

Improving Relationships...

THE ASSERTIVENESS OF REMEDIATION

1. **When you say or do A...**
2. **...I feel B.**
3. **I would appreciate if, instead, you would say or do C+.**
4. **Agree?**

THE CLASSIC EXAMPLE of what I call the “assertiveness of initiation” is the shy guy who has difficulty asking a woman out for a date. He has difficulty breaking the ice, initiating contact, asserting himself. In contrast, the “assertiveness of remediation” is a method of clearly and constructively addressing an irritation or area of conflict with another person in hopes of remedying or remediating the problem. There are four steps to asserting oneself in hopes of obtaining a remedy. They are summarized in the statements above, but each requires further elaboration.

1. **When you say or do A...**
2. **...I feel B.**

The first statement, divided into two steps, may be the toughest: It requires a person to speak up, to state one’s beef! In doing so, however, there is yet another challenge: to dispassionately state one’s complaint without pointing an accusatory finger or using inflammatory language. A husband, for example, will point to his wife and yell, “You make me feel lousy [or some expletive] every goddamn time you stay out ‘til two in the morning with your [expletive deleted] bridge club friends!” This will not invite an open conciliatory ear from his wife! The accusatory “you-make-me-feel” language not only puts the listener on the defensive, it is patently erroneous thinking. No one “makes” or causes another to feel a certain way; no one “zaps” another with feelings. Apart from speaking up, the other big challenge in these first two steps is to move away from accusatory, causational language (“You make me feel...”) to *correlational* language (“*When* you do A, I feel B”). This is not only more accurate, but the other person is more likely to *listen*. And if the other is more willing to listen, resolution is more likely. His wife would be far more open to discussion had the husband said something like, “Honey, when you stay out so late with your bridge club friends, I feel both concerned about your well-being and angered and jealous that you may enjoy your friends’ company more than mine.”

3. **I would appreciate if, instead, you would say or do C+.**

As difficult as the first two steps may be, stopping there is insufficient. While you may feel good that you have diplomatically stated your complaint, you cannot be sure if the listener knows what to do to rectify your complaint. *You* offer a positive, constructive (“C+”) alternative. You do *not* simply say “Don’t do A!” Better to say, in

the case of our husband-wife feud, “I would appreciate if, instead, you would come home, say, by midnight, or let me know before then if you are running late.”

4. Agree?

All the creative, constructive, and positive thinking which went into the suggested alternative in step 3 is inadequate if it falls on deaf or uncooperative ears. One needs to confirm that the suggested alternative is agreeable. Moreover, simply hearing a “yes” to your suggestion is insufficient. Ask the listener what he or she has agreed to! Changing a yes-no question (“Do you agree?”) into a fill-in-the-blank question (“What are you agreeing to do?”) can help confirm there is mutual understanding of the agreement. Most importantly, do not give up until you do attain an agreement. If it means altering your suggestion, be flexible and do so. Some improvement is better than none.

The 48-hour rule

Many people have a habit called “gunnysacking,” where they often unintentionally fail to confront, and therefore store up, uncomfortable feelings stemming from the actions of another. What happens, then, is that after a series of unresolved hurtful or uncomfortable events, the “last straw... breaks the camel’s back.” For example, a girlfriend may become extremely upset and tearful over her boyfriend’s being five minutes late for a date they planned. The extremity of her response does not seem to “fit the crime.” In fact, however, it was simply the final straw over a series of events with her boyfriend in which she felt hurt in some way. Had each been “nipped in the bud,” the pressure cooker of hurt would not have had the opportunity to boil over. Especially with couples, I often suggest they arbitrarily self-impose the “48-hour rule,” where each will confront the other of their complaint within 48 hours or it is to be forgotten. To bring up a two year old tiff is “dirty pool,” and oftentimes clear recollection of the particulars in the matter is obscured by one and exaggerated by the other. Deal with a clean slate and avoid the heartburns and blowups: approach one another constructively within 48 hours.

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