

Assertiveness Skills



Assertiveness is a philosophy and a technique of communication. To build assertiveness skills, we must acquire a deeper understanding of just what goes on when we interact with others, particularly when an element of conflict is present (which covers, of course, most of human experience), and make an appropriate response.

Assertive people have several things in common:

- They feel empowered. They do not feel that they are unjustly controlled by others.
- They project dignity and calmness in their dealings with other people.
- They are proactive: They make things happen, rather than react or wait to see how they will respond to the words and actions of others.
- They know their rights and responsibilities when they deal with others.
- They avoid apologetic dialogue or submissive language and tone.
- They are able to resist the aggressive, manipulative, and passive ploys of other people.

A good definition of assertiveness is this:

“Getting what you want from others without infringing on their rights.”

This booklet will explore the whole subject of Assertiveness. When you have completed it, see whether the definition is a useful one.

1

Analyze.

In order to understand the nature of Assertiveness in terms of assertive behavior and communication, we also need to understand the nature of non-assertive behavior and communication. There are four different styles of communication:

- **Assertive**
- **Aggressive**
- **Passive**
- **Manipulative**

The three non-assertive styles of communicating—Aggressive, Passive, and Manipulative—can sometimes be effective, but they usually involve a degree of dishonesty, negativity, time-wasting, and conflict. Only the Assertive style leads to honest, effective, and problem-solving communication.

It is rare for an individual to be 100% Assertive or Aggressive or Passive or Manipulative. All of us tend to be a mixture of all four styles. Indeed, we might be passive in one set of circumstances, aggressive in a second setting, assertive in a third, and manipulative in a fourth.

For example, an individual might be Passive at work, and become the target of bullying from aggressive types. He or she will likely resent such bullying, but not be assertive enough to retaliate against such behavior or neutralize it. It's quite possible that this individual will in turn release his/her frustration by becoming aggressive toward less-threatening people (children, relatives, subordinates) in other settings. Passives can be passive for a long time in the face of aggression from others, and then one day, just *snap*.

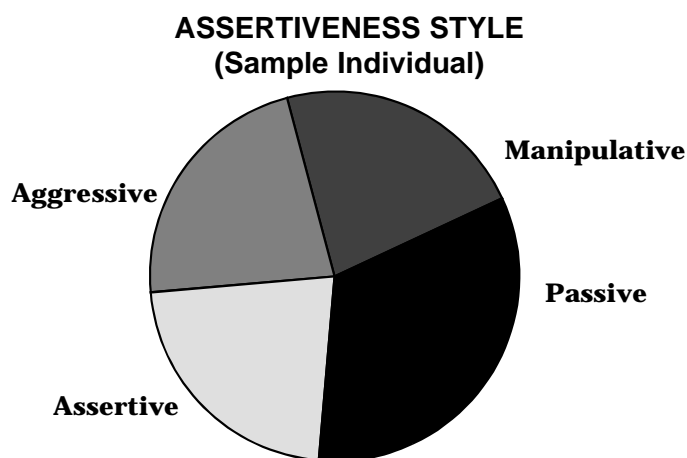
FOUR STYLES OF COMMUNICATING

	Aggressive	Passive	Manipulative	Assertive
General behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I win—you lose" approach • Abuses rights of others • Doesn't trust or delegate • Listens poorly • Verbal and non-verbal behavior usually congruent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I lose—you win" approach • Ignores own rights • Complains, doesn't act • Avoids conflict • Listens poorly • Verbal and non-verbal behavior often not congruent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'll let you <i>think</i> you've won" approach • Undermines rights of others • Sees others as objects to be used • Listens in order to dig dirt, not understand • Verbal and non-verbal behavior often not congruent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I win—you win" approach • Takes action to get what is wanted, without denying the rights of others • Trusts, delegates • Proactive and is solution-oriented • Is a good listener • Non-verbal and verbal behavior congruent
Verbal cues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks loud, fast • Interrupts others • "You" language: "You must/should/ought/always/never . . ." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stumbles over words • Few "I" statements • Avoids saying "no" • Self put-downs: "This is probably stupid, but . . ." • Often seeks approval 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses sarcasm • Undue emphasis on words—"Who, <i>me</i>? Oh <i>no!</i> <i>Never!</i>" • Hostile humor • Gives others silent treatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I" language: "I choose to/ think that/believe that . . ." • Focuses on facts: how, when, where, who, what • Says "no" when it can't be done—doesn't feel guilty • Appropriately firm, warm tone
Body language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glaring—tries to stare down • Jutting jaw • Rigid posture • Arms crossed—hostile • Invades personal space of others • Engages in finger-pointing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evasive eye contact • Smiling at everyone, even when angry • Slumped posture • Wrings hands • Arms crossed—protective • Sighs often 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rolling eyes • Over-elaborate winking • Conspiratorial expression • Hand in front of mouth when talking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct but not staring • Relaxed posture • Open-hand movements (showing honesty; inviting others to speak)

Adapted from *Dealing with Conflict*, by Baden Eunsom (1997. Brisbane: John Wiley and Sons)

