# COACHING WITH THE SPEAKER-LISTENER TECHNIQUE

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“Destructive language tends to produce destructive results.” *Sir John Templeton*

This lecture will address important points to remember when coaching a couple with the Speaker-Listener Technique. The content is derived from the authors of *Fighting for Your Marriage* (PREP).

Couples coaching has a natural affinity with marriage education. Couples coaching is simply marriage education applied or customized to a particular couple. Coaching involves teaching basic insights and training the couple in certain skills that allow them to solve their own conflicts and find their own way to adjust to the challenges facing them. It is not “marriage counseling” and the coach does not analyze the couple’s situation. It is not concerned with digging deeply into childhood roots of issues or analyzing motivations, although the couple might do that themselves. Coaching facilitates the partners coming to their own realizations about each other and they way they relate. The coach defines the path so to speak, and allows each couple to move along at their own pace.

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Though it does not require professional training, coaching a couple does require a great deal of confidence in the skills you are teaching as well as self-control. You can only guide someone toward a dynamic that *may* result in some insight or exchange of important emotions or information. It is not guaranteed. But through the encouragement of the coach, a couple may finally begin to break down some recurring patterns that were blocking them from deeper commitment, understanding or teamwork.

The Speaker-Listener Technique is a remarkably effective, all-purpose skill to teach couples. First, facilitating their communication allows them to tackle any issue on their own. Second, it can foster immediate emotional connection, since both partners will now be heard by the other. Many people feel loved just from being better understood. Third, it can quickly create a more positive and hopeful atmosphere in the relationship.

**The couple must “do the work” NOT the coach.**

If you have never used this technique or something similar before, you are encouraged to practice it yourself before you coach others. Practice with friends on relatively “safe” topics—views on a recent movie, deciding which restaurant to go to, figuring out whether to buy an appliance or not—just to get a handle on your role. Below are some tips and reminders for you to think about as you learn and learn to coach others in the Speaker-Listener Technique.

### “To remember” coaching checklist:

* Your goal is to get this couple using the skills of the Speaker-Listener Technique so that they will be able to internalize the method in future conversation.
* Think about timing—if one or both parties are extremely agitated, it might be better for them to have a time-out and try a structured conversation when emotions have cooled down.
* It will feel “unnatural” at first to the couple—reassure them that this is due to the learning phase. Remind them also that what comes naturally is not always constructive!
* Remind the speaker to use “I” statements. Don’t be judgmental; try saying something like, “It is more helpful if you focus on your experience and thoughts. Try using ‘I-statements.’”
* Watch the speaker isn’t saying too much that the listener will have trouble remembering and paraphrasing.
* Model paraphrasing if necessary: “What I hear you saying is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Is that what you were saying?”
* During the listener’s paraphrasing, if you hear them adding in their own interpretations, feelings or additional information, interrupt gently. Sometimes you can catch this before it happens when you hear a “Yes, but . . .” statement. Of course you can recognize that the listener is having an emotional reaction to what is being said, but remind the listener to edit out their own views. They will have their turn to have “the floor” and be able to say what they need to.
* If the listener is getting overwhelmed with his or her reaction to what is being said, such that they cannot listen further without “unloading” somehow, let them take a moment to jot down their thoughts on paper, so they are free to continue active listening. Encourage couples to have paper and pen nearby when using this technique just in case this happens.
* Be sure to ask the speaker if the listener has paraphrased accurately their views, before continuing on and especially before switching roles.
* The speaker holds a physical item representing the “floor” as long as he/she needs to have all of hr. his feelings and issues understood and accurately paraphrased back to him or her. When the speaker is finished as the speaker he/she passes it to the partner and now the roles switch and the speaker become s the listener.
* Make sure that the floor goes back and forth a few times during the discussion to give each partner the chance to practice both roles of speaker and listener.
* The goal is not to solve all of the problems in one session or even to solve any. The goal is to get them to listen well, understand each other and to validate each other.
* Be prepared to interrupt them and clarify the roles, structure or guidelines again. If they lose the structure the technique will not work well. It is up to you as the coach to keep them on track. It is hard work for most new coaches but the best way to learn!
* Encouragement and positive feedback, like, “now you’re working as a team!” from the coach can really be helpful. Couples often feel discouraged, as if there is no way out of their negative routine. Coaches should recognize even a modicum of success—small gains count as victories. Keep reminding them of the rules and to develop new skills.

The Speaker-Listener technique offers plenty of opportunities for character growth, since it encourages the practice of many virtues such as:

**Responsibility:** Taking responsibility for one’s own feelings, thoughts and perceptions. This helps to avoid blaming, accusing and withdrawal behaviors.

**Empathy:** It is tough to focus on the *experience* of others when we are agitated because our own feelings can be overwhelming. The structure of the method allows for the opportunity to practice empathy.

**Patience:** The structure of the method imposes the idea of “taking turns” which requires patience to fulfill. We are anxious to get our point of view across, but must wait (even biting our tongues!) before it is our turn to talk and be heard.

**Trust:** Continual cycles of conflict can erode couple’s trust in their abilities and sense of confidence in self-management. The result of good coaching is that the couple starts to trust their own resources—not those of the coach—and begins to see themselves again as a working *team,* in which neither person is perfect and neither person is always right or wrong. The way to work in conflicts is to establish a more effective direction for their collaborative conversations on difficult topics.

**Speaker Listener Technique Modeling**

For many couples, the speaker listener technique requires careful coaching as it goes contrary to common practice. For this reason you need to keep the couple sticking to the rules as stated. The following models some of the steps in the technique.

**SPEAKER:**

**Speak for yourself:**

1. Wrong: “You forget to call me on purpose!” (This is mind reading and a “You statement”.)

Right: “I feel upset. It seems as if you don’t call me on purpose.” (This is a statement of feeling, and not assuming the other’s motivation etc. This is an “I statement”.)

**Keep statements brief:**

2. Wrong: “I am sick and tired of your being late. I feel like you have no regard for me and all have to do. I have to fix dinner and keep it warm... it gets ruined after heating it up over and over again. I may have to run to the store but can’t leave the kids alone, so I can’t get what they need for lunch tomorrow. And I am worrying that something happened to you....” (This is way too much for anyone to follow and paraphrase) The coach should stop the speaker and remind them to give only brief statements.)

Right: “I am frustrated by your being late. I feel disregarded, with all I have to do for making a nice meal for you” (Good, sticks to the point, only two fairly short sentences. Makes an I

“I statement”, not a “you statement” because of the “I feel like …”)

**LISTENER:**

**Paraphrase what you hear**:

1. Wrong (from 1. above): “What are you talking about? I call you whenever I am running late!!” (This is a rebuttal and question, not listening.)

Right: “You feel upset and like I am intentionally not calling you when I am late.” (Good paraphrase, restates what was said while trying to understand the feeling and situation of the speaker, the listener is effectively listening and only focused on the other person right now, not focused on one self and a defense.)

2. Wrong (from 2. above): “Well, I am sick and tired of your yelling at me when I come home after working hard all day!” (This is a defensive rebuttal, not listening, not paraphrasing.)

Right: “You are frustrated by my coming home late. It feels to you like I am not thinking about your situation and things you have to do.” (Good paraphrase, reaching for feeling and content of statement while putting it in your own words, the listener is listening)