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Communication Exercises



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PositivePsychology.com B.V.
Gandhiplein 16
6229HN MAASTRICHT
The Netherlands

<https://PositivePsychology.com>

Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of communication tools. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with the Positive Psychology has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



The Softened Start-Up

Communication

Exercise

10 min

Client

No

Interpersonal conflict is an unavoidable part of life. After all, we are unique beings with diverse and sometimes incompatible opinions, needs, and views. While conflict is inevitable, it is also paradoxical in that it is neither inherently good nor inherently bad; instead, it all comes down to how it is managed. How a conflict conversation begins plays a significant role in the trajectory of the entire discussion. Indeed, 96% of the time, the outcome of a conversation can be predicted based on the first three minutes [1], also known as the 'start-up.'

A harsh start-up to a conflict involves using criticism and blame to make a point. This kind of start-up is ineffective and may interfere with the supportive functions of relationships, negatively affecting trust and commitment [2] and causing others to question the motives, capabilities, and sincerity of those involved while the real issue remains unresolved [3]. Fortunately, the development of conflict resolution skills helps minimize these detrimental outcomes.

The softened start-up denotes a gentle opening to a conflict conversation. When approached in a non-confrontational manner, conflict can be constructive, improve communication, lead to the resolution of problems, provide opportunities for self-expression, and refine interpersonal collaboration skills [4].

A softened start-up is about complaining without blaming and encourages non-judgmental language and facial expressions that convey respect for others [5]. A gentler start-up diffuses tensions, reduces hurtful communication, protects both parties from feeling attacked or defensive [1], and likely induces the same communicative behaviors in the other person [6]. This exercise will help clients approach potential conflict conversations in a non-judgmental and non-confrontational way, preventing tension escalation and potential damage to relationships.



Author

This exercise was adapted from the study by Gottman and colleagues [1] by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients formulate softened start-ups to conflict conversations. By approaching potential conflict in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way, clients can alter the trajectory of conversations, prevent escalation, and protect both parties from feeling attacked or defensive.



Advice

- When formulating softened start-up statements, clients should focus on their feelings, needs, and “I” statements as much as possible. Clients must also be mindful not to turn an “I” statement into a “You” statement that blames the other person. “I” statements must not be used to veil criticism. For instance, a statement like, “I feel like you never help me around the house,” is still a harsh start-up because it blames the other person. Clients should focus on the facts of a situation and avoid exaggeration that paints the other person in a negative light.
- Remind clients that it is not just the words they use that can make someone feel attacked, blamed, or criticized. While mostly unintentional, tutting, body language like eye-rolling, frowning, arms crossing, or looking at a clock during a conversation are not helpful and are unlikely to result in a favorable outcome.
- This exercise is an effective tool when dealing with interpersonal conflicts in the workplace, with friends, family, intimate relationships, and many other situations.
- Encourage clients to follow a softened start-up with a question like, ‘What do you think?’ to show that they are open to discussing the issue and to listen to what the other person has to say.



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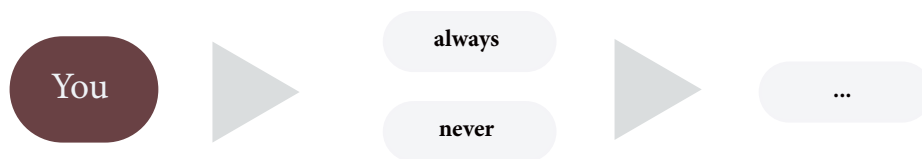
The Softened Start-Up

How a conflict conversation starts determines how the entire interaction plays out. Indeed, you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes. Imagine for a moment that someone approaches you with a complaint: if they do not try to blame you or criticize your actions, you are likely to remain calm and open to what they have to say without feeling defensive.

You can think of conflict 'start-ups' in two ways: harsh and softened.

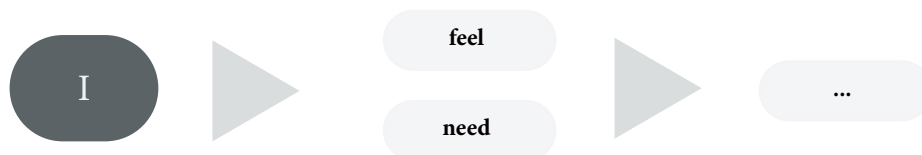
Harsh Start-Ups

A harsh start-up is when someone brings up an issue or complaint using criticism and blame to make their point. This way of approaching potential conflict conversations can be extremely damaging to any relationship, including intimate, workplace, friends, or family relationships, among others. Harsh startups often include "You" statements and language like "always" and "never."



