

How to Engage in a Conflict-Free Solution-Focused Discussion

Most couples I see in my counseling practice complain about their lack of communication skills and how this gets in the way of their ability to effectively discuss and resolve conflicts. Most often their attempts erupt into arguments or fights that rarely solve the problems they are attempting to resolve. I developed the following protocol that outlines how to structure a conflict-free discussion that is especially useful for people whose conflict seems unmanageable to one or both people.

- 1) All parties to the discussion must agree in advance to the topic(s) that are under consideration. Adequate time should be given for all participants to gather their thoughts about the topic(s) before beginning a session. I usually recommend choosing only one topic per session but certainly no more than two. Using statements such as; *"are you willing to discuss"*; *"can we find time to discuss....."*; *"my hope is that we can have a discussion regarding..."* tend to promote cooperation from all parties by making a **request** for a conversation rather than a **demand** for one.
- 2) A mutually agree upon date and time needs to be established and I usually recommend that early attempts at using this format refrain from having conversations lasting longer than 30 minutes, less if possible. The longer the conversation goes the more likely two things might happen based upon my experience – a) the topic tends to broaden (content drift) into other subjects too complex to resolve in one session and b) most people's mood tends to turn into frustration and/or anger the longer the discussion continues, especially if no clear trend toward a satisfying resolution seems likely.
- 3) Thoroughly define the problem or issue to be undertaken in the discussion. Often people have a vague description of what they want to talk about without putting much effort into accurately describing the scope of the problem. All participants need to have their inputs recognized and respected. Arriving at a consensus as to what is to be discussed is, in my opinion, the most important way to begin a conversation and the best way to preclude misunderstandings and confusion. ***The definition of the problem, and all its important and relevant aspects, is critical to focusing on and containing a conversation and to putting limits on the discussion process.*** In many situations this may take the entire time allotted for the first discussion without moving on to the next phase.
- 4) Once the problem or issue has been clearly defined all participants need to move into the "brainstorming" or solution phase of the discussion. During this phase all suggestions are welcomed, honored and considered regardless of how challenging they might appear at face value. Notes should be taken so that nothing gets lost in the conversation.
- 5) If a solution is reached then it should be written down and signed by all participants. If no solution is reached in the first attempt a follow-up session should be scheduled.

Suggestions :

- a) Use ***I-statements*** (statements from your personal experience such as feelings, thoughts and behaviors, etc...) during discussions versus ***You-statements*** which tend to be blaming.
- b) Use ***reflecting listening*** during communication which promotes empathy of the other person's statements and feelings and helps clarify your understanding of what the other person is saying. This builds rapport during conversation and allows for a freer, less defensive conversation. (As an aside, in no way does reflective listening mean that you are agreeing with someone - only that you are confirming what your understanding is of what is being said).

- c) View the problem as the problem and not the participants as the problem. While this might be obvious or even confusing to some, my clinical experience is that most people that are having difficulty with problem solving tend to view the other person as the problem and not the problem itself. This promotes the inevitable power struggle that is all too familiar to couples who can't seem to have productive dialogues.
- d) Always allow only one person to speak at a time without interruption and never talk over another while he/she is speaking. Unfortunately, a hallmark of bad communication is often that both people try to get their points across without allowing the other person to finish his/her thought. Inevitably as the amplitude of conversations escalates emotions tend to increase as well causing people to not engage in their best thinking.