Communicating Safely and Clearly: The Speaker-Listener Technique

The Speaker-Listener technique offers you an alternative way of communicating when issues are hot or sensitive, or likely to get that way. Any conversation in which you want to increase clarity and safety can benefit from this technique. Most couples (although not all) can decide whether to go out for Chinese food without this technique, but many can use more help in dealing with sensitive issues like money, sex, and in-laws. It's the structure of the technique that makes it work.

Rules for Both of You
1. **The speaker has the floor.** Use a real object to designate the floor (i.e. coosh ball, pencil, etc.)
2. **Share the floor.** Switch roles, as you go, and continue back and forth as the floor changes hands.
3. **No problem solving.** When using this technique you are going to focus on having good discussions. You must consciously avoid coming to solutions prematurely.

Rules for the Speaker
1. **Speak for yourself.** Don’t mind read. Talk about your thoughts, feelings, and concerns, not your perceptions or interpretations of the Listener’s point of view or motives. Try to use “I” statements, and talk about your own point of view
2. **Talk in small chunks.** A good rule of thumb is to keep your statements to a sentence or two, especially when first learning the technique.
3. **Stop and let the Listener paraphrase.** After saying a bit, perhaps a sentence or two, stop and allow the Listener to paraphrase what you just said. If the paraphrase was not quite accurate, you should politely restate what was not heard in the way is was intended to be heard. Your goal is to help the listener hear and understand your point of view.

Rules for Both of You
1. **Paraphrase what you hear.** Briefly repeat back what you heard the Speaker say, using your own words if you like, to make sure you understand what was said. The key is that you show your partner that you are listening as you restate what you heard, without any interpretations. If the paraphrase is not quite right, the Speaker should gently clarify the point being made.
2. **Don’t rebut.** Focus on the Speaker’s message. While in the Listener role, you may not offer your opinion or thoughts. This is the hardest part of being a good Listener. Good listening does not equal agreement. Wait until you get the floor to state your response—in the form of an “I” statement.

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1 A Lasting Promise—Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, Milt Bryan

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Complaining Appropriately

“When you did (or didn’t do) X in situation Y, I felt Z”

X= what they did
Y= specific situation
Z= how you felt about the specific scenario

“When you didn’t call to tell me you were going to be late (X) for our dinner appointment (Y), I felt frustrated (Z).”

“When you bounced several checks (X) and the bank called (Y), I felt embarrassed and angry (Z).”

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2 Why Marriages Succeed and Fail …And How You Can Make Yours Last—John Gottman
Top 10 Intimacy Needs

Acceptance
Romans 15:7 So accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.
Met: secure, confident, feels of worth, relaxed, peaceful
Unmet: performance oriented, workaholic, poor self-image, insecure; defensive

Affection
Romans 16:16 Greet each other in Christian love. All the churches of Christ send you their greetings.
Met: secure, free to give, feels of being loved and comforted
Unmet: aloof and distant, uncomfortable being physically close to people, cold and unfeeling, promiscuous, flirting, clinging to others of the opposite sex, unclear behaviors with opposite sex

Appreciation
1 Corinthians 11:2 I am so glad, dear friends, that you always keep me in your thoughts and you are following the Christian teaching I passed on to you.
Met: positive and optimistic, good work ethic, grateful, encouraging to others
Unmet: easily discouraged and pessimistic, performance oriented, insecure, self-doubt

Approval
Romans 14:18 If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God. And other people will approve of you, too.
Met: productive, confident, good self-image
Unmet: search for approval, performance oriented, workaholic, “self made,” lack self-confidence, insecure, confused, fearful

Attention
1 Corinthians 12:25 This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally.
Met: good self-image, confident, feelings of “I’m important,” secure, willing to be a servant; attentive to other’s needs
Unmet: promiscuous, boisterous, poor self-image, feelings of being worthless, delinquency, shy and withdrawn, concentration on appearance