Softened Start-Ups

A soft start-up is about gently approaching potential conflicts so that the other person is more likely to listen to what you have to say. Softened start-ups tend to use "I" statements that avoid criticism and blame, explain your concerns, and describe what you need while being respectful, non-judgmental, and courteous.



This exercise will guide you through the process of formulating softened start-ups to potential conflict conversations.

Step 1: Understanding harsh and softened start-ups

While conflict is an inevitable part of life, how we choose to approach potential conflict determines how that conversation will play out. If you are critical or judgmental, you will likely receive negativity and defensiveness in return. A harsh start-up can feel like a direct attack on someone's character. For example, "You always spend too much money!", "Why can you never get things are done on time?" or "You never do anything around here."

Softening the start of a conversation is crucial to managing and resolving conflicts with your spouse or partner, your children, friends, or coworkers. A softened start-up allows you to voice your concerns and needs without blaming the other person. This makes it more likely they will be receptive to your complaint because your words and tone are not accusatory, judgmental, or negative.

Using the examples above, softened alternatives include, "I would like to sit down together and work out how we can budget our money better," "We talked about a deadline for the project and agreed on a schedule, please give this all of your attention," and "I like when we work together to get things done."

More examples can be found in Appendix.

Golden rules for softening your start-ups:

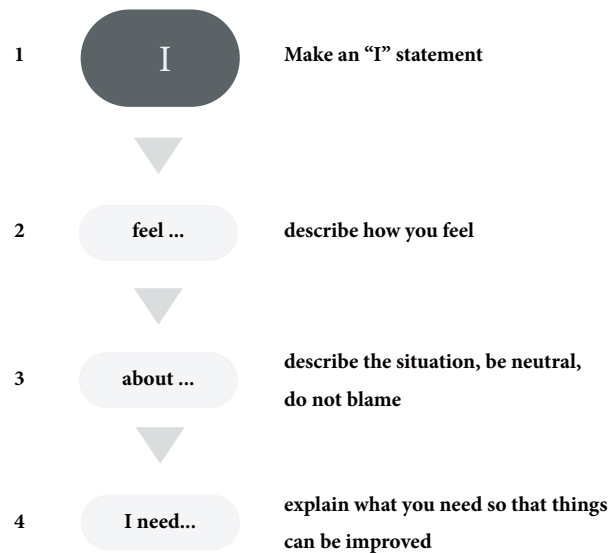
- Complaining is okay but criticizing and blaming are not. When statements start with the word "You" instead of "I," they are more likely to make the other person upset and defensive so try starting your sentence with an "I" statement. Avoid using words like "always" and "never," which can be seen as attacking another person's character.
- Instead of criticizing, judging, or blaming, describe what is happening using facts.
- Be clear about what it is that you need and avoid talking about what you do *not* need.
- Be polite and show appreciation. Use phrases such as "please....." and "I would appreciate it if you would...."

Step 2: Identify a past conflict

In this step, you will take a moment to think of a conflict you had in the past. This could be with a work colleague, family member, spouse, or partner, for example. Using the space below, describe what happened, including what was said and the outcome of the disagreement.

Step 3: Forming a softened alternative

Now that you have recalled a past conflict, you will think about how you might have approached the conversation in a gentler, non-confrontational way. A useful formula to follow when creating a softened start-up is:

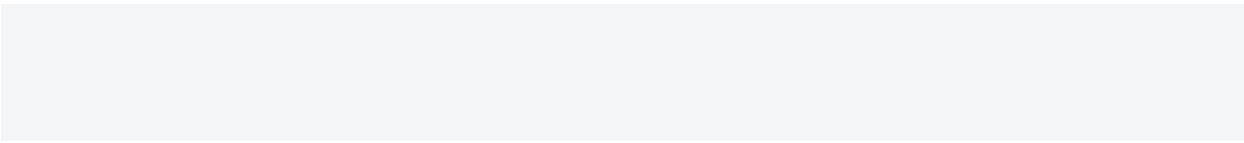


Take some time to think about this past conflict and, using the formula, write your softened start-up in the corresponding spaces below. If required, additional examples of softened start-ups can be found in Appendix.

