

MEN AS BETTER LIFE PARTNERS WITH WOMEN:

A PILOT PROJECT

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MEN AS LIFE PARTNERS WITH WOMEN
UNITY CHURCH MEN'S RETREAT WORKSHOP
Breakout Session with 70 men
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Bill Doherty, Presenter

Desired Outcomes

1. Appreciate what each of us does well as a husband or partner
2. Better grasp of the challenges in relating to women as life partners.
3. New ideas about relating to women

Agenda

00 – Why came for this topic?

10 – What do you do well in relationships with the significant woman in your life—that your wife/partner would agree with? When you're at your best.

- Write two things on a piece of paper, one you are willing to share
- Hand in the piece of paper, then groups of 3 for 10 minutes
- Question: what was it like to write and share these things?
- Facilitator summaries the written findings, the group comments

30 – A challenging area (where you don't do as well as husband/partner) that she tells you about and that you would like to work on or at least understand better.

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50 - Presentation

- We apply our friendship models: low maintenance, low to moderate self-disclosure, action rather than discussion, problem solving more than listening
- A good starting point is to do more of what we do well.
- Bids: reaching out in small or large ways: turning to, turning away, turning against
- Soft start up
- Responsive listening
- Sharing when it's not necessary
- Surprises to make women feel special
- Looking out for the relationship: planning for it, commenting on it

85 - What are you taking from our conversation?

90 - Finish

BETTER LIFE PARTNERS WITH WOMEN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

General Description: An educational experience where each of us takes responsibility to learn ways to be a better husband/partner, and where we support one another on this learning path. [Note: group size of 10 men, all married (one married during the group)]

Immediate Goal: We become better life partners

Longer Term Goal: Our couple relationship improves

Larger Goal: We aim to help not only ourselves but also other men (and couples) in the congregation and beyond. Therefore, we will document what we do and what we learn so that others can benefit.

What the Group is Not: not for relationship problem solving, not for getting our wives to change, and not for solving entrenched personal problems

Proposed Ground Rules

1. Confidentiality: no identifying information attached to stories shared outside of the group.
2. No advice giving unless asked for, only clarifying questions, encouragement, and personal experiences.
3. No complaints about our wives—zero tolerance for whining.
4. We are a learning community, not a therapeutic community

Steps in our a Process

1. Create individual agendas in consultation with wife/partner
2. Create a plan for learning together
3. Implement the learning plan
4. Evaluate and decide on next steps

Logistics: Meet for 2-hours meetings every 2-3 weeks. Aim for 8 meetings but see how long it takes us to accomplish our goals. NOTE: we met 20 times.

BETTER LIFE PARTNERS WITH WOMEN AGENDA SETTING PROCESS

Criteria for personal agenda

- Meaningful to both partners
 - It's meaningful enough for me to take personal ownership
 - I've heard from her that my changing here would be good for her—would help her feel more loved, respected, or like a full partner
 - I think it's something I could improve in myself
 - I would benefit personally from making this change—shouldn't be just "complying" with her expectation
 - The relationship would likely benefit
 - It's on both of our lists after our conversation

- Practical enough to learn and do
 - Visible behavior rather than a general attitude
 - Something I could benefit from practicing
 - But not something very narrow and specific

- Involves positive behavior and not only the absence of negative
 - Doing more of something she likes
 - Trying a new behavior
 - Substituting a positive behavior for a negative one

- It's about my changing, not her changing
 - Progress would not require her to shift her behavior
 - My effort would not require her to notice and praise

- Small changes could make a difference
 - A trajectory of change rather than an immediate transformation

- Safe enough to share in the group
 - To tell others about
 - To share progress and setbacks
 - To be part of a group educational plan

Examples

- Would *not* fit the criteria
 - "I'd like to be more sensitive to your needs." (Too general)
 - "I'll remember to take out the garbage." (Too narrow)
 - "I'd like to be less critical of your family." (The absence of a negative)
 - "Let's go out on more dates." (Requires her active collaboration)

