



## Strong Leadership in Couples Therapy: How the Developmental Model Helps You

Being a highly skilled couples therapist requires strong leadership, especially in early sessions. Here you set the tone, establish your role and the clients' role, solidify your credibility, assess what is wrong and why, and chart a clear direction — all while preventing regression, creating hope, and stimulating individual accountability. Not an easy task!

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Enclosed you will find some handouts for you to use. These provide support for you to take a stronger leadership role in your work with couples.

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# The Paper Exercise

This is an exercise adapted from Susan Campbell's book, *The Couples Journey*.

The Paper Exercise is a wonderful tool that can be used either diagnostically or as an intervention. It will enable you to identify a couple's developmental stage and plan incisive interventions. This exercise is so rich that you can learn an enormous amount about any couple in just a few minutes!

## Setting up the exercise

I take a piece of plain white 8 ½ x 11 paper and I hold it out in my hand. Then I look one partner in the eyes and say, "This piece of paper represents something important to you. I'd like you to take a minute and think about what this piece of paper represents to you. You can pick anything that's important to you except for your kids and your marriage." Then I'll pause and continue to look that person in the face, giving him a few seconds to think about what it is I've asked him to do. I want him to have time to process the request.

Then I turn to the second partner and I say, "This piece of paper represents something important to you and I'd like you to take a minute to think about what it represents to you. It can be anything that's important to you except for your kids or your marriage." Then I pause again, take time, and give her time to think about it; then I ask the couple to hold the piece of paper between them. I make sure each person has a hand on one end of the paper.

I say to them, "I'd like you to hold this paper between you, and I'm going to give you up to five minutes to decide who gets this paper without ripping or tearing it. You can do it verbally or non-verbally. You can do it any way you like, but at the end of the five minutes, I'd like you to decide who gets the paper without ripping or tearing it."

Then I'm quiet. I'll even back up my chair a little. And I watch. You might even want to consider recording this when you do it. You watch and you time it. A lot of couples will try to engage you in answering a lot of questions, because you've created a projective type of situation that's unsettling for them, and they're going to want you to structure it for them.

They'll ask you all kinds of things. I keep saying back to them, "You can do it any way you choose, and you'll have up to five minutes to decide who gets the paper without ripping or tearing it." That's all I say to them.

## Summary List of Diagnostic Assessment Areas

1. Do the partners self-define?
2. How do they manage boundaries? Are their boundaries rigid or overly permeable?
3. Do they show awareness that their partner is separate and different from them?
4. How do they manage conflict? Is it avoided, escalated, or acknowledged and handled?
5. Do they have the capacity to move the conflict forward?
6. Is each partner able to give and/or receive?

This exercise is very illuminating. There's a lot that can be done with it. I'm hoping you'll come away from today not thinking this is some rigid technique or that there's a right time to apply it. It's something you can apply when it feels right to you and when it makes sense. And it can help you illuminate some of the developmental deficits and impasses for any couple.

# Initiator | Revealing One's Self

## Focus on One Issue Only

- Before you begin, get clear on your main concern.
- Check your partner's readiness.
- Stay on track with this one issue.
- Describe what you want.

## Express Your Feelings & Thoughts

- Feelings are often complex and can even be contradictory.
- Are you sad, scared, angry, or happy?
- Go beyond simply expressing one feeling.
- Look for the vulnerability that may be underneath your initial feeling, e.g. sadness, fear, jealousy, hurt, guilt.

## Remind Yourself

- This is my problem. It's an expression of who I am. It's about me revealing myself and being willing to express my own thoughts and feelings.

## Avoid Blaming, Accusing and Name-calling

- Blaming stops you from knowing yourself.
- You have a role to play in being heard.
- You may wish to acknowledge some positive aspects of the situation.

## Be Open to Self-Discovery

- Explore your personal inner experience.
- Keep going deeper into how you feel.
- What does this tell you about yourself?
- How do you respond?
- How do you think and feel?

## Remind Yourself

- This process is about my willingness to take a risk to speak or discover my own truth and increase my ability to tolerate the expression of our differences.

# Inquirer | The Effective Listener

## Listen Calmly

- Don't defend yourself, argue, or cross-complain.
- Remind yourself that you don't have to take what's said so personally.
- Hold on to "The Big Picture."

