

ASSERTIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Have you ever heard yourself saying ‘I wish I’d said that or I wish I hadn’t backed down so easily?’

How does that make you feel?

Being assertive doesn’t come easy to many people. But what do we actually mean by assertion?

Assertion involves defending one’s personal rights and feeling free to express one’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways and which do not violate another person’s rights. Being assertive is about being respectful – to yourself and to those with whom you are communicating. The goal is for mutuality or a ‘win-win’ outcome.

How often have you been on the receiving end of someone believing they were being assertive but it certainly didn’t feel that they were respectful? If you want to be more assertive in the workplace and remain respectful to your colleagues follow the tips covered in this short guide and notice what difference it makes.

Assertiveness and Integrity

When we are assertive we increase our integrity because we are honest with ourselves and with others.

WITH OURSELF – What you feel, what you think and what you need

WITH OTHERS – The impact on you, their behaviour and what you want from them.

How does assertiveness benefit organisations?

- The organisation become less hierarchical
- There is a move away from command and control culture
- Greater emphasis on team work, including teams becoming more self- managed
- Organisations clarify their values and work hard to live these values.

SO WHAT’S HOLDING YOU BACK?

1. Fear of upsetting others – You think the risk of damaging your working relationship or losing the person’s respect is higher than doing or saying what you want. However, not being honest about how you feel can often be more damaging. Just think for a moment about people you work with who can be assertive and show respect for you at the same time – do you lose respect for them? I’m sure you don’t.
2. Feeling responsible for the other person – Developing your skills so that you know how to be assertive in the right way, will certainly help. But remember, you are not responsible to another person’s feelings. If your need is reasonable and you have expressed it in the right way; that is respectful of the other person, then their feeling is their choice. It is important to remember that we are not talking about aggressive behaviour.
3. Your inner voice – We all have inner voices in our heads that monitor what we do and how we behave. I’m not saying it’s always easy to stop them but you always have the choice to not allow them to influence you. Particularly if they are going to stop you from doing the right thing.

Do those inner voices sound like this?

- It's silly to make a fuss
- Well they got a result in the end I suppose
- Just grin and bear it
- They've been here longer so they must know more than me
- Respect my elders

4. Self- defeating mind games:

Generalisation: One of the ways in which our mind filters information is by Generalising. Generalisation is often a very good thing, so that we don't have to stop and think about everything we do i.e. generally we know how to open and close a door as our brain has generalised that doors will open and close a certain way. However, taking one event and generalising that it will always occur can sometimes stop us from achieving.

Thinking:

'I failed once so I always fail,' or 'I did not get it right first time and so I will never get it right.'

If you think you can or you think you can't, you're right' (Henry Ford) You get what you expect.

Labelling: This is like hanging a large sign around your neck which says hopeless or something similar. When an opportunity occurs for you to do something, you look down at your label and act in the way you believe you will act. If you keep saying it to yourself it quickly becomes your reality.

Personalising: When you personalise, you take full personal responsibility for a mishap or difficulty. Situations occur for many different reasons and in some cases you will have played some part.

But if you continually accept full responsibility for situations; you will be condemned to a life of doubt, guilt, and blame.

BEING MORE ASSERTIVE STARTS WITH CHANGING YOUR BELIEFS

BELIEFS THAT CAN LEAD TO AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Attack is the best form of defence
- I need to be aggressive to get results
- Other people cannot be trusted to do the right thing
- I am superior and so I know best
- I must give as good as I get

BELIEFS WHICH CAN LEAD TO NON ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

- I am not as important or good at the job as others
- My opinion doesn't count
- Other people will not like me if I say what I think
- It is safer to keep your head down and say nothing
- It's always best to put others first

BELIEFS WHICH CAN LEAD TO ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

- I am responsible for what happens to me – no one else
- I can be more in control
- I can choose how to behave
- I cannot fail as I will always learn from feedback
- I believe assertiveness does work

Using affirmations to improve your inner voices i.e. Keep telling yourself:

- I am a competent and confident person
- I have the ability to do what I want to do
- I always learn from my mistake and those of others
- People often listen to what I have to say
- I do contribute greatly to the team
- I am responsible for myself and my actions

