

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

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Assertiveness is one of the keys to good communication with others. Behavioral psychologists have identified the basic components of assertive behavior as well as several specific techniques that can help improve communication. By practicing these techniques on a regular basis, people are usually able to improve their communication skills.

What is assertiveness? Assertive behavior involves asking for or stating what you want in a clear and direct manner while taking into consideration the feelings and rights of others. Assertive behavior involves standing up for yourself in such a way that you do not violate the rights of another person. Assertiveness 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. Similarly, when someone interacts with us in an assertive manner, we are likely to feel valued and respected even when we don't get what we want.

What assertiveness is not. In understanding assertiveness as a behavior or style of communication, it is important to understand what it 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. Aggressive or hostile behavior can involve saying what you want, clearly and directly, but without the element of empathy or caring found in assertive behavior. Aggressive behavior is not the same as anger. Although the

expression of aggression usually involves anger, the expression of anger can occur without aggression. Aggressive behavior can be measured on a continuum ranging from pushy and controlling behavior to violence and rage. Aggressive behavior can involve either overt or covert hostility. *Covert aggression* involves anger that is expressed in an indirect, manipulative, or passive-aggressive manner, including subtle behaviors such as withdrawal, sabotage, or sarcasm. *Overt aggression* includes anger that is expressed in a direct, controlling, or domineering manner, including more obvious behaviors such as arguing, yelling, or violence. 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, we often feel put-down, hurt, or angry.

Submissive behavior involves having one's own rights violated. Submissive or non-assertive behavior involves not saying what you want, or saying it in such an ineffective way that you 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 principles within oneself. When we act 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. Otherwise, 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 you 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 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 by you 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 you 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 serves to illustrate the point that you 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 you want to happen. The first step requires *empathic recognition* of the other person’s feelings or behavior, which involves validating what you are observing about his or her behavior. The

second component involves stating clearly and honestly the *content* of your own feelings or opinions, and taking responsibility for your position. The third part is the *action* component, or stating what you want to happen. For example, in response to a friend who wants help with a project with which you are unable to help, an empathic assertion might sound like, “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” (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 you have attempted two empathic assertive responses, you 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 describes what the other person said they would do, what they did actually do, and what you 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 making 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 sometimes not as important as how we say it. Effective communication involves basic honesty and spontaneity of expression. In

Your perfect right, one of the most highly acclaimed 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 you are speaking to him or her is an effective way of declaring that you are sincere about what you are saying.

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

Be aware of facial expression. Effective assertions require an expression that agrees with content of the message. Have you ever seen anyone trying to express anger while smiling or laughing?

Monitor voice tone, inflection, and volume. A whispered monotone will seldom convince a person that you mean business, whereas a sarcastic or shouted response will raise the other person’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.

Timing is important. Spontaneous expression is generally a desirable goal, because hesitation can diminish the effect of an assertion. However, good judgment is necessary in timing and selecting an appropriate occasion. For example, it may be better to speak to your manager in the privacy of an office rather than in front of a group where he or she 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. Keep saying what you want, over and over again without getting loud, irritated, or angry. State your position without justifying what you want or don’t want (no excuses, reasons, or explanations). Don’t be distracted by side issues the other person might raise. Continue saying what you want in a calm voice until the other person accedes or agrees to a compromise.

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. Be realistic in your expectations and be flexible in striving for a balance between assertiveness and restraint.

Free information. Practice listening to the clues people give about themselves. Disclosure of free information gives you something to talk about. It enables you to assertively prompt and makes it easier for people to talk about themselves.

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

Fogging. When criticized, cope with the criticism by offering no resistance or hard psychological striking surfaces to the other person’s statements. Instead, agree with any

truth in the criticism. Agree in principle with any statement that you can. 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 yourself, assertively accept those things that are negative about you. If you are negatively assertive about yourself, you cannot be manipulated by the other person through feelings of guilt or anxiety.

Negative inquiry. When criticized, actively prompt further criticism about yourself or the perceived wrongdoing by requesting specific information in a thoughtful manner. This response uses radical acceptance instead of denial, defensiveness, or justification. *Radical acceptance* involves the conscious effort to not only accept, but also 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.

Practice assertiveness on a daily basis.

Practicing assertiveness in your daily life is more than using strategies and techniques. Being assertive improves your self-awareness and ability to communicate your feelings and thoughts in a clear, honest, and non-manipulative manner. Living assertively requires taking responsibility for your own feelings and behaviors by reminding you that you have rights and choices. It involves learning and experimenting through role-playing, increased self-awareness, and practicing effective communication with others. 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.

References

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