



**Breaking the Communication Stalemate:
How to Get People Talking When No One is Talking**

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Introduction

When disagreements between people reach the point that neither side is talking, it can be difficult to convince them to come back to the table. Without careful planning and agreed upon ground rules, conversations can easily lead to more fighting. Many clients have never learned how to communicate respectfully, especially when they disagree with the other side or have been emotionally hurt. This course offers the steps necessary to advance communication past a stalemate including dialogue examples for setting ground rules, responding to attacks, and clarifying issues.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Set ground rules to encourage respectful communication.
2. Respond to aggressive attacks and minimizing comments.
3. Clarify goals and stick to relevant issues.

Let's Get Started!

Establish Ground Rules

When clients experience a communication breakdown, tensions are high and the chance for damaging attacks increases. It can be difficult to encourage people to continue the dialogue mainly because they don't know how to speak differently. The first step in bridging the gap is to help them set up appropriate guidelines and then teaching them how to express their ideas differently. Before they can discuss content, they have to agree on how it will be shared. This alone can be a long process with no guarantees, but if clients need to talk to each other for a resolution, eventually they'll need to comply.

Concentrating on communication ground rules first also helps to create goodwill. Before you start discussing difficult topics, it's easier to agree that you'll treat each other with respect and listen fully. This is far more difficult to do in the middle of a heated discussion. Once you're on a roll, it's hard to stop! It's better to start with points of agreement on a neutral topic than to dive in without any boundaries. Here are some examples of guidelines for a respectful conversation:

- All discussions will be face-to-face.
- One person talks at a time.
- Listen fully to understand, *even if you disagree*.
- No interrupting.
- No name-calling, sarcasm, or use of profanity.
- No eye rolling or other intimidating behavior.
- No yelling.
- Stay on the agreed upon topic.

- Keep discussions focused on the present and future, not the past.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

Communication guidelines are appropriate when the conflict is emotionally charged or has escalated in the past. If two people have a history of communication breakdowns, then ground rules are necessary. Create them together rather than set down your own list of pre-determined rules. Here are three examples of how to get the conversation going:

- “Before we start, I’d like to ask you about setting a few ground rules that will help us stay on track.”
- “In the past, we’ve had a hard time remaining calm. How about this time we agree to how we want to treat each other.”
- “I want to make sure our conversation stays productive. What do you think are some good communication guidelines?”

It helps to write down your ground rules as a reminder of boundaries. If one of you should violate a rule, offer a gentle reminder of your agreement, but don’t point fingers. If it’s too hard to stay calm, even with ground rules, then it’s better to take a break rather than argue about who’s not following the rules. This step may need to be repeated multiple times before a real discussion can continue. Even so, it’s still a form of communication and a good example of healthy boundaries.

Monitor Nonverbal Signals

How you say something is more important than what you say. The old phrase, “actions speak louder than words,” really rings true. If you say you’re willing to work things out while crossing your arms over your chest, or staring at the ground, the message you’re really sending is the exact opposite. A major sign that you’re sending mixed messages is if people question your sincerity with, “I don’t trust you,” or “I don’t believe you.” When your words and actions are inconsistent, your body language broadcasts the loudest message.

Become aware of what your body language is saying and if it’s consistent with how you want to come across. Consider facial expressions such as eye contact (lack of or glaring), eye rolling, tight jaw, clenched teeth or furrowed brows. You may intend to appear friendly by plastering on a fake smile, but instead be communicating insincerity. The most appropriate facial expression is open, relaxed and responsive.

Posture is another nonverbal signal that speaks volumes. Whether sitting or standing you want to appear interested, but not intimidating. A relaxed posture is one that is upright with shoulders aligned over your hips, without being stiff or hunched over like you don’t care. Have you heard of people who talk with their hands? You do too! Making fists, pointing, or picking at your nails are examples of a strong messages that you’re either angry or anxious. Another nonverbal factor is your voice pitch, tone, and volume. Has anyone ever told you that “nothing” is

wrong but you knew by the tone of voice there's a big problem? That's why the truth of your message is all in the delivery.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

If the other person's nonverbal behavior is sending you mixed signals don't ignore the discrepancy because it will only come back to haunt you later. It's better to check things out early in the process. Here's how you can ask for clarification:

- "I hear you saying everything is fine, but the tone of your voice seems to be saying it's not. What's the truth?"
- "I noticed you rolled your eyes when I spoke. It makes me think you don't agree. What are your thoughts?"
- "When I see you tapping your toes, it seems to me you're anxious about speaking with me. Is everything okay?"
- "I know you say you're listening to me, but without any eye contact, I get the opposite impression. It would help me if you'd look at me."

