The Speaker/Listener Technique*

The speaker/listener technique is not all that different from other approaches and ideas about good communication in the literature. However, it is more structured and more specific than what we have seen others writing about. We have taught this approach to communication to hundreds of couples and find that it is very helpful to couples if they are willing to try it, practice it, and give it a chance to work. Remember that this is not a way to communicate most of the time. It is a way to communicate when you are dealing with a really difficult topic. This can be a powerful way to put James 1:19 into practice.

*You must understand this, my beloved: * let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; James 1:19 NRSV*

Before this technique will be really useful, you need to practice it with easier topics.

Rules for both of you:

1. **The Speaker is the one with the floor.** Use a real object to designate the floor. Your leader may hand out a “floor” for you to use. You can use anything, though: a pen, a piece of paper, a paperback book, anything at all. If you do not have the floor, you are the Listener. As Speaker and Listener you follow the rules for each role below. The speaker keeps the floor while the listener paraphrases, and until he or she is ready to give up the floor.

2. **You share the floor over the course of a conversation.** One has it to start, and may say a number of things, then it is passed to the Listener who becomes the Speaker. You switch roles and continue.

3. **No problem solving.** During this technique you are going to focus on a good discussion, not trying to prematurely come to solutions.

4. **Stay on one subject at a time.** Some subjects are pretty big and can cover a lot of ground. Just be careful not to be talking about many different things at once.

5. **You can stop the flow for a moment if something is unclear or not going right.** However, do not stop the technique and get into big discussions about what each other is not doing right. Just get back on task and follow the rules.

**Rules for the Speaker**

1. **Don’t go on and on.** The Speaker talks about his or her feelings and concerns in small enough bits that the listener can paraphrase. You will have plenty of opportunity to say all you want.

2. **After saying a bit, stop and allow the Listener to paraphrase what has been said.** If the paraphrase was not quite accurate, the Speaker should politely restate the part that was not correctly understood.

3. **Speak for yourself.** The Speaker tries to use “I’ statements, talking about their side of the issue.
4. You can pass the floor at any time to the listener to hear their side of the issue.

Rules for the Listener:

1. **Paraphrase what the Speaker is saying.** Briefly repeat back what you heard the Speaker say, using your own words if you like, and make sure you understood what the Speaker meant to convey.

2. **You can ask for examples or explanations of something the Speaker said.** These questions can only be about something the Speaker has already said that you are unsure of, not questions challenging them or getting them off track. For example, “When you said you were upset about what I did, I wasn’t sure what part upset you. Could you say more about that?” Paraphrase most of the time.

3. **Do not offer your opinion or thoughts until you get the floor.** This is the hardest part of being a good listener. Your job is to speak only in the service of understanding the Speaker as well as possible. Any words or gestures to show your opinion are not allowed, including making faces! You will get your turn.

4. **Concentrate on what the Speaker is saying, and attempt to edit out your internal responses.** In arguments, people are usually not listening, preparing their next point instead. Focus on your partner’s point of view! Validate your partner.

The Speaker/Listener Technique has many advantages. For the spouse(s) who tends to withdraw from conversations about potential conflict areas, the structure makes it much safer to remain in the conversation. For the spouse who is usually in the pursuer role, structure in conversations assures that you will be heard and issues are going to get addressed. This gets you closer to a win-win situation, and out of hopeless win-lose cycles. The structure of the technique also makes it much harder to get into escalation. In fact, it would be nearly impossible if you both follow the rules and work at showing respect.

The technique has other advantages, as well. First, as the speaker, you know immediately if what you meant to say is what the listener heard. Many bad arguments start with a miscommunication between spouses, and escalate from there. Second, the technique makes it pretty hard (though not impossible) to invalidate or put down your partner. The best thing that can happen is for each of you to feel validated about what you are saying. **Again, this does not mean you have to agree with each other, but in validating each other you show that you respect each other and your ideas.**

Often this takes place when you briefly let your partner know that you understand how they might feel the way they do, even if you disagree. You could say “I understand” or “I see what you mean” at the end of a paraphrase. This does not mean that you agree, just that you can see it from their perspective. Save agreement or disagreement for your turn as Speaker.

**KEEP THESE GUIDELINES HANDY FOR REVIEW.**