

# Compassionate Communication

by Marshall Rosenberg

At an early age, most of us were taught to speak and think Jackal. This language is from the head. It is a way of mentally classifying people into varying shades of good and bad, right and wrong. Ultimately it provokes defensiveness, resistance and counterattack. Giraffe bids us to speak from the heart, to talk about what is going on for us - without judging others. In this idiom, you give people an opportunity to say yes, although you respect no for an answer. Giraffe is a language of requests; Jackal is a language of demands.

Human beings the world over say they want to contribute to the well-being of others, to connect and communicate with others in loving, compassionate ways.

Why then, is there so much disharmony and conflict?

Setting out to find answers, I discovered that the language many of us were taught interferes with our desire to live in harmony with one another. At an early age, most of us were taught to speak and think jackal. This is a moralistic classification idiom that labels people; it has a splendid vocabulary for analyzing and criticizing. Jackal is good for telling people what's wrong with them: "Obviously, you're emotionally disturbed (rude, lazy, selfish)."

The jackal moves close to the ground. It is so preoccupied with getting its immediate needs met that it cannot see into the future. Similarly, Jackal-thinking individuals believe that in quickly classifying or analyzing people, they understand them. Unhappy about what's going on, a Jackal will label the people involved, saying, "He's an idiot" or "She's bad" or "They're culturally deprived." This language is from the head. It is a way of mentally classifying people into varying shades of good and bad, right and wrong. Ultimately, it provokes defensiveness, resistance, and counterattack.

I also came upon a language of the heart, a form of interacting that promotes the well-being of ourselves and other people. I call this means of communicating Giraffe. The giraffe has the largest heart of any land animal, is tall enough to look into the future, and lives its life with gentility and strength. Like-wise, Giraffe bids us to speak from the heart, to talk about what is going on for us - without judging others. In this idiom, you give people an opportunity to say yes, although you respect no for an answer. Giraffe is a language of requests; Jackal is a language of demands.

By the time I identified these two languages, I had thoroughly learned Jackal. So I set out to teach myself Giraffe. What would I say, I wondered, if someone were doing something I found unpleasant and I wanted to influence him to change his behavior? Giraffes, I realized, are aware that they cannot change others. They are not even interested in changing people; rather, they are interested (italics) "in providing opportunities for them to be willing to change." One way of providing

such an opportunity, I decided, would be to approach the other person with a message such as: "Please do this, but only if you can do it willingly - in a total absence of fear, guilt, or shame. If you are motivated by fear, guilt, or shame, I lose."

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As Giraffes, we make requests in terms of what we want people to do, not what we want them to feel. All the while, we steer clear of mandates. Nothing creates more resistance than telling people they "should" or "have to" or "must" or "ought to" do something. These terms eliminate choice. Without the freedom to choose, life becomes slave like. "I had to do it, superior's orders" is the response of people robbed of their free will. Prompted by directives and injunctions, people do not take responsibility for their actions.

As time passed, I learned much more about Giraffes. For one thing, they do not make requests in the past. They do not say, or even think, "How nice it would have been if you had cleaned the living room last night." Instead, Giraffes state clearly what they want in the present. And they take responsibility for their feelings, aware that their feelings are caused by their wants. If a mother is upset because her son's toys are strewn about the living room, she will identify her feeling: anger. She will then get in touch with the underlying want that is causing this feeling: her desire for a neat and orderly living room. She will own the anger, saying, "I feel angry because I want the living room to be clean and instead it's a mess." Finally, she will ask for a different outcome: "I'd feel so much better if you'd just put these toys away."

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Whereas Jackals say, "I feel angry because you...," Giraffes will say, "I feel angry because I want ... " As Giraffes, we know that the cause of our feelings is not another person, but rather our own thoughts, wants, and wishes. We become angry because of the thoughts we are having, not because of anything another person has done to us.

Jackals, on the other hand, view others as the source of their anger. In fact, violence, whether verbal or physical, is the result of assuming that our feelings are caused not by what is going on inside us but rather by what is going on "out there." In response, we say things designed to hurt, punish, or blame the person whom we imagine has hurt our feelings. Aware of this tendency, a Giraffe will conclude, "I'm angry because my expectations have not been met."

As Giraffes we take responsibility for our feelings. At the same time, we attempt

to give others an opportunity to act in a way that will help us feel better. For example, a boy may want more respect from his father. After getting in touch with his anger over the decisions his father has been making for him, he might say: "Please ask me if I want a haircut before making a barbershop appointment for me." Giraffes say what they do want; rather than what they don't want. "Stop that," "Cut it out," or "Quit that" do not inspire changed behaviors. People can't do a "don't."

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Giraffes ultimately seek a connection in which each person feels a sense of well-being and no one feels forced into action by blame, guilt, or punishment: As such,  
Giraffe thinking creates harmony.

