

In the Name of Love, Get Off My Back

by Philip Mulford

Dear Philip,

For reasons unknown, my wife feels that it's her role in life to tell me what to do. I can't stand it! When I bring it to her attention that she's telling me what to do, she denies doing it and defends herself with an excuse like, "It was just an idea. Do whatever you want." That's often followed by her going off in a huff (how dare I suggest to her that I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions?). Quick examples: "You should call your mother" (I'll call her if and when I chose.) "You shouldn't eat that; it's not good for you. Remember what the doctor said?" (I'd like to eat what I choose, when I choose without a running commentary.) "You should spend more time with the kids – they miss you." (I work long days, coach my kids' sports teams, and I need to spend more time?) "I don't know why you feel that way. They were just trying to help." (Can't I feel the way I feel without being subject to review?)

I feel like I'm under constant evaluation and no matter what I do it's always subject to her review. Any ideas would be most appreciated.

Sincerely,
Tom K.

This is the second in a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work. Thank you for your feedback on my last article. Keep those e-mails and comments coming! I hope this article addresses some of the concerns that many of us have including Tom.

Dear Tom,

Thanks for your e-mail. Not that it'll make you feel any better, but your concern is shared by many. This is not a gender thing; men and women agree – none of us like being told what to do, or how we should feel, think, or behave. This concept includes, second guessing "shoulda's" as in "You shoulda done it this way...", offers of constructive criticism "coulda's," as in "You coulda done it this way...", explanations of your own approach to similar circumstances "I woulda's" as in, "If it were me, I woulda done it this way..."

Anytime we criticize one another, we are telling our spouse he or she did not do it right. No one I know got married so he or she could be under the constant evaluation of his or her spouse. No one. Who wants to live that life?

So why do we do it? Because we love our spouses. We do it for their benefit. I doubt any of us offer our comments and suggestions except from a place of good intentions – at least from our own perspective. We want to save our spouses from repeating our own bad experiences

or from embarrassing themselves; we want to improve our spouses future interactions with our children so things don't happen the way they did last time; we want to protect our spouses from their faulty thinking or inappropriate emotional responses (all for their own good, of course). One of the ways this treatment is described by the recipients is, "It feels like I'm walking around on eggshells. I know that no matter what, my spouse will have

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some comment to make on how I could have done it better.” “She’s a control freak.” “It’s his way or the highway.” “Nothing I do is ever good enough.” “He shows me no respect.” “This isn’t a marriage, it’s a dictatorship; whatever he wants to do, he does, whatever I want to do is subject to his approval.” Those feelings drive us away from those who treat us that way – from our spouses and, as children, from our parents. It can become one of the biggest obstacles in our relationships and is often a factor in marriages that end up in my office for mediation of a divorce.

And it seems to get worse with age. I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but it seems like the longer we’re married, the more responsible we think we are for each other and the more entitled we become in telling the other what to do. We’d never consider treating a date with the type of constructive criticism we offer our spouses on a daily basis. We both begin to supervise, second guess, and direct our spouses more and more and in finer

and finer detail until it reaches the point where you both may want to stand up and yell, “Enough already! I can’t stand it and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

I’ve heard many long-married couples suggest that a refined and well-practiced use of the words “yes dear” is one way to manage this behavior by one’s spouse. You know what I mean, a wife tells her husband what to do and her husband says “yes dear” and then either does it (without a care) or does whatever he pleases. Most “yes dear” advice that I’ve received comes with a knowing wink that suggests the latter option is chosen more often than not.

Personally (though perhaps this is a sign of my maturity level), I don’t particularly care for the “yes dear” option (though my wife thinks it’s a wonderful option). But I also can’t imagine subjecting myself to a life of the seemingly relentless and ever expanding notion that my wife needs to tell me what to do. There must be another way. And I believe there is.

**We can stop
telling each other
what to do.**

**Simple. Done.
Next topic.**



(Or at least, my wife can stop telling me what to do. I’m sure she’ll still need my help from time to time. Come to think of it, we probably all have a spouse whom we believe needs our help from time to time.)

Joking aside, what makes this such a challenge for all of us is that telling each other what to do is subtle, often unconscious, and generally comes from a well-meaning mindset so it’s easy to convince ourselves that we are truly helping our spouse when we tell our spouse what to do. If we become aware that even our best intentioned, loving efforts to save our spouses from themselves by telling them what to do is creating a severe wedge in our relationships, then maybe it would allow for a change. Telling each other what to do is a root cause of much that

we find unacceptable in our relationships.

Whenever I give a marriage communication workshop or work with a couple individually on marital communication, I ask two questions:

1. “Do you like being told what to do?” and
2. “In the last 24 hours, have you told your spouse what to do, in any way, shape, or form?”

(By the way, I get the answer to the first question before asking the second and I ask both questions with everyone’s eyes closed – a raised hand indicates the answer.) Invariably, the answer to the first question is, “No.” Again, men and women are consistent in their answers to this question. It rarely takes anyone much time to think about it. The clarity and certainty

of the responses is consistently clear and without hesitation. Do you like being told what to do? NO. I don’t either.