By addressing and clarifying the nonverbal signal that's giving you reason to doubt a person's real message, you remain non-confrontational. Just make sure you state the behavior as your reason for asking rather than jumping to conclusions.

Listen and Paraphrase

Without a doubt, the toughest part of working through any conflict is listening to the other person's side when you think he's wrong. Listening well is the secret weapon to de-escalating an argument. It's more than waiting for the other person to stop talking so you can start. If you're really listening, you allow the other person to talk until you understand and he feels understood. In fact, *the real reason most people fight is not to get their way, but to be understood.*

Empathic listening is listening with the intent of understanding. (Empathy is different from sympathy, which is feeling sorry for someone.) It means you do your best to stand in the other person's shoes to see the situation from his perspective. This doesn't mean you have to agree or share similar experiences. You don't even have to like him! But you do have to be able to step outside yourself for a moment and consider the other side.

Listening with empathy means you have a goal of understanding the other person rather than defending yourself. You must give your full attention without multitasking. Fully concentrate on the message without thinking of your rebuttal and then clarify his main points by paraphrasing.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

One of the best ways to show you're listening is paraphrasing. That's when you repeat key points of the conversation back to the other person in order to clarify. Be careful not to do this by parroting

each and every word, because it could be interpreted as mocking him. For example, if he says, “I’m overwhelmed with work, I have way too many projects and then you keep asking me questions – it stresses me out!” You could paraphrase back, “I get that you’re overloaded with work and my questions add to your stress.” Here are some other ways to work paraphrasing into your conversation to let him know you’re listening:

- “Let me make sure I understand what you’re trying to tell me.”
- “This is what I hear you saying.”
- “I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Do you mean...?”
- “So what you’re trying to say is...”
- “You want me to know...”
- “If I’ve got it right, you feel...”

Paraphrase throughout the conversation so that you’re clarifying as you go, rather than waiting until the very end to find out if you understood. The best time to do it is when there’s a break in the conversation, after a major point has been made and before you share your side.

Clarify the Issue

You may think you know what the real issue is, but when you’re mad or hurt, it’s easy to perceive the other person as the problem (and by the way, *you* are likely the problem in his eyes). The surest way to shut down a conversation is to expect someone to sit and listen to all the reasons you think he’s a problem! Would you be willing to do that? In order to keep the lines of communication open, you need to separate the person from the issue, which means focusing on the behaviors or circumstances you want changed.

Remember to picture conflict as a triangle with you and the other person at the base, sharing equal power. At the top of the triangle is the issue. Examples of issues are behaviors (what you do and say), systems, rules, and communication processes. All of these things are changeable. But, if you make the person the problem he also becomes the solution. He has to change or nothing gets solved. Do you see what a helpless position this puts you in? Separating the person from the issue not only improves communication, but it also gives you back some resolution power.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

Intense emotions can cloud the real issue, so at first you may find it hard to separate the person from his behaviors or the circumstances. If you realize you’re using name calling or labeling, you’ll know you’ve resorted to making the person the problem. Here are some common examples:

- Instead of, “You’re a slob!” Say, “I’d like to discuss expectations for how our space looks.”
- Instead of, “You have anger issues.” Say, “I want to agree on when and how we’re going to express concerns to one another.”
- Instead of, “Everything would be fine if you weren’t so lazy.” Say, “I want to talk about how the workload is divided.”

- Instead of, “The issue is your attitude.” Say, “I don’t like it when you roll your eyes or speak in a sarcastic tone.”

Once you identify the behaviors or conditions you want addressed, make sure they’re the real issue. How would your relationship improve if these changes were made? Sometimes you can ask for things that have nothing to do with what you really want. This can happen if you’re too scared to get to the root of the problem and just skim the surface, or you’re making too many assumptions. If you expect the other person to read your mind and assume that he’ll know the other changes you really wanted, you’ll be disappointed. The first step is to get honest with yourself before you can communicate the issue clearly to someone else.

Eliminate Attacks

You may have heard the phrase, “Attack the problem, not the person.” It’s easier said than done when emotions are running high. If you feel hurt or embarrassed by someone, the natural response is to hurt him back. Launching verbal attacks may feel good for a brief moment, but in the long run, you’ll only feel worse. Either your words will destroy the other person or he’ll fight back harder to crush you. These situations can escalate into making threats, which is why you never want to start down the road of attacks.