## **STATING A REQUEST CLEARLY**

Stating a request in simple Giraffe is a four-part process rooted in honesty:

- Describe your observation
- Identify your feeling
- Explain the reason for your feeling in terms of your needs
- State your request

In describing the situation, do so without criticizing or judging. If you have come home from a busy day and your partner seems preoccupied with the newspaper, simply describe the situation: "When I walked in the door after an especially trying day, you seemed busy reading." Identify your feeling: "I feel hurt." State the reason for your feeling: "I feel hurt because I would like to feel close to you right now and instead I'm feeling disconnected from you." Then state your request in do-able terms: "Are you willing to take time out for a hug and a few moments of sharing?"

The same process applies if your teenager has been talking on the phone for hours and you are expecting a call. Describe the situation: "When you have the phone tied up for so long, other calls can't come through." Express your feeling and the reason for it: "I'm feeling frustrated because I've been expecting to hear from someone." Then state your request: "I'd like you to bring your conversation to a close if that's all right."

In a Jackal culture, feelings and wants are severely punished. People are expected to be docile, subservient to authority, slave like in their reactions, and alienated from their feelings and needs. In a Giraffe culture, we learn to express our feelings, needs, and requests without passing judgment or attacking. We request, rather than demand. And we are aware of the fine line of distinction between these two types of statements.

In Jackal, we expect other people to prove their love for us by doing what we want. As Giraffes, we may persist in trying to persuade others, but we are not influenced by guilt. We acknowledge that we have no control over the other person's response. And we stay in Giraffe no matter what the other person says. If she or he seems upset or tense, we switch into listening, which allows us to hear the person's feelings, needs, and wishes (*italics*) without hearing any criticism of ourselves. Nor does a Giraffe simply say no; as Giraffes we state the need that

prevents us from fulfilling the request.

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### **RESPONDING TO A "NO"**

Responding to a refusal is a four-part process rooted in empathy:

- Describe the situation
- Guess the other person's feeling
- Guess the reason for the feeling, together with the unmet need; then let the person verify whether you have correctly understood
- Clarify the unmet need

When people say no in a nasty way, what they invariably want is to protect their autonomy. They have heard a request as a demand and are saying, in effect, "I want to do it when I choose to do it, and not because I am forced to do it."

Sighing, sulking, or screaming can likewise reflect a desire to protect one's freedom of choice, one's need to act from a position of willingness. If people scream at us, we do not scream back. We listen beneath the words and hear what they are really saying - that they have a need and want to get their need met.

If a mother has asked her daughter to please do her chores and she has refused, the Giraffe dance may go something like this:

**Parent:** Are you feeling annoyed right now because you want to do your chores at your own pace rather than being forced to do them?

**Child:** Yeah, I'm sick and tired of being a slave. [Note the defensive mode, indicating a need to be listened to.]

**Parent:** So, you really want to do things when it feels good to do them, and you're not just avoiding them altogether?

**Child:** You order me around! [The child still needs to be listened to. The parent must keep guessing what the child is saying about feelings and wants.]

**Parent:** So, it's frustrating when I seem to be ordering you around and you have no choice about when to do your chores?

**Child:** I don't want to do chores! They're stupid. If you want them done, you do them.

**Parent:** You really hate doing chores and you would like me to do all of them?

**Child:** Yeah... no... I don't know. I just don't feel like being bossed around. (The child is becoming vulnerable and starting to open up because she's feeling heard without judgment.)

If we have been Jackalish and demanding in the past, the people close to us may need a lot of empathy at first. So we listen and listen, reflecting back with guesses about what they are feeling and wanting, until they feel heard and shift out of being defensive. We don't take anything personally, for we know that upset, attacking, defensive statements are tragic expressions of unmet needs. At some point, the person's voice and body language will indicate that a shift has occurred.

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At a meeting I attended at a mosque in a refugee camp near Jerusalem, a man

suddenly stood up and cried, "Murderer!" As a Giraffe, all I heard was "Please!" - that is, I heard the pain, the need that wasn't being met. That is where I focused my attention. After about 40 minutes of speaking, he did what most of us do when we sense we have been accurately heard and listened to: he changed. The situation

was immediately defused of all tension. He later invited me to dinner.

In international disputes, as well as in relationship, business, classroom, and parent-child conflicts, we can learn to hear the human being behind the message, regardless of how the message is framed. We can learn to hear the other person's unmet needs and requests. Ultimately, listening empathically does not imply doing what the person wants; rather, it implies showing respectful acknowledgment of the individual's inner world. As we do that, we move from the coercive language we have been taught to the language of the heart.

Speaking from the heart is a gesture of love; giving other people an opportunity to contribute to our well-being and to exercise generosity. Empathically receiving what is going on in others is a reciprocal gesture. Giraffes experience love as openness and sensitivity, with no demands, criticism, or requirements to fulfill requests at either end of a dispute. And the outcome of any dialogue ruled by love is harmony.

In the end, Jackals are simply illiterate Giraffes. Once you've learned to hear the heart behind any message, you discover that there's nothing to fear in anything another person says. With that discovery, you are well on your way to compassionate communication. This form of dialogue, although offering no guarantees of agreement between disputing parties, sets the stage for negotiation, compromise, and most importantly, mutual understanding and respect.

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