

Assertiveness

Working WITH People, Not Against Them

Do you consider yourself to be assertive? And what does being assertive mean to you? Does it mean exercising your rights all the time, every time? Or does it mean knowing when to let someone else or some other cause or outcome take precedence over your rights?

Is the boss who places a pile of work on an employee's desk the afternoon before that employee goes on vacation being assertive? Or, is the employee who is about to go on vacation being assertive when she tells the boss that the work will be done upon her return?

It's not always easy to identify truly assertive behavior. This is because there is a fine line between assertiveness and aggression. Some definitions are helpful when trying to separate the two:

Assertiveness is based on balance. It requires being forthright about your wants and needs while still considering the rights, needs, and wants of others. When you are assertive, you ask for what you want but you don't necessarily get it.

Aggressive behavior is based on winning. It requires that you do what is in your own best interest without regard for the rights, needs, feelings or desires of others. When you are aggressive, you take what you want regardless, and you don't usually ask.

So, that boss was being aggressive. Yes, he had work that needed to be done. However, by dumping it on his employee at such an inappropriate time, he showed a total lack of regard for the needs and feeling of his employee.

The employee on the other hand, demonstrated assertive behavior when she informed her boss that the work would be done, but it would be done after she returned from vacation. She asserted her rights while recognizing her boss' need to get the job done.

Being assertive is not necessarily easy, but it is a skill that can be learned. Developing your assertiveness starts with a good understanding of who you are and a belief in the value you bring. When you have that, you have the basis of self-confidence. Assertiveness helps to build on that self-confidence and provides many other benefits for improving your relationships at work and in other areas of your life as well. In general, assertive people:

- Get to "win-win" more easily – they see the value in their opponent and in his/her position, and can quickly find common ground.
- Are better problem solvers – they feel empowered to do whatever it takes to find the best solution.
- Are less stressed – they know they have personal power and they don't feel threatened or victimized when things don't go as planned or expected.
- Are doers – they get things done because they know they can.

When you act assertively you act fairly and with empathy. The power you use comes from your self-assurance and not from intimidation or bullying. When you treat others with such fairness and respect, you get that same treatment in return. You are well liked and people see you as a leader and someone they want to work with.

Developing Your Assertiveness

Some people are naturally more assertive than others. If your disposition tends more towards being either passive or aggressive, you need to work on the following skills.

Value yourself and your rights

- Understand that your rights, thoughts, feelings, needs and desires are just as important as everyone else's.
- But remember they are not more important than anyone else's, either.
- Recognize your rights and protect them.
- Believe you deserve to be treated with respect and dignity at all times.
- Stop apologizing for everything.

Identify your needs and wants, and ask for them to be satisfied

- Don't wait for someone to recognize what you need (you might wait forever!)
- Understand that to perform to your full potential, your needs must be met.
- Find ways to get your needs met without sacrificing others' needs in the process.

Acknowledge that people are responsible for their own behavior

- Don't make the mistake of accepting responsibility for how people react to your assertive statements (e.g. anger, resentment). You can only control yourself.
- As long as you are not violating someone else's needs, then you have the right to say or do what you want.

Express negative thoughts and feelings in a healthy and positive manner

- Allow yourself to be angry, but always be respectful.
- Do say what's on your mind, but do it in a way that protects the other person's feelings.
- Control your emotions.
- Stand up for yourself and confront people who challenge you and/or your rights.

Receive criticism and compliments positively

- Accept compliments graciously.
- Allow yourself to make mistakes and ask for help.
- Accept feedback positively – be prepared to say you don't agree but do not get defensive or angry.

Learn to say "No" when you need to

- Know your limits and what will cause you to feel taken advantage of.
- Know that you can't do everything or please everyone and learn to be OK with that.
- Go with what is right for you.
- Suggest an alternative for a win-win solution.

Assertive Communication Techniques

There are a variety of ways to communicate assertively. These can easily be adapted to any situation you are facing.

I statements

Use "I want.", "I need." or "I feel." to convey basic assertions.

I feel strongly that we need to bring in a third party to mediate this disagreement.

Empathy

First, recognize how the other person views the situation:

I understand you are having trouble working with Arlene.

Then, express what you need:

...however, this project needs to be completed by Friday. Let's all sit down and come up with a plan to get it done.

Escalation

This type of assertiveness is necessary when your first attempts are not successful in getting your needs met.

The technique involves getting more and more firm as time goes on. It may end in you telling the person what you will do next if you do not receive satisfaction. Remember though, regardless of the consequences you give, you may not get what you want in the end.

John, this is the third time this week I've had to speak to you about arriving late. If you are late one more time this month, I will activate the disciplinary process.

Ask for More Time

Sometimes, you just need to put off saying anything. You might be too emotional or you might really not know what you want. Be honest and tell the person you need a few minutes to compose your thoughts.

Dave, your request has caught me off guard. I'll get back to you within the half hour.

Change Your Verbs

- Use 'won't' instead of 'can't'
- Use 'want' instead of 'need'
- Use 'choose to' instead of 'have to'
- Use 'could' instead of 'should'.

Broken Record

Prepare ahead of time the message you want to convey:

I cannot take on any more projects right now.

During the conversation, keep restating your message using the same language over and over again. Don't relent. Eventually the person is likely to realize that you really mean what you are saying.

I would like you to work on the Clancy project.

I cannot take on any more projects right now.

I'll pay extra for you accommodating me.

I cannot take on any more projects right now.

Seriously, this is really important, my boss insists this gets done.

I cannot take on any more projects right now.

Will you do it as a personal favor?

I'm sorry, I value our past relationship but I simply cannot take on any more projects right now.

Tip:

Be careful with the broken record technique. If you use it to protect yourself from exploitation, that's good. However if you use it to bully someone into taking action that's against their interests, it's manipulative, dishonest and bad.

Scripting

This technique involves preparing your responses using a four-pronged approach that describes:

1. **The event:** tell the other person exactly how you see the situation or problem.
Jacob, the production costs this month are 23% higher than average. You didn't give me any indication of this, which meant that I was completely surprised by the news.
2. **Your feelings:** describe how you feel about it and express your emotions clearly.
This frustrates me and makes me feel like you don't understand or appreciate how important financial controls are in the company.
3. **Your needs:** tell the other person what you need so they don't have to guess.
I need you to be honest with me and let me know when we start going significantly over budget on anything.
4. **The consequences:** describe the positive outcome if your needs are fulfilled.
I'm here to help you and support you in any way I can. If you trust me, then together we can turn this around.

Once you are clear about what you want to say and express, it is much easier to actually do it.

Key Points

Being assertive means knowing where the fine line is between assertion and aggression and balancing on it. It means having a strong sense of yourself and acknowledging that you deserve to get what you want. And it means standing up for yourself even in the most difficult situations.

It can be learned and developed, and although it won't happen overnight, by practicing the techniques presented here you will slowly become more confident in expressing your needs and wants. As your assertiveness improves, so will your productivity and efficiency. Start today and begin to see how being assertive allows you to work with people to accomplish tasks, solve problems, and reach solutions.

Source: <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Assertiveness.htm>