose one of a number of different options. At the beginning, a mediator is generally using one of those choices each time; for instance, after surfacing needs of one person, they ask for reflection from the other person. When these basic choices become second nature, however, it is a good time to begin practicing other options and getting a feel for when these options are appropriate. In this way, the mediator begins to learn how to stay present in the mediation and choose from any number of options instead of simply following a formula.

For example, after surfacing needs from Disputant A and getting reflection from Disputant B, the mediator might, instead of asking what Disputant B wants to be heard about, choose to ask how A felt hearing the reflection of their needs. This checks the level of connection A feels at having their needs reflected back to them. Or, the mediator might ask A whether they are satisfied that they were heard in the way they would like to be heard. This option checks whether they are satisfied that the other person heard them. The mediator might also ask Disputant B how they feel having reflected Disputant A's needs. There are many choices along each step; these are simply a few that we coach to when someone is learning to mediate using this model. In practicing with them, a mediator becomes more sensitive to when they might be appropriate to use, based on body language or verbal cues that they get from either party.

Another way to increase challenge is to up the level of difficulty in the mediation. A new mediator, when requesting the level of difficulty prior to beginning, might request a low level of difficulty, meaning that disputants reflect when asked even if they don't feel like it, and that disputants do not interrupt. At a later stage, the mediator may ask to up the ante by requesting that disputants only reflect back if they feel like it or that they interrupt if they feel moved to do so. In these cases, the request is not to fabricate the interruption or the refusal to reflect, the request is that the disputants allow themselves to get caught up in the role they are playing and play it authentically. Starting with some kind of cognitive thought about being difficult or unpleasant in the role is not as likely to lead to the same kind of learning; when someone is

authentically in their role, reacting as they feel moved to react, then they end up experiencing the kind of real shifts that can happen in mediation. This is the kind of learning we are after. For the mediator, the challenge is learning to respond to these kinds of reactions from disputants; when the disputant is authentically playing their role, the mediator gets a much richer experience of which choices support disputants to shift.

Another way to increase the challenge is to increase the length of time in the mediator's chair. Early on, it is a challenge for people to be in the mediator's chair for 10 or 12 minutes, often people spend much of that time doing self empathy and dealing with the overwhelm and insecurity they experience from trying to do anything. After awhile, people find that they want more time. If you increase the time for the whole process to two or two and a half hours, each person has a commensurately longer period of time to be in the mediator's chair. Alternatively, if one person wants to be in the mediator's chair for longer and others don't, the time could be divided unequally, or the group could even agree to have one person mediate for the entire session, and the other two people switch chairs.

If you have an experienced person who can act as a coach during the practice that is an added bonus and adds another level of learning. If you have a coach, simply add to the checklist at the beginning of each round an agreement between the mediator and the coach as to how they would like to receive coaching. For example, one person may want to be interrupted immediately when the coach sees options that they might choose, another may prefer the coach to wait until asked for help. While being coached in the midst of this type of practice is invaluable, it is certainly not necessary for learning to take place.

### Taking on Different Perspectives

The power of doing this type of practice and rotating through the three different chairs is that you gain greater understanding of three different frames of reference. As the initiator, when you begin you are in your own skin, as it were; in this chair you begin to see what is animating your own conduct. Empathy and the distinctions of NVC help you clarify the needs that are behind your strategies in the conflict situation, which might help you gain a sense of compassion for yourself.

When you move into the second chair, you take on the perspective of the person you are in conflict with. You speak from within their frame of reference and have a dialogue with someone who is playing your role in the conflict. Again using the distinctions of NVC and through receiving empathy while you are in this role, you begin to gain clarity and understanding about what might be motivating the other person to act as they are acting. In my experience, it is often humbling to recognize how easy it is to take on the role of the other person and to get in touch with what might be going on for them.

When you move into the mediator's chair, you take on a third perspective; in this role you are taking on an expanded frame of reference, not being an advocate of either position. As the mediator you are listening for what each disputant is saying and through empathy—translating what you hear from these positions into feelings, needs, and requests—demonstrating to each person that you hear his or her perspective. The mediator's role is also to help each person step outside of their frame of reference long enough to reflect what the other person has said. In a sense, when you mediate your own conflict, you are holding both your own perspective and the perspective of the other person in the conflict at the same time, which requires that you be bigger than both perspectives.

Shifting perspectives in this way is likely to result in a new understanding of the conflict, and in my experience has often changed the way I feel and act toward the person I'm in conflict with. It also helps us become more adept at seeing from these different perspectives, and this ability, along with the mediation skills we learn in doing the practice repeatedly, enhances our capacity to transform the conflicts in our lives.