I feel...

About...

I need...



Step 4: Reflection

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- What did this exercise teach you about conflict?
- In what ways has this exercise changed how you think about approaching potential conflict?
- In what ways did you find this exercise to be helpful?
- What insights have you gained from this exercise?

Appendix: Examples of harsh and softened start-ups

HARSH START-UPS	SOFTENED START-UPS
You can't even finish the simplest project on time!	I feel a little anxious that the project hasn't been completed; I would appreciate it if you gave it your full attention to get things finished up.
You are impossible to deal with!	I feel frustrated about how this conversation is going. It would be great to sit down and talk about the issue together.
You never want to talk about your day.	I feel upset when we don't reconnect after work, and I need to spend some quality time together this week.
You make me so mad when you don't listen to what I'm saying!	I feel frustrated when I can't get my point across, and I need to talk about the things that are bothering me.
You are so untidy - you never help with the cleaning.	I appreciate it when you tidy up the house; sometimes, I need help.
You work too much.	I feel quite lonely and have been missing you lately. I would love to do something special together this weekend.
The trouble with you is your selfishness; we always do what you want to do.	I find it quite upsetting when I don't get to do the things I enjoy, and I'd love for us to go hiking together. How does that sound?
You think you're the only one good enough to lead this project. You're always taking over, and it's so annoying!	I understand that you want to take the lead on this project, but we work well together. I have some really good ideas and would like to move forward as equal partners.
You are so irresponsible with our money.	I am quite worried about our finances and would like to save some money over the next few months. What do you think?
You never get up through the night to feed the baby; it's always left up to me to do it.	I have been feeling very tired lately because I'm not sleeping well. I would be so thankful if we took turns so I could get a good night's sleep.

Positive Gossip

Communication

Exercise

15-30 min

Group

No

Gossiping is a behavior that everyone encounters, contributes to, and intuitively understands [1]. On average, people spend approximately one hour per day engaging in some form of gossip behavior [2]. In evolutionary terms, gossip helped our ancestors collect and share knowledge that was once essential for survival [3], and it continues to have many social functions to this day. For instance, to build and maintain relationships with others, define our social status, and influence the behavior and opinions of others [3]. It is important to note, however, that there are different types of gossip behavior.

Negative gossip is sharing information that has potentially damaging effects on an absent third party [4]. This kind of gossip behavior may be detrimental to the gossiper *and* the victim. For instance, frequent negative gossipers are perceived as more aggressive, less amiable, and less popular [5]. Negative gossip makes it difficult for group members to trust each other or establish healthy cooperative relationships [6]. Indeed, targets of negative gossip exhibit less proactive behavior and heightened emotional exhaustion [7].

Positive gossip, on the other hand, is a social currency that builds and fortifies relationships. This prosocial behavior includes praising an absent third party or sharing positive information with good intentions [5]. Positive gossip is a low-risk way of demonstrating social support, and unsurprisingly, this kind of behavior builds trust and strengthens social bonds in groups [8]. This group exercise will encourage the use of prosocial, positive gossip about the behavior, accomplishments, and achievements of others.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This activity aims to create a climate of appreciative personal feedback by encouraging the use of positive gossip that focuses on the behavior, accomplishments, and achievements of others.



Advice

- For practitioners delivering a workshop: At the start of the day, you can mention that this exercise will be completed at the end of the training. By doing so, participants are more likely to notice the positive traits of other people. This will ensure the exercise is more effective and make the group atmosphere even more positive throughout the day. This activity provides an opportunity to reflect and debrief at the end of the day.
- For an alternative approach, instead of dividing the participants into smaller groups, you can also do this exercise with all group members simultaneously. For example, you point at someone in the circle, and the rest of the participants take turns to say something positive about that person.



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Positive Gossip

Whether we admit it or not, everyone gossips. It is human nature to do so. In simple terms, gossiping is talking about people who are not present. The average person spends around one hour each day engaging in some form of gossip about work colleagues, friends, family, or other people.

