

Avoiding Communication Fouls

Part 3 of our 3-part Couples Communication Series

Communication is not about winning and losing.

When communication between a couple breaks down, it's often because the communication team has committed what can be called a "foul." A foul occurs when two people go from speaking and listening respectfully into trading put downs, blaming, and sometimes, attempting to punish their partner with silence. When this happens, the whole team loses, because the course of communication becomes about winning an argument instead of finding a mutually favorable resolution.

As you practice your communication skills, be careful to not commit these common mistakes:

Foul #1: Criticism

Criticism is not always a negative thing. When it is not constructive however, it can lead to partners verbally attacking each other. Using criticism in communication implies that a problem or issue is the other person's fault which may in fact be the case. Assigning blame to the other person through criticizing remarks though, places the listener on the defensive. The listener feels like they have to prepare a counter attack. This sort of communication isn't a good foundation for addressing a conflict. Some might think that a criticism and a complaint are the same thing. In actuality, a complaint can be better than a criticism. A complaint can describe a particular issue, situation or behavior in a non-threatening way and therefore is preferable to criticism. To learn other differences, let's look at some examples:

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Criticism—*You are always nagging me for watching TV, can't you just leave me alone until I feel like talking?*

Complaint—*"Sometimes, I just need to relax and unwind by myself when I get home. If you let me have some time by myself, in a little while I'll be ready to hear what you have to say."*

Foul #2: Sarcasm and Cynicism

Sarcasm and cynicism in communication go beyond criticism by adding put downs or demeaning sentiments that are directed to the listener. Together, they convey what appears to be dislike or contempt for the other person.¹ This is likely the worst foul to commit because it can lead to a poisonous cycle of increased, hurtful conflict. Not only does the receiver feel attacked or blamed, they can also feel rejected because of the negative emotions that are conveyed. In some cases, it can also prompt an angry (and unproductive) reaction to the speaker. It can sound like this—*Oh yeah? Well what are you going to do about it?*²

Here are examples of sarcasm and cynicism:

Sarcasm and Cynicism—*Yeah, like you can fix dinner and take care of the kids while I'm gone. You don't help with things while I'm here—why should you start now?*

This statement conveys several things to the listener:

1. **A sense of distrust**—*You can't take care of kids and fix dinner because you don't care.*
2. **That the person is unreliable**—*Don't try to help now.*
3. **Doubt about character**—*Why start now?*
4. **Assigns blame**—*You don't help.*

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Foul #3: The Counter Attack

It's natural to want to either fight or try to escape when feeling threatened or attacked. Scientists call it the *fight or flight* response. When on a communication team, the counter attack further fuels an already burning fire. It can prolong a conflict by

preventing the real issue from being discussed. If you are too busy pushing back, you can't listen to what the root of the real message may be. Avoid the temptation to issue a counter attack by using your turn as the speaker to raise an issue that is important to you.

Foul #4: The Silent Treatment

You are likely familiar with this negative tactic. The silent treatment describes when one person makes a conscious decision to stop talking to their partner. In conflict, this is often done out of spite. As the saying goes, silence can be deafening! Because communication is a team sport, when one person stops talking or listening, no communication can happen. Sometimes the silent treatment can signal that one person has had enough of the conversation or that they've reached their limit.³ This can be a signal that its time to take a break

¹ Gottman, 29.

² Ibid, 30-31.

³ Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage*, 33-34.

from the discussion [see *Speaker in the House Rules*]. Taking a break isn't a bad thing—but it has to be a mutual decision. At other times, the silent treatment can be viewed as a way to avoid an argument or conflict. The logic of this avoidance can make a person think this, *If I don't bring it up, we can't argue about it*. Avoiding or removing yourself from communication can actually cause more conflict in the long run. It triggers the other person to continue, often in vain, to initiate dialogue. It's probably pretty clear to see how this can create a cycle that becomes hard to break.

The key is to keep trying to incorporate the techniques into your communication, particularly when things are going well.

Like learning any new skill, practicing and incorporating these “rules” may seem silly, or unnatural at first. The key is to keep trying to incorporate the techniques into your communication, particularly when things are going well. That way you'll be well-practiced when you need to use the rules during a conflict.

Want to know or do more? Check out these resources:

To Read:

- *12 Hours to a Great Marriage: A Step-by-Step Guide for making Love Last*. Howard Markman, Scott M. Stanley, Susan L. Blumberg, Natalie H. Jenkins and Carol Whiteley. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2004.
- *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, Gary Chapman. Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 1995.
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. John Gottman, Ph.D., and Nan Silver. Crown Publishers, New York, NY, 1999.

To Do:

- Attend a marriage enrichment class, find one in your area by visiting:
<http://www.smartmarriages.com/app/Directory.Home>