



A STRUCTURED CONFLICT CONVERSATION

THE GOTTMAN-RAPOPORT CONVERSATION

A structured way to talk about a disagreement so both partners feel heard before either tries to persuade. Adapted from the Gottman Method.

THE CORE PRINCIPLE

Before you can engage in persuasion, you each have to **summarize your partner’s position to your partner’s satisfaction**. Not approximately. Not to your own satisfaction. To theirs.

WHEN TO USE THIS

A SOLVABLE DISAGREEMENT

One you’ve been having on and off for weeks. Different from a gridlocked dealbreaker.

A REGRETTABLE INCIDENT

A specific moment last week that still has a charge on it for one or both of you.

A RECURRING FRICTION

Logistics, chores, in-laws, sex, money — the same fight in different outfits.

NOT FOR ACTIVE DYSREGULATION

If either partner is flooded (heart rate above ~95), call a 20-minute break first. Come back regulated.

RULES FOR THE SPEAKER

Your task is to say what you feel and what you need, not to make a case for why your partner is wrong.

NO BLAME, CRITICISM, OR CONTEMPT

Talk about your own experience. Not what your partner did wrong.

USE “I” STATEMENTS ABOUT A SPECIFIC MOMENT

“I felt overwhelmed on Tuesday when...” Not: “You always...”

TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS

Name the emotion underneath the facts. Sad, scared, lonely, angry, ashamed, small.

STATE A POSITIVE NEED

Under every complaint is a longing. Express the longing as a request. “What would help is...”

SOFT START-UP

Lead with feeling and need. “I’m feeling ___ about ___ and I need ___.”

EXAMPLE: A SOFT START-UP

HARSH START-UP

“You never help with the kids in the morning. I’m always the one rushing around. I’m exhausted.”

SOFT START-UP — FEELING + NEED

“I’m feeling alone and stretched thin in the morning routine. What would help is if we mapped out who covers what before Sunday night so I’m not the default.”



RULES FOR THE LISTENER — 4 STEPS

Your task is to listen and ask questions until you can summarize their position so well they recognize it. Persuasion comes later — or not at all in this conversation.

STEP 1

Prepare yourself

- Postpone your own agenda for these minutes.
- Tune into your partner's world, not the rebuttal forming in your head.
- Hear their pain even where you don't agree with the details.

STEP 2

Attune

- Ask open-ended questions. "Tell me the story of that." "How did that land for you?"
- Get curious about the values underneath: "What does this matter so much to you about?"
- Don't minimize, judge, fix, or try to cheer them up. Be present, not useful.

STEP 3

Summarize what you heard

- Reflect their feelings and restate the content in your own words.
- Goal: summarize so well that they would say, "Yes — exactly."
- Take notes if it helps. There's no points off for jotting things down.

STEP 4

Validate

- Validation doesn't mean you agree. It means you can see why this lands the way it does for them.
- "It makes sense you'd feel that way given how you're seeing this."
- Then ask: "Did I get it? Is there anything else?" If yes, switch roles. If no, ask more questions.

THE SWITCH

After the listener summarizes and validates, ask: "Did I get it? Is there anything else?"

WHEN THE SPEAKER FEELS UNDERSTOOD

Switch roles. The listener becomes the speaker. The original speaker now does the four steps. Both partners get the full structure. If you only do one side, you've made a complaint, not a conversation.

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

ASSUMPTION OF SIMILARITY

If you're attributing something positive to yourself, look for it in your partner. If you're attributing something negative to your partner, look for it in yourself.

REPAIR EARLY, NOT LATE

Either of you can say: "Can we pause and start over?" The conversation isn't a contract. Course-correct freely.

BOTH SIDES GO

After validation, switch. Both speakers get the full structure. The conversation isn't done until both feel heard.

Educational only — not therapy. Adapted from the Gottman-Rapoport Intervention developed by Drs. John and Julie Schwartz Gottman. If you'd like a therapist in the room while you practice this, we offer a free 15-minute consult.

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