

Rotary Youth Exchange

Dealing with Difficult Situations

In the course of your year abroad, you will likely encounter some criticism of America or Americans, sometimes rather harsh. This may be directed at Americans as a people, but it is more likely to be directed at American lifestyles (real or imagined) and especially at American foreign policy. Remember, every culture or group tends to be ethnocentric, and one common ethnocentric characteristic is to be critical of the way another culture does something. Since the United States has such a dominant role in world affairs and popular culture, “outsiders” are exposed to a lot of information that can be criticized.

You are likely to have one of three responses to such criticism.

- a. You agree with the criticism and are willing to say so.
- b. You are not familiar with the issue being raised, and are not sure how to respond.
- c. You disagree with the criticism but don’t know how to respond without getting into an argument.

A fourth response, both ethnocentric and dysfunctional, is to counter any criticism of the United States with a criticism of some aspect of the host culture. As an “outsider” you will quickly see things about your host culture that you can criticize. But to do so in a situation like this would be missing a great opportunity to listen, to learn and to try to create a more open dialogue with the “critic”.

Ethnocentric/Dysfunctional Examples:

Critic – “You Americans seem to think you can solve every problem in the world by throwing money at it”.

Exchange Student – “Well at least we don’t have people living in cardboard shacks.”

Critic – You Americans represent only a small percent (4.5) of the world’s population, but you consume a large percent (26) of the world’s energy”.

Exchange Student – “you’re just jealous of what we have”

Critic – “Why does your government say it is on the side of democracy, but always seems to side with the established dictatorships when an uprising happens?”

Exchange Student – “Well, your government doesn’t do much to protect religious minorities in your country.”

Host Parent Critic – “We really didn’t want to host an exchange student – but we were required to.”

Exchange Student – Bursts into tears!

Would you like to find alternative ways to respond to such criticisms? If so, read on. This article presents three specific techniques, from communications and assertiveness training, which will allow you to respond using a fairly simple formula, so that you do not have to create a complicated response to each and every situation.

Technique #1 – Active Listening

Active Listening is a technique that allows you to respond to the content and emotion of what the other person is saying, without agreeing or disagreeing. It puts the focus on acknowledging the point of view of the other person, which if done effectively, often neutralizes the criticism and creates a more meaningful dialogue. It can be used in any of the situations, **a**, **b** or **c** described in the above paragraph. It is the most versatile and readily useable of all the techniques.

Example:

Critic – “You Americans seem to think you can solve every problem in the world by throwing money at it”.

Exchange Student – “You really don’t like the way we seem to try to solve problems”. (note – this is likely to elicit further comments, so continues listening responses will likely be necessary. But eventually it de-fuses the criticism, or at least the strong emotional tone, and you have neither agreed nor disagreed.)

Typical active listening responses start with phrases like, “Sounds like you feel..., In other words you feel..., So you’re saying... or You think...”

It takes practice, but gets easier and easier when you try it for a while.

Technique # 2 – Negative Assertion

Negative Assertion is a technique used when you are (or our country is) being criticized, AND YOU AGREE WITH THE CRITICISM. Instead of the frequent habit people have of offering explanations or excuses, even when they agree with the criticism, it is easier, faster, and requires much less energy to simply agree. This is not intended as a manipulation or false agreement just to avoid an argument. But if we genuinely agree with the criticism, one simple choice is to just say so. It can be used in situation **a** in the first paragraph.

Example:

Critic – You Americans represent only a small percent (4.5) of the world’s population, but you consume a large percent (26) of the world’s energy”.

Exchange Student – “I agree - we use an awful lot of resources, and that doesn’t really seem fair, does it?”

Often the critic is taken aback, and for a moment doesn’t really have anything else to say, because they were expecting an argument, explanation or excuses. The result is more likely to be a meaningful dialogue, looking together for reasons, solutions, etc.

Technique #3 – Fogging

Fogging is another assertiveness technique that allows you to acknowledge the possible truth, or opinion of the other person, while maintaining a separate position of your own. It is similar to active listening, and the first part of a fogging response is very close to active listening. But the second part, maintaining a separate opinion, is in addition to active listening. It is the most complicated and difficult of the three techniques, but it can be learned with some skill. It is useful in situations **b** or **c** described in the first paragraph.

Example:

Critic – “Why does your government say it is on the side of democracy, but always seems to side with the established dictatorships when an uprising happens?”

