

Ten Rules for Effective Communication in Conflictual Situations with Your Partner

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The ways in which you verbally communicate to your partner--the ways in which you vocalize your thoughts and feelings--need to be varied and fluid in order to adapt to the many different moods and circumstances involved in your relationship. However, when you find yourself in conflictual or potentially conflictual situations with your partner, then your verbal communication needs to become more rule-governed. It needs to become more rule-governed because conflict with your partner has a tendency to generate visceral reactions that can significantly limit your capacity to both send and receive clear messages. Here are ten basic rules that Wile (1988) suggests will help you communicate more effectively in conflictual situations with your partner:

- Rule 1.** Make “I statements” rather than “you statements.” Statements that begin with a “you” or a “you are” can be more easily interpreted as accusations in conflictual situations. When they are interpreted in this way, then your partner can become more defensive. To minimize this possibility, keep your statements in the first person. For example, don’t say “You aren’t listening.” Say something like “I feel frustrated because I don’t think I’m not getting my point across.”
- Rule 2.** Don’t say “always” or “never.” The terms “never” and “always” are usually exaggerations that can provoke your partner unnecessarily. Moreover, statements that include these terms cry out for refutation--all your partner has to do is point out an exception and your point is negated. Because of these hazards, stick to less extreme qualifiers like “sometimes” or “occasionally.”
- Rule 3.** Don’t directly interrupt. There are many disadvantages to directly interrupting. It can deprive your partner of the chance to have his or her say, it make your partner angry, and it can make him or her feel like not listening to you. But there are also important disadvantages to *not* directly interrupting. Especially if you are having adverse reactions to what your partner is saying, your patience can lead to a buildup of frustration and you can actually end up losing your patience by not interrupting. So you have to become adept at interrupting with out interrupting, namely, at finding ways of expressing your reactions that don’t completely cut off your partner. For example, say something noninflammatory like “I won’t interrupt you, but I want you to know that I’m having some strong reactions right now and I can hardly wait to talk.”
- Rule 4.** Paraphrase what your partner said. Paraphrasing simply involves putting into your own words what you think your partner said and then checking with him or her to see if you got it right. This rule is based on an important insight, namely, that we often stop listening to one another without realizing it. We don’t fully see that we have temporarily slipped into a distraught or adversarial mode. Implementing this rule

keeps you listening to your partner--one of the most important elements in effective communication and conflict resolution.

- Rule 5.** Don't mindread. Mindreading is telling your partner what you think he or she is thinking, feeling, or trying to do without the benefit of asking your partner or waiting until your partner tells you. Statements like "You were trying to make me feel guilty" and "You feel threatened by my success" can promote defensiveness and bring a conversation to an angry halt. Your partner generally doesn't like you making such guesses about his or her feelings and intentions. And your partner particularly doesn't like it if these guesses are wrong (which they often are) because a lot of mindreading is an expression of your fears put in the form of assertions about your partner's feelings or motives.
- Rule 6.** Stick to the topic. Shifting to another topic will complicate the situation, will frustrate your partner, and will probably make him or her even less likely to listen. So given all of these problems, why not stick to the subject? The answer is that staying on the topic often puts you at a disadvantage. Consequently, in order to put yourself in a better position in the argument or to move away from a valid point, your partner is making, you try to shift topics. The difficulty is that this kind of jockeying for position has only short-run gains and, in the end, tends to make things much worse.
- Rule 7.** Avoid old grievances. The existing differences between you and your partner are usually difficult enough to negotiate without bringing up unresolved issues from the past. Other than giving you a chance to air your old hurts and frustrations, bringing up past grievances in a conflict situation usually just makes the conversation more adversarial and increases the likelihood that your partner won't listen to you. Besides, in many cases the old grievances are simply a dramatized versions or clearer forms of the concerns you have now. So stick to the present concerns.
- Rule 8.** Avoid using negative labels. Negative labels are broad terms used to generalize about supposed limitations in your partner's character and personality. Some of these labels like "jerk," "ass," "idiot," etc. are highly inflammatory and will almost certainly accelerate a conversation into further conflict; other labels like "egotistical," "irresponsible," "controlling," etc. are not as caustic, but will often derail a conversation into a defensive and argumentative mode. So refrain from negative labeling or be prepared to suffer the consequences.
- Rule 9.** Don't unload complaints. We all tend to store up complaints about our partner in the interest of being polite, respectful, tactful, and considerate. As a result, resentment tends to build up in us and we are more prone to unload all of our complaints when we are in a frustrated conversation with our partner. If this happens, it has the effect of overloading the conversation and obscuring the significance of any initial concerns that came up in the conversation. Of course, the most effective strategy for avoiding these difficulties in the first place is to express your complaints in a more limited manner on a more ongoing basis.

Rule 10. Treat infractions of the above rules as clues. Violations of the above rules should be viewed as clues to use rather than mistakes to correct. The reality is that strictly obeying these rules is impossible. Everybody repeatedly breaks them. From this perspective there is little point in spending time pointing your finger at who is to blame. Instead, the focus should be on figuring out what breaking these rules means for you and your partner. For example, if you broke the paraphrase rule (#4), it could be a clue that you are feeling unlistened to yourself. Or if your partner broke the never or always rule (#2), it could be a clue to some other unexpressed emotions he or she is experiencing. The key here is to be able to take a look at what happened, so that later, when the dust has settled, you and the other person will be able to sit down together and talk about it.

Reference

Wile, B. W. (1988). *After the honeymoon: How conflict can improve your relationship*. New York: Wiley & Sons.