

Sharon Strand Ellison,  
Author of, *Taking the War Out of Our Words:*  
*The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*

Content: Background & Training Experience — Applicability of the PNDC Process  
Sample Client List — Comments from Organizers & Participants

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## **Diversity and Cultural Fluency**

### **Background & Training Experience**

Sharon Strand Ellison grew up in a predominantly white, Northern European, Protestant culture. She was, however, deeply impacted by experiences with the Indigenous Peoples from the Wasco Tribe in the community where she lived as a child. In the early 1990's, Sharon moved to the San Francisco Bay area in order to live in a richly diverse community. She has been fortunate to receive feedback and to learn many invaluable lessons from people and groups in various cultures, such as Black, Asian, Latino, Jewish, Muslim, and LGBTQIA.

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### **Applicability of *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*<sup>™</sup> (PNDC) Process**

Diversity training can provide a wealth of information and insights. However, knowledge and understanding are not enough. People can still get easily triggered when interacting in situations that involve prejudice. Gaining communication skills that can be used to quickly defuse defensiveness is thus, also essential. It can open the door to staying in the hard conversations with grace and honesty.

The focus of Sharon's work in the area of cultural competence has been on using non-defensive communication as a tool in (a) identifying and eliminating our own internalized biases, (b) responding effectively in conversations with others who label groups of people, express prejudiced attitudes and behaviors, and (c) working with people from diverse populations with regard to how to enhance their ability to respond to prejudice with clarity and power, without needing to rely on defensiveness.

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### **Sample Client List — Keynotes & Training Programs:**

#### **Conferences:**

- Facing a Challenge Within: A Progressive Scholars and Activists Conference

on Anti-Semitism and the Left, Oakland CA (Keynote & session)

- Women of Color in Action (WCAN), Annual San Francisco Bay Area Conference: A grassroots activist initiative for preventing violence against Black Women in Black communities (Session)
  - The Human Capacity for Peace Conference: *What is the Power of Nonviolent Language and Action, From the Individual to Global Settings*, UC Berkeley, CA (Speech)
  - Women's Funding Network: Program for Women of Color in International Development, San Francisco, CA (Day-long Training)
  - SIETAR [Society for International Education, Training, and Research], Annual International Conference (Session)
  - International Symposium on Human Dignity and Humiliations Studies, Columbia University, invited participant, New York, NY (Participant)
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### **Educational Institutions:**

- University of California Medical School (UCSF) San Francisco, Gender Equity Center, "Diversity Pipeline: Women of Color in Health Sciences" (Speech)
  - UCSF Medical School, Annual Women's Conference (Session)
  - U.C. Berkeley Staff Diversity Facilitator Network, CA (Daylong training)
  - Oakland Schools: Training for counselors for at risk youth and suspended students [*Primary Black and Latino counselors, dealing with discriminatory treatment of Black and Latino students and their families.*] (3-hour training)
  - Bay Area High School: [name withheld for confidentiality] Training for 450 freshman in a school where an altercation between two groups of students ended with one 14-year-old being murdered. (2-day training, 1 hr. per class)
  - Snell School: Administration, staff, and teachers at a school for students who have been permanently expelled from CA school districts. (1 day training)
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### **Associations:**

- Latino Medical School Association, Annual Regional Board Conference,

University of CA, Sacramento (Speech)

- Association for Multicultural Education, Portland, OR (Speech)
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### **Non-Profits:**

- Asian and Pacific Islanders Reproductive Health Organization, Oakland, CA (Daylong training)
  - Violence Prevention Association, Richmond, CA (Speech)
  - "I have a Dream Foundation," San Francisco, CA (Daylong Training)
  - Stir Fry Productions, producers of the diversity film, *The Color of Fear*. ( Daylong training)
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### **Indigenous Peoples:**

- Ka-Nee-Ta Tribe, Family Social Service Counselors (Daylong training)
  - National leadership program for indigenous women leaders, working in Indian Health Services positions (Training & Development, multiple days)
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### **LGBTQIA:**

- Training For Activists Working to Defeat a Discriminatory Oregon Bill (3-hour training)
  - *New Community*: a highly successful, co-facilitated training, bringing Conservative, right wing Christians together with LGBT community Leaders (3-hour training)
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### **Government:**

- Multnomah County/City of Portland, Oregon, "Diversity: Tools, Action and Accountability," Annual Conference (Keynote)
  - Law Enforcement: S.F. Jail: Empowerment Project for Women Prisoners (3-hour training)
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### **Corporate:**

- Hewlett Packard, Harassment, Discrimination and Diversity training [in

conjunction with HP attorneys] (Daylong training)

- Nordstrom, Diversity Managers, annual regional conference, Denver, CO (Daylong training)
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### **Cultural Fluency for White People:**

- "Cultural Competence: Transforming Vision into Reality," Collaborative Family Law Conference, New Orleans (Session)
- Public workshops on cultural competence for White people, co-facilitated with Mercedes Martin, an international diversity trainer (Daylong trainings)
- Training programs for white, mostly male, regional managers and dentists on gaining cultural competence when supervising Indigenous women in healthcare and social service positions, Albuquerque, NM (Multiple daylong trainings over a period of several years)
- Co-Author with Shakti Butler of the questions for White People in the conversation guide for the film, "Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible."

