

PREP SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE COACHING ESSENTIALS

IMPORTANCE OF THE SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE

The Speaker Listener Technique (SLT) is a structured communication strategy that promotes clarity, understanding, and Emotional Safety. In addition, when couples are using the technique, it becomes much harder to engage in any of the Communication Danger Signs. The structure slows people down (reducing Escalation), encourages an immediate check that the message was heard as intended (reducing Negative Interpretations), requires that both parties speak only for themselves (reducing Invalidation) and provides equal opportunity to share concerns in a safe way (reducing Withdrawal/Avoidance).

THE ROLE OF A COACH

The role of a coach might best be defined by what it is *not*: a coach is not a therapist. A coach is one who ensures couples adhere to the structure and follow the rules of the Speaker Listener Technique. If the couple steps out of bounds, the coach calls it; if the couple is playing by the rules well, the coach praises their efforts. It is not the role of the coach to get involved in the discussion, explore reasons for behavior or uncover dynamics or deeper patterns.

COACHING WITH THE SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE

Begin with a review of the SLT rules and goals. When a couple is *first learning* the SLT (you do not need to do this every time unless they need the reminder), start by very briefly reviewing the rules and roles detailed on the Floor card so that both partners have them fresh in their minds:

The rules for the Speaker are: 1) Speak for yourself from your own perspective (use I statements, not 'you' statements), 2) keep statements brief, and 3) stop to let the Listener paraphrase. The rules for the Listener are: 1) paraphrase what you hear, and 2) focus on the Speaker's message and not your own opinion. The rules for both are: 1) the Speaker has the Floor, 2) the Speaker keeps the Floor while the Listener paraphrases, and 3) share the Floor over the course of a conversation.

When coaching, it is important to make sure the Speaker is holding the Floor card as a reminder of those rules and a reminder of who is the Speaker. If there are no Floor cards handy, the couple may use another object.

Remind couples that they're a team. When you meet with a couple to have them practice the SLT, you should ask the partners to talk to each other in a gentle, respectful and caring manner and to remember that they are a team.

When using the SLT, the focus is on understanding (not agreement) and discussion (not solution). During the first practice (and at other times, as needed), state the goals of the SLT clearly by saying something like, "By using this technique, you will be able to increase your understanding of each other's perspective, but we're not looking for you to agree or solve a problem."

Tell the couple that you will interrupt to make sure they are learning the rules correctly. Make sure the couple understands that you will be interrupting enough to help them learn the technique, and that you do not mean to seem rude by doing so.

Allow the rules to be your guide. Much of the effectiveness in coaching will be accomplished by having the couple follow the rules of the technique. That is, you can coach couples out of many negative behaviors and into better communication by focusing on them following those rules.

Be active, structured, and reinforcing. When first using the technique, your goal is to make sure the couple follows the rules and can use them in a discussion. You will start out being very active and structured, providing ample positive reinforcement and gentle redirection. Here's what being very active looks like using what we call our 1,2,3,4 model:

1. Start off by asking who wants to start with the Floor (once the topic of conversation is clear), then prompt the Speaker to speak, making sure they stop after a statement or two.
2. Then, ask the Listener to paraphrase (this may happen naturally).
3. Next, ask the Speaker if it was an accurate paraphrase.

Note: It is up to the Speaker, not the coach, to determine if a paraphrase captures what he or she said. If the paraphrase is not accurate, you can still say "good effort" to the couple and then ask the Speaker to clarify his or her point in the next statement. The idea is for the couple to be moving forward in their conversation.

4. Positively reinforce the couple (you cannot reinforce too much). Just briefly comment with something like "good job" or "you're getting it."

After the Speaker has had the Floor for a few statements, reinforce the couple (e.g., "very good job") and then ask the couple to switch the Floor. Repeat the above with the new Speaker. As a conversation continues with a couple who is getting the idea, you can start to relax the emphasis on the 1, 2, 3, 4 model. As the couple learns the technique over time, you will be able to relax further your focus on the full structure and the couple will talk more naturally, adapting the technique to their own style.

Stress the value of practicing the technique A LOT. As you close a coaching breakout, emphasize the value of practice. Note that practice will improve their use of the SLT and that practicing the SLT will improve their communication even when not using the SLT. Practice, Practice, Practice!!

Use open-ended prompts to keep the conversation moving forward. If the couple falls into an awkward silence and looks to you for direction, one way to help the couple expand on their thoughts and feelings in order to keep the conversation going forward is to prompt them to "say something more about...." Use this sort of open-ended prompt, rather than asking a yes/no question like, "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

Be active but let the couple get in a flow. Effective coaching requires you to be active. However, that does not mean that you are talking a lot. If you are talking more than the couple, you are saying too much and getting in the way of the couple getting into a flow. Make your coaching points brief and to the point, and keep the two partners talking to each other. Intervene enough to be helpful, but not so much that the couple never gets a successful back and forth experience with the SLT, especially when they are first learning the technique.

Remind couples that the Floor is not about who is talking, it's about whose message is in play. The Speaker should hold the Floor card, even while the Listener paraphrases, to remind them whose message is the focus of the conversation.

When the couple is not getting how a typical conversation with the SLT would look. If a couple is not understanding how the flow of a conversation can look with the SLT, you can give them a brief example, like this: "In a typical conversation with the SLT, there is a back and forth, with several Floor switches. Person **A** speaks, **B** paraphrases, **A** says more, **B** paraphrases, **A** says a bit more, and **B** paraphrases. Then watch for a good time to pass the Floor. Now **B** is the Speaker and **A** the Listener. The conversation continues, with **B** having the Floor—adding their perspective on the same issue—for a few statements before the roles switch again."

The role of emotions. The overarching goal is for the couple to be able to talk without fighting, where there is conflict, and to be able to have productive conversations about other important or sensitive topics. We have found that when a couple is able to communicate more safely, and there are deeper issues/feelings involved in the subject, those deeper concerns will generally come up as a function of the Emotional Safety created by the SLT structure. A coach's role is to help a couple learn how to use the SLT, but it's the structure, not the coach, that makes it safe to share feelings and deeper issues.

COMMON ERRORS WHEN COUPLES ARE LEARNING THE SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE

- 1. Partners are talking to or through you.** Partners should talk to each other, not to you, when learning skills. If a partner starts talking to you, politely remind them to talk to each other. Suppose the Listener starts to paraphrase to you, such as, "She is saying that . . .," you can quickly remind the Listener to "talk to him" (nodding in the direction of the Speaker).
- 2. Going on and on.** Make sure you jump in if the Speaker is going on too long, gently saying something like, "try stopping there for a moment so your partner can paraphrase what you've said before you go on."
- 3. Listener tends to interject.** Be aware of the Listener's tendency to interject his or her own thought or feelings when paraphrasing. This can be obvious as in the case of a "yes, but. . ." statement, or it can be more subtle. Redirect by reminding the Listener to focus on the Speaker's message and to edit out any internal response. You can also reassure the Listener he or she will get the Floor soon. When a Listener is struggling not to interject, it is a good time to reiterate that "understanding, not agreement" is the goal of this technique.
- 4. Negative Escalation.** If a couple is having a particularly tough time talking to one another, stick especially closely to the rules of the SLT. If the topic is too heated or emotional for the practice to be productive, suggest a Time Out on that topic so a new one can be chosen that is more suitable for practicing the technique.
- 5. Sliding into a different, and often higher, conflict topic.** Couples will often start out talking about a low or no-conflict issue and all of a sudden they slide into a higher conflict issue. When this happens, politely note that this is happening and get them back to talking about the lower or no-conflict issue/topic.