

8- Four Guidelines for Successful Negotiation

Let's begin with the assumption that you and your spouse do not agree about something. It may be about how to meet an unmet need, or about overcoming a thoughtless habit that is bothering one of you. In fact, it may be about anything that has become a conflict.

Chances are that you have been responding to this issue in one of three ways: 1) ignoring your own feelings and doing it your spouse's way, 2) ignoring your spouse's feelings and doing it your way, or 3) ignoring the problem entirely. Negotiation, however, requires something very different--taking your feelings and the feelings of your spouse into account simultaneously. The following guidelines will help you achieve that very important objective:

Guideline 1: Set ground rules to make negotiation pleasant and safe.

Most couples view negotiation as a trip to the torture chamber. That's because their efforts are usually fruitless, and they come away from the experience battered and bruised. Who wants to negotiate when you have nothing but disappointment and pain to look forward to?

So before you begin to negotiate, set some basic ground rules to make sure that you both enjoy the experience. Why? Because you repeat activities that you like, and avoid those you don't like. Since you should negotiate as often as a conflict arises, it should always be an enjoyable experience so you make it a regular part of your married life.

To be certain that you will have a pleasant and safe negotiating environment, I suggest three ground rules.

Ground Rule #1:

Try to be pleasant and cheerful throughout negotiations

It's fairly easy to start discussing an issue while in a good mood. But negotiations can open a can of worms, so be prepared for negative emotional reactions. Your spouse may begin to feel uncomfortable about something you say. In fact, out of the clear blue, he or she may inform you that there will be no further discussion.

I know how upset and defensive couples can become when they first tell each other how they feel about the way they have been treated by each other. That's why I first coach them individually to prepare them for negative comments. I simply tell them what I am telling you--try to be as positive and cheerful as you can be, especially if your spouse says something that offends you.

Ground Rule #2:

Put safety first--do not make demands, show disrespect, or become angry when you negotiate, even if your spouse makes demands, shows disrespect, or becomes angry with you

Once the cat is out of the bag and you have told each other what is bothering you or what you want, you have entered one of the most dangerous phases of negotiation. If your feelings have been hurt, you are tempted to retaliate. Your Taker is very persuasive at this point, and unless you make a special effort to resist its advice, your negotiation will turn into an argument. But if you can keep each other safe, you will be able to use your intelligence to help you make the changes you both need.

Ground Rule #3:

If you reach an impasse where you do not seem to be getting anywhere, or if one of you is starting to make demands, show disrespect, or become angry, stop negotiating and come back to the issue later.

Just because you can't resolve a problem at a particular point in time doesn't mean you can't find an intelligent solution in the future. Don't let an impasse prevent you from giving yourself a chance to think about the issue. Let it incubate for a while, and you'll be amazed what your mind can do.

If your negotiation turns sour, and one of you succumbs to the temptation of the Taker with demands, disrespect or anger, end the discussion by changing the subject to something more pleasant. After a brief pause, your spouse may apologize and wish to return to the subject that was so upsetting. But don't go back into the minefield until it has been swept clear of mines. The mines, of course, are demands, disrespect and anger, and you must discuss how to avoid them before you return to the issue. You can't negotiate if your destructive instincts control your discussion.

Guideline 2: Identify the problem from both perspectives.

Once you have set ground rules that guarantee a safe and enjoyable discussion, you are ready to negotiate. But where do you begin? First, you must understand the problem from the perspectives of both you and your spouse.

Most couples go into marital negotiation without doing their homework. They don't fully understand the conflict itself, nor do they understand each other's perspectives. In many cases, they are not even sure what they really want.

One of the responsibilities of a marriage counselor is to help couples clarify the issues that separate them. I'm amazed at how often the clarification itself solves the problem. "Oh, that's what we've been fighting about!" many couples say. And once they understand the issue and each other's opinions, they realize that the conflict is not as serious as they thought. Or when the issue is clarified, the solution is immediately apparent and the conflict is resolved.

Respect is the key to success in this phase of negotiation. Once the issue has been identified, and you hear each other's perspectives, it is extremely important to understand each other--not try to straighten each other out. Remember that your goal is enthusiastic agreement, and there is no way you will be enthusiastic if you reject each other's perspectives. In fact, the only way you will

reach an enthusiastic agreement is if you not only understand each other, but also come up with a solution that accommodates each other's perspectives.

It's so much easier to negotiate the right way when your goal is enthusiastic agreement. It eliminates all the strategies that attempt to wear each other down with abuse. You may as well forget about demands because they never lead to an enthusiastic agreement. The same can be said for disrespectful judgments and angry outbursts. If you are looking for real solutions to your problem, you will find them in whatever yields an enthusiastic agreement.

But when I take demands, disrespect and anger away from some couples, they are left feeling naked. They don't know how to discuss an issue if they can't demand, show disrespect or express their anger. And without those Love Busters they often feel hopeless about resolving their problems, because they have rarely approached their problems with the goal of finding a win-win solution. And they simply don't know how to do it. It's as if the only way they know how to communicate in marriage is through demands, disrespect and anger. Is that true of you and your spouse?