Develop some of your own affirmations

Basic assertive rights – You do have the right to:

- Be treated with respect
- Express your opinions and feelings
- Say no
- Ask for what you want
- Make mistakes
- Change your mind
- Decide whether or not to assert yourself

You also have a responsibility to:

- Respect the rights of others
- Recognise the opinions and feelings of others
- Help others to work to their goals and objectives
- Encourage others to fulfil their needs
- Help others learn through their mistakes so that they can grow
- Help others reach conclusions about their actions

HOW TO DISAGREE

- **State that you disagree clearly and confidently:** ‘I don’t agree with that course of action because.....’, ‘my experience is different to what you have described in that’, ‘I can see it differently because....’
- **Express any doubt in a constructive way:** Will that result in.....? OR ‘I can see a potential issue with.....’ Can we get around it if.....? Don’t say: that won’t work!
- **Say ‘I’:** It is important that the other person is able to distinguish if something is your opinion or fact. Examples: ‘I can see that.....’, ‘I do have the belief that...’, ‘I often find that’, ‘In my experience I.....’
- **How to change your opinion:** If you now have access to additional information it is important to be honest and firm. Example, ‘In view of this new information....I now think we should.....because.....’
- **Give reasons for your disagreement** – It is important that the other person (s) know the reason for your opinion so that they can look at it from your perspective, before responding, ‘I don’t agree with this next step because it will impact X in this way.....’
- **State what parts you agree and disagree with;** It is likely that in many situations you will have parts you agree with as well as disagree with. To avoid coming across as negative, it is important to be clear about what you agree and disagree with. Example ‘I agree that we need to move forward with this project, but I don’t feel we should go ahead quite as quickly as you have mentioned. Can we look at.....?’
- **Recognise other people’s point of view:** This is about showing respect for the other person (s). Examples, ‘I do respect that you have a different view to me’ or ‘I understand that this is going to have a different impact on you than it does for me. Let’s discuss it to see if we can come up with a plan, we are both happy with’

BEFORE SAYING NO

Some questions to ask yourself:

- How much time will I need to deliver the work to a high quality standard? How does the work I'm being asked to do fit in with my current work schedule?
- Can I offer an alternative solution in order to show a willingness to help in some way?
- What will I gain from saying yes? You may decide that the benefit is about strengthening the relationship with the other person and there isn't really a negative consequence to you if you say yes.
- Do I have to say yes or no right now? Is it right to delay my decision?
- What is the impact of saying no?

Saying NO

If you do have to say No:

- **Don't do it via email if it can be avoided**– remember the receiver cannot hear your tone through email. Do it face to face if possible.
- **Keep your explanation short and simple.** If you go into details of your entire workload, the other person will switch off and may think you are just making an excuse
- **Explain Why. Example:** "I need to get this report finished by 2pm as X is relying on the information for a meeting later."
- **Give them new ideas and/or resources, if you can.** For example, "I know you want to get the feedback from the team today. How about if we used an online 360 form instead of needing me to speak to everyone individually?"
- **Be clear about what's not negotiable.** For example, "Even though I don't have the time to write the report for you right now, I'd be happy to review it together later, if that will help."

Clarifying the other person's needs

Your manager has asked you to attend a meeting as he/she is unable to go. However, you are working flat out for an important presentation later. Asking for you to go is his solution to his need.

Questioning to establish the need:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What would happen if we weren't represented in the meeting?
- How will my attending the meeting help?
- Does the person attending have to be me?
- Why is the meeting important to us?

Once you have clarified the other person's needs, you may establish that your manager just needs the meeting to be represented by someone in the team and it doesn't need to be you. You were asked because your manager thought you would have time to go and because you sit near him/her. The actual need is therefore to have representation at the meeting but it doesn't necessarily need to be you. You are now able to discuss if there is someone else on the team who is able to go and therefore are able to achieve a win-win

How often do you say yes because it's your boss doing the asking, without asking any questions? Try asking a few more questions next time – you may be surprised!

The tips covered in this guidance sheet are a great starting place to become more assertive. If you are interested in learning more and developing your skills further please contact us to discuss how we can help you and your colleagues become more self-assured and assertive in the workplace.

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