

Session 1: Introduction to the Four Styles

Purpose: Participants will become familiar with the four styles of communication

Supplies: Folders, paper, handout (Introduction to Relationship Building), markers

Content:

- Origin of the material
- Lecture on Small Talk
- Lecture on Control Talk
- Lecture on Search Talk
- Lecture on Straight Talk
- Review of the rules

Activities:

- A. One-on-one small talk
- B. One-on-one control talk
- C. One-on-one search talk
- D. One-on-one straight talk
- E. Discussion
- F. Journal writing: Choose a goal for this section of the course
- G. One-on-one goal
- H. Group – share goals.

T> Welcome to the Washington Ethical Society and Relationship Building, which will be five core sessions plus three optional workshops. My name is _____, and my co-trainer is _____. [Say a few words about yourself and your affiliation with WES and the LifeWorks program.]

Our plan for tonight is to talk about the origin of this material, discuss the four styles of communication, and get to know each other. We'll do this by breaking into pairs for one-on-ones, sharing with another person at various times during the evening.

In order to begin to get to know each other, we're going to start with one of WES' finest traditions: the Name Game. The Name Game begins with one person saying his/her name. The next person says the name of the first person and then his or her own name. Each time you begin from the beginning and end with yourself. So the further we get around the circle, the more names will be said by each person. Who would like to start? [If anyone has trouble, make this suggestion: I'd like to offer a suggestion. If you're having trouble with people's names in the class, make sure that as we do the Name Game, you're looking not at the speaker, but one at a time at the people in the class, as they're being named.] (At the end of the Name Game, acknowledge the participants for playing.)

T **Origins of the Material.** I'm now going to say a few words about the origins of the course at the Washington Ethical Society. In 1972, at the University of Minnesota, researchers studied 100 couples who had been married for five years or longer to gather information about the way couples communicate. One of the goals of this research was to determine how long the average couple spent communicating with each other during the week. Does anyone have any idea as to what amount of time they discovered? (Get responses from the group.)

The answer was 27½ minutes per week. The average amount of time was 27½ minutes per week that couples spent communicating with each other. From this comes one of the central themes of this part of the course: What counts is not how long we talk to each other or even what we talk about, but how we talk to each other and the style that we use.

Researchers also noticed that the talk itself could be categorized into four main types or styles of communication. In addition, they discovered that those couples who resolved conflicts the most effectively were those who had skill in using all four styles. Those who had the most difficulty tended to use two styles at the most.

Out of this Minnesota study was born the book Straight Talk, a book about the four styles and conflict resolution. We used to use that as a textbook in this course, but it's out of print now, unfortunately. However, lots of people have gotten through the course, and some have become teachers of the course, without ever having finished that book.

In 1976, when the Ethical Society's committees and programs were being born, leaders and members of the Society determined that members needed to know how to communicate effectively and resolve problems productively in order for programs to flourish and grow. We needed a common framework as a community for creating relationships, making ground rules, and establishing agreements that supported the ethical principles we were choosing to live by. The driving belief of the course is that no one is born knowing how to build good relationships. However, those skills and the related skills necessary to resolve the inevitable conflicts between people can be taught and learned. Therefore, Don Montagna, Lynne Waymon, and others created this course based

on Straight Talk and similar works. Since 1976, we've taught a lot of people, and the principles underlying this course pervade the Ethical Society and many of the courses that have been taught here over the years.

Does anyone have any questions or comments? (Look at each participant when asking this question.)

T> **The Four Styles.** So let's begin with the four styles. Most of us have some skill in one or two of these styles. We can increase our effectiveness a great deal if we are aware of all four and are able to select each style when it's appropriate. We'll talk about each style, and then we'll experience using each one tonight.

Small Talk. The first style is Small Talk. Small talk is sociable, chit-chat, usually friendly. It's talk about "it" – it's an exchange of information. It's the "meet and greet" talk in your office. Small talk does not have to be inconsequential. The subject itself may be very weighty – the political scene, or an office problem, for example, or, not so heavy, a movie you liked, perhaps. But small talk is low risk; it's not especially self-revealing; it's not about our relationship. It's about something other than us, and the intention is to exchange information, to make contact, and to keep things on an even keel.

Some examples of small talk are:

How are you today? I'm fine.

This report says we need to cut back operating costs.