— *Shakti Butler is the Founder of World Trust Educational Services and a filmmaker and racial justice educator whose films have been used in more than 5,000 institutions*

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### **COMMENTS FROM ORGANIZERS & PARTICIPANTS**

Sharon is one of the very few "white" teachers whom I've seen succeed in attracting a significant number of "non-white" learners. Over and over again, I've seen her facilitate sensitive communications about differences in race, religion, class status, etc., and leave people feeling connected instead of alienated, and enlightened instead of embattled.

—*Emily Zimmerman, Instructor, Korean Studies, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA*

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As a leadership consultant, I have pioneered the introduction of global diversity and leadership development programs in the US, Canada, Africa, and South and Central America for companies such as Hewlett Packard and Proctor and Gamble. I have extensive training in the Powerful Non-Defensive Communication process developed by Sharon Strand Ellison and have found it to be invaluable in my work. The process offers tools for removing obstacles

to understanding across lines of differences in viewpoint, position, vested interests, and culture. Using these non-defensive skill sets, people are able to connect on a deeper level and engage in a creative problem solving process that resolves difficult issues and addresses the widest range of needs possible.

—*Mercedes Martin, Talent Development Consultant and Executive Coach, South America Region, Ernest and Young*

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Powerful Non-Defensive Communication is the missing link that bridges the gap between our desire to communicate effectively and our ability to actually do so. The immediacy and ease of application to difficult professional and personal situations is remarkable.

—*Robert Brownstone, Corporate Educational Specialist, Fortune 500 Corp, Silicon Valley, CA*

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Sharon Ellison is fabulous! She did an incredible job at our annual conference where she presented “The Power of Non-Defensive Communication” to over 300 people at our opening plenary. The response was a standing ovation. Everyone felt they had been touched and educated. Sharon's work has very broad implications for communication at every level with staff, clients, and volunteers, and can greatly enhance the services we provide. In fact, the potential for professional and personal growth is unlimited. We have already integrated Sharon's concepts and material from her book into ANSA's leadership development program and will be inviting her to present as part of our Leadership Development Institute. I highly recommend her and her work and believe she is a rare and exceptional talent. Sharon is a brilliant speaker, a tremendous motivator and an outstanding educator. The appeal and application of PNDC is universal and offers a powerful tool for social change.

—*Frank Abdale, Executive Director, Association of Nutrition Services Agencies, an international membership organization focused on nutrition services for the critically ill.*

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As Executive Director of the UCSF Center for Gender Equity, I invited Sharon to speak at a leadership conference for women of color students in the health sciences which was also attended by some of the university medical school deans. The conference was designed to increase the pool of women in career, academic paths in the UC Health Science system with a particular emphasis on women from underrepresented backgrounds. As always, Sharon's presentation was engaging, participatory and highly valuable. She

was able to communicate effectively across lines of culture and received the highest ratings from the attendees. Comments included:

"Amazing information! Very powerful. The best and most practical workshop of the conference." — "I believe everyone would benefit from hearing Sharon's message and practicing her techniques." — "As a woman of color, I thought this was outstanding. She brought me to tears!" — "I think this was the best talk I have been to in my entire medical career."

—Amy Levine, Director, Gender Equity Center, University of California Medical School, San Francisco, CA

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When used with compassion, thoughtfulness, and respect, language becomes a powerful tool for liberation. We need Sharon Ellison's work in our homes, in our offices, and most of all, in our hearts.

— Evelyn C. White, editor, *"The Black Woman's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves,"* and author of *"Alice Walker: A Life"* [an authorized biography]

Sharon's work has had a tremendous impact on the Napa Valley Peace Table's ability to make open and honest community building a successful priority. The session was attended, among others, by our mayor, the district attorney, the superintendent of schools, the president of the community college, as well as some of Napa's most exciting young student leaders. Sharon's own communication skill and her powerful training program made it easy for all of us to realize how our words and attitude affect our ability to create "community" rather than chaos. The Napa Valley Peace Table's goal of bringing a multicultural, multigenerational vision to the Valley's future was jump-started at the heart by Sharon's easy to understand non-defensive communication tools.