Exchange Student – “It may be that our stated policies are not consistent with what we actually do, but I’m afraid I don’t know enough about it to have an informed opinion.”

Example:

Critic - “You Americans think every Muslim is a terrorist. You even have pilots who refuse to fly if Muslim clergy are aboard”.

Exchange Student – It may be that many Americans stereotype all Muslims as terrorists, but I know we are frightened of terrorism so much that sometimes we are irrational about it.”

Technique #4 – “I” Messages

“I” Messages are very powerful statements of thoughts, feelings, opinions, likes and dislikes. When feelings are negative, “I” Messages evoke much less defensive reactions in the other person than typical “You” Messages. Examples are “I feel guilty intruding in your family when you don’t really want me here.” vs. “You make me feel guilty being here.”

“I” messages can stand alone, or are often used in connection with active listening or fogging.

Example:

Host Parent Critic – “We really didn’t want to host an exchange student – but we were required to.”

Student: (active listening) “It must be very frustrating having a stranger in your house that you didn’t really want” and (“I” message) “I feel really bad about that. I want to be the best exchange student I can in your house.”

Technique # 5 - Broken Record

Broken Record is the calm but firm repetition of a simple message, often a refusal of some kind, but can be applied to any situation where one wants to stay calm, be firm, and not have to have an elaborate script or set of excuses ready at hand.

Technique #6 - Bonus -the Free Question

The free question is always an option, especially if we do not fully understand the criticism or want to find out if the person wants to engage in a constructive conversation or doesn't really want to engage in a dialogue.

(Background and Instructions for Rotex, Rotarians or other
small group discussion leaders)

Role Playing

Role playing is an experiential learning technique that can help people practice real-life situations without the risks of real-life consequences if things don't go well. Role playing should not be confused with acting. In role playing there can be no mistakes – just re-takes. The role players can stop any time, rewind, and “do over”. Role players can pause, re-group, ask for suggestions or try several different versions of what they want to say. The goal is to find comfortable, assertive, effective ways to communicate in difficult situations.

One useful way to prepare for a role play is to discuss the objective and possible things to say or do with a group of confederates/coaches before beginning. Three questions to ask are:

1. How do I feel about the situation and/or what is my opinion?
2. What is (or are) my goal(s) in this situation?
3. What can I say or do to bring about the goal(s)?

Sample role plays:

1. How can we trust you? Many of your journalists are CIA agents.
2. Why do you blame Latin countries for your drug problems when the cause is that so many Americans want to use illegal drugs?
3. How can you criticize France's immigration policy on the Roma when you arrest and deport peaceful Mexicans whose only crime is to cross the border to get jobs in the US?

Practicing (Assuming the large group has had instruction in and several demonstrations of the three assertiveness techniques - Active Listening, Negative Assertion, Fogging and “I” Messages)

In your group:

1. Pick one of the role plays, or any “hot topic” the group would like to practice.
2. Divide the group in two. Half the group will be the “critic”, half will be the exchange student. Separate the two groups so they can discuss their “roles” without interfering with the other half of the group.
3. Each group discusses the role play from the point of view of their “character” until they are clear about what they want to say or do and why.
4. Bring the two halves of the group together and have one volunteer take the part of the critic and one the part of the student.
5. The facilitator starts the role play.
6. Depending on what happens, the facilitator can become a movie set director, a discussion leader or a teacher.

The role plays will probably be short, and should be. Usually they will end themselves. If the situation drags on, the facilitator can call “time out”. During a “time out” here are some techniques the facilitator can use:

1. Ask the exchange student how they felt about the role play
2. Ask the critic how they felt about the way the exchange student played the role.

3. Ask the exchange student if they felt stuck. If so, ask that person's "support group" for suggestions.
4. Ask the student "if you had it to do over again, what would you say or do?", then have them do the role play over on the spot.
5. Have the entire group discuss which of the three techniques might be useful in the situation.
6. Have two different people to the same situation again.

The process can go on indefinitely, and new "hot topics" can be added at any time. Discussion groups will also come up with totally new techniques that seem to work. Common statements include phrases such as:

1. "I really don't know very much about that subject, but I'm going to try to learn more so that we can talk about it again."
2. "Even within the United States there is often a lot of disagreement about any specific domestic or foreign policy. Not all Americans agree with every U.S. policy or action."
3. "I don't think we are going to agree about this, but I'm willing to listen to your opinion".
4. Other?