

PREP'S SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE COACHING MANUAL

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 helps couples learn how to use the Speaker Listener Technique by offering assistance, guidance and supervision. While both therapist and coach roles are ultimately aimed at producing change in a couple's relationship, the changes desired are quite different. Whereas a therapist may work for change in any or every domain of a relationship through a variety of means, 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. You might think of coaching as helping them learn to fish together rather than giving them fish.

Here is a simple example of the difference between acting as a coach vs. acting as a therapist.

Coaches might say: "Could you say more to clarify what you just said?"

Therapists might say: "Why do you think this pattern developed in your relationship?" or "How does this relate to how you each grew up?" or "Is there some deeper reason why you do that?" [**Note:** It is not the role of a coach to probe more deeply or to help people develop insights about why they do what they do.]

As a coach, you are not probing for feelings or pushing people to go deeper. Rather, you are helping them learn the skills and follow the instructions for specific practice sessions. That does not mean that deeper feelings will not emerge. They often will, but this comes about as a result of the Emotional Safety fostered by the structure. Your job is to help a couple learn that structure.

COACHING WITH THE SLT

The following is a detailed list of effective coaching strategies that we recommend using as you as help participants practice the SLT.

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.

Be sure to 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.”

Note about timing: While the timing may vary depending on the exercise, a solid conversation with the Speaker Listener Technique will generally go on for 7-10 minutes or so. If a couple talks about one topic for 4 minutes and there is time left, you should ask that they pick another topic and keep practicing. The goal is getting in a certain amount of practice time with the new skills, not having one good, brief discussion (though that certainly is a good thing).

Remind couples that they’re a team. The first time 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. A lot of the effectiveness in coaching the use of the Speaker Listener Technique will be accomplished by focusing on the simple rules expressed in the technique. That is, you can coach couples out of many negative behaviors and into better communication by focusing on them following those rules. The rules, when followed, make it very hard to communicate negatively or unproductively and help foster Emotional Safety through turn taking, respect, and listening. Thus, the rules themselves provide the best means of coaching. You can coach struggling couples pretty well by focusing on the rules because the structure does a lot of work.

Ban solutions: discuss first, then solve if needed. In using the SLT, stress that the goals are to have a good discussion, to understand each other, and to concentrate on speaking clearly and listening effectively. Sometimes good solutions emerge because the couple is talking and hearing each other and that's a bonus. However, if the participants seem to be striving for a solution, you could say, "This sounds like a pretty important issue in your relationship. It would probably be best if you don't even try to resolve it right now. Wait until you have really mastered these skills."

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. A couple who does so will find other talks they have going better even when not using the structure of the technique.

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. Listeners talk during times the Speakers have the Floor, but their talking should be in service of listening and showing the Speaker they are paying attention and describing what they heard (paraphrasing). The Speaker holds 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. Make sure the couple understands the general back and forth of the technique. If the couple is struggling, explain the back and forth nature of the technique clearly by saying something like, "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."

COMMON ERRORS WHEN COUPLES ARE LEARNING THE SPEAKER LISTENER TECHNIQUE

This section is designed to give the coach some additional help handling some of the common errors that occur as couples are learning to use the SLT. While most of these issues rarely cause on-going problems, we want you to be fully prepared to address them.

Do not let the couple talk through you. They should talk to each other, not to you when learning skills. Often one partner will turn to you, such as to paraphrase, to check if they got it right. If a partner starts talking to you, politely remind them to talk to each other. You can also model statements that they can use to begin talking with each other like, "Sam, what I hear you saying is . . ." or try something like this:

John: I worry that you don't really like being with my parents.

Mary (*turning to you as the coach*): He's saying . . .

Coach (*gently but directly interrupting*): Talk to him (*nodding or pointing toward John*).

Mary: Oh, Okay. So, I hear you are saying you are concerned . . .

It is especially important to not get into conversations with the couple that come at the expense of practicing the skills. Some people will be happy to talk to you at length about any number of topics, but that is off task. It is best for most of the practice time to be spent practicing. It is harder work to coach the learning of skills than to chat with them about how their week went, but your job is to do the harder task of helping them learn the skills.

