

# Rules of the Road for Effective Communication

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Nobody likes conflict, yet the most innocent words or actions can result in an argument, even with the best of intentions. Don't wait for your next argument- read this article now to learn nine "Rules of the Road" for effective communication and conflict resolution in any relationship. These are key to avoiding hitting "The Wall" which results in arguments and conflict.

## The Rules of the Road

In any communication there is a sender and a receiver. The risk of conflict is highest when the sender is experiencing an issue of some kind and needs to communicate about it. Before any effective communication starts, especially around an issue, it's important to understand these ground rules.

### **1. Issues are Unmet Needs**

In my thinking, a problem or an issue in a relationship is about an unmet need. If it weren't a need, it wouldn't be an issue.

### **2. All Issues are Valid**

If we assume this then we won't argue with each other about the validity of the issue. It is not nice to discount somebody's issues and say, "Oh come on now that's no big deal. What's your problem? Don't be ridiculous."

Don't allow someone to discount your issue. And don't discount their issue either, because all issues are valid, big and small. Just the fact that you experience an issue makes it valid; you don't need to justify it or get agreement about whether it's an issue or not.

### **3. Who has the Unmet Need, Owns the Issue**

I call this "David Steele's Law of Relationship," and it goes two ways- for the sender it means that if you have an issue, it's about you, you own it. It's yours. It belongs to you. There is no universal issue out there that if everybody experiences this one thing, everybody will have an issue with it. Some people will. Some people won't. Needs and issues are subjective, not facts. They are your truth and not necessarily a truth that others share.

So if it's an issue for you, it's because you have the need and the need is unmet. It's not automatically an indictment that your partner is in the wrong. For example, if your partner comes home late and doesn't call, in some relationships that might be a problem, in others it wouldn't be a big deal.

If you have a need to know what to expect it will be an issue for you if that need is unmet when your partner is late and didn't call. The need is yours and the issue is yours. Your partner being late is simply a fact; it doesn't make them right or wrong. It doesn't make your issue less valid, it simply means you take an attitude of ownership.

Taking ownership of your needs and issues in a relationship is incredibly important because it empowers you to be responsible for your needs, and is much less likely to put your partner on the defensive because you're not making them wrong or blaming them for your unmet need.

For the receiver this means that that it's not about you. It's not your issue and your job is to let the sender have the issue and don't try to take it away from them by having an issue with their issue. If you take their issue personally and make it about you then you'll hit "The Wall." If you let them have their issue and support them to get their unmet need met you will be helping yourself as well because you want a happy relationship and happy partner.

#### **4. One Issue at a Time**

This is very important because when people communicate about issues and they talk about more than one at a time it often goes all over the place. They bring out everything and the kitchen sink; every resentment they've saved up, every little grievance. If you want to have productive communication, if you want to resolve something between you two, you pretty much have to focus on one thing at a time.

#### **5. Take Turns**

Take turns being the sender. One person speaks at the time. This is basic playground behavior. Share and take turns. However, you notice that arguments happen because one person is not letting the other person speak so they feel like they have to talk louder to be heard. And then it goes back and forth. So take turns being the sender.

I want to acknowledge that this is simple, but it's not necessarily easy. When you're hitting "The Wall" it feels so urgent to have your partner listen to you that you have a hard time being present to them. This can take a heroically conscious effort, but it can be done.

#### **6. Speak with Moderation**

If you're taking turns, then you don't need to yell to be heard. You can speak with moderation. Productive communication is about being calm, respectful and choosing your words carefully so that you say what you mean and mean what you say.

### **7. Listen with Curiosity**

This is an important attitude, to be curious about where your partner is coming from and not to prejudge them as wrong, or speculate that, "they really mean—this," or "they're just saying that because of-- that." Look at them through new eyes. Listen to them as if you're listening to them for the first time. Listen with curiosity. When you do, I guarantee you'll learn something new about your partner and your relationship will not only work better, it'll be more passionate and fulfilling.

Think back to your patterns in listening to your partner. How often are you formulating in your mind what you're going to say back to them while they're talking? Sometimes we don't even give the other guy a chance to finish before we insert our opinions. This is human nature, it's a bad habit, we all have this tendency and it takes a little effort to adopt an attitude of curiosity, but it'll help you really be able to hear and listen effectively.

This is also part of taking turns. If your partner is the sender, then you need to be the receiver. You need to listen. If it's your turn to be the sender then you have a right to expect that your partner listen and receive you and if they are not playing that role you can request them to do so.

### **8. Assume the Win-Win**

Most of us understand intellectually that we can negotiate. We can find a way that works for both of us. But what often happens unconsciously is that there is an assumption or fear that if you get your way then I'm going to lose and I'm not going to get my needs met. There is oftentimes a scarcity mentality that drives people into conflict. They really don't trust that their needs will be met if their partner's needs are met at the same time. It's either-or. I like to believe that it is both-and. So assume the win-win.

### **9. Nurture the Space Between**

Here's a concept that oftentimes we forget about, and many couples don't even know about, which is that a relationship is more than just two people. There is a space between you where this relationship lives. This is where your children live, and everyone else that comes into contact with the two of you. There's an emotional atmosphere between you two and it needs to be clean in order to be fulfilled and happy. If you have unresolved conflict, if your communication is not clean and effective, if there

are resentments and disappointments and unresolved issues between you two, that is going to pollute the space between you two -- and everyone, including you, will feel it. So the space between IS the relationship.

We want to nurture that space; we want to treat it as sacred. It's not just about your partner and it's not just about you, it's the combination for which you are both 100% responsible. Not 50/50, each partner is 100% responsible for what happens in the space between.

**These Rules of the Road are key paradigms that will help your communication to be positive and productive-- and you WILL forget them! I call this phenomenon "going unconscious." No problem -- next time you "go unconscious" and find yourself hitting "The Wall" and in an argument, remember the Rules of the Road for effective communication and conflict resolution.**

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