

A blueprint for handling conflict

From: *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage: America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship* by John Gottman Ph.D., Julie Schwartz Gottman, Ph.D., and Joan DeClaire

Some people avoid conflict because they fear getting hurt or hurting their partners. In fact, some know from experience that arguments with their partners always end up that way; the two start to disagree, the disagreement escalates and then “blows up.” Meanwhile, nothing gets resolved.

If that's your experience, the following exercise may help. Based on the ideas of social theorist Anatol Rappaport, we developed this exercise as a structure or “blueprint” for couples to use in talking about their differences.

Step 1. Set aside a quiet time to discuss one single conflict at length.

Step 2. Designate one person as the speaker and one person as the listener.

Step 3. The speaker begins talking about the conflict, saying everything they want to say about their point of view. The listener can ask questions and take notes. Writing things down gives the speaker the distinct feeling that what they're saying really matters to the listener—and that's the point of the exercise.

When the listener asks questions, those questions are simply to ensure understanding. *The listener must delay talking about solutions and postpone any attempt to try to persuade the speaker.* The listener can't use questions to imply he or she disagrees. The listener should not present his or her own views. The listener can't correct the partner's facts or express reactions to the speaker's view. The listener's job is simply to listen. The whole interaction should be civil and polite.

Step 4. When the speaker is completely finished, the listener restates the speaker's point of view. The speaker listens carefully and clarifies anything the listener didn't really seem to grasp. Then the listener restates the position. This process repeats until the speaker is satisfied that the listener really understands.

Step 5. Switch roles and start over with Step 1.

Once you've completed these steps, you or your partner have not yet persuaded each other to see things differently. You may still have conflicting points of view. The exercise postpones persuasion until each person can state the partner's entire point of view to the partner's satisfaction. Then, and only then, can persuasion begin. You may now discuss your differences and try to compromise, or you may still “agree to disagree.” Either way, however, it's likely that each of you will feel heard and better understood. In that state, you feel more emotionally connected to your partner, and that makes for a better relationship.