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## **Special Report:**

# **The Art of Assertive Communication**

I describe assertiveness skills as an art form because to do assertiveness right, you need to achieve a perfect balancing act between several extremes. When you act on one of the extremes, you will not come across well and you're unlikely to get your needs met. The art of assertiveness, on the other hand, is achieved when you reach the level of balance in the middle of the polarized opposites. These extremes are:

- Passive versus aggressive
- Overly confident versus timid
- Demanding versus relenting
- Self-focused versus others-focused

## **Assertiveness Skills Leads to Less Work Stress**

One of the reasons that being assertive at work is so important is that it can reduce your stress. Here are the top strategies for improving assertiveness to decrease stress at work. We'll discuss some of them in greater detail later in this report.

1. Determine if you're passive or aggressive. Assertiveness is in the middle of passivity and aggressiveness. Gather information from others to figure out if you come across as passive and submissive or aggressive and intimidating. You want to fall in the assertive range in the middle of passive and aggressive.
2. Learn how to say no. The ability to say no is an assertiveness skill that can take off a great level of your stress in your job. Don't allow yourself to be paralyzed by the fear of saying no and not taking on more than you can handle. If saying no to work is difficult for you, begin slowly by first working on not saying yes right away. Build up to saying no.
3. Compromise for win-win solutions. Look for opportunities to create compromises that will work for everyone involved. If your boss wants you to have a project down in one week and that seems impossible to you, tell her the benefits of your finishing the project within two weeks.

4. State what you want. A major problem that leads to stress at work is not stating your goals. You then feel out of control of your work situation, but in reality you did not really try to be the leader of your own career. Be a leader and say what you want to happen.
  
5. Ask for help. Let others help you decrease your burden and stress level. Allow yourself to ask for help with specific tasks or activities. Asking questions and asserting your needs can help you perform better at work and feel more satisfied with your career.

### **When You're Not Assertive, You're More Likely to be Anxious**

Being able to communicate assertively means that you can state your opinion even if it's in contrast to another's opinion. You can ask for help when you need it or ask someone to do something differently than they have been doing it. Another aspect of assertive communication is the ability to say no and refuse to take on additional work and responsibilities. The key to speaking assertively is that you are respectful and empathic to others and in control of your own behavior. You're not being assertive to try to change them, you're working on your own responses and behaviors.

Anxiety and assertiveness are linked in several ways. For example, let's say that you have perfectionist tendencies and worry about producing suboptimal work. If you are

not able to say no to certain projects, you will quickly become overwhelmed and therefore more nervous about completing your tasks well. Of course we don't want to develop assertiveness to enable the perfectionism and allow you to work on fewer tasks.

Some perfectionists have difficulty asking for assistance when it is very reasonable to get assistance. This is because you feel like you *should* be able to do everything on your own. Developing assertiveness can help you get the assistance that you really do need to overcome perfectionism and do the job well.

## **Making Assertive Requests**

The first key to making requests in an assertive manner is to state the reason that the request would be beneficial. Second, you want to ask for the specific item that you want to request. Third, you want to reiterate how the change would be helpful and arrange a plan to insure that your request will be implemented. Always consider “what’s in it for me” for the person you are speaking with and have empathy for their position. You can vary whether steps two or three comes first based on the specific request.

For example, “Jim, I know that this account is extremely important. For this reason, I’m putting my all into it. But I’m having difficulty moving forward without the data. I would like about three hours of time from one of the assistants. Once they get the data to me, I can move forwards quickly. What day should I plan on having three hours from the assistant?”

## **It's Tough to Say No**

Saying no can be difficult, especially when you are trying to show your company or yourself that you are extremely dedicated and hard-working. For this reason, it is important to clarify why you're saying no. Again, always think of "what's in it for me" for the other person. They are likely to be displeased with your refusal of their request, so it's important to highlight the benefit to them when there is one.

An example of how to assertively say no is, "I got the new assignment that you sent to me. I am still working on the project that you said is the number one priority this quarter. I'd suggest that I focus my efforts on that project and finish it before taking on something new. How does that sound?"

## **Effective Delegating**

The types of making requests discussed above typically arise when you ask for something from your boss or supervisor. Making requests of your subordinates is typically a type of delegating.

When employees feel invested in the project or role that they are assigned to, they are likely to be the most motivated. For this reason, you can allow employees to choose among a couple activities. Choice gives people the perception of control and helps them to buy into the process. Or you can highlight the specific skills and attributes of the

individual that make them well suited to the task. When you highlight positive qualities of an individual and say why you expect them to do well, you set up a beneficial self-fulfilling prophecy. There is evidence that people perform in line with the expectations and feedback that others give to them.

One of the reasons that delegation often fails is that managers don't provide employees with the resources and feedback that they need to perform well. Build in processes and systems for monitoring the progress of employees. Work hard to empower them to excel and to ask for assistance when needed. If you have ever been micromanaged, you know how annoying and demoralizing this is. Delegating without micromanaging is the key.

## **The Broken Record Technique**

If people are not responsive to the assertive techniques described above, you can try the broken record technique. Let's say you have a coworker who constantly chatters away. You like this coworker, but he is not respectful of your time and you feel that you are getting behind at work. The best strategy is to confront him directly, state your problems with the current situation and make the request that he not talk with you while your door is closed or for longer than a couple minutes. If he is not responsive, you can try the broken record technique and say the same thing every time he comes over to speak with you.

For example, you can say, “Joe, I can’t talk now, I have a deadline coming up.” Or, “I’d love to chat now but it would put me behind.” Then you can come up with an alternative plan, such as getting together later in the evening to talk over drinks or having lunch together the next day.

When you say the same or a similar response every time, the person will eventually get the message. And if they don’t you may need to assertively ask to move to a new office!

**Larina Kase, PsyD, MBA** is a business coach who helps executives and entrepreneurs to improve their communication skills, effectively lead others, focus their attention and energy, and enhance use of time to soar ahead in their careers. Sign up for one of the free newsletters, *Keys to Marketing Success* or *Control Stress-Achieve Success*, and you’ll receive the ebook *Get the Mental Edge in Your Career*. Visit <http://www.PAScoaching.com> for this and other free gifts.