Assertive Communication - 6 Tips for Effective Use

What is assertive communication?

Assertive communication is the ability to express positive and negative ideas and feelings in an open, honest and direct way. It recognizes our rights whilst still respecting the rights of others. It allows us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions without judging or blaming other people. And it allows us to constructively confront and find a mutually satisfying solution where conflict exists.

So why use assertive communication?

All of us use assertive behavior at times... quite often when we feel vulnerable or unsure of ourselves we may resort to submissive, manipulative or aggressive behavior.

Yet being trained in assertive communication actually increases the appropriate use of this sort of behavior. It enables us to swap old behavior patterns for a more positive approach to life. I've found that changing my response to others (be they work colleagues, clients or even my own family) can be exciting and stimulating.

The advantages of assertive communication

- There are many advantages of assertive communication, most notably these:
- It helps us feel good about ourselves and others
- It leads to the development of mutual respect with others
- It increases our self-esteem
- It helps us achieve our goals
- It minimizes hurting and alienating other people
- It reduces anxiety
- It protects us from being taken advantage of by others
- It enables us to make decisions and free choices in life
- It enables us to express, both verbally and non-verbally, a wide range of feelings and thoughts, both positive and negative

There are, of course, disadvantages... Disadvantages of assertive communication

Others may not approve of this style of communication, or may not approve of the views you express. Also, having a healthy regard for another person's rights means that you won't always get what YOU want. You may also find out that you were wrong about a viewpoint that you held. But most importantly, as mentioned earlier, it involves the risk that others may not understand and therefore not accept this style of communication.

What assertive communication is not...

Assertive communication is definitely NOT a lifestyle! It’s NOT a guarantee that you will get what you want. It's definitely NOT an acceptable style of communication with everyone, but at least it's NOT being aggressive.

But it is about choice - Four behavioral choices

There are, as I see it, four choices you can make about which style of communication you can employ. These types are:

1. **direct aggression**: bossy, arrogant, bulldozing, intolerant, opinionated, and overbearing
2. **indirect aggression**: sarcastic, deceiving, ambiguous, insinuating, manipulative, and guilt-inducing

3. **submissive**: wailing, moaning, helpless, passive, indecisive, and apologetic

4. **assertive**: direct, honest, accepting, responsible, and spontaneous

**Characteristics of assertive communication**

There are six main characteristics of assertive communication. These are:

1. **eye contact**: demonstrates interest, shows sincerity

2. **body posture**: congruent body language will improve the significance of the message

3. **gestures**: appropriate gestures help to add emphasis

4. **voice**: a level, well-modulated tone is more convincing and acceptable, and is not intimidating

5. **timing**: use your judgment to maximize receptivity and impact

6. **content**: how, where and when you choose to comment is probably more important than WHAT you say

**The Importance of "I" statements**

Part of being assertive involves the ability to appropriately express your needs and feelings. You can accomplish this by using "I" statements. These indicate ownership, do not attribute blame, focuses on behavior, identifies the effect of behavior, is direct and honest, and contributes to the growth of your relationship with each other.

Strong "I" statements have three specific elements:

1. **Behavior**: describe the behavior or action that provoked you

2. **Feeling**: describe how you are feeling when something occurs

3. **Tangible effect (consequence to you)**: mention how the behavior affects you

Example: "I feel frustrated when you are late for meetings. I don't like having to repeat information."

**Six techniques for assertive communication**

1. **Behavior Rehearsal**: which is literally practicing how you want to look and sound. It is a very useful technique when you first want to use "I" statements, as it helps dissipate any emotion associated with an experience and allows you to accurately identify the behavior you wish to confront.

2. **Repeated Assertion (the 'broken record')**: this technique allows you to feel comfortable by ignoring manipulative verbal side traps, argumentative baiting and irrelevant logic while sticking to your point. To most effectively use this technique use calm repetition, and say what you want and stay focused on the issue. You'll find that there is no need to rehearse this technique, and no need to 'hype yourself up' to deal with others.

Example:

"I would like to show you some of our products"

"No thank you, I'm not interested"
"I really have a great range to offer you"

"That may be true, but I'm not interested at the moment"

"Is there someone else here who would be interested?"

"I don't want any of these products"

"Okay, would you take this brochure and think about it?"

"Yes, I will take a brochure"

"Thank you"

"You're welcome"

3. **Fogging**: this technique allows you to receive criticism comfortably, without getting anxious or defensive, and without rewarding manipulative criticism. To do this you need to acknowledge the criticism, agree that there may be some truth to what they say, but remain the judge of your choice of action. An example of this could be, "I agree that there are probably times when I don't give you answers to your questions."

4. **Negative inquiry**: this technique seeks out criticism about you in close relationships by prompting the expression of honest, negative feelings to improve communication. To use it effectively you need to listen for critical comments, clarify your understanding of those criticisms, use the information if it will be helpful or ignore the information if it is manipulative. An example of this technique would be, "So you think/believe that I am not interested?"

5. **Negative assertion**: this technique lets you look more comfortably at negatives in your own behavior or personality without feeling defensive or anxious; this also reduces your critics' hostility. You should accept your errors or faults, but not apologize. Instead, tentatively and sympathetically agree with hostile criticism of your negative qualities. An example would be, "Yes, you're right. I don't always listen closely to what you have to say."

6. **Workable compromise**: when you feel that your self-respect is not in question, consider a workable compromise with the other person. You can always bargain for your material goals unless the compromise affects your personal feelings of self-respect. However, if the end goal involves a matter of your self-worth and self-respect, THERE CAN BE NO COMPROMISE. An example of this technique would be, "I understand that you have a need to talk and I need to finish what I'm doing. So what about meeting in half an hour?"

**Conclusion**

Assertiveness is a useful communication tool. Its application is contextual and it's not appropriate to be assertive in all situations. Remember, your sudden use of assertiveness may be perceived as an act of aggression by others.

There's also no guarantee of success, even when you use assertive communication styles appropriately.

"Nothing on earth can stop the individual with the right mental attitude from achieving their goal; nothing on earth can help the individual with the wrong mental attitude" W.W. Ziege