Top Ten Intimacy Needs—David Ferguson and Don McMinn
Strong Marriages, Strong Families

Comfort (empathy)
Romans 12:15 When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow.
Met: caring, compassionate, positive, giving, sensitive, self-confident, loving
Unmet: fearful, insecure, controlling, possessive, anxious, worrier, negative, rigid, self-reliant

Encouragement
1 Thessalonians 5:11 So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.
Hebrews 10:24 Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds.
Met: “can do” attitude, positive and optimistic, creative, productive
Unmet: lack of confidence, failure complex, defeatist attitude, pessimistic, frustrated, withdrawn, negative

Respect
Romans 12:10 Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.
Met: respectful of others, freedom to “grow up,” giving, sensitive, high self-worth, loving, positively assertive
Unmet: feelings of worthlessness and inferiority, insecure, demanding, intolerant, “victim” mind-set

Security
Romans 12:16 Live in harmony with each other. Don’t try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don’t think you know it all!
Met: full of faith, confident, giving, grateful, positive, adaptable, flexible
Unmet: fearful, insecure, controlling, possessive, anxious, worrier, negative, rigid, self-reliant

Support
Galatians 6:2 Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.
Met: encouraged, grateful, feelings of being loved, hope, sensitive to “giving” opportunities
Unmet: discouraged, weariness toward life, fear of failure, timidity

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Conflict

Conflict is the process of resolving different perspectives regarding an important issue.

Truths about Conflict

- Conflict is neither good nor bad in and of itself—how couples handle conflict is what can be classified as good or bad.
- Conflict won’t damage a relationship or destroy a marriage, but mishandling conflict can.
- Most of us haven’t had great examples of conflict to learn from.
- Conflict can lead to change and growth.
- Conflict can lead to resolution.
- Conflict can lead to intimacy.
- Conflict can be disruptive, at best, and at worst, destructive.
- Conflict does not feel good.
- Conflict causes a person to use a lot of emotional and physical energy.
- Low levels of conflict don’t mean that the marriage is happy.

Resolving conflict often happens in a “fight”… which must be done fairly if marriages are to prosper and grow.

If you’re going to fight, when should you do it?

- Ephesians 4:26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,
  - “don’t let the sun go down” doesn’t mean you can’t sleep... it means you may have to schedule an appropriate time to have the discussion and resolve the issue.
  - Sometimes sleeping will help us get more clarity, rest, and patience when addressing the issue.
- Mark 1:35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.
  - Jesus prayed and brought his issues to God during the early morning hours.
- If you do schedule another time to have the discussion, you need to be able to release the anger, to God, so as not to become bitter while waiting for the set time.

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4 The Fighting Marriage—Focus on the Family

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Where should you fight?

- Again, Mark 1:35—Jesus went to a solitary place.
- Jesus brought His issues to God in a quiet, reflective, and peaceful place when He could feel comfortable releasing His emotions.
- Many couples choose to keep their bedroom as a sacred place and choose not to fight in the bedroom.
- Usually better in the privacy of your own home, when the children are out, and the TV is off—as opposed to the grocery store parking lot or at your in-law’s house.
- Conflict resolution should take place at a time and place that give you and your spouse the best opportunity to work out the issues at hand—without interference or inhibiting factors.
- What about children:
  - It is generally good for kids to see healthy conflict
  - Conflict needs to take place in private if it concerns a matter for which the parents are needing to provide a united front,
  - Kids can benefit from seeing conflict and its resolution.

How do you fight?

