

Communication Enrichment. . .

Using the Speaker/Listener Skill

I. Purpose of the Speaker/Listener Skill:

- A. The Speaker/Listener Skill is designed to increase the level of mutual understanding between the two people using the skill. The focus is not upon agreement/disagreement or like/dislike, but rather upon understanding. (“Let’s try to understand each other’s point of view; then we can discuss what we like or don’t like about that view.”)
- B. The Speaker/Listener Skill tends to slow down the discussion and reduce the amount of emotional intensity. Since “speed” and “heat” are two frequent ingredients of an argument, this skill often reduces the potential for a damaging argument.
- C. This skill increases the sense of “safety” within the communication climate. The speaker can share more “safely” because he/she knows that the other person is in a listening role and is “not allowed” to respond to the message through criticism, evaluation, or emotional reaction.

II. Occasions for Using the Speaker/Listener Skill:

- A. This skill can be used when a discussion is underway and one person becomes aware of “not feeling understood.” He/she can request the use of the skill to facilitate better understanding. (“Time out! I’m feeling misunderstood. I’d like for us to use the Speaker/Listener Skill. Ok? Could I be the speaker first--then we’ll reverse roles?”)
- B. The skill can also be used to begin a discussion. Couples can agree to discuss an issue using this skill as the primary communication tool. They set a specific time/place for the discussion, and agree to start the discussion with the Speaker/Listener roles.

III. The Process of the Speaker/Listener Skill:

- A. One person agrees to be the speaker; the other person becomes the listener. Each one stays in that role until they agree to reverse roles or to stop using the skill in that particular discussion.
- B. The speaker begins by sharing his/her “inner awareness” (thoughts, feelings, wants, actions, etc.) to the listener.
- C. The listener imagines that there is a “shelf” on his/her shoulder. As he listens to the speaker’s information (“story”) he is aware that his own “story” develops (his personal reactions to what the speaker is sharing). He places his reactions on his shelf to allow himself to focus totally on the speaker. Sharing his reactions immediately would take him out of the listening role and would interfere with his listening effectiveness. (These personal reactions can be shared later when he becomes the speaker.)
- D. When the speaker pauses the listener is to paraphrase what he heard (“I’m hearing you say. . .” or “Sounds like you’re saying that you. . .”)
- E. The speaker decides whether or not the listener really understood the message which was sent. The speaker is to do one of two things:
 - 1. Confirm: “Yes, you understand.” (Verbally or nonverbally)
 - 2. Clarify: The speaker is not totally satisfied with the listener’s level of understanding and decides to send all or part of the original message again. The listener paraphrases and the speaker confirms or clarifies again.
- F. The speaker and listener continue this back-and-forth process until they agree to change roles or to stop using the skill (end the discussion or begin using a different skill).
- G. If the speaker continues talking for quite a long time, the listener will have difficulty remembering the message. The listener can choose to interrupt the speaker (politely) to give the paraphrase/feedback. (“Excuse me; I want to be sure I’m following you okay. So far I’m hearing you say that you . . .--right?”) This interruption is the only kind that is allowed within this skill framework, and it needs to be done with courtesy.