- Would fit the criteria
 - “I’d like to listen to you better when you are sharing things with me.”
 - “I’d like to tell you more about my thoughts and feelings.”
 - “I’d like to be more affectionate towards you.”
 - “I’d like to share more household (or child care) responsibility, and my nomination is”

Proposed process for generating the agenda

1. Generate draft of list and share with the group for feedback and refinement
2. Explain the process to our wives, give them the letter, and schedule a meeting
3. Have the meeting
4. Finalize the agenda for change, making the decision and share with our wives soon after the meeting or after consultation with the group. The agenda would consist of:
 - One or two changes discussed with our wives
 - One “bonus” change not shared with our wives
 - We will all work on bids: increasing “turning towards” bids and decreasing “turning away” bids and “turning against” bids.

Bullet points for first conversation with our wives

- In our men’s group we’ve come up with a process for deciding what we each want to work on to be better husbands or partner.
- I’m enthusiastic about what we are going to do.
- We decided to explain it in a common letter to our wives. Could you read the letter and discuss it with me?
- (She reads the letter.)
- (You clarify, answer questions.)
- Schedule the meeting on the agenda for change

Letter to our Wives

Dear _____,

As you know, I am working with a group of men on an educational experience where each of us wants to learn ways to become a better husband/partner, and where we support one another on this learning path.

Because no group has tried to do what we are attempting, we are making up a new process. We decided to put this process in writing so that we are all on the same page about our plan.

The steps involve:

- Each of us comes up with an agenda of two or three behaviors we would like to learn about and work on.
- We meet individually with our wives to get feedback on our agenda, and then make a final decision.
- We draw on our group and on outside resources to learn a new skill or to do more of something we already know how to do.
- We evaluate how our plans work out.
- We share what we've learned with the larger Unity community and maybe beyond.

Our effort will only be worthwhile if what we work on is meaningful to both wives and husbands. It also has to be practical and doable as opposed to pie-in-the-sky promises. If you like, I can share the full list of criteria we are using to come up with areas of change to work on, as well as our ground rules for confidentiality and not expecting our wives to change or do the work for us.

If you're okay with this, the next step will be for the two of us to meet within a few days. At that meeting I'll share two or three areas of change I'm thinking about. (Please don't ask me now!) I'll ask for your feedback and your priorities, as well as anything that would be on your list that did not make mine. After I have a chance to reflect on our conversation, I'll get back to you with what I decide to work on—something that you would like and that I can take ownership of.

It's hard to know what will come of this (one of the men in the group said it's like "stepping into a dimly lit room"), but I am up for it and hope you are too.

With love,

For the Couple Meeting

[Remind your wife of the purpose of our work together and give her the following material filled out with your areas of change, which you can explain one by one. Then ask her to answer the three questions below.]

These are the areas I am considering working on to be a better life partner to you: List them and describe them and why you chose them.]

I have three questions to help me figure out the best thing to work on.

1. Is there anything you would take off my list?
2. Do any of my areas of change have higher priority for you?
3. Is there ONE other area that you would add?

[After the conversation, which can be relatively brief, let her know that you will think about what you both have said and get back to her about which area you want to work on—something that she would like and that you can take ownership of.]

COMMON AGENDA AREAS

1. Listening and validating
2. Open sharing
3. Intentional planning
4. Making “bids”

STANDARD MEETING PROCESS

AFTER WE GENERATED THE OVERALL PLAN

1. Check-in: What on your mind about our work together?
2. Review ongoing summary of what we’ve learned or decided
3. Updates on how our “bidding” is going
4. Work on one of our common agenda areas
 - Challenges
 - What’s worked for dealing with the challenges
 - What else would be helpful
5. Personal consultation, distilling common learnings from it
6. Check-out: How do you feel about or work in this meeting?

