

Being assertive

What does being assertive mean?

There are many situations in both work and personal life when we either lose control or become angry or say nothing and ‘swallow’ our feelings. In either case we are often the main losers because we feel bad at the time or later, and we cause other people to feel bad and react in a negative way towards us.

Understanding what ‘being assertive’ means is very important as it appears often in the popular press and is misused in a very negative way.

Being assertive is **not** a way to be selfish or aggressive, it is **not** about winning come hell or high water or getting your own way all the time.

A useful way of looking at assertiveness is to compare it with being aggressive and being passive. Being aggressive means getting your own way at the expense of other people, putting them down, making them feel small, incompetent, foolish, worthless or tricked; manipulating them for your own ends. Being passive means ignoring your own or your department’s interests, needs and goals. It often means putting up with a situation which makes you burn inwardly, rather than being honest about what you **really** think or how you **really** feel.

So it isn’t about being aggressive or passive, but what is being assertive? Being assertive means being honest with yourself and others. It means being able to say what you want, need or feel, but **not** at the expense of other people. It means being self confident, positive and understanding other people’s point of view and being able to behave in a rational adult way. It means being able to negotiate and reach workable compromises.



‘Being assertive’ shows you that assertiveness is all about being honest with yourself and with others. Assertive behaviour will enable you to be more effective, increase the chance of your needs being met, give you greater confidence in yourself and others, take responsibility for your own behaviour, take on more initiatives – and save you energy! Go ahead and start making use of the practical tips on language, how to say ‘no’ and how to take criticism constructively.

Why be more assertive?

To be more effective

The short answer to this is that behaving more assertively will result in your being more effective in your job. This is because assertiveness tends to breed assertiveness, so people are more likely to keep working with you rather than against you. In turn, this makes it easier to get satisfactory outcomes to many of the situations you have to handle.

An increased chance of needs being met

If you are behaving more assertively, you are stating more clearly what your needs, wants, ideas and opinions are. This by itself increases the chances that your needs will be met and your opinions taken into account.

At the same time, because assertion is about not ignoring or dismissing the needs and wants of others, you will encourage others to make their needs known. If there is no conflict between their needs and yours, then you have increased the chances that these too will be met. Where the needs that emerge are in conflict, then we believe assertive behaviour helps individuals to find solutions that are acceptable to both persons.

Greater confidence in yourself

It must be recognised, however, that in some instances your needs may not be fully met. Indeed, in some cases they may not be met at all. The important point here is that, even if this should happen, because you made your needs or views known, you are more likely to feel 'OK' about yourself and the situation.

Greater confidence in others

Increased confidence about yourself helps you to recognise and accept the strengths of those who work with you or for you, rather than being threatened by them.

*Assertiveness
tends to breed
assertiveness*

Increased responsibility for your own behaviour

Being more assertive involves you taking more responsibility for your own behaviour. This leads in turn to you being more in control of your behaviour.

Increasing your own assertion leads you to recognise that you have more control over how you respond to difficult incidents than you previously thought.

Taking more initiatives

If you are to influence the environment in which you work, it is not enough just to react to situations as they occur. It is necessary and important to take initiatives to make or stop certain situations occurring. These initiatives may be small – for example, putting forward an idea in a meeting – or large – such as changing the flow of work through your department.

If you behave assertively you are more likely to take such initiatives, because you are not afraid of failure or making a mistake. You do not want to fail and will work hard to get it right. However, you recognise that from time to time an initiative will fail, but that you can acknowledge and cope with this failure. You do not let the risk of failure stop you taking the initiative as people behaving non-assertively do. Neither do you try and blame others or pretend that it was not a failure, as the aggressive person does.

A saving in energy

Because you are no longer pre-occupied with not upsetting others, and no longer concerned about losing out, you will be able to save yourself a lot of nervous energy.

You will also experience a reduction in stress and tension associated with getting results. For example, you will find taking decisions less stressful because you will be less concerned with what people think and with the fear of making a mistake.

Using less energy in these negative ways leaves you more energy to use productively in other areas of your job.

*Be assertive and
save yourself
energy!*

Practice an assertive script

- Describe** 'When this happened...' 'When you said...'
Descriptive rather than evaluative – not the other person's motives, attitudes or intentions or your reaction to them – just what the behaviour was.
- Express** A statement of how you feel, not how you think the other person feels or about the other's attitudes etc. 'I feel...' not 'You make me feel...'
- Explain** Concisely and clearly
- Empathise** Recognition of other person's situations, interests, and possible or expressed views
- Specify** 'I wonder prefer...' 'I would like...'
What you would like the other person to do and what you would be will to do to reach a solution.
- Choose** 'If you do...' 'If you do not...' The choices open to you resulting from the other's response to your request. Should make it clear that this is information given to clarify your position, not to threaten the other person

Learn how to say 'no'

If you felt you lack assertiveness, you are likely to also find it hard to say 'no'. Learning to say this one very small word is not easy, but the results of not saying no can be catastrophic. We don't want to appear selfish or uncaring, we are scared that we may damage a working relationship or lose us a promotion. There are some steps to help:

- ◆ Beforehand always be specific about what you want – and don't want. Be consistent, if you tell someone that what they want is impossible – explain why
- ◆ Stick to your point. Use the broken record technique to re-state your objections and your refusal
- ◆ Don't over elaborate by giving lots of excuses or making lots of apologies

Learning to say no is not easy but it is vital

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- ◆ Remember that you don't always have to give an immediate answer. State that you would like time to think things over
 - ◆ Finally, people respect others who aren't a 'soft touch' or a 'door mat'. Also you will respect yourself

Taking criticism constructively

It is natural to find yourself being angry or defensive when criticised, regardless of whether the criticism is valid or not. Here are three steps to help you take criticism constructively, being assertive rather than aggressive or passive.

Step 1: Listening

- ◆ Keep calm, think and avoid any immediate reaction.
- ◆ Don't defend, justify, argue, deny or agree.
- ◆ Repeat back the criticism as you heard it.
- ◆ Protect yourself from any aggressive or subjective criticism by:
 - a) acknowledging they **may** have a point
 - b) looking calm, relaxed and controlled
 - c) maintaining eye contact

*If you are criticised,
start by listening*

Step 2: Clarifying

- ◆ Once the critic has calmed down their aggression, ask for exact clarification. Ask for examples, if necessary:
- ◆ Actively encourage the critic, listen and analyse the criticism
- ◆ Exhaust the criticism; check that there is no more points waiting to be used against you
- ◆ Again, check your understanding of the complete criticism and ask the critic to confirm you have got it right
- ◆ Decide which points are justified and accept them. Unjustified, unsustainable criticism can then be rejected
- ◆ State your points of view in a clear, calm way

Step 3: Solving

- ◆ Ask the critic what they want you to do
- ◆ Offer possibilities of your own
- ◆ Decide on an amalgam of ideas
- ◆ Agree what has been agreed

*Gain control over
how you respond
to difficult
situations*