As stated in the previous tip, getting clear on the issue will help you stay focused on what really matters. If you don’t start with attacks, he won’t be as defensive so you’ve already reduced the chances of an aggressive conversation by half. But, what if he attacks you anyway? Preparing ahead of time for this possibility will help you stay calm. Your response can either give fuel to an attack or make it fizzle. Make a personal commitment not to engage and instead assertively reinforce your boundaries.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

The fear of getting attacked can keep you from even starting a conversation. Instead of worrying that it might happen, plan for how to respond. By staying calm and redirecting the conversation, you can quickly dissipate the tension to move forward in a productive way. Here are some examples of how you can stand your ground against attacks:

- “Please keep your comments focused on the issue rather than personal attacks.”
- “This topic is important to me and I’d like to continue discussing it without hearing insults. Should we do that now or take a break?”
- “This is getting too heated. Let’s pick it up again when the conversation can stay focused on the issue.”
- “I want to talk to you, but not when it’s disrespectful. When you’re ready to discuss the problem without yelling, I’m available.”

- “I want to solve this problem without having a screaming match. If it’s not possible to calm down now, I suggest we take a break.”

You teach people how to treat you. The above responses let the other person know that you’re willing to talk, but not be attacked. Don’t continue a discussion if he refuses to stop yelling or becomes personally insulting. That type of behavior is a violation of boundaries. Once he learns that you won’t engage in a battle, he’ll be forced to change his approach.

No Minimizing

There’s nothing more frustrating than being told that what’s bothering you is, “No big deal.” Minimizing is when you downplay the importance of feelings or details that you don’t like, agree with, or understand. The message you’re sending is that because it’s not important to you, it doesn’t matter. This attitude takes on a condescending tone by invalidating the other person.

Each person’s feelings are non-negotiable and need to be honored. No one has the right to tell you what you feel is wrong or unimportant. Yet, minimizing slips into many conflicts with phrases like, “You shouldn’t feel that way,” “No one else feels that way,” “You’re overreacting,” “You’re being too sensitive,” “I don’t feel like that so you shouldn’t either,” “It’s stupid to feel like that” and “Why do you have to be so negative?”

Facts and details are another area that can be minimized, especially if they put you in a bad light. If you’re not careful, you may invalidate the other person’s views by saying, “You’re blowing it out of proportion,” “It only happened a couple of times,” “You’re the only one who thinks this is a big deal,” “Everyone else does the same thing,” and “Everyone makes mistakes.” Your communication goal is to avoid minimizing others and know how to respond if someone tries to do it to you.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

Having what you say constantly minimized can shake your confidence if you start to believe it (which is the other person’s goal). Over time, you can start to question the validity of your feelings and wonder if you really are making too big a deal of out of something. If you feel the other person is trying to lessen the importance of what you have to say, speak up. Here’s how to stand your ground:

- “I have the right to feel the way I do, even if you don’t agree.”
- “I understand you see things differently, but that doesn’t change how I feel.”
- “The facts I’ve pointed out are important to me.”
- “I’m asking that you respect my feelings and I’ll do the same for you.”
- “I’m speaking from my personal experience and how I’ve been affected.”

You’re an expert on how you feel so don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise! By correcting minimizing comments in a respectful and assertive fashion, you let the other person know that

you're not backing down on the importance of your story. In doing so, you must also offer the same respect to him, honoring his feelings as well.

Stick to the Issue

Have you ever been in a conversation that took so many twists and turns that by the end you don't even remember what you were arguing about in the first place? If so, you know how confusing and exhausting tangents can be. Usually, all you can be sure of at the end is that you just don't like the other person. Some conflicts involve long and complex histories, so there are multiple issues that need to be settled. However, you can only address one at a time!

Conversations can get off track for several reasons. If an individual tends to hold a lot inside, when he does finally speak, he unleashes all his pent up frustrations in one rambling rant. Another cause for tangents is that one or both parties don't really intend to resolve anything, only to hurt the other person with attacks from every direction. Finally, going off topic is a tactic used to protect and deflect when the subject is hitting too close to home. In order to stay on track, it's helpful to gain agreement upfront about the most pressing issue and focus on resolving it first. Even if you don't agree on the same topic, you can both state your personal priority and then decide which will be discussed first. It even helps to write down the issue and place it where both of you can see it just as a reminder. One way to acknowledge new information that's off topic is to create a "set aside" list in which you write down other emerging issues and agree to discuss them later. That way, each person feels heard, but you can also stay focused.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

Even with the clearest intentions to stick to the issue, conversations can still go off track. If it starts taking a different direction, here are some gentle ways you can attempt to get back to the main topic:

- "Help me understand how this is related to the issue we've agreed to discuss?"
- "It seems this information is off topic. Can we return to our original discussion?"
- "I can hear you have other issues that are really important to you. How about we write them down and set them aside for a separate conversation?"
- "I thought we agreed to our topic but it seems we're going in a different direction. Let's revisit our goals."
- "I hear that several things are bothering you. Since we can only solve one at a time, which one is the most important to you?"

Skimming the surface of multiple topics without resolving any of them leaves everyone feeling frustrated. The only way to make progress is to stick to one issue and get to the bottom of it before moving on to the next.