If so, remember that with practice you will begin to feel more comfortable approaching every conflict with the goal of mutual agreement. You learn to ask each other questions, not to embarrass each other but to gain a fuller understanding of what it would take to make each other happy. And when you think you have the information you need to consider win-win solutions, you are ready for the next step.

Guideline 3: Brainstorm with abandon.

You've set the ground rules. You've identified the problem from each other's perspective. Now you're ready for the creative part--looking for solutions that you think will make you both happy. I know that can seem impossible if you and your spouse have drifted into incompatibility. But the climb back to compatibility has to start somewhere, and if you put your minds to it, you'll think of options that please you both.

When you brainstorm, quantity is often more important than quality. Let your minds run wild; go with just about any thought that might satisfy both of your Takers. If you let your creative side run free, you are more likely to find a lasting solution.

Carry a pad of paper or a pocket notebook, with you so you can write down ideas as you think of them throughout the day. Some problems may require days of thought, and pages of ideas. But keep in mind your goal--a solution that would appeal to both of your Takers.

Resist the "I'll let you do what you want this time if you let me do what I want next time" solution. For example, imagine that you want to go out with your friends after work, leaving your spouse with the children. So to arrive at an enthusiastic agreement for that thoughtless activity, you suggest that you take the children another night so that your spouse can go out with his or her friends.

What you're really proposing here is that each of you will sacrifice so that the other can have fun. The problem with that arrangement is that you are agreeing to behavior that makes one of you unhappy whenever the other is happy, and as I've said earlier, once you have made an agreement, it can easily turn into a habit.

You will be tempted to offer those kinds of win-lose solutions because win-win solutions are more difficult to discover. Your concept of fairness may be that if you are both suffering equally, that's fair. But if you want an effective outcome, by the time you are finished you should have arrived at a solution where neither of you suffers. And each part of the solution should not require either of you to sacrifice so that the other can be happy.

Guideline 4: Choose the solution that meets the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement -- mutual and enthusiastic agreement.

After brainstorming, you will have come up with some good and some bad solutions. Now you need to sort through them. Good solutions are those both you and your spouse consider desirable. In other words they meet the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement. Bad solutions, on the other hand, only take the feelings of one spouse into account at the expense of the other. The best solution is the one that makes you and your spouse most enthusiastic.

Many problems are relatively easy to solve. You will be amazed at how quickly you can find an enthusiastic agreement to some problems when you have decided to hold off on any action until you both agree. That's because when you know you must take each other's feelings into account, you become increasingly aware of what it will take to reach a mutual agreement. Instead of considering options that are clearly not in your spouse's best interest, you reject them immediately and begin to think of options you know would make both you and your spouse happy. It's amazing how smart you can be when you direct your mind to find smart solutions.

For example, consider the situation we mentioned above. You would like to go out with your friends after work, leaving your spouse with the children. Before you had agreed to the Policy of Joint Agreement, you may have simply called your spouse to say you would be late, or worse yet, arrived home late without having called. But now, you must come to an enthusiastic agreement prior to the event. It certainly restricts your freedom of choice, but on the other hand, it protects your spouse from your thoughtless behavior.

After having presented your case, you would probably hear immediate objections. Your spouse might feel that he or she does not appreciate your having fun while he or she is home battling the kids. "Besides," your spouse might mention, "our leisure activities should be with each other." In response, you might suggest that your spouse drop the kids off at your parents' (which you will call to make the arrangements) and join you.

If you and your spouse can enthusiastically agree on that suggestion, you are home free. Your parents take your children for a couple of hours, and your spouse joins you wherever it was you were planning to meet your friends. Problem solved. In fact, if going out after work with friends becomes a regular event, you can plan ahead for it by arranging the child-care in advance.

Of course, other problems can be very difficult to solve, involving many steps. Learning how to meet each other's emotional needs, for example, can require quite a bit of trial and error, along with the time and energy it takes to create the habits that eventually make meeting a need almost effortless. If one of you struggles with an addiction, you will find that the Policy of Joint Agreement simply cannot be followed at all until you have overcome the addiction. Whether it's drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, or any other addiction, you will find that thoughtfulness is almost impossible to practice as long as you are addicted. You must sweep the addiction completely out of your life before you will be able to negotiate in the way I have suggested.

When a couple has tried to follow my advice, but can't seem to negotiate with each other regardless of how hard they try, addiction is usually the culprit. In fact, a good way to determine if you are addicted to a substance or activity is to see if you can follow the Policy of Joint Agreement after you have agreed to it. If you find you can't, chances are, you're an addict. If you follow the guidelines I have suggested, negotiation can be an enjoyable way to learn about each other. And if you avoid unpleasant scenes and negotiate to an enthusiastic agreement, you can resolve with relative ease all of the many conflicts you will have throughout life.

Whenever a conflict arises, keep in mind the importance of depositing as many love units as possible while avoiding withdrawals. In other words, use the opportunity to find a solution that will make your spouse happy, and avoid solutions that make either of you unhappy.

The 9th and 10th Basic Concepts will help you understand why finding win-win resolutions to conflicts can be so tough. They will encourage you to avoid your natural instincts to either let yourself lose (your Giver), or let your spouse lose (your Taker}.