

## Get Your Partner To Talk

Most of the time when people want their partner to be more open, they think it comes down to knowing a magic word or phrase – and that there isn't much effort needed to encourage their partner to be more transparent, once that magic word is found. Sadly, it doesn't work that way.

A former client of mine, Sue\*, had this problem with her husband Joe\*. Sue didn't want to hear that she needed to make a concentrated effort to get Joe to open up. This was because, as much as Sue didn't want to hear it, she was part of the reason that Joe had closed down. It wasn't intentional. And it didn't happen overnight. But in the end she had to come to grips.

Few people have a desire to know what follows. Even fewer will apply it. For one thing, it's not easy to read and take in. For another, we humans often seem to fear being accountable. And maybe we think we are inviting blame or criticism. Maybe we think we are letting our partners off the hot seat – and putting ourselves on it! For so many reasons, it remains the little known strategy that is today.

Here's the blueprint, exactly as I gave it to Sue. (And certainly, the gender roles could be reversed.)

*First, Sue, don't tell Joe how you feel when he is closed. All that does is load up the guilt.*

*Second, don't criticize or judge him when he does start to open up. Don't react as though his pee wee efforts until now aren't good enough.*

*Third, getting Joe to open up requires that you change your perspective. The question, "How do I get him to open up/talk more?" is basically a self-centered question. It is about you getting more, but not about what is important to Joe.*

*So change your attitude about 'getting.' Think about giving to Joe and responding to him first.*

At this point Sue was understandably doubtful of what I was asking her to do, but she held on, realizing that it actually might just work.

And this one's the kicker... I told Sue that, when timing is convenient for Joe, start by saying,

*"I think I have been messing up. And I would like to ask you a few questions about my mistakes. Is this an OK time to inquire?"*

*If Joe doesn't agree, negotiate a better time with him. Once you get agreement, this is what you say:*

*“Joe, you’re probably aware that I want you to be more transparent about what you think and feel about \_\_\_\_\_.”*

*Specific examples will give much needed clarity here.*

*“However, I believe I do some things that discourage you from being more open. Perhaps I interrupt you too often. I think I might become critical or judgmental when you say something I disagree with. Maybe I withdraw or give you a cold shoulder when you say something that displeases me. I don’t think I encourage you when you do become more open. Sometimes I withhold affection when you say or do something I don’t like.*

*You could even think it is unfair that I want you to be more transparent when I am not clear and specific about my motivations or desires.*

*So it would help me a lot to understand what I do that discourages you from being more transparent. And I PROMISE not to get defensive about anything you say because I won’t learn anything about me or us if I do that.*

*Would it be easier for you to respond to me now or would you like some time to think about it and get back to me? Either by email or in person would work.”*

And as I explained to Sue, here is the hardest part... DO NOT respond in any negative way to what he says.

*If he says, ‘Well gosh honey, you don’t do anything that discourages me,’ then he’s lying. He is even more afraid to open up than you thought. If he denies you do anything that discourages him, you might respond with, ‘Wow, I thought I was pretty good but I do not believe I have saintly communication skills...’”*

And nor should you. Do not believe you are as pure as the driven snow just because he *said* you’re innocent. In thirty years of working with couples in this very format, I’ve never met one partner who had not discouraged their partner from being more open on a given topic.

The next step I gave Sue was to thank him for his critique of her. Then to work like the dickens to improve those suggestions, and to tell Joe she was going to work on it.

... And that was it. That’s how Sue turned around a very non-communicative and closed off Joe. She found that when she gave to him, he could give to her. She got out of the futile, self-centered perspective that Joe had to give more first.

So – can you handle the challenge? It’s not easy, as I said in the beginning. It merits taking a step back to see a bigger picture. But once you can change your perspective, and open up the lines of communication with your partner, you will feel freer than you ever thought possible.

Dr. Pete Pearson

\* Client names have been changed to protect privacy.