

**HOW TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE:
A KEY TO BETTER COMMUNICATION**

William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Assertiveness is one of the keys to good communication. Behavioral psychologists have identified the basic components of assertive behavior as well as several specific techniques that can help improve communication. With regular practice, most people are able to improve their communication skills.

What is assertiveness? Assertive behavior involves asking for or stating what we want in a clear and direct manner while taking into consideration the feelings and rights of others. Assertiveness involves standing up for ourselves in a way that respects and does not violate the rights of others. It involves a direct, honest, and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions, or requests. When we act assertively, we take control of our actions and accept responsibility for ourselves. When others interact assertively, we are likely to feel respected, valued, and validated even when we don't get what we want.

What assertiveness is not. Assertiveness is not a "me first" attitude that is an all-too-common destructive force in many relationships. Assertiveness is not simply sharing how we feel without regard to the feelings and rights of others. Behavior that is not assertive can be classified as either *aggressive* or *submissive*.

Aggressive behavior involves violating the rights of others. It can involve trying to control or dominate others. Aggressive or hostile behavior can involve making a request—clearly and directly—but without the element of empathy or caring found in assertive behavior. Yet aggressive behavior is not the same as anger. Although the expression of aggression usually involves anger, the expression of anger can occur without any aggression. Aggressive behavior is usually *reactive* (based on emotional impulse or dysregulation) rather than *responsive* (thoughtfully based on a principle). Reactive

behavior can vary on a continuum ranging from pushy and controlling behavior all the way to rage and violence. Reactive verbal behavior can also include the "silent treatment" of stonewalling and emotional neglect as well as expressions of criticism or contempt.

Aggressive behavior can involve either *overt* or *covert* hostility. **Covert aggression** involves anger or resentment that is expressed in an indirect, manipulative, or passive-aggressive manner, including behaviors such as sabotage, sarcasm, or silence. **Overt aggression** includes anger that is expressed in a direct, controlling, or domineering manner, including more obvious behaviors such as arguing, yelling, or violence. Issuing a directive in a harsh tone is a form of overt aggression. When we act aggressively, we may sometimes feel good or powerful at the time of the action, but later we pay the price in terms of guilt, shame, or anger at ourselves. Similarly, when we interact with a person who is aggressive toward us, we often feel angry, hurt, or put-down.

Submissive behavior involves having one's own rights violated. If aggressive behavior is like stepping on someone, then submissive behavior is like being a doormat. Submissive or non-assertive behavior involves not saying what we want, or saying it in such an ineffective way that we are not really heard. Submissive behavior is often reactive rather than proactive in origin. **Reactive** behavior occurs in response to the behavior of another person, whereas **proactive** behavior involves taking the initiative by acting on the basis of higher principles within oneself. When we react in a submissive manner, we often feel helpless or powerless and then later we feel angry, resentful, or frustrated. When we interact with a person who is submissive, we often feel pity, impatience, or even anger.

Use the right assertiveness response. Good communication requires the right tools. If one's only tool is a hammer, then everyone else may look like a nail. In choosing the right tool for the situation, there are several types of assertive responses that can help build good communication.

Basic assertion involves a direct statement of what we want to happen. A basic assertion might involve a request, refusal, or an attempt to rectify a wrong. For example, a basic assertive response might involve a simple request, such as "I would like your help with this project." An assertive refusal might involve a statement such as "I don't care to buy any of those." Remember that "no, thank you" is a complete sentence. Another type of assertive response might involve an attempt to rectify a wrong, such as "I believe that I was here first."

Soft assertion is a technique that can be a wonderful learning experience. Soft assertion involves the expression of true, positive statements to another person. When practicing soft assertions, they should be in the form of proactive "I" statements that are not simply responses to the other person's statements. The use of a soft assertion allows us to give an unsolicited, positive statement to another person without discounting or qualifying the statement. For example, "I like the way you handled that project" or "I felt good when you acknowledged me." On the other hand, the practice of receiving soft assertions from others illustrates the point that we can accept a compliment, reassurance, or positive statement from another person without having to discount the statement or pay it back. For example, "I appreciate your comment," or simply "Thank you."