The music is a bit sad.

Red is my favorite color.

The weather is great!

I know a great new Italian restaurant.

Small talk includes reporting, questions and answers (as in “Where are the car keys?”), joking, and opinions. Small talk is always exchanged under clear expectations. It’s low risk, and our intention when we use small talk is to keep things moving along smoothly. You and I are talking about something other than our relationship. So do you recognize this way of being together? Does anyone have any questions?

One caveat: I mentioned that small talk can include politics and opinion. But those subjects can also get intense. So when the conversation gets onto those topics, ask yourself the following question: Am I invested in changing this person’s mind? Because if you are, it’s probably not small talk anymore; it’s another style we’re going to talk about in a few minutes.

T> Tonight, we’re going to experience each of the four styles through a series of one-on-ones. In a minute, I’m going to ask you to choose a partner and then listen to what the one-on-one is about. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers in these exercises, so just have fun and enjoy being with the people in the class.

Remember, you’re in charge of your own participation. Share what’s comfortable for you, and feel free to sit out any activity. In each one-on-one, I’ll ask you to take turns. After you both have had a turn, I’ll ask you to choose a new partner for another one-on-one on another subject. Now, please choose a partner and listen for directions. For these first few, choose someone you don’t know, or don’t know very well. (Help people get paired up. Say “Raise your hand if you’re looking for a partner.”)

A. Introduce yourself. Tell your partner something about where you live, where you work, anything else you’d like to share about yourself. One of you will go first. How

about the person with the brighter clothing on? I'll call time in a couple of minutes, and then the other person will take a turn.

Thank your partner. Say goodbye and choose a new partner. (Teachers note that each person has a partner and help those who do not, by asking "Who's looking for a partner?")

B. Tell your partner what you did last night. Again, one of you will go first. I'll call time and then the other will take a turn.

C. Tell your partner about a good book, movie, or restaurant you've enjoyed recently. Each take a turn. You'll have about two minutes each.

Say goodbye and come back to the large group.

T> Again, small talk is always low risk and low emotion, even if the subject itself is "weighty."

Control Talk. The second style is Control Talk. The intention of control talk is to take charge, to get someone else to do something you want them to do. It does not maintain the status quo like small talk; its aim is to alter the course of things.

There are two kinds of control talk, light and heavy:

Light Control is necessary in the world to get things done. It takes the form of:

- Persuading – We really need you to come to the meeting.
- Seeking agreement – How about the last person in the office turning off the computer?
- Praising – You did an absolutely perfect job on that report.
- Teaching – See if you can hear the difference between small talk and control talk.

- Making rules, at least where there's an expectation that the speaker is the one who makes the rules – Don't cross the street alone.

As long as there's no undue compulsion attached, control talk is efficient and functional.

Heavy Control is the other kind of control talk, and it's win/lose. The message is, Do it my way, or else. It takes the form of:

- Blaming – You're the one who makes us late all the time.
- Threatening – If you don't learn where the pots and pans go, I'm not going to cook anymore.
- Sarcasm – I guess it will be another month before we're blessed with one of your meals.
- Criticism – You talk too much at parties. It bores me.

Notice how the word "you" keeps coming up.

Heavy control talk includes labeling, name-calling, accusing, demanding, ridiculing, and put-downs, the kinds of statements that begin, "The trouble with you is" Heavy control talk itself has two forms – Active and Passive, which we call the Iron Fist and the Velvet Glove.

When someone uses Iron Fist Heavy Control talk on you, you know you've been hit. The intention is loud and clear. "If you have one more drink, I'm taking the car and leaving."

When someone uses Velvet Glove Heavy Control talk on you, you know you've been hit, but you're not sure how the blow came. My mother never called me. When I

called her, she'd say, "My God! Where have you been? I thought something had happened to you!"

The intention of Velvet Glove Heavy Control is to control by inducing guilt, sympathy, or anxiety.

So let's do some more one-on-ones. Find a partner, someone you haven't worked with yet.

D. Give your new partner your best advice about how to get the most out of this class. Tell your partner what he or she should do to make the class the best possible experience. I'll call time so that each of you gets a couple of minutes to give your best advice.

(Say goodbye and choose a new partner.)

