

The Power Of Agreement (P.O.A.)

Negotiating a Win-Win in Marriage: Having the Heart and Learning the Art

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The Win-Win

Learning to negotiate effectively with your spouse toward finding a *win-win* solution is both a skill and a commitment. When one spouse wins and the other spouse loses, the spouses are operating as adversaries at war and the marriage becomes a casualty. Conversely, when discussing an issue is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate care and concern, the spouses are better poised to champion each other's needs. It is this latter posture that helps create *win-win* experiences in your relationship. Below is the framework my husband and I call *The Power of Agreement*. It is designed to minimize conflict and provide a way to negotiate meaningfully toward a *win-win*.

The P.O.A. Framework

1. Set up a time to talk.
2. Sit facing each other.
3. Spouse 1: Share your thoughts, feelings, and wants without using the words "you" or "your."
4. Spouse 1: Say, "I'm finished."
5. Spouse 2: Share your thoughts, feelings, and wants without using the words "you" or "your."
6. Spouse 2: Say, "I'm finished."
7. Discuss and agree on solutions.

The P.O.A. Guidelines

1. Set Up a Time to Talk

While it may be tempting to just blurt out our objections or frustrations whenever we feel them or as soon as our spouse walks through the door, it is much more

productive (1) to let our spouse know we have something we'd like to discuss and (2) to agree to a mutually desirable time to discuss the issue. It's as simple as saying something like, "John, I'd like to set up a time to talk." If right then is not an appropriate time, we suggest setting up a time that is not more than 24 hours later. A fitting response from 'John' would be something like, "Sure, how about this evening at 8:00 PM?" A key is to agree on a time that will be free from interruptions, such as when the children are sleeping.

— Once the Designated Time Arrives, Continue as Follows —

2. Sit Facing Each Other

Sitting face to face and making eye contact, even holding hands, can be powerfully positive body language for issue resolution. Give your spouse your full attention, making sure that telephones, televisions, and other distractions are put away or turned off.

3. Share Your Thoughts, Feelings and Wants without Using the Words “You” or “Your”

Share your thoughts, feelings and wants about the particular issue you are raising. Your spouse is not a mind reader, so the key here is to paint a picture that really helps your spouse understand the way the issue is affecting you. Eliminating “you” and “your” helps you to own your thoughts, feelings, and wants by using more “I” statements, and it minimizes language that can sound accusatory and that can raise the listener's defenses.

While what you share will likely be longer than the example below, what you share should be similar in tone and wording:

- *Thoughts*: “The issue I'd like to discuss is the dirty dishes that are left around the house. I've noticed that if I don't pick the dishes up myself and take them to the sink they are left there until the next day. Everyone then leaves for work and school and the dishes are left for me to pick up.”
- *Feelings*: “I feel discouraged and frustrated when dirty dishes are left in the living room, in the bedrooms, and on the kitchen counters. I feel taken for granted and taken advantage of.” (A key to capturing feeling words is to not use the words “like” or “that” after saying “I feel.”)
- *Wants*: “I wish that we would work together on this. It would be such a relief for me to know that I don't have to scour the house looking for dirty dishes, and it would save me time when I'm cleaning.”

4. Say “I’m Finished.”

When you are sure that you have fully painted the picture in a way that helps your spouse see and understand the issue from your perspective, say “I’m finished.” This lets your spouse know that it is his or her turn to respond.

5. Share Your Thoughts, Feelings and Wants without Using the Words “You” or “Your”

Now it is the other spouse’s turn. So if the wife raised the issue and has shared, now it is the husband’s turn to share his thoughts, feelings and wants regarding the same issue. It is important here to stay on topic and not meander onto a different issue. Share using the same guidelines given in number 3.

6. Say “I’m finished.”

When you are sure that you have fully painted the picture for your spouse, say “I’m finished.” This lets your spouse know that you have finished sharing your heart on the issue.

7. Discuss and Agree on Solutions (Using “You” or “Your”)

Take turns sharing solutions. At this point you are not providing commentary or going back into sharing thoughts, feelings and wants. You are only sharing solutions. (For clarity, the husband and wife’s solutions below are presented in two different colors.) The spouse who raised the issue offers the first solution, beginning with the words, “My solution is....”

- For example, the wife might say: “My solution is that when we are finished eating we put the dishes in the sink right away.”
- If the husband agrees, he simply says, “I agree.” The negotiation is complete.
- If the husband agrees but would also like to add something to the solution, he affirms the spouse’s solution by repeating it and then adds the new solution to it: “My solution is that when we are finished eating we put the dishes in the sink right away and that we only eat downstairs and we don’t take food upstairs.”
- If the husband disagrees altogether with the original solution, he does not criticize the spouse’s solution. Rather, he simply states an alternative solution: “My solution is that we only eat at the table and that we clear the dishes off of the table when we are finished meal time.”

- If the wife agrees, she says, “I agree.” If she does not agree or only agrees with part of the solution, then she follows the guidelines outlined above in the green bullet points.
- The above negotiation of solutions is continued until both agree on the solution.

Remember, the heart here is to come to a *win-win* where both spouses experience the care and cooperation of the other. Sometimes this means the solution will be a “fifty/fifty” type of solution. Other times an issue means so much to a spouse or has deeper implications for one spouse than the other. In such a case, the solution may lean more toward meeting the needs of a particular spouse. Whatever the case, it is important that each spouse values the other spouse’s needs as the solutions are offered. Success here has a great deal to do with the heart you bring to the negotiation.

I would encourage you to keep a Power of Agreement journal where you record your solutions, and then both spouses sign and date it. Years of helping couples through issue and conflict resolution bears witness to the huge difference this step can make in the event that a spouse meanders away from the agreement and the couple needs to revisit the issue.

Note: Sometimes marriages have deep-rooted, complex issues that are interfering with communication. In such cases it might be necessary to reach out to a professional counselor for help with identifying and treating those issues. Even in such cases, however, learning from the principles provided above can equip the spouses with valuable tools that can begin to improve the communication dynamics in their marriage.

For additional marriage resources, visit www.DrDawnMarie.com.