Empathic assertion involves the three basic components of empathy, content, and action. All three parts are necessary for an assertive transaction. An **empathic assertion** consists of your recognition of what the other person is feeling plus a direct statement of what we want to happen. The first step requires **empathic recognition** of the other person's feelings or behavior, which involves validating what we are

observing about his or her behavior. The second component involves stating clearly and honestly the **content** of our own feelings or opinions, and taking responsibility for our position. The third part is the **action** component, or stating what we want to happen. For example, in response to a friend who wants help with a project with which we are unable to help, an empathic assertion might sound something like the following sentence: "I know that your project is important (empathy), but I've made other plans (content); therefore, I won't be able to help you" (action).

Using another example, notice how each of the three components of an empathic assertion focuses on "I" rather than "you" language:

1. "I know you are angry right now." (empathy)
2. "I'm feeling confused because I don't know exactly what you're angry about." (content)
3. "I'd like for us to sit down and talk this over." (action)

Escalating assertion involves a more intense assertive response than the previous ones. Escalating assertion is used when the first assertive response does not get the desired results. Of course, getting the desired results depends on what is realistic in a specific situation. For example, after we have attempted two empathic assertive responses, we state, "If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to call the manager."

Confrontive assertion involves verbally pointing out a discrepancy between another person's words and actions. A confrontive assertion can describe what the other person said they would do, what they actually did, and what we would like to see happen. For example, "I understood I would get a raise after three months (contract), but I've been here three months and I am still earning the same amount (where specifically the contract has been violated). I would like to know if there is some problem with my raise" (action).

Be assertive with your body language. What we say is often less important than how we say it. Effective communication involves basic honesty and spontaneity of expression. In *Your Perfect Right*, one of the classic books on assertiveness training, psychologists Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons (1970, 2001) provide the following guidelines:

Maintain eye contact. Looking directly at another person when we are speaking is an effective way of declaring that we are sincere about what we are saying.

Remember body posture. The “weight” of our messages to others will be increased if we face and lean toward the person, sit or stand appropriately close to the person, and hold our head up.

Be aware of facial expression. Effective assertion requires an expression that agrees with content of the message. It is difficult if not impossible to express anger effectively while smiling or laughing.

Monitor voice tone, inflection, and volume. A whispered monotone seldom convinces a person that we mean business. A harsh or sarcastic response will raise the other’s defenses. A well-modulated statement can be convincing without being controlling or intimidating.

Use hand gestures. Like good punctuation in a sentence, a message accented with appropriate gestures takes on an added emphasis. However, like too many exclamation points in a paragraph, over-enthusiastic gestures can be a distraction. To avoid misinterpretation, we do not touch the other person when there is anger.

Timing is important. Spontaneous expression is usually a desirable goal, because hesitation can diminish the impact of an assertion. At the same time, a pause can be effective. Good judgment is necessary in timing and selecting an appropriate occasion. For example, it may be better to speak to a manager in private rather than in front of a group where the manager may respond more defensively.

Practice effective assertiveness techniques. Psychologists have identified several specific techniques that can help improve communication. In one of the classic books on assertiveness, psychologist Manuel Smith (1975) provides the following examples of assertiveness techniques:

Broken record. We keep saying what we want, over and over again without getting loud, irritated, or angry. We state our position without justifying what we want or don’t want (i.e., no excuses, reasons, or explanations). We don’t get distracted by side issues the other person might raise. We continue saying what we want in a calm voice.

Workable compromise. In some situations, it may be appropriate to offer a workable compromise to the other person. However, not every situation lends itself to assertive behavior. We are realistic in our expectations and flexible in striving for a balance between assertiveness and restraint.

Free information. We listen to the clues people give about themselves. Disclosures of others give us something to talk about. They enable us to make inquiries, which makes it easier for people to share and talk about themselves.

Self-disclosure. Assertive disclosure involves sharing information about ourselves—how we think, feel, and react. Such sharing may allow communication to flow both ways. By self-disclosing in response to the other person’s free information, we make it easier for him or her to prompt us for further information.

Fogging. When criticized, we strive to offer no resistance or hard striking surfaces to the other person’s statements. Instead, we agree with any truth in the criticism. We agree in principle with any statement we can. We become like a fog bank, which does not fight back or offer resistance to penetration.