E. Complain to your partner about something going on in your life. Your partner's job is to just listen. Then change and give your partner a turn. (NOTE: A very effective variation of this is to have them use numbers to express their complaints. They express the same emotion, but don't get momentarily stuck in their problem. Directions are: Now when you complain, don't use words. Use numbers from one to one hundred in any way you want. Like "One, two, three, four, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, eight, nine, TEN.) Why is complaining control talk? Because it is often intended to induce guilt, sympathy, or anxiety.

(You may want to have a brief large group discussion here to check in with people about small talk and control talk. Are they familiar forms? Are you more comfortable with one than another?)

One final comment about Control Talk: In a relationship, heavy control talk always has consequences. If you overpower or humiliate the other person in a relationship, that incident will come back again. The other person either will start avoiding the topic, or will be looking to get you back, or both.

T> **Search Talk.** The third style is Search Talk. Search talk is tentative, exploring, detached; it tests the waters. The intention of search talk is to stop the action in a tense situation and look at things in an objective way. Its tone is reflective, contemplative. The goal of search talk is to signal an intention to explore a problem area in a relationship in an unemotional way to create more understanding and more possibilities without necessarily finding a solution. This “wonder why” talk is low risk, even though the topic may be high risk.

Search Talk often starts with “I noticed...” as if you’re a spider on the wall, observing, watching, but not taking a position. Some examples of search talk are:

- We seem to be fighting an awful lot. I wonder if it’s because we’re getting married in a month.
- I’m curious about why we squabble after we go to one of our in-laws’ for dinner.
- What are some ways we could change this unpleasant state we seem to be in right now?

Did you notice that the word "we" kept coming up?

Search talk is a good place to go if you’ve gotten into control talk and you don’t know how to stop. While control talk says “I have the answer and I’m going to force it on you,” search talk is an admission that you don’t have the answer but you’re willing to look for it. It looks back for possible reasons (notice the plural) to explain what is happening and forward for possible solutions (plural again) to the problem

Does anyone have any questions? Search talk is one that may seem the most unfamiliar to you, or you may recognize it as a style that you've been using all along. Search talk can be an enormously effective tool to use, especially in tense situations. It changes the nature of the dynamic right away if one steps back and begins to look, in a purely exploring way, at what is going on and what might be behind it.

But watch out. Often, we think we're using search talk when we say such things as "I wonder why you always start fights after we go to my mother's." But what style is that?

How do you know what style that is? The surest way to figure out what style you're using is to ask yourself, "What is my intention?" Intention is always the clue. And the intention of search talk is to step back and consider the causes and effects in a non-blaming way.

Choose a new partner for another one-on-one.

G. In this one-on-one, speculate with your partner on what you might get out of this course. Be tentative, exploring, pondering. I'll call time to give both of you a turn.

Thank your partner and choose a new one.

H. [I sometimes skip this and use it in the second session.] In this one-on-one, share with your partner a recent situation that was very tense, one in which you chose to use control talk and complained or ridiculed or demanded or withheld. Tell your partner about it. Then think of what you might have said in search talk that might have stopped the action.

Thank your partner.

I. **(Optional one-on-one.** Choose a new partner. We're going to have an experience of being with each other now without using words. Our society doesn't encourage us to be together in silence. We often fill up silence with meaningless words. Sit knee to knee with your hands on your own knees. Now close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. In a minute, I'm going to ask you to open your eyes and be with each other without talking. (Pause.) Okay, now open your eyes. Notice any physical sensations you might have. Notice any tension in your stomach or shoulders. Try to let go of the tension. Notice if you need to laugh. Let it up and let it go. Notice your need to talk, but don't talk. Just be with each other without using words. Notice any thoughts or feelings you're having. Notice the other person across from you. Whatever you think or feel is okay. Just notice it.

(Now stay with this same partner and share what this was like for you. Be exploring, speculative, and open-ended. Be curious about why you might have thought or felt the way you did. Speculate with your partner what your relationship might be like now that you've shared this experience.)

T> **Straight Talk.** The fourth style is Straight Talk. Straight talk is a way of communicating responsibly and openly about what you think and feel in the present. The intention of straight talk is to build a relationship, seek a course of action, seek resolution to an issue. Straight talk is self-responsible, self-disclosing, caring, committed. It's "I" talk – I think, I feel, I want. You state how you think and feel and then listen to the other's sharing of the same. Straight talk is high risk. You're letting your defenses down. You become vulnerable when sharing thoughts and feelings.

