

Top Tips

Assertiveness

What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a life skill that we use in all situations involving an element of influencing or negotiation. It is about standing up for our rights as individuals, whilst respecting those of other people. Assertiveness can be compared with other behaviours as below:

Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
 	 	 
You're OK I'm not OK	I'm OK You're OK	I'm OK You're not OK

Examples of behaviours

	<i>Passive</i>	<i>Assertive</i>	<i>Aggressive</i>
Manner	Gives in easily	Not overawed	Uses authority
Attitude	Thinks is inferior	Thinks is equal	Thinks is superior
Speech	Soft, hesitant,	Even, firm	Shouting, harsh
Listening	Defers to others	Listens, speaks in turn	Interrupts
Eye contact	None, looking down	Frequent	Staring, glaring
Posture	Sitting slumped	Relaxed	Standing rigid
Gestures	Closed, small	Open, relaxed	Sudden, active
Opinion	Withheld	Firm but flexible	Cast in stone
Decisions	Agreeing, whatever	Considers others	Own agenda only
Action	Dithers, delays	Considerate, decisive	Rushes in
Conflict	Submissive, gives in	Works to resolve	Must have own way
Outcome	Inconveniences self	Negotiates win-win	Inconveniences others
Responsibility	Avoids if possible	Takes willingly	Imposes on others

Tips and Techniques

Plan your conversation

If you are about to have a conversation where you feel you may need to be assertive, it is worth spending a few minutes considering your options beforehand. It falls into a four step process:

- Consider the rights of all parties involved
- Listen actively to what is being said, then show the person that you both hear and understand them
- State what you think, feel or believe about the situation
- Describe what you want to happen and what outcome you want

Concentrate on issues, not personalities

- Remember that you are discussing an incident or an issue, not a personality
- Keep the discussion calm, impersonal and non-emotional; use phrases such as 'I can't agree with that' which states disagreement, rather than 'You must be joking!' which implies a personal attack

Be honest and specific

Be specific and descriptive, stick to relevant points, and use 'I' rather than 'you' in phrases such as 'I've been disappointed with your punctuality over the last two weeks', rather than 'You can never get out of bed on time, can you?' If you need to express an opinion present it as that rather than as a fact; 'I feel that you've not been...'

Stick to your bottom line

A good tool to use here is the 'broken record' or 'instant replay' technique, which consists of repeating the same assertion as often as is necessary; 'No, that's not an option I could consider', 'No, I couldn't do that', 'As I said, that's not an option open to me'.

Dealing with anger or criticism

A technique to use here is called 'fogging'. This means acknowledging another person's anger without accepting liability for causing it. 'I can see why you say that', or 'I'm sorry you feel that way about it'. This acknowledges their concern without admitting responsibility; in this context the words 'I'm sorry' do not admit anything, they are merely a politeness.

- Don't deny the criticism; this provides your critic with further ammunition
- Don't get defensive, as this may imply the criticism is justified
- Don't respond with criticism of your own; this may start an argument
- Respond only to what is said, not what is implied

Work towards a solution

It can help to soften a refusal if you are able to suggest a compromise or a way round the difficulty. When doing this 'however' or 'although' is usually better than 'but', as in 'I can't do it then, although I could do it later'.

If you are criticised following a mistake you've made, admit it then use a question to turn the conversation towards a solution rather than spending time discussing how it happened; 'Yes, I should have checked the flipchart before the briefing. Could we use the whiteboard or would notepaper be OK?'

Written communication

If you are creating a memo or report, whether on paper or email, consider carefully the initial effect it will have on the reader:

- Choose your words carefully to support your intended impact
- Consider the overall appearance – bold print may appear aggressive
- Use capitals appropriately - a message all in capitals is seen as 'shouting'
- Use an appropriate font – not too large or too small
- Beware excessive punctuation particularly exclamation marks

For related topics see Top Tips:

- **Body Language**
- **Communication**
- **Influencing**
- **Rapport**