Negative assertion. When criticized, there is a natural tendency to respond defensively by denying the matter or offering a counter-criticism. Instead of defending ourselves, we strive to accept those things that are negative about us. If we are negatively assertive about ourselves, we cannot be manipulated by the other person through feelings of guilt or anxiety.

Negative inquiry. When criticized, we actively prompt further criticism about ourselves or the perceived wrongdoing by requesting more information in a thoughtful manner. This response uses radical acceptance instead of justifying, arguing, defending, or explaining (JADE). *Radical acceptance* involves the conscious effort to not only accept, but to actively welcome any and all critical comments from the other person—no matter how odd, disturbing, or provocative. Responding by asking for more negatives may decrease the potential for manipulative criticism on the part of the other person. We do so in a genuine, inviting manner with a kind voice. Three words to use for starters are “Tell me more.”

Practice assertiveness on a daily basis. Practicing assertiveness in each day is more than using strategies and techniques. Being assertive improves our self-awareness and ability to communicate our feelings and thoughts in a clear, honest, and non-manipulative manner. Living assertively requires taking responsibility for our own feelings and behaviors by reminding us that we have rights, choices, and options. It involves learning and experimenting through increased self-awareness, other-awareness, role-playing, and practicing effective communication. While many people can learn to be assertive on their own, the process can often be facilitated by consulting a psychologist who has training and experience with these principles.

Think before speaking. There is rarely a spoken word that cannot be made better by thinking before speaking. Before speaking or replying, a good test is to THINK: Is what I am about to say Thoughtful? Honest? Intelligent? Necessary? Kind?

Make Requests Positive and Specific

If the point of making a request is to achieve some small goal, then there are three tips that make may a difference (Doverspike, 2007, p. 1).

Specificity: Make requests explicitly and clearly rather than vaguely, because *specificity* increases the ability to evaluate outcome (e.g., frequency, intensity, duration, or context of the action or behavior).

Positivity: Make requests positively rather than negatively, because *positivity* increases options for creating adaptive behavior. It is more useful to request, “Please help me _____” than “Please don’t _____.”

Desirability: Make requests by stating an increase in desired behaviors rather than a decrease in unwanted behaviors, because *desirability* builds motivation for change.

Frequency, intensity, duration, and context: Focus on increasing—rather than decreasing—target behaviors, because *increases* build behavior rather than inhibit behavior. *Generalization* requires practicing new behaviors in different contexts, locations, and settings.

Nonverbal language also makes a difference. Intonation, modulation, and volume of speech can mean the difference between compliance and refusal of a request. *Reactance theory* predicts a target behavior will increase if a person’s personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966). The phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *behavioral reactance* or *psychological resistance*. Problem behavior will increase in its frequency, intensity, or duration if a person perceives that his or her personal freedom is being challenged (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). For example, in terms of understanding how nagging works, reactance theory predicts that nagging a family member about a problem behavior will eventually increase rather than diminish the problem behavior.

It's Not Rocket Science

On January 28, 1986, the Space Shuttle Challenger (OV-099) broke apart 73 seconds into its flight—killing all seven crew members. It became the first fatal accident involving a U.S. spacecraft in flight. An investigation found that the immediate cause of the disaster was the failure of two rubber O-rings to seal a joint between the two lower segments of the right-hand solid rocket booster. This failure was due to severe cold, and it opened a path for hot exhaust gas to escape from inside the booster during the shuttle's ascent. It was many months later that it became clear that one phone call could have prevented the accident. It could have been placed that morning to either Jesse Moore, NASA's Associate Administrator for Space Flight, or Gene Thomas, the Launch Director. Sometimes, words matter. The properly placed words—said at the right time and in the right way—can make a difference.

Sociologist Diane Vaughan, Ph.D. made the following observation: “Seventeen years and 88 launches after *Challenger*, it happened again. At 9:00 a.m. on February 1, 2003, NASA's Space Shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated over Texas, having reentered the earth's atmosphere, its mission completed. Again, seven astronauts lost their lives” (Vaughan, 2016, p. xiv). In understanding safety and risk, Vaughan is best known for coining the term “normalization of deviance” (Vaughan, 2016, p. xii), which she used to explain the sociological causes of the NASA disasters. She defined *normalization of deviance* as a process in which a clearly unsafe practice comes to be considered normal if it does not immediately cause a catastrophe: “a long incubation period [before a final disaster] with early warning signs that were either misinterpreted, ignored, or missed completely” (Vaughan, 2016). She also popularized the concept of “retrospective fallacy: “To the extent that we retrospectively identify events as particularly important—even though they may not have been thought particularly important by diligent and competent people working at the time—we are committing the “retrospective fallacy” (Vaughan 1996, p. 68–70).