EVALUATION

1. Self-evaluation
 - Rating before and now on common agenda and person version, on a 1-10 scale
 - Meeting with wife to get her feedback and comments on the self-evaluation
 - Narrative summary shared with the group: new awareness, new strategies, barriers to change, plan for further work
2. Group feedback from wives
3. Group evaluation of our process

BETTER LIFE PARTNERS WITH WOMEN

LEARNINGS ON LISTENING AND VALIDATING

Larger Points

- Know that listening alone is a gift
- Listening is usually more important than what I have to say
- Cultivate mindfulness of our internal responses: notice and focus
- Show her that I am listening
- Times of stress drive down listening and validating

Challenges

1. How do I validate her feelings when I don't agree with what she is saying?
 - Recognize your own feelings
 - Express interest and curiosity in where she is coming from
 - Look at her, nod
 - Acknowledge her feelings and perspective
 - Let her know you support her
 - Let her know you understand how she got to her thoughts and feelings on this issue
 - This is more about connection and support than "truth statements"
2. How do I keep from rehearsing what I am going to say next?
 - The key is being aware that I am doing it, either from listening to my internal talk or noticing that I missed something she said.
 - Then try to shift my focus to her and what she is saying.
 - In other words, *notice* and *focus*.
 - It can help to prepare to restate what she is saying at the end.
 - We can develop the habit of attending.
3. How do I keep from moving too quickly into problem solving?
 - The key is to wait till she asks for input.
 - Listen for what she wants; often it's just to be listened to and validated about her concerns.
 - When in doubt, ask for clarification if she wants solution ideas.
 - Don't waste good solution ideas if she is not interested in them at the moment.
4. What do I do with my critical feelings when I am trying to listen?

- The key is to notice my critical thoughts and feelings before acting on them.
 - Then try to gently let go of these critical thoughts and feelings.
 - Say I'm cranky rather than acting cranky.
 - Be aware that if I'm off physically, I'm more likely to feel critical.
 - Come back later when I can bring my "A" game.
5. How do I keep from cutting her off before she finishes—when I already know where she's going?
 - Notice my impulse to interrupt before acting on it.
 - Stay focused on her and what she is saying.
 - Remind yourself that she gets annoyed when you interrupt her.
 6. What about when I'm tired and not up to par—when I know I'm not going to be a good listener?
 - Same as above. Notice and focus
 - Acknowledge what's going on: now is not a good time
 7. How do I bring closure to the conversation when I've been a good listener?
 - Do it caringly, not impatiently
 - Validate what she has already said
 - Express regret about wanting to stop before she may want to
 - Too much guilt can get in the way
 - Offer to talk later

Learnings from a Consultation on Listening Well While Feeling Defensive

1. Stop and notice the defensive feelings.
2. Decide whether to be in the conversation even if you didn't welcome it. If you don't sign up for the conversation, it will not go well.
3. Then listen.
4. Keep in mind that there may be something important underneath what seems to be an unnecessary and irritating conversation.
5. If you created barriers at the beginning and there is mutual tension, suggest backing up and starting again ("hitting the rewind button").
6. Ideally, share that this is hard for you and ask to take the conversation slowly.
7. Apply work skills (for example, dealing with uncertainty) and parenting skills (accepting that things often go awry) to our marriages.
8. Re-examine our relationship paradigm (low-maintenance male friendships) when it comes to relationships with our wives.

LEARNINGS ON OPEN SHARING WITH OUR WIVES

Challenges

1. Fear of
 - being vulnerable
 - rejection
 - invalidation
 - disclosing weakness
 - threatening my spouse
 - getting close
 - the unknown
 - being misinterpreted
 - conflict
2. Reluctant to share without knowing the information or when I feel unresolved in what I think or feel.
3. Reluctant to close off the possibility of solving my problem myself, for example, a health issue
4. Don't know where to start when she poses a question on something she has thought about
5. Lack of time and energy
6. The environment is not right (kids, chores, hurrying, etc.)
7. In the presence of anger, frustration, and conflict
8. When I'm stressed: physically, emotionally, spiritually
9. Feeling dumb, not together—hurting my image of being on top of things
10. We have different interests and hobbies
11. When she doesn't count my sharing as real sharing
12. Challenges are different at different layers:
 - Sharing about everyday life and making bids (small gestures of affection or appreciation)—small challenge and launching pad for more sharing
 - Sharing deeper thoughts and feelings—medium challenge
 - Sharing during conflict—high challenge