Stay in the Present and/or Future

Most of the stuff upsetting you in a conflict has already occurred. Because it's in the past, it can't be changed and dwelling on it will only make you more upset. That doesn't mean what has already taken place doesn't matter, but expecting history to be different is unrealistic. Exploring what happened in the past is helpful to recognize patterns or validate how you've been impacted. But, what's most important is drawing lessons from the past that can be applied in the present or future. Problem solving can only happen with current or future situations. There's no "making up for the past" but there is agreeing to a better present and future.

Right now, become mindful of the moment. Notice your surroundings. Take several deep breaths and exhale. Release any tension stored in your shoulders, arms, hands, and feet. No matter what drama you've grappled with previously, can you appreciate that at this very second, nothing is currently happening to you? If you're tempted to respond with, "Yes, but..." whatever example you would give is in the past, even if it just happened. That's the power (and challenge) of being in the moment. It's powerful because each new moment offers a fresh start and challenging because it's easy to drift into the past and get angry or grow anxious by imagining the future without changes.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

The more you can keep your communication focused on the present or planning the preferred future, the more positive it will be. Here's how you can acknowledge what has happened in the past, but not dwell on it:

- "Based on our past misunderstandings, what changes do you want to make now?"
- "How can we use our mistakes to improve future communication?"
- "I'm not happy with how we treated each other in past conflicts, so these are changes I'm requesting from this point forward."
- "What can we focus on right now that will make things better?"
- "I'd like to practice improving our current relationship since we can't change the past."

The present and future are still full of possibility, no matter how messy the past has been. Even if the other person wants to live in history, you can slowly nudge him into the present by talking about what's happening here and now.

Emphasize Points of Agreement

Most conflicts focus on what's going wrong without ever mentioning what's going right. There may not be a lot you agree on, but highlighting even the smallest aspects of cooperation will increase hope that you can work through the rest. At the very least, you both agree there's a problem, right? You may not see eye-to-eye on the details, but at least your big picture is the same! The more you have in common with someone the harder it is to dislike him. So, the more you

highlight areas of commonality, the more you're reminding yourself and him that you share similarities.

When people are really at odds, you might have to cast a wide net to come up with points of agreement. Consider areas like feelings. You can both agree that the conflict is upsetting or that both of you are feeling angry. You can also point to a desired outcome and agree that you'll both feel calmer or satisfied once the issue is settled. Communication guidelines are another neutral subject where you can meet in the middle, agreeing that you both want to be treated respectfully. A different way to look at things is to think small and specific. Perhaps there are minor details where both of you can find common ground. It could be the timeline or location of events – no detail is too small. Picture every “Yes, I agree,” as moving one inch closer to resolution.

Teaching Clients How to Say It

You may not particularly like the other person when you're in the middle of a disagreement, but that doesn't mean you can't sincerely point out certain facts where you're more alike than not. Here are some examples of how to point out mutual opinions:

- “We may not agree on everything, but at least we agree it's important to keep talking.”
- “Even though we may not agree on how it happened, we agree changes are necessary in the future.”
- “I agree with you that our communication needs to remain respectful.”
- “I'm the same as you in that I don't enjoy being in conflict.”
- “I'm encouraged to know that we both want this to be resolved.”

Highlighting areas of agreement softens the hard edges of a conflict. You may not think it's worth it if you can't currently agree on the main issue, but remember every resolution is a series of tiny steps, not one big leap.

In Conclusion

It's not easy to convince people to try talking with each other again after a communication breakdown. If they're at the point of refusing to speak to one another, then it's likely that previous conversations were particularly hurtful. Therefore, in order to start the dialogue again, it must be focused on the communication parameters first, before sharing content. Gaining agreement on the “rules” may not be a quick process, but it's less emotionally charged. Clients may not ultimately agree with each other, but by learning how to listen, clarify issues, and eliminate attacks, they can repair some of the damage caused by negative communication.

TEST

**Breaking the Communication Stalemate:
How to Get People Talking When No One is Talking**

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Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. One example of a healthy communication ground rules is:
 - a) Continue talking even if one person is yelling.
 - b) Communicate only through texting and email.
 - c) Agree to listen to understand even if you disagree.

2. A respectful way to address minimizing is to say:
 - a) “The facts I’ve pointed out are important to me.”
 - b) “Stop being so mean.”
 - c) “I don’t care what you think.”

3. Problem-solving discussions should remain focused on:
 - a) Past events.
 - b) Present and future situations.
 - c) Getting the other person to apologize.

4. Clarifying issues to discuss requires:
 - a) Sharing all your feelings.
 - b) Letting the other person know why he’s wrong.
 - c) Separating the person from the problem.

5. Once guidelines are discussed, people will automatically follow them.
 - a) T
 - b) F

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