

Taking the War Out of Our Words: Sharon Ellison’s “Powerful Non-Defensive Communication” Workshop

by Laurie Israel

Intrigued by the title of the workshop and feeling that I needed to work on my skills in managing effective communication, I came to the Toronto IACP conference early to take the all-day Pre-Forum workshop on “Powerful Non-Defensive Communication” (“PNDC”), presented by Sharon Strand Ellison. The workshop was packed with enthusiastic collaborative practitioners who, like me, were highly motivated to work on “Taking the War Out of Our Words”, as Ellison puts it in the title of her book.¹

Power Struggle as a Global Problem.

Ellison’s premise is that power struggle is the most pervasive and least-recognized addiction in the world. When there are conflicting views, we immediately have a negative reaction to the person who disagrees with us. We are likely to jump to the conclusion that the person is not intelligent, or intentionally mean, hurtful, destructive or rude. When a follow-up fact-finding question is asked in an open, honest, neutral and inviting manner, the other person becomes non-defensive and, as Ellison puts it, is “dis-armed”. The response to the powerful non-defensive (PND) question is often transformative and amazing. In her workshop, Ellison gives many compelling and powerful instances of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC) exchanges.

For instance, if you ask a person “Is *that* how you peel potatoes?”, the person will become immediately defensive and upset, even though there is no potato in the person’s hands. The reason for this is that the question engages the person’s “limbic brain”, which is hard-wired for the defensive fight or flight response. The way in which a question is asked (for instance, the tone of voice, the choice of words) can instantly engage the “limbic brain”, completely skipping over the person’s “thinking brain”.

Ellison points out how strongly the engagement of the limbic brain impairs our work in divorce, particularly in having effective team/client meetings and productive interchanges between the divorcing couple. As Ellison says, if people can shut down and become defensive in a nanosecond, openness to listening to and understanding others and mutual connection and problem-solving work is impeded. Once the limbic alarm system is set off, it stays active for 20 minutes to an hour, further worsening the problem. This can very quickly destroy the effectiveness of a multi-party collaborative meeting with divorcing clients and the collaborative team. Ellison asks, “How can there be peace in the world, if people can get defensive in a nanosecond?”

The Powerful Non-Defensive Question

At the core of PNDC is the PND question. In Ellison’s workshop, we worked on listening to, and practicing the tone of voice needed to ask a question innocently (even “musingly”, as Ellison puts it), to make sure the other person’s limbic alarm system is not

¹ “Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication”, by Sharon Strand Ellison, Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, Inc. (Third ed. 2007), \$16.95. Available through Sharon’s website www.pndc.com, and through www.amazon.com

triggered.² Ellison asks PND questions to elicit non-defensive responses, instead of arguing with a person or trying to convince the person to agree with her.

Although Ellison's premise as to how to address power struggle and defensiveness may seem simple, implementing the highly transformative PNDC techniques is quite challenging to master. Putting into effect PNDC at the moment of a verbal interchange by formulating a PND question is difficult. Emotions get the better of us and our speech becomes reactive. With lots of practice, however, it can become part of our arsenal (excuse the word – perhaps toolbox would be better?) of social interchange skills for us to use in our collaborative practices and elsewhere in our daily lives.

For instance, you can ask a person to explain what he or she meant before you react to it. You can do this by asking a question by starting "What do you mean by ...". Often you will be surprised at the new information you get, or how your assumptions as to what the other person meant were incorrect. Ellison teaches us to stay in a state of inquiry, and try not to fill information in with our own assumptions.

An effective method used in PNDC is asking a person directly about his/her intentions. When a person says something that seems negative or insulting, we tend to avoid asking the person directly. By asking, you may find out that the intention was not negative as you previously thought. Perhaps the intent was totally different, and the statement was not meant as an attack or criticism. Or, you might find just the opposite: the person *did* mean to attack and *was* being critical or negative. With either result, you have increased your understanding and the mutual exchange can be transformative when done in an open, honest, curious, non-defensive way.

Ellison teaches us to be aware of many types of communication problems. These include stating opinion as fact, identifying tones of voice and facial expressions that indicate covert messages (which can be decoded with proper PND questions), accepting your own assumptions without questioning them, and trying to convince someone of something (it's almost never successful and always causes defensiveness).

PNDC and "Active Listening"

Ellison also had some interesting comments on the use of "active listening" in mediation and Collaborative Practice. This is the technique of repeating or rephrasing something said by the speaker, so that they know you are empathetic and they know that you have understood them. She believes that this technique often projects a false and shallow veneer of understanding, especially when you disagree with what is said, that greatly reduces its effectiveness. Ellison suggests that the language the active listener uses should not be merely a repetition or a paraphrase, but should go further in defining and understanding the various components of what the speaker said. Asking multiple active listening questions aimed at the various elements and specific words in the statement that is being actively listened to can be very powerful. When the statement is broken down like this, the speaker has a chance to respond and rearticulate what was said in its many aspects and in all its ramifications in the fullest manner possible. This gives a

² A set of 12 CDs of Sharon Ellison reading her book is available through www.pndc.com. This is an excellent way to learn her techniques and how to formulate non-defensive questions. You can practice asking PND questions in the proper non-accusatory but curious tone of voice in the privacy of your car during your morning commute.

more accurate expression to the complexity of human life and subtlety of thought and emotion. It increases understanding and furthers mutual respect.

The Powerful Non-Defensive Statement

Another feature of PNDC is the use of the non-defensive statement. When we speak truthfully and openly, without fear and without hiding, our vulnerability can strengthen the statement and elicit a positive response. When we are guarded and hide information, our ability to resolve problems and work creatively with each other is impeded. As a result, when we are vulnerable and direct at the same time, we actually become more effective. When we state our own reactions to what another is saying in a neutral, sincere, honest way, defensiveness is eliminated, clarity can be achieved, and progress can follow. This aspect of PNDC may be difficult for attorney-Collaborative Practitioners to absorb, because in our legal training we learn that it is dangerous for our clients to put "everything on the table".

Conclusion

Ellison's teachings seem simple, but putting them into practice takes much attention and training. Learning how to formulate PND questions "on your feet" during interchanges requires a lot of work. I have been reading and re-reading Ellison's book, and I am working to get better at PNDC skills in my law practice, my collaborative practice, and at home. I think incorporating PNDC into my life will be a very worthwhile undertaking.

-- Laurie Israel (December 16, 2007)

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Laurie Israel is an A-V rated lawyer practicing in Brookline, Massachusetts. Laurie helps clients resolve their disputes with a high level of dignity, integrity and creativity.

Laurie works in the areas of collaborative divorce, divorce mediation, divorce negotiation and prenuptial agreements. She also helps people who wish to stay married through providing marital mediation (a/k/a mediation to stay married) and negotiation of postnuptial agreements.

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