- All conflict resolution should be just that… discussing ways to resolve a conflict. If you are fighting for the purpose of gaining control, proving a point, or any other selfish reason, you are not behaving according to God’s plan for your life or your marriage.
- Your spouse is not your enemy.
- No name calling—be careful with your tongue (Proverbs 15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.)
- Don’t bring peripheral people, subjects, issues, or objects into the discussion.
- Protect the safety of your spouse.
- Anger is a normal emotion, but we must choose how we express it.
- Speak softly.
- Speak from your perspective using “I” statements… don’t say “You…”, “You always…”, or “You never…”
Couple Conversation Starters

Sometimes we end up in a rut of talking about the same things—usually kids and work—all the time. You can use the following questions/statements to spur conversation between you and your spouse. Feel free to delve deeper or elaborate on these questions as you and your spouse feel more comfortable with disclosing your thoughts, emotions, memories, and feeling to one another.

1. Name one thing you wish your mate would do more often.
2. Give your definition of a good marriage.
3. When is your relationship the happiest?
4. Talk about the importance of spending time alone with your mate.
5. In what ways do you take your spouse for granted?
7. Do you think marriage should be a fifty-fifty partnership? Explain.
8. Express appreciation to your mate for something that he/she did recently.
9. How do you feel about the way you and your spouse spend weekends?
10. Complete the statement: “After a quarrel, I…”
11. What is something you really like about your relationship?
12. What are some ways your mate encourages you?
13. Complete the statement: “Something that embarrasses me is…”
14. What quality do you like best in your spouse?
15. How do you show that you love your spouse?
16. What are your goals in your relationship?
17. What do you enjoy doing as a couple?
18. Tell you mate what you would give him/her if you could give any gift in the world.
19. Look at your mate and complete this statement: Something I can give you is…”
20. If your mate were to write your epitaph, what do you think it would say?
21. What is something you remember your mate telling you about his/her childhood?
22. Complete the statement: “An emotional need I have at this time in my life is…”
23. In what ways does your mate let you know that he/she loves you?

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5 Adapted from The Ungame
24. Look at your mate and complete this statement: “One thing I want from you is…”
25. How would your relationship be different if you knew you only had one year to live?
26. What is something you did when you first entered your relationship that you no longer do?
27. In what ways would you like for your relationship to improve?
28. When you die, what do you want to be remembered for?
29. Make a statement about your self image.
30. What are some reasons for getting married?
31. Complete the statement: “Before I entered this relationship, I…”
32. What constitutes a good sexual relationship?
33. Describe your marriage as you are currently experiencing it.
34. Talk about the importance of forgiveness in a relationship.
35. Complete this statement: “I wish I felt free to…”
36. What was your first impression when you met your mate for the first time?
37. Tell you mate “I love you” without using words.
The Policy of Joint Agreement

*The Policy of Joint Agreement:* Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse.

How to Negotiate the Policy of Joint Agreement

1) **Set ground rules to make negotiations pleasant and safe**
   a) Be pleasant and cheerful throughout your discussion of the issue
   b) Put safety first—do not use threats, even if your negotiations fail
   c) If you reach an impasse, stop for a while and come back to the issue later

   ***Under no circumstances should you be disrespectful or judgmental of each other’s opinions or desires. Your negotiations should accept and respect your differences.***

2) **Identify the problem from the perspectives of both you and your spouse**
   - Be able to state each other’s position on the issue before you go on to find a solution.
   - Each should be able to describe what you would like and why you would like it.
   - Then, explain each other’s position to each other’s satisfaction.
   - Be sure you fully understand each other before you go any further.
   - And, respect your differences of opinion.

3) **Brainstorm solutions with abandon**
   - Spend some time thinking of all sorts of ways to handle the problem and don’t correct each other when you hear of a plan that you don’t like—you’ll have a chance to do that when you come to the 4th step.
   - If you use your imagination, you will have a long list of possible solutions.

4) **Choose the solution that is appealing to both of you**
   - Some of the solutions will only satisfy one of you, but not both.
   - However, scattered among the list will be solutions that both find attractive.
   - From the ones you both enjoy—choose the one that you both like the most.
   - If you can’t find one that you can both enthusiastically agree upon, go back to step 3 and brainstorm some more.

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6 *The Four Gifts of Love*—Willard Harley