

# How to Be Assertive

To be assertive isn't to say you are mean or rude. It doesn't make you pushy or annoying. It just means that you say the truth and get things done. This can be accomplished with simple steps.

- 1. Have a confident demeanor.** The way you hold yourself speaks volumes about you – long before you even get a chance to open your mouth. Keep your shoulders squared and your chin up. Avoid fidgeting (put your hands in your pockets if you must) or covering your mouth when you speak. Look people in the eye when you speak to indicate that you don't intend to be brushed off
  - **Try not to be easy to read**, especially if you are nervous or uncertain. Hide your “tells” by controlling your hands, feet, and facial expressions so that they don't betray your emotions.
  - **If making eye contact is a problem**, practice with sunglasses and then work up to doing it barefaced. If you must avert your gaze, look off into the distance as if in thought, not down.
  - **Even if you are nervous or confused**, you can still act confident. There's no shame in asking questions.
- 2. Speak slowly and clearly.** Rushing when you talk is an admission that you don't expect people to take the time to listen. Speaking slowly, on the other hand, will indicate to people that you're worth the wait. Use a clear, calm voice. You don't need to be loud, but you do need to make yourself heard.
  - **If people aren't noticing you**, say "Excuse me" clearly and firmly. Don't be apologetic when you haven't done anything wrong; it will communicate to people that you feel slightly embarrassed just for existing.
  - **Try to be concise when you speak.** Even the most confident person in the world will lose their audience if they don't make their point soon enough.
- 3. Work on your appearance.** Shallow though it may be, people make snap judgments based on your appearance. People who are naturally confident and charismatic can change others' minds, but the rest of us aren't so lucky. If you're wearing clothes that look like you've just got out of bed, or if you wear a pound of make-up with fluffy high-heels, the average person won't take you seriously. On the other hand, if you look like you're ready to get things done, people will tend to be more respectful.
  - **Dressing well doesn't necessarily mean dressing up.** If you're the naturally casual sort, focus on having clean, matching, unwrinkled clothes with no embarrassing slogans or inappropriate images. Going to the supermarket in sandals, socks, basketball shorts, and a ripped turtleneck, on the other hand, is an invitation for ridicule, even if *you* think you look just dandy.
- 4. Know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em.** Like anything else in life, being assertive is about balance. If the waiter made a mistake and brought you something you're allergic to, speak up – and keep at it until the problem is corrected. But if a cashier growls at you, it's not your job to educate them on manners and customer service, so let it go. It's important to **get** what you deserve in life, but it's just as important to **understand** what it is that you deserve in the first place!
- 5. Be honest with yourself about what you want.** Acting confidently won't do you any good if you can never make up your mind or are trying too hard to “go with the flow.” People can tell if you already know what you want out of them, and it's much easier for them to do what you ask them if you can tell them clearly what that is.
  - **Being too accommodating can actually make things harder for people.** Whether you're speaking to an insurance agent or a waiter, their job is to serve you and you'll make their job about ten times easier if you know what you want.
  - **Off-loading decision-making onto everyone else** is a passive-aggressive way of shirking your responsibility – and placing the consequences squarely on someone else's shoulders. (To say nothing of

the fact that it's just plain annoying.) The next time your friends ask you where you want to go to dinner, don't respond with, "Oh, wherever"; give them a concrete answer.

6. **Don't misdirect your frustration.** If the airline counter agent tells you that you must pay extra for your heavy bag, don't get angry at the agent! Your beef is with the airline's policy (and possibly your own failure to read the fine print). Instead, treat the agent like an ally. If the policy was made available to you, apologize and ask for an exception. If you were never informed of the policy, say so, and ask for an exception.
  - **Many people who want to be assertive overcompensate by being aggressive.** Being assertive means clearly and coolly communicating what you want, which is the definition of being in control. Being aggressive, on the other hand, means acting pushy and overreacting to small things, which is the opposite of being in control.
  - **The whole point of being assertive is to get what you want.** Aggressiveness, on the other hand, will throw a monkey wrench into your plans, as it puts the people around you into foul, unhelpful moods.
7. **Say what's on your mind.** Don't be silent if you have something to say. Share your feelings freely: it's your right. Remember, there's nothing wrong in having an opinion.
  - **Practice in low-stakes situations.** Do all your friends love that new TV show everyone's talking about? Don't be afraid to admit that you weren't all that impressed. Has someone misinterpreted what you said? Don't nod and play along; explain what you really meant, even if the miscommunication was harmless.
8. **Learn to say no.** If you do not feel right doing something, then don't do it! It's okay to reject someone. (Have you ever been rejected? Did you live?) Remember, for yourself, the most important person is **you!** If you don't respect your own desires, how can you expect others to?
  - **You may think that being a people-pleaser will put you on people's good side,** but unfortunately, an overabundance of generosity usually has the opposite effect on people. People only value the things they invest time/energy/money into, so if *you're* the one doing all the giving, your esteem for that person will skyrocket... but theirs for you will plummet. Take a stand. People may resist at first – or even be shocked by your transformation – but in the end, they will respect you for it.

## Tips

- If you have to deliver bad news, don't offer unnecessary details. If you explain every single reason for your decision, the other person can use those reasons as negotiation points. Your decision is firm, and this will come across most clearly if you are short and to the point.
- If you're doing everything right and whoever you're talking to isn't getting you anywhere, ask to talk to their superior and be very insistent. Most of the time you'll see immediate results.
- Here are some techniques that are used in assertive communication:
  - Broken record - consists of simply repeating your requests or your refusals every time you are met with resistance.
  - Fogging - consists of finding some limited truth to agree with in what an antagonist is saying. More specifically, one can agree 'in part' or agree 'in principle'.
  - Negative inquiry - consists of requesting further, more specific criticism.
  - Negative assertion - consists in agreement with criticism without letting up demand.
  - 'I' statements - used to voice one's feelings and wishes from a personal position without expressing a judgment about the other person or blaming one's feelings on them.
- In the beginning, don't try changing your behavior in loaded or difficult situations. Practice first in the least risky ones.

- If you're about to engage in an important encounter, like asking for a raise or getting out of an unhealthy relationship, ask a friend to role-play with you. Practice what you are going to say, and have your friend give you feedback. If you aren't assertive enough, try it again. This works best if the friend knows the person with whom you're about to engage.
- Maintain eye contact when arguing your point.

### Warnings

- In confrontations especially, emotions can run high. Remember to be respectful and keep a cool head.
- While you can use these techniques on authority figures, such as police officers and military officers, know where to draw the line. Arguing too much on the spot can backfire, even if you have a good case.
- Assertiveness is not always practiced in a balanced way, especially by those new to the process. Many people, when trying out assertive behaviour for the first time, find that they go too far and become aggressive. So if it's possible, in the beginning, become a part of an assertiveness or communication skills group
- Try asking first; don't demand things right off the bat. Gather information and make the other person an ally. If that approach doesn't work, **then** you may put your foot down. Rule out miscommunications first; make sure the person actually slighted you, and knowingly, before you come out with guns blazing.
- The key to success in confrontations is to use an appropriate tone of voice and the correct words. Speak to someone like you would like to be spoken to!