Sometimes, we talk about others solely to share information. This is called neutral gossip and is generally harmless. Other times, perhaps because of our insecurities or to increase our social standing, gossip is used as a weapon against others. This kind of malicious gossip can be damaging to both the gossiper *and* the target of the gossip. For example, talking negatively about people can make others assume that you will also talk about them in the same way and, as a result, damage existing relationships and weaken trust within the group. Being the focus of negative gossip is hurtful, isolating, and it can undermine a person's abilities and damage their self-esteem.

However, we can fulfill our need to gossip in a way that benefits us and others. Positive gossip is about sharing the accomplishments of others and celebrating their contributions with no malicious intent. Gossiping in this way can build trust, strengthen relationships, make us feel like part of a team, and provide opportunities to learn from the examples of other people.

We can all benefit from positive gossip, and this group activity is your opportunity to talk freely about - and celebrate - the behavior, accomplishments, and contributions of others.

Step 1: Understanding the roles

To begin, you will get into groups of three or more people. Each group member will take turns playing one of three roles:

- 1) *The Positive Gossiper* will share positive gossip about the recipient's behavior, abilities, accomplishments, or contributions.
- 2) *The Recipient* will be the focus of the positive gossip.
- 3) *The Listeners* will listen quietly without interrupting the gossiper.

Step 2: Sharing positive gossip

Sit in a circle with the rest of your group and select someone at random to play the recipient's role. This can be done alphabetically or by drawing names, for example.

The person sitting to the recipient's right will kick off the exercise by standing up and sharing one piece of positive gossip about that person while the other group members listen. Whatever piece of positive gossip is shared, it should be specific and true. Perhaps, it could show appreciation for something they do well. For example, "I like that [recipient's name] listens when you speak," "I think that [recipient's name] is warm and friendly," or "[recipient's name] has incredible management skills."

When the first gossip has finished, he/she should sit down, and the person to their right will begin his/her sentence with, "That's right and..." before going on to share their positive gossip about the recipient.

You will continue to go around the circle in this way until all group members get an opportunity to share their positive gossip about the recipient, at which point someone else will assume the recipient's role.

Repeat the activity as described above until every group member plays the role of the recipient.

Step 3: Reflecting on your experience in each role

In this step, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experience in each of the three roles. When everyone has assumed the recipient's role, take a few moments to consider the questions detailed below and write your responses in the space provided.

1. How did it feel to share positive gossip about others?

2. How did it feel to listen to your group share positive gossip about others?

3. How did it feel to hear others share positive gossip about you?



Step 4: General reflection questions

- How did this exercise change how you think about gossip?
- In what ways did this activity help you understand the value of positive gossip?
- Which of the three roles did you enjoy most? What are your reasons for this?
- What other groups or situations would benefit from positive gossip?
- As the recipient, what piece of positive gossip did you appreciate the most?

36 Questions to Increase Closeness

Communication

Exercise

45-60 min

Group

Yes

Interpersonal closeness describes the psychological proximity of two or more people and the related feelings of attachment between them [1]. According to the Social Penetration Theory [2], the reciprocal sharing of personal information underlies the process of getting to know someone. As relationships develop, communication moves from relatively superficial to more profound and personal. Indeed, to develop deep and trusting relationships, some level of reciprocal, personal self-disclosure is required [3]. This information sharing influences interpersonal closeness in numerous ways, including how quickly relationships form and how close those relationships become [2].

It is interesting to note that mutual self-disclosure has been shown to foster closeness even between strangers. A study in which unacquainted pairs asked one another 36 questions designed to generate closeness reported an increase in feelings of intimacy [3]. Within just 60 minutes, participants typically said they felt unusually close to their unknown partner. Surprisingly, the level of closeness reported after the activity matched that of their most valued relationships [3].

Developing closeness and being part of a cohesive group have several benefits. While indifferent and weak connections within teams may cause stress and dissatisfaction [4], strong in-group bonds improve morale, increase motivation [5], and promote trusting, respectful engagement between team members [4]. This exercise will encourage reciprocal self-disclosure among group members to allow new and established teams to generate and increase feelings of closeness.



Author

This exercise was adapted from the study by Aron and colleagues [3] by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help teams increase feelings of closeness and build lasting relationships through reciprocal self-disclosure.



