

# Say What You Need and Listen Well

by  
Linda Gryczan

After several years of helping people turn conflict into cooperation, I have come to believe that a disagreement turns into a feud for two primary reasons—we do not say what we need and we do not listen well.

**A disagreement turns into a feud because we do not say what we need & we do not listen well.**

We learn the patterns of conflict in our families, and tend to recreate them in the workplace, our neighborhood, and in intimate relationships. We do this whether it works for us or not. It is difficult to change conflict styles from our past if we have never seen any different.

Here are some patterns of miscommunication that I see across the mediation table:

- talking on and on without making a specific request.
- sarcasm and putdowns.
- complaining to other people about the problem.
- saying some version of, “this is what is wrong with you and what you did to cause this problem.”
- shutting down—the silent treatment.
- speaking in absolutes-- “you always,” or “I never.”
- airing multiple complaints without resolution.
- powerlessness—“it’s impossible. They you will never allow me.”
- trying to convince the other that they are wrong.

Do any of these look familiar? I’ve tried a few of them too, and they don’t work for me either.

**“I want to discuss this with you, but not like this.”**

One way to interrupt ineffective communication is to stop, and say something like, “I want to discuss this with you, but not like this. How about if we take some time and bring this up again in a couple of hours.” Mediator, Tammy Lenski suggests taking some space to focus

on something else that will distract you from replaying the argument in your head. Try a

crossword puzzle or a video game. Then ask yourself, what do I need in this situation? What behavior would I like to ask of the other? How can I word this in a way s/he can hear?

**3 questions to ask in a conflict--**

**What do I need in this situation?**

**What behavior would I like to ask of the other?**

**How can I word this in a way s/he can hear?**

When you come back to the conversation it is very important to listen well. Being listened to and understood is what most of us want more than anything else in the world. Summarizing what the other has said to their satisfaction, goes a long

To summarize what someone has said,  
does not mean you agree.  
It just means that you understand.

way towards reaching a resolution. Once people have been heard, they are usually ready and willing to reasonably negotiate. Recap what s/he has said, using his

or her own words. This doesn't mean that you agree, or that it is something you will go along with, it just means that you understand what they have said.

A good opener might be, "if I heard you correctly, you think \_\_\_\_\_, and would like me to do \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?" Then ask them to summarize your thoughts in the disagreement.

Once people are understood, they  
are usually willing to be reasonable.

Don't be surprised if they don't have a clue about what you were saying and you don't have their thoughts down perfectly either. Listening is hard, and most of us haven't learned how to do it well.

Listening is not:

- Doing something else in a conversation.
- Interrupting
- Offering advice—"what you should do is \_\_\_\_\_."
- minimizing or disregarding—"you don't believe that do you?" or other words that suggest that their feelings are not valid.
- Paying attention to what you are going to say next.

Listening is:

- Giving your full attention to the speaker. Everything about your body language—arms unfolded, legs uncrossed, leaning forward, should say, "I'm listening."
- Paying attention—don't distract yourself with what you plan to say next.
- Summarizing—"So what you are saying is \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?"
- Listening for the feelings behind the words and acknowledging them.

Say what you need & listen well.  
It settles minor skirmishes before they escalate.

There is far more  
to good  
communication,

but taking a break, saying what you want and need, and listening well, helps settle minor skirmishes before they escalate into all out arguments.

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