It's Not Submarine Science

On June 18, 2023, *Titan*, a submersible operated by the expeditions company OceanGate, imploded during an expedition to view the wreck of the *Titanic* in the North Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. The U.S. Navy's sonar detected an acoustic signature consistent with an implosion around the time communications with the submersible ceased, suggesting the pressure hull had imploded while *Titan* was descending, resulting in the instantaneous deaths of all five occupants. Numerous industry experts had raised safety concerns about the *Titan* (Bogel-Burroughs et al., 2023). OceanGate's own Director of Marine Operations, David Lochridge, had compiled a report in 2018 documenting the safety concerns he had about the submersible. In later court documents, Lochridge stated that he had urged the company to have *Titan* assessed and certified by an agency, but OceanGate had declined to do so, citing an unwillingness to pay Bogel-Burroughs et al., 2023). Lochridge also said that the transparent viewport (i.e., “the window”) on its forward end, due to its experimental and nonstandard design, was only certified to a depth of 1,300 meters, which was only one third of the depth required to reach the *Titanic*. According to Lochridge, real time monitoring (RTM) would “only show when a component is about to fail — often milliseconds before an implosion,” and therefore could not detect existing flaws in the hull before it was too late (Low & Goodwin, 2023). OceanGate executives, including Chief Executive Officer Stockton Rush, had not sought certification for *Titan*, arguing that excessive safety protocols hindered innovation. Sometimes being assertive is not enough. Good communication also requires good listening—especially when guarding against *confirmation bias* (i.e., the tendency to interpret evidence as confirmation of one's own pre-existing beliefs). Scientists and engineers must be continually on guard against seeing what they expect to see in the data. One way to guard against confirmation bias is to use *perspective-taking* involves striving to understand a subject matter from another perspective or from an alternative hypothesis.

References

- Alberti, R., & Emmons, M. (1970). *Your perfect right: A guide to assertive living*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.
Although hundreds of books on assertiveness have been written in the 50+ years since this one was published, most contemporary books on this topic are a rehashing or repackaging of some of these original ideas.
- Alberti, R., & Emmons, M. (2001). *Your perfect right: Assertiveness and equality in your life and relationships*. (8th ed.). San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.
- Bogel-Burroughs, N., Gross, J., & Betts, A. (2023, June 20). OceanGate was warned of potential for ‘catastrophic problems with Titanic mission. *The New York Times*. Retrieved June 21, 2023 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/20/us/oceangate-titanic-missing-submersible.html>
Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, Jenny Gross, and Anna Betts are writers for *The New York Times*.
- Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological resistance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Doverspike, W. F. (2007, October). *How to set realistic goals: A key to achievement*. http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_set_realistic_goals.pdf
- Low, M., & Goodwin, G. E. (2023, June 22). The missing Titanic sub would only detect hull failure ‘milliseconds before an implosion,’ company executive warned in 2018. *Insider*. Retrieved June 22, 2023 from <https://www.insider.com/titanic-submersible-only-warns-milliseconds-before-hull-failure-fired-executive-2023-6>
- Matthew Low and Grace Eliza Goodwin are writers for Insider.
- Smith, M. J. (1975). *When I say no, I feel guilty*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Vaughan, D. (1996). *The Challenger launch decision*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vaughan, D. (2016, January 4). *The Challenger launch decision: Risky technology, culture, and deviance at NASA* (Enlarged edition). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2009). How to be more assertive.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to be more assertive," May 01, 2009. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William F. "How to be more assertive," 01 May 2009 [Date accessed]

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Be More Assertive.doc

Server path:

http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_be_more_assertive.pdf

Server file name:

how_to_be_more_assertive.pdf

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Be More Assertive

Workshop Presentation Deck:

N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:

N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Copyright © 2009 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
 Some content updated 2023

Manuscript History: The original title was "Assertiveness: A key to good communication."

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2009, May). How to be more assertive.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>