—Dorothy Lind, President, The Peace Table, Napa, CA

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Having these non-defensive tools is so important for us as an organization, as a county. All of us work in teams in various ways and team members have such a diversity of ideas as well as diversity of background and experience. You were so accurate when you talked about how we get into a war mentality, and then people think, "I have to win," and they get locked into power struggle, which can be like an addiction. With regard to your keynote, in speaking to a large group of about 700 people, you used humor very

effectively and engaged the audience immediately. You used yourself as a teaching tool and they could see you as human. You used imagery and painted a scenario that people could visualize. I found myself envisioning the people in your stories as you spoke and you linked the scenarios to the teaching points in a way that was moving. The beauty of your approach is that you showed us how to speak with clarity without being defensive or attacking. I have already used the skills you taught us.

—Mohammed Abu Zayed, Ph.D., Speakers Committee, Chair, Multnomah County/City of Portland 9th Annual Diversity Conference: "Diversity: Tools, Action and Accountability"

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When Sharon conducted a workshop for the mostly Latino immigrant parents and guardians of "I Have a Dream"- San Francisco, she presented the components of non-defensive communication, using PNDC role plays and personal examples to get her point across. As I translated the presentation into Spanish, I could see that our families were really enjoying and learning the PNDC process, and that Sharon's natural graciousness, humility and humor helped make the material accessible, helpful and relevant to their lives as busy, working, immigrant parents of rapidly Americanizing adolescent youth. They left smiling and equipped with realistic, practical new tools and strategies for talking and listening, setting boundaries, communicating their values and perspectives, and building strong, healthy, reciprocal and respectful relationships with their sons and daughters. Sharon has the remarkable ability to convey her message about the power of non-defensive communication to absolutely any audience-regardless of their primary language, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or educational experience.

—Abby Rovner, Project Director "I Have a Dream" Foundation - San Francisco

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During Sharon's keynote people learned that they can have an avenue to address misunderstandings and conflicts instead of having them eat away at their hearts and souls. Sharon got the audience excited about learning something different, and people don't always get excited about wanting to change! It was so clear that this can be used in every aspect of our lives without feeling threatened. Sharon made us laugh and moved us to tears. The audience wanted more.

—Beverly Bolensky Dean, EEO Investigator, City of Portland/Multnomah County OR, Steering Committee & Speakers Committee, City/Country 9th Annual Diversity Conference: "Diversity: Tools, Accountability, and Action"

Ms. Ellison has conducted workshops at San Francisco City College [for a mix of] administrators, faculty, counselors, clerical and custodial workers, and security staff. Each person became an active participant letting down his/her defenses, asking questions, doing role-plays. I have never seen such a positive response from such a diverse group of people. [Sharon role-played situations with people in various positions, including] a security guard who role-played a dangerous situation with street gangs on school property, learning to transform power struggles into effective dialogues. Perhaps, most importantly, everyone learned how to communicate with each other, whether we were colleague, supervisor or subordinate. It built a sense of community throughout the college.

—Jennifer Biehn, *Dean of Student Services, City College of San Francisco, CA*

*[This training was provided in the early 1990's when there were significant racial tensions on the City College campuses.]*

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I have used PNDC skills when working with teens in trauma over incidents of community violence, as well as with parents and families from diverse backgrounds, many of who are immigrants. They absolutely love the work because they gain the tools for knowing how to say things in a very honest way that allows people from diverse backgrounds, communities, cultures, groups feel understood, welcomed, and supported by each other.

These tools are increasingly powerful in how I build alliances and partnerships with parents, youth, teachers and administrators in schools, and with other community organizations. I make stronger contributions as a commissioner with the Human Rights Commission, and I've been asked to help facilitate a conversion with the Richmond, CA City Council about having a clear code of ethics in their relationships with each other and our very diverse community. In my work as a community organizer I give out so much of the time and the PNDC skills I've learned not only replenish me, but make the difference between being successful at being who I want to be and having the impact I want to have.

—Demetria Saunders, *Youth Enrichment Strategies, Outreach Coordinator; Human Rights Commissioner; Richmond, CA*

*[Demetria has also made it part of her work to teach these skills to groups of predominantly black men in prison]*



I was introduced to Sharon's pioneering work on "Taking the war out of words" a couple of years ago. Since then, I have had an opportunity to hear Sharon in a workshop setting and have listened many times to an audio of her work. I am fascinated about the massive potential, benefit and influence this approach to communication can have on relationships at every level in society and indeed on the whole of humanity. If we value and respect the pluralism around us and if we are to change our communication model to become truly a dialogue then non defensive communication is a condition sin qua non. Sharon's work needs to become part of the curriculum of our school system and beyond and part of the training of our biggest asset, which is our human talent.

*—Karim Sunderji, Mediator, Toronto, Canada*