

A New Pattern for Conflicted Couples – Listening and Validation

(adapted from Gottman's Conflict Blueprint)

Introduction

Just like at the Canadian Tire Customer Service desk, when a partner feels a 'complaint' it does not need to become a fight. Avoid criticism and the 'Four Horsemen' (see 'Resources'). Instead follow a new rule for navigating your complaint: **Neither partner can move to 'fixing' until both of you can state your partner's position to your partner's satisfaction.**

So, if you are the one with the complaint, then you are the 'Speaker' and you would prepare your presentation on the following guidelines.

Speaker

- ***ONE THING AT A TIME** - Isolate and choose only one topic
- ***SAFE** - Find an agreed time with appropriate heads-up to your partner. Do not engage if there is too much emotion. Create a safe environment for both of you.
- ***NO BLAME** - Remove any 'you' statements or approaches that may be interpreted by your partner as blame.
- ***TAP INTO YOUR FEELINGS** - Use 'I feel' statements, drawing on what it feels like to be you in the situation you are describing. Remember that, "I feel that you..." type statements do not qualify! Rather, try statements like, "I feel unheard and lonely." Or, "I feel like I'm in the doghouse."
- ***BITE-SIZE** - Breakdown your remarks into small units; your listeners is going to try to paraphrase you and will fail if there is too much in each part.
- ***STATE YOUR NEED** - Be sure you include your **positive need** somewhere in your position. A positive need lets your listener learn a concrete thing you hope for out of the dialogue.

Meanwhile, the other partner becomes the 'Listener' who also has specific tasks and guidelines;

Listener

- ***LOSE YOUR OWN AGENDA** - Quickly determine what your usual or historical 'agenda' is on this topic and rigorously suspend it from your mind. You are now *the listener*. There will be time for you in a moment when you become the Speaker.
- ***LISTEN FOR EMOTION** - Listen for your partner's 'heart' (emotions and meanings) as you hear their words. This is where empathy is reintroduced into a suffering relationship.
- ***ACTIVE LISTENING** - In your own words *paraphrase what you think your partner is trying to say*. Begin with a phrase like, 'So, what I hear you saying is...' and finish with asking, 'Did I get that right?' If you got it ask, 'Is there more?' If you didn't get it let your partner speak again and then try again as above. Avoid saying, 'I understand' as it says nothing of their content and sounds patronizing.
- ***VALIDATE** - When your partner is satisfied that you got it validate them with something like, 'It makes sense to me that you would think/feel that way because...' Remember that validating your partner does not need to imply agreement with their position, just that you 'get' and appreciate their position.
- ***CLARIFY** - It is OK to ask gentle, probing questions to improve your understanding of your partner. Avoid asking 'Why' questions. If the speaker knew those answers they probably would not have a complaint in the first place.

Conclusion

Once you have achieved the Speakers satisfaction, switch Speaker/Listener roles. Use a white hankie or another object for the 'Speaker' to hold if you need a symbol for who is doing what. This process will become easier, less rigid and more fluid with use. Listening and Validation are essential relational ingredients before a healthy couple can move on to effective problem-solving. This tool is not meant to replace usual friendly conversation.