Keeping the Speaker from going on and on. Make sure you jump in pretty quickly 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.” Explain to both that keeping statements relatively brief will help the Listener keep their attention on what the Speaker is saying, and that longer statements make it hard for the Listener to do their job well. Some couples will be able to have longer Speaker messages with the Listener doing a great job of feeding back what they heard but most couples will benefit early on from your efforts to help Speakers keep their statements to easy-to-digest-and-paraphrase pieces.

If the couple is having trouble sharing the Floor, you can add an extra rule: pass the Floor every 3 times no matter what. Remind people they will get plenty of time to make their points. They can continue making the points they want to make when they get the Floor back, but it becomes very hard to be a good Listener if the two are not sharing the Floor pretty regularly.

Managing the Listener’s tendency to interject. One thing to be very aware of is a Listener’s tendency to interject his or her own feelings into the paraphrase of their partner. This often occurs in the form of a “yes, but” statement. Sometimes this interjection is obvious, as when the Listener gets so into the discussion that they forget about the format and essentially take the Floor without having the Floor. Often, however, the Listener puts in his or her own opinions very subtly by changing the content of the paraphrase (either through their words or their body language). Be aware of this tendency and stop it by simply reminding the Listener to paraphrase only and to edit out any internal response. You can also reassure the Listener that they will get the Floor soon.

Stopping negative escalation. Many coaches have expressed a concern about handling any situation where the couple begins to escalate negatively (when partners respond to each other with increasingly negative content or emotion). The first step in handling this situation is by remaining active with your couple so that they are expecting your interruptions and comments about how they are interacting. That way, if negative escalation occurs, they will not feel resentful of you jumping right in to help them stop it and stay on task with the skills.

The next step in avoiding negative escalation is to stick closely to the task at hand. The structure of the technique should keep couples from escalating. However, if a couple is having a particularly tough time talking to one another, here are a few tips to get things back on track and, most importantly, to keep the environment safe:

- If the level of negative emotion is high or threatens to get out of control, be even more active about them sticking to the rules so that the structure of the SLT can help.
- Normalize their feelings by saying something like, “All couples have issues that they need to work on and solve in their relationship.” Then, try to redirect your couple back to the task.
- If the topic is heated enough to make it hard to practice the skills and learn to use them, ask the couple to choose a less heated topic to discuss. The ideal topics for practice have meaning, emotion, and even some conflict connected, but not so much conflict that it gets in the way of practicing the skills.
- Ask the couple to take a Time Out during the practice session. If all else fails, wonderful coaching would be to help them see the need for the Time Out and then to help them take a successful Time Out right

there, in the session. Perhaps you could even have them try working through the relaxation exercises for calming down.

Sliding into different, and often higher, conflict topics. Couples will often start out talking about a low or no-conflict issues and all of a sudden they Slide into a high 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.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

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.

Don't get hung up on making the distinction between "feel" vs. "think." Sometimes, people use "I feel" and "I think" synonymously. Do not get hung up on people needing to express feelings, even if they are using the phrase "I feel . . ." It's not crucial that people always or even often express feelings when they say "I feel" as it's a common colloquialism to express one's mind. We advise only pushing this distinction when the specific goal is to express a real feeling such as when using the XYZ statement.

Responding to resistance. Coaches generally should not be confrontational. Instead, be supportive, encouraging, and positive. In the beginning, be sensitive to the couple's feelings, especially to differences in the partner's styles. Also, this is not a therapeutic intervention, so we avoid interpretative or challenging comments. If a couple is resistant, take their concerns seriously and adopt a "try it, you may (or may not) like it" approach. Or, "what in this technique might work well for the two of you? How can I help you adapt this skill to your needs?" Assure them that it is up to them to decide what they will take from the program and use together in the future. However, most couples do not present these sort of challenges.

Responding to feedback that the technique is "unnatural" and "awkward." Someone may say "This is unnatural" or "awkward." If so, you should acknowledge that the SLT is a little awkward at first. Stress that these unfamiliar strategies are a lot of why it works because we don't *normally* slow down and really listen to each other and take turns. Stress the value of engaging the structure to slow things down and pay clear attention to each other. The structure is especially likely to be valuable for important conversations or for talks that have not tended to go well. For some couples, it is fine to note that "unnatural" is good if what they naturally do is engage in the Communication Danger Signs.

