

LEARN TO SPEAK IN WAYS THAT DO NOT PROMOTE AN ARGUMENT

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

We (Marlene and Bob) used to put a lot of energy into arguments trying to convince each other of our positions and opinions, making excuses or trying to determine who said what. We were more concerned with who was right than really communicating clearly. We used generalizations like “always” or “never.” We made accusations that began with “you ...” to try to make our point. We tried to read each other’s minds, thinking that we knew what each other meant and then taking it personally. We used the words “I feel...” to talk about our thoughts; for example, “I feel like you don’t love me.” Or “I feel that you want to hurt me.” Bob would get lost in vagueness and frequently would say, “I don’t know” rather than a clear “no.” We would say “I know that you...” or “you don’t like ...” believing that we knew everything there was to know about someone. We might resort to name calling and insults, “lazy, useless, helpless...” In hindsight, it is not surprising that we had trouble hearing each other.

One area of learning for us has to do with our different pace. Marlene is faster getting started in the morning than Bob. In the past, this could cause a problem. If Marlene got out of bed before Bob did, he would become convinced that she was upset at him and then tiptoe around her. If Marlene stayed in bed, she would lie there waiting and become irritable. At other times Marlene would accuse Bob of wasting time, or Bob would feel pressured and rushed. We have learned to take responsibility for our pace differences, play with them (i.e. be creative) and to express ourselves in an unarguable way when they come up. For example, this morning, Marlene noticed that she finished breakfast before Bob started his. She noticed her anxiety and irritability. Marlene described to Bob exactly what she observed, “you are just beginning breakfast” without placing a value on it. Then she described her physical sensations “and I feel swirling in my belly.” She noted that she was being reminded of the past, “This reminds me of times in the past when we would get into arguments because I was ahead of you.” She finished by making a clear request about tasks that would be done that morning “so what time will you be available to work on our article together?” Bob was able to hear that, make a clear agreement and finish his breakfast in peace as well as take time for his daily meditation. Marlene felt happy with their interaction and went off to complete other tasks before their appointment.

Recently two clients whom we will call Matt and Martha came to see us after a big argument they had had. Martha told us that she had felt close to Matt and asked him to cuddle next to her as she was falling asleep. Matt responded by saying “Sometimes, I would like you to cuddle next to me” in a strange voice. Martha told us that she replied firmly, “Hey Matt, I cuddle you a lot. Whenever we watch TV together, I ALWAYS extend my arm to caress you for HOURS.” He responded in a strange voice “Fine, don’t answer my request. I will stop expressing my needs then...”

When we slowed down this interaction, and untangled it, both realized that they had not communicated what was going on inside of them clearly. We coached Matt to speak in an unarguable way to Martha, telling her about his reaction to her request to cuddle, describing the heaviness in his chest and the longing he felt to connect to her.

Martha realized that she had interpreted Matt's response of "Sometimes, I would like you to cuddle next to me" as meaning, "you NEVER cuddle me, you are cold and you reject me." We coached Martha to speak in an unarguable way to Matt, telling him about her reaction to his response (churning in her belly and fear) and that she had made up a story that he was accusing her of rejecting him.

We helped them see how using words like "whenever," "always", and "I do this for hours" were arguable and only escalated the drama. We assisted Matt in saying what he really meant rather than "Fine, don't answer my request. I will stop expressing my needs then..." Really, he was hurt and angry and needed to learn how to say that to her in a way that she could hear him. With our help, he was able to say what was true, "when I heard your response, I felt a rush or energy up my back and pressure on my chest and had the thought that you were not open to responding to my request. This reminded me of times in my childhood when I could not express my needs."

Both of them realized that their underlying motivation was similar, they both wanted to connect to each other. They were able to turn to each other and express their need for connection in a way that allowed them both to be heard.

So what is unarguable? What we observe (without interpretation), our body sensations, our core feelings (anger, fear, sadness, joy, sexual feelings), and what this reminds me of from the past do not usually bring forth an argument. It's trickier when we get to the meaning we make of what we observe. If it is important to communicate this it is really helpful to let the listener know that this is "the story I am making up" or "I imagine that this means..." or even "the thought I am having..."

How do you know that it is unarguable? You don't get an argument back. If you are getting an argument in response, then you likely haven't gotten to the unarguable truth yet. There is usually another layer of truth that you can access.

Learning to speak the unarguable truth is an important aspect of claiming full healthy responsibility. It allows us to communicate in a way that does not blame, a way in which we claim our ability to respond, especially when done in an atmosphere of curiosity and non-judgment.

Most of us haven't learned how to communicate in this way. We don't have role models who communicate unarguably, not even at school or at church or in government. This is an essential skill that will assist you in all of your relationships. What might you do to speak unarguably today?

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1 hour introductory session.