As for the second question, ultimately all responses are in the affirmative, but often with a bit of hesitation and reluctance. Understandably so, an answer in the affirmative acknowledges that you are treating your spouse the very way you just said (in answer to the first question) that you don’t like being treated. That’s hard for some to admit. It may take a bit of contemplation and reflection. It generally helps when I describe what it means to tell someone what to do. Those who apply a literal test to the question, may feel somewhat pleased with themselves at first, but when I suggest that the words

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“Do this” are rarely used and that the concept includes criticism of any kind (criticism is telling someone they should do something differently), “suggestions” or “ideas” about what the other should do, think, eat, believe, feel (how many times have you told someone, “You shouldn’t feel that way?”), “opinions” about the other’s choices (“It’s just my opinion, but ...”); and all of the above even if offered with polite niceties (“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you might want to consider doing it this way.” Or “Whatever you want to do is fine with me, but if I were you...”). After I describe some of the less obvious ways we “tell each other what to do,” every spouse has affirmed his or her recent participation in the very act to which they are each clearly opposed. Me too, sad to say, every time.

So here we are, recognizing that we do to each other something that we don’t like being done to us. And we do this to each other much more often than we realize.

So why don’t we like being told what to do? Why is this such a problem between spouses? Heck, you married the person; wouldn’t you think he or she would have some valuable insights on the way you live your life that would be beneficial for you to know? Sounds reasonable, but such is not the case. Even if we think our spouse is the smartest person who ever lived, we still don’t want to be told what to do. Even if we know that our spouse has our best interests at heart, is well-intentioned, and loves us dearly, we still don’t want to be told what to do.

Now I’m not a psychologist and what I’m about to say isn’t based on scientific research, but I think the reason none of us likes being told what to do, especially by our spouse, is that when we are told

what to do we hear the message, “You are not acceptable to me the way you are.” That rocks us in our core.

I believe we each want to be loved and accepted, unconditionally, by our spouse. Not loved and accepted **if** we become that person we are capable of becoming (if only we do this, that, and the other), but **loved as we are**. I’ve never heard a spouse say that the reason he or she married was to be “fixed” by his or her spouse. Never. And I ask that question a lot. We marry with the underlying premise of being accepted as we are, unconditionally, forever. I often hear, “I married my spouse because for the first time in my life, I felt that I could be myself.”

When we assume the role of telling our spouse what to do, we send the message “You are not acceptable to me the way you are” with every “opinion,” “suggestion,” “criticism (constructive or not),” “you should...,” “you shouldn’t...” No matter how well-intentioned and insightful the overlaying message is, the underlying message continually erodes the fundamental fabric of our marriage. Bit by bit, it poisons our relationship. So what possesses us? What motivates us to take on the role of telling each other what to do?

We think we’re helping. We think we are expressing our love for our

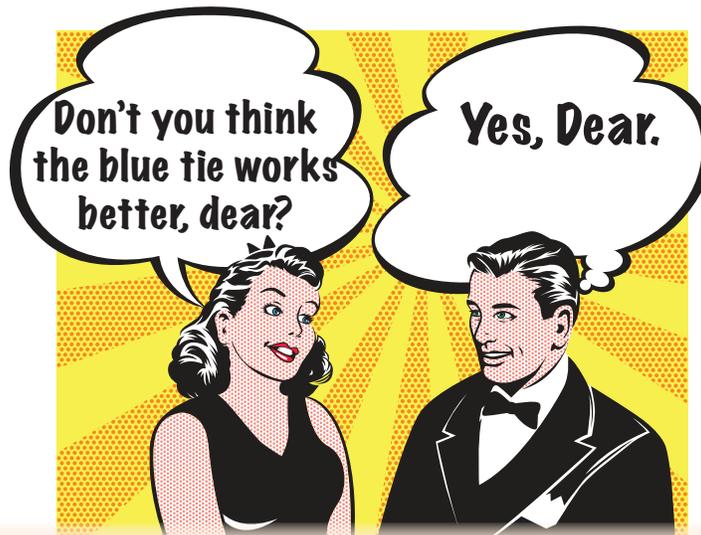
spouses by helping them live their lives better.

That’s the issue. Here’s my advice: **Become aware of how often you tell your wife what to do and stop doing it.** (You may be surprised at how often you tell her what to do.) Share with your wife your new awareness of this interaction between the two of you. Offer her this article to read if she chooses. Let her know what you are consciously choosing to do and why; don’t expect her to guess. (“I’m going to stop telling you what to do, how to feel, and what to think because I don’t like being treated that way and I imagine you don’t like it either.”) You might even follow up with an apology for your past efforts. (“I am so sorry. Throughout our marriage I have been telling you what to do and how to feel. I realize that doing that to you is unloving and causes us to disconnect. I love you and respect who you are. I am going to act out my love and respect for you by accepting you as you are and stop telling you what to do.)

If she chooses to do the same, great, if not, the next time she tells you what to do, tell her, quietly, calmly, and patiently, how it makes you feel. (“When you tell me XXX, it really makes me feel like you don’t trust my choices and that you don’t respect my ability to do YYY. It makes me feel like I’m not good enough for you.”) However, what you won’t do is tell her to stop telling you what to do (isn’t that just you telling her what to do?). Let that be her choice. But certainly share with her the impact that her actions have on you.

There is no doubt in my mind that you can do this and that the change this will make in your relationship will be powerful and wonderful.

I wish you all the best,
Philip



Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded **Mulford Mediation** in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 20 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. Philip may be reached at pmulford@mulfordmediation.com or at 540-341-4615. In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called **Communication360** where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the air at WWPR 1490 AM in Sarasota-Bradenton-Tampa and on the internet at www.webtalkradio.net. All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about **Communication360**, please visit www.C360today.com.