Intervening if you notice mind reading. The basic element of mind reading is that one person is assuming or asserting what the other person thinks or feels—or their motive—rather than the person on the receiving end of the mind reading saying this for him or herself.

Mind reading can be a difficult thing to determine and, because of this, it can be difficult to know how to intervene when you think you are seeing a serious degree of mind reading as you coach two people in their communication. Here's one dilemma: if someone says to their partner, "You don't like to do the yard work," is she mind reading or is she simply restating a fact that they have discussed before? The person on the listening end of such a statement may have said exactly this in the car on the way into the workshop that evening or it may be understood between partners.

In short, there will be plenty of "you" statements by Speakers and you have to decide which to intervene on and which to let go. A lot of mind reading does *not* cause a couple any problem. It's usually a problem when the mind reading carries within a negative interpretation and/or is said in a negative way. It's okay to let some go and see if they stir up difficulty, and then if they do, intervene more strongly about the statements that appear to be mind reading:

Speaker: You don't even like my mother. That's why you refuse to talk about Thanksgiving.

Coach (*noticing that the Listener is upset with the mind reading*): I'd like you to try saying that again, but this time, focus more on what you think and feel about the issue, and try leaving out the part that suggests what your partner was thinking or feeling. That will help the two of you when you talk about things where there is some disagreement or upset.

Checking non-verbal communication. As the coach, you should be particularly aware of what your couple is communicating to each other non-verbally. Often non-verbal messages are more powerful than what is being said, and can have a great effect on the tone of an interaction. If voice tone, extreme body position, eye rolling, facial expression, etc. begin to become a significant problem in the conversation, point it out. Remind them that communication is communication, no matter in what form— verbal or non-verbal. Because this most often is an issue for the Listener, note that non-verbals like looking away or rolling one's eyes is actually "speaking" a lot and that the Listener will do best to wait for their turn to have the Floor to say what they want to say.

Note: When one person rolls their eyes or conveys some other negative view non-verbally, they are essentially taking the Floor when it's not their turn to be the Speaker. You can remind them to focus on the Speaker's message and wait until they get the Floor to say what is on their mind or express disagreement, if needed.

Working with distressed couples. Not all couples who attend these types of workshops are non-distressed. In fact, research suggests that a good percentage can be unhappy and in some distress. That does not change the coaching task to a therapist task. Many couples who may/would benefit from counseling will first seek an educational workshop or program as the first step to getting help. There are other couples who simply do not have access to counseling for their relationship, so learning some skills and strategies in an educational program is one of their best options to make some changes. Your role is the same even if the work might be more difficult. You are teaching strategies and coaching them in the skills.

Making referrals. We generally do not advise referring a couple to counseling unless they ask for such help. Some couples may not think of themselves as needing that much more help, and to label them as needing “therapy” can come as quite a shock to them. Of course, we would make an exception to this if a particular couple was quite distressed or in danger of emotional or physical abuse. In all versions of PREP for couples, we suggest that program leaders are asked to make sure all couples get a referral sheet, so some couples will use these resources on their own or you can direct the couple to the referral sheet if a couple asks for more help.

IN CONCLUSION

By using the above as a guideline, we believe you can increase your effectiveness as a PREP coach. But the most important tip might be to enjoy the program. Do not allow yourself to become so caught up in trying to remember every tiny aspect of the skills that you do not enjoy the program. If you are not a perfect coach, or if you forget to emphasize this or that skill at some time, you are not going to ruin the couple, or even their experience with the program. Think of yourself as an assistant (which you are, in this situation) who is helping his or her students practice valuable skills that will aid them throughout their lives (unlike calculus--for most of us). Do not feel responsible for your couples’ problems and their solutions. Do the best you can, using your personal judgment and your knowledge of the material and your couple. Also, remember that you are not alone: you have your fellow coaches and PREP facilitators and workshop leaders to refer to with questions and concerns. Enjoy yourself and everything will go more smoothly!