Advice

- It is important to note that the 36 questions require individuals to disclose more or less intimate information, and participants may feel uncomfortable responding to questions perceived as too personal. Therefore, they may select questions from the list (Appendix) that resonate with them.
- The instructor should ensure that participants have ample time to respond to questions. Please allow at least 45 minutes to complete this activity and be aware that some questions will take longer to answer than others. Depending on the time available to you, you may increase or decrease the allotted time.
- Participants should make eye contact during the exercise, although it may be a source of embarrassment or discomfort at first. Sharing eye contact is a powerful social stimulus that signals their direction of attention, while avoiding eye contact may create a disconnect.
- This activity works best in workshops, team meetings, or other group settings and is effective for new and existing teams. Some adaptations may also be used to generate or increase closeness within any relationship: between romantic partners, colleagues, remote workers, friends, or family, for instance.



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36 Questions to Increase Closeness

Closeness within any team is important. When people know each other well, whether in the workplace, a sports team, or any other group setting, they are more likely to trust, respect, and understand one another.

The best way to get close to your team is for you to share with them and for them to share with you. You must reveal things about yourself and listen to what others share with you. The feelings of closeness from the mutual sharing of opinions, stories, and experiences help build strong, long-lasting connections.

Sharing personal information can make you feel exposed, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable helps build more trusting relationships and encourages others to be open and honest with you in return.

In this exercise, you will get into pairs and take turns answering questions that are designed to break down barriers, build rapport, and increase the sense of closeness you feel to your allocated partner.

Your instructor will now guide you through the activity step-by-step.

Step 1: Divide the group into sub-groups

Divide the group into random pairs. If the group has an odd number of people, one group can have three members. Hand out a copy of the 36 questions to each pair (see Appendix).

Step 2: Instruct participants

This activity is most effective when both parties are honest and open, so remind participants that this is a safe space where they can allow themselves to be vulnerable. In pairs, inform participants that they may select questions that resonate with them. Alternatively, pairs may work through all 36 questions in the order they are listed.

Participants will take turns to ask and respond to a question so that the person who answered last should be the first to answer the next question, and so on.

Step 3: Swap roles

Give a verbal signal to remind participants to move on to the next question when it is time to do so. This will ensure participants share responses with their partners promptly. Allow at least 45 minutes for pairs to complete all 36 questions. Please be aware that some questions will take longer to answer than others. Question 11, for instance, has an allotted response time of four minutes.



Step 4: Reflect

Upon completion, reflect with the whole group on their experience using the following questions:

- How did it feel to be open and vulnerable with your partner?
- How did it feel to witness your partner's openness and vulnerability?
- What have you learned about your partner that you did not know before?
- What question did you find most challenging to answer? Why was this challenging?
- What was the most enjoyable aspect of this exercise?
- How close did you feel to your partner before completing this activity on a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not close at all and 10 being very close)?
- How close do you feel to your partner after completing this activity on a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not close at all and 10 being very close)?
- In what ways do you feel a deeper connection with your partner?
- If you could repeat this exercise with anyone else, who would it be? What steps can you take to make this happen?



Appendix: The 36 questions to increase closeness

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and the other person appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell the other person your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?
13. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?
14. Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
15. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
16. What do you value most in a friendship?
17. What is your most treasured memory?
18. What is your most terrible memory?
19. If you knew that you would die suddenly in one year, would you change anything about how you are now living? Why?
20. What does friendship mean to you?
21. What roles do love and affection play in your life?
22. With your partner, alternate in sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of the other person. Share a total of five items.
23. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
24. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?
25. Both of you come up with three true “we” statements. For instance, “We are both in this room feeling...”



26. Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share ... "
27. If you were going to become a close friend with the other person, share what would be important for them to know.
28. Tell the other person what you like about them; be very honest, saying things that you might not say to someone you've just met.
29. Share an embarrassing moment in your life.
30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
31. Tell the other person something that you like about them already.
32. What is too serious to joke about, if anything?
33. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?
34. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to make a final dash to save any one item safely. What would it be? Why?
35. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
36. Share a personal problem and ask the other person's advice on how he or she might handle it. Additionally, ask your partner to reflect on how you seem to be feeling about your chosen problem.