Some examples of straight talk:

- I feel out of control when I can't find things. I'd like to propose some agreements about where things go.
- I'm disappointed we're not getting together on Sunday. I'd like to make plans to see you later in the week.
- I feel pretty good about our relationship. I care a lot about you.

But be careful. Sometimes we think we're airing our thoughts and feelings in a "straight" way such as what I've described, but we may be using disguised control talk. If you said something like "I feel that you're not listening to me when I talk about work," what style is that? How do you know? What might you say to make that a straight talk message? What is the best means of knowing what style we're in? (Make the point again that intention is always the best gauge for knowing what style we're in. Do I want to hurt and punish, or do I want to resolve a problem and bring myself and the other closer together?)

Why do you think that straight talk is high risk? What makes you vulnerable when you share your feelings? Let's try some straight talk. Choose a new partner. Find someone you haven't been with tonight.

J. Share with your partner why you decided to take this course. What's going on in your life that motivated you to choose spending some time with building relationships? Use "I" statements to describe your thoughts, feelings, and wants about relationships. When you're the listening partner, just listen and repeat back what you hear your partner saying. I'll call time so each of you will have a turn. You'll have about two minutes each.

(Thank your partner and come back to the large group.)

T> Does anyone have any questions about the four styles? Any comments? Do you recognize that you have been using them in your life? Which ones are you the most familiar and comfortable with? Which ones are most difficult and why? (Pause and look at each person as you ask questions. Call on people by name who look as though they may have something to share.)

One important point about speaking self-responsibly: Compare these two statements, one in small talk and other in straight talk: “The music is sad” and “I feel sad when I listen to this music.” In one of them, the emotion is put off onto the music. It is said to be sad. In the other, the speaker owns the emotion of sadness as his or her own. This will become very important as we go further into the conflict resolution portion of the course, because owning your emotions is a necessary step before you can think about where they originate and how much choice you have around them.

T> Take about five minutes now and think about the one-on-one we completed a few minutes ago. Why did you decide to take this course and what is your goal for this portion of the course? What would you like to create for yourself here? How would you like yourself and/or your relationships to change as a result of this class?

(If there is time, lead a one-on-one where partners share and get clear on each other’s goals. There are several options from here: 1. Ask participants to write a letter to themselves with their goals; date the letter and keep it handy so they can refer to it during the class. 2. Have a go-around where each person shares his or her goal and teachers write on flip chart. Stress a one-sentence goal for this exercise.)

T> Before we end tonight, we'd like to revisit some of the ground rules for this course. We're going to begin next week discussing interpersonal conflict, and there are a few things that are important to remember.

- The most important ground rule: Confidentiality. This means that personal information shared in here needs to stay in here. Again, we hope you'll share the content, techniques, skills, and activities of the course with the world. But this is a small community, and, since we want to make it safe for all of us to share personal information about ourselves and significant others, we need to know that this information is considered confidential and will not be repeated outside class. And I'd like to extend this rule a bit, to include even talking with other people in the class about personal information that you both heard in this room. The reason for that is we want to practice creating a culture that moves conflicts toward resolution. When people start to gossip about conflicts, it creates interest groups and side issues that can get in the way of resolving the original conflict.
- Also, we like to stress that everyone is in charge of his or her own experience in here. You choose what you're willing to share. You have the right to pass during a go-around or any other activity.
- Finally, an exception to the rule about being in charge of your own participation. In the coming weeks, we'll all have the opportunity to identify some specific conflicts we've had in our relationships. If you're here in the course with a person with whom you're in a relationship, I'd like you to get that person's permission before you share with the class a conflict incident that occurred

between you. If you plan to do that, please come in with a clear agreement that it's OK with your partner.

Does anyone have any questions about any of that, or any other agreements proposed?

T> Good. Homework for this week revolves around the four styles.

1. Notice which styles you use, and how you use them.
2. Notice the styles that people around you are using.
3. Watch a movie or a soap opera and, as the dialog unfolds, notice what styles they're using in various situations.

T> [If there's time.] Well, this evening has flown by, and we'd like to end by having a final go-around. What was the evening like for you? Given the size of the class, please say just one sentence. Whoever wants to start can start.