

# Respecting Is Not the Same as Conceding

**By Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.**

In a conflict situation, understanding the other person's needs does not mean you have to give up your own needs. It does mean demonstrating to the other person that you are interested in both your needs and theirs. When they trust that, there's much more likelihood of everyone's needs getting met, which is what happened in the following situation.

I was working with a group of minority students many years ago who had the impression that their school principal was very racist in many of his behaviors, and wanted my help to resolve their conflicts with him.

In our training session, they defined their needs clearly. When we talked about expressing their request, they said: "Marshall, we're not optimistic about making requests of him. We did make requests of him in the past, and it wasn't very pleasant. In the past, he has said, 'Get out of here or I'm going to call the police.'"

I asked, "What request did you make of him?"

One of the students replied, "We said we didn't want him telling us how we could wear our hair." They were referring to the fact that the principal barred them from the football team unless they cut their hair short. I pointed out to them: "Telling him what you don't want (you don't want him telling you how to wear your hair) is really not what I'm suggesting. I'm suggesting you learn how to tell him what you do want."

Another student said, "Well, we told him we wanted fairness."

I responded: "Well, that's a need. We have a need for fairness. Once we know our needs, the next step is to be clear with people about what we really want them to do. What can they do to meet our needs? We have to learn how to say that more clearly."

We worked very hard and came up with thirty-eight present requests in positive action language, and we practiced how to present their requests in a respectful, nondemanding way. Doing that means that after you make your request, no matter how the other person responds, whether the person says yes or no, you give an equal amount of respect and understanding. If they say "no," try to understand what need they are meeting that keeps them from saying "yes."

The students went in, told the principal their needs, and expressed their thirty-eight requests in clear action language. They listened to what needs the principal had, and in the end the principal agreed to all thirty-eight of their requests.

About two weeks after that happened, I got a call from a representative of the

school district asking if I would teach their school administrator what I had taught those students.

It's very important, in expressing our requests, to be respectful of the other person's reaction regardless of whether they agree to the request. One of the most important messages another person can give us is "no" or "I don't want to." If we listen well to this message, it helps us understand the other person's needs. If we are listening to other peoples' needs, we will see that every time a person says "no," they're really saying they have a need that is not addressed by our strategy, which keeps them from saying "yes." If we can teach ourselves to hear the need behind that "no," we will find an openness toward getting everyone's needs met.

Of course, if we hear the "no" as a rejection, or if we start to blame the other person for saying "no," then it's not likely that we're going to find a way of getting everyone's needs met. It's key that, throughout the process, we keep everyone's attention focused on meeting everyone's needs.

I'm very optimistic about what happens in any conflict if we create this quality of connection. If all sides in a conflict get clear about what they need and hear the other side's needs, if people express their strategies in clear action language, then even if the other person says "no," the focus returns to meeting needs. If we all do this, we will easily find strategies that get everyone's needs met.

International peacemaker, **Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.**, is the founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, author of [Speak Peace in a World of Conflict](#) the international bestseller, [Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life](#), and several booklets.