Strategies

1. Address the barrier when I don't feel like sharing
 - Ask myself if the barrier (such as the ones on the first page) is present and if they are on my side—if I'm withholding when sharing would be connecting and constructive. Then deal with those feelings.
 - Then ask if the barrier is on her side—for example, is she pushing into my boundaries or not accepting my disclosure as real disclosure?
 - For ongoing boundary pushing:
 - a. Realize that it's a boundary issue, not an open sharing or intimacy issue. Have a clear handle on what she has a claim on knowing (e.g., feelings I have about her, or that I am experiencing at work) and what has to be a free gift (e.g., feelings I have about my father, getting into a lot of detail about what I am experiencing right now at work)
 - b. Develop a plan to let her know that she is overstepping.
 - c. *Calmly* let her know when she does it, for example:
 - “I'm in charge of what I talk about with my father.”
 - “It doesn't work for me when you have so many questions about my work. Sometimes I just need to process it on my own before talking about it.”
 - d. Reassure her that you want to be open with her when you are ready
 - e. Principles: Forced sharing is not open sharing. Delay in sharing is not the same thing as being closed.
2. Creating a sharing environment through couple rituals. Examples:
 - Coffee after dinner
 - Talking stick format to discuss the day
 - Joys/sorrows exchanges
 - Quiet talk in bed when one goes to sleep earlier
 - Meals out
 - Dates
 - A weekly meeting
 - “Getting complete”—asking each evening if there is anything unresolved from the day
3. Looking for opportunities for fuller disclosure on everyday matters
 - What happened to me during the day
 - After a phone conversation with a family member
 - Not sharing, or only sharing a few words, can leave her feeling left out or withheld on
 - Voluntary sharing can be a “bid” for connection
4. Asking her if there are areas of my life that she would like me to share more with her.

LEARNINGS ON INTENTIONAL PLANNING WITH OUR WIVES

What we mean by intentional planning

- Relational
 - Proactive leadership for the relationship
 - Working on the relationship in areas that are good for her, you, and the relationship
- Practical
 - Taking responsibility for planning and coordinating
 - Taking more responsibilities for chores

Challenges

- Inertia
- Easier to let her lead
- Splitting my life into intentional/organized areas and coasting areas
- Fear of failure by not meeting her expectations
- Unclear expectations—hers versus mine
- Hard to identify and describe what I want
- Taking the relationship and her for granted
- Wrong paradigm: that the relationship doesn't need working on
- Finding a common focus and interest for me to take the lead on
- Feels restricting and not spontaneous to plan about the relationship
- Feeling invalidated when my intentional planning is overlooked or dismissed
- Lack of time—finding it, taking it
- Kids a higher priority than the relationship
- Not identifying the opportunities
- When she is good at planning and organizing, and I am not
- Hard to shift an entrenched leader-follower pattern
- When she feels shut down by my need to lead
- Dealing with her anxiety that when she doesn't do something herself it won't go well (especially in child rearing and hosting)

Strategies

- Our perennial two strategies:
 - Being aware of my feelings about what's going on with me in the relationship
 - Sharing these feelings
- Admitting that this is not a strong suit for me, *and* that I want to work on it
- Speaking up when I feel inadequate or when I feel put down
- Making the leader/follower/resister pattern overt if it's present

- Suggesting that together we create a process to avoid the leader/follower/resister pattern
- Being persistent in making changes; it takes time to change entrenched patterns of behavior
- Picking the spot to try something new
- Engaging her in the planning—don't go it alone even if she says that's what she wants
- Keeping in mind that it's not mainly about the task, it's about the relationship—the feelings, the caring
- Immediate action can signal her that you're serious about change, for example, picking up the phone to call the babysitter.
- If you make the planning collaborative, you don't have to have the whole skill set
- Persistence in breaking the pattern, which may not be as strong as you think
- Seek first to understand her before confronting her
- When anxiety is driving her interference with your planning, try being calming and reassuring
- You have to keep putting new logs on the fire or it will go out