

Speak Your Heart Before Speaking Your Mind

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Do you often find yourself apologetically backpedaling in a conversation with your significant other after making a comment you intended to be positive? Many people find themselves in that position. It sounded right while it was still in our head, but as soon as it came out of our mouth, the negative reaction of the other person lets us know we did not communicate as well as we had hoped. Our response usually sounds something like this, “Whoa, wait, what I meant was...” at that point we try to give clarification as to our intent as fast as possible. Many a well intended statements, and even compliments, have backfired in a similar scenario.

The worse case scenario is when negative emotions are running high and feelings are already raw. With this, and all good communication, it's best to slow down and be intentional in choosing one's words to increase the likelihood one is understood. It is my strongly held opinion, in most all cases, that *the person speaking* bears the primary responsibility for being understood. In regard to public speaking or private conversation, the listener should not have to struggle to understand the message or intent of the one speaking. Otherwise, the listener is likely to misunderstand, make assumptions, or miss the message altogether.

This is why, in counseling couples especially, I encourage them to slow down and start their statement by voicing the intent of their heart. For example, a couple (John and Jane Doe) has been upset about the lack of trust in their relationship. John loves Jane and wants to prove to her he can be trusted but he is frustrated by never seemingly being able to meet her expectations.

All he wants is to know what she needs for them to have a close and loving relationship again. If he allows his frustration to get the best of him he will blow it. Consider the following bad example.

I would not advise it, but his first frustration-driven thought is to open with, *“I don't know what your problem is? I'm trying to prove myself, but nothing is ever good enough?”*

In those two sentences there is enough fuel to keep an argument going for hours, making the problem even worse. First, he makes an accusation that “she” has the problem. Second, the assertion he is doing what is right. Third, she can't be pleased. When she responds in anger and indignation, and she will, he will get more of a response than he wanted.

A better approach might be the following: Sitting down with her on the couch, and calmly speaking his heart first, he says, *“I love you and really want us to have a close and loving relationship again and I will try to do whatever I can to make that possible. Will you help me to understand what you need and what is most important to you in regard to our trust issues?”*

If she starts off with an emotional response, as if feeling she needs to defend herself as usual, he can quietly signal for her to pause and once again remind her of his heart by saying, *“Slow down, I promise I'm going to sit here and listen to everything you want to say.”* Inwardly, he may think he knows everything she is going to say before she says it, but that most often is evidence he really doesn't. If he does know, it would be fair to ask why isn't he addressing her concerns and or why does she feel the need to keep saying it?

As she continues, perhaps bewildered by the change in John, Jane continues with her comments. John listens. *Only occasionally* asking for clarification, but never interrupting her or correcting what she has said. If he is truly listening, he will understand more of her heart and needs and find what he has been looking for—something on which he can take action. Additionally, at this point he can tell her of his intentions and clarify his plan with her by asking, *“What if I do this? Is that what you were wanting?”* It only makes sense, if we intend to address someone's concern, we make sure our efforts will hit the mark *before* we take action.

The outcome will likely be a closer warmer feeling between them, a conversation that actually produced something good and didn't take all day. John will know better how to augment his behavior and Jane will have a sense the man she loves cares about her and her needs.

Remember, if we know someone's heart is for us, grace and cooperation will be easier to offer.