## Ask Questions

- Develop an interested and curious state of mind.
- The questions you ask are designed to help you understand your partner's experience.
- Can you come up with any examples on your own that will let your partner know you really understand?

## Remind Yourself

- Am I in a place to listen with openness?
- I do not own this problem.
- I do not need to get upset.
- It's up to me to manage my reactions.

## Recap

- Repeat back to your partner, as accurately and completely as you are able, what you've understood.
- Check it out with your partner to see if it's complete and accurate.

## Empathize

- Do your best to put yourself in your partner's shoes.
- Respond with empathy.
- Keep making empathic statements until a soothing moment occurs.
- You can hold onto yourself and still imagine what it's like for the other person.

## Remind Yourself

- My partner is a separate person with his or her own feelings, thoughts, personality, and family history. I only need to listen, not look for solutions.

# Six Types of Confrontation in Couples Therapy

Confrontation is, according to Webster's Dictionary, "a technique used in therapy to recognize shortcomings and their possible consequences."

The six types of confrontation are:

1. Soft
2. Empathic
3. Gentle, but Tough
4. Indirect
5. Hard/Tough
6. Bombshell

## 1. What is a Soft Confrontation?

A soft confrontation is a very mild mention of a specific problem designed to just start bringing it into the client's awareness.

It might be a mild mention in the form of a question.

*"Were you drinking last night when you were fighting?"*

*"It seems like a lot of fights occur when you've been drinking."*

It describes the process going on in the couple's interaction.

*"I notice that when you withdraw, your wife starts making more demands on you."*

## 2. What is an Empathic Confrontation?

In an empathic confrontation, the therapist names feelings that are barely recognized in order to surface them.

*"You seem to feel lonely in your parenting role."*

*"You seem frightened as you are coming across so angry."*

*"You are hurt and come out fighting."*

The therapist keeps coming back to the feelings and empathically describing the emotional state of the client.

An empathic confrontation can also be used to expose an internal conflict.

*"There is a part of you that feels tenacious and does not want to give up and there is another part of you that is sad and grieving and feels that the end is in sight."*

Or the therapist might self disclose in a way that uses their countertransference in an empathic way.

*"Am I the only one in the room dreading that I might not be able to do it right?"*

### 3. What is a Gentle, but Tough Confrontation?

In a gentle, but tough confrontation the therapist exposes very dysfunctional thoughts or behavior in order to make these very explicit.

This confrontation is said kindly, with a smile, but it does not shy away from a tough subject. It is descriptive and non judgmental.

*"You both seem to operate in a competitive framework where you try to get 1-up on each other. Do you really believe that only one of you can get a positive outcome?"*

*"You operate like many people from the 'get and protect syndrome.' You push to get, while hiding and protecting your own vulnerability."*

### 4. What is an Indirect Confrontation?

In an indirect confrontation, what is said directly to one partner is actually meant for the other partner.

This might be said to a withdrawing spouse and meant for an angry partner who escalates rapidly:

*"When your wife makes requests of you, you may say yes, you may say no. In fact, I hope some times you will say no because partners need to learn to listen calmly and not to jump to dire conclusions when the other says no."*

### 5. What is a Hard/Tough Confrontation?

This confrontation is designed to hold up a mirror to make the client feel anxious or uncomfortable and to get their attention or show the outcome of what they are doing

It might be a strong description of dysfunctional behavior and when the client evades or wiggles away, the therapist must be tenacious and say it over and over again.

*"Let's back up. I don't know if you heard what I said. You keep asking your husband/wife to support you not functioning as a full partner in this marriage. Is that what you mean to ask?"*

### 6. What is a Bombshell Confrontation?

Here the therapist sets a forceful limit. It might mean refusing to continue without change or making therapy contingent on a change so strong, so intense they have to attend to it. Or, it might involve tracing out a devastating future, if the person continues doing the self-destructive behavior.

*"I won't schedule another session until you have two coffee dates with each other."*

**It is often effective to use these in a sequence in a session building tougher and tougher confrontations over time. You can also back off to a lower level one when too much resistance results from making a higher level one.**

# The Cycle of Confrontation