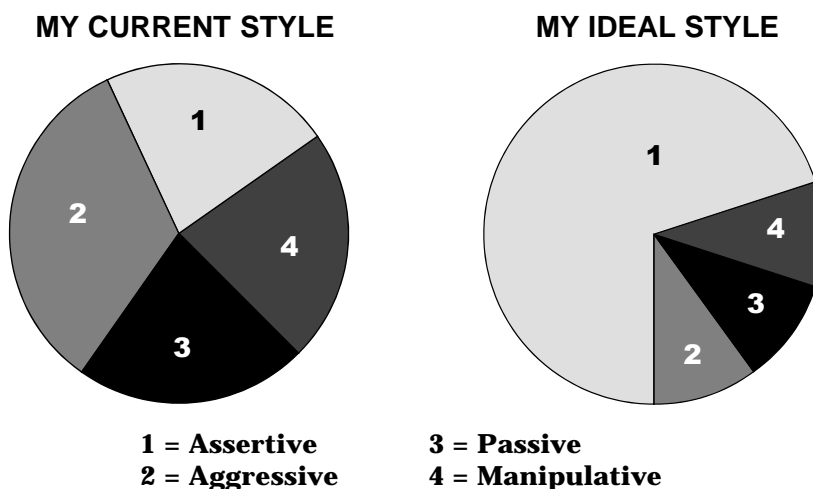
1

As we have already said, most of us are blends of all four styles—Assertive, Aggressive, Passive, and Manipulative. It should be possible, then, to illustrate the style mix of any individual with a pie chart, like this:



Think now of your own style of communicating. Is it predominantly Assertive? Predominantly Passive? Predominantly Aggressive? Or predominantly Manipulative? Does your predominant style cause you problems when interacting with other people? Do you find that your predominant style changes according to the circumstances or settings you find yourself in?

It is also possible to distinguish between your current style mix and an “ideal” style. The ideal style is overwhelmingly assertive—the most positive and effective. Realistically, it is unlikely that we will ever be 100% assertive, with no residues at all of aggression, passivity, and/or manipulation. Here is an example of how a current style compares with an ideal style mix:



The trick is to move a little closer to our ideal style mix. Let's move on to find out just how we can do that.

1

Assertive skills are quite useful. For one thing, they help us maintain our composure during a conflict, allowing us to think on our feet. There is nothing quite so frustrating as having come off second-best in an encounter with someone else, only to later realize what we should have said and done. If this is what usually happens to you, then you are reacting instead of acting. You need to take control of the situation by using anticipation and preparation.

This hindsight experience should teach us that we don't have all the information we really needed. The other person or persons seemed to have access to all the data, and they used this to gain the upper hand. There was a gap between what we knew and what we needed to know.

Assertive skills are the **process** part of what you need to get across, but by themselves they are not sufficient. You need facts, which are the **content** part of what you need to get across. Information is power, and information is how you close the gap between what you know now and what you will need to know when you assertively confront someone.

How can you best prepare before you encounter your next “problem” person? You need to know the “Five Ws and One H” of a situation: The **who, what, when, where, why and how**. It's impossible to anticipate all the facts needed in any future encounter, but the more prepared you are, the more confident you will be in a dynamically changing situation. **Chance favors the prepared mind.**



1

Another way to become a more confident (and thus more assertive) person is to take small, manageable risks in your daily life. This does not mean placing yourself in dangerous situations! **It simply means to begin to push the borders of your comfort zone**—to become comfortable with more stressful situations. The more you do this, the better you will handle yourself with problem people.

Begin by making a list of things that are difficult for you, but usually not dangerous. For example:

RISK LIST

1. Ask to share a taxi with a stranger on a rainy day.
2. Ask another person not to smoke.
3. Tell someone that they have bad breath/body odor.
4. Speak up when someone cuts in line.
5. Ask a cashier at a store to give you change for a \$50 bill, even though you aren't buying anything.

Another way to become more confident is to be familiar with your “assertiveness rights.” Here is a sample list of such rights:

A LIST OF ASSERTIVE RIGHTS

I have the right to:

1. Be treated with respect and to respect others.
2. Ask for explanations for things I do not understand.
3. Change my mind.
4. Make mistakes, to be responsible for them, and to learn from them.
5. Say “No” without feeling guilty.
6. Express anger, pleasure, and other feelings when and where I think it appropriate.
7. Express my ideas and opinions and have them listened to.
8. Make reasonable requests (the responsibility is to acknowledge other people's rights to refuse).
9. Not assert myself.
10. Be paid what I'm worth.

Remember, a right is something to which you are entitled. It's not a privilege. **Rights need to be balanced with responsibilities. If we do not accept this balance, then assertiveness simply decays into another form of aggression or selfishness.** If you know what your assertive rights are and determine that you will no longer have these rights violated, then you are well on the way to being an assertive person.



2

Script.

In some ways, **performing well in an encounter with one of your problem people is a bit like being an actor in a play.** But what if you don't have any lines? Perhaps to perform better, you had better write your own.

What you need is a script. This is not necessarily a set of specific words that you should learn by rote, but it would certainly be a general set of words, attitudes, and behaviors that you can draw on in an actual encounter.

We have already discussed the communication styles of others. What you need to do now is to try and remember previous encounters with a problem person, and attempt to analyze these encounters. Do you recall any word patterns or approaches used by this person? Consider the styles of communication we looked at earlier: Was there any distinct body language used by the person that might give you clues as to what style of communication they were operating from?

If the encounters with this person are still continuing, it might be better to continue to behave as you always have done, but to also become more observant. Perhaps you should keep a "conflict diary," in which you record and analyze just what goes on.

Once you have analyzed what has happened in the past, you are now ready to learn specific skills that can be used to devise responses to such patterns. Stay flexible when you use them and be ready to adapt them to continually changing circumstances: Anticipate the expected and the unexpected.

Let's look at these: Feedback Sequence Skills and Verbal Skills. We will then complete this section called "Prepare a Script" by considering how you can visualize yourself succeeding with these new-found skills.



2

ASSERTIVE SKILLS: THE FEEDBACK SEQUENCE

A useful technique for asserting yourself is to use the seven-step Feedback Sequence. This technique is easy to rehearse and memorize, and it can help manage the stress of an encounter with a person who is stepping on the assertive rights of others.

Assertive Skills: The Feedback Sequence

1. When you . . . (do something)
2. This happens . . .
3. And I feel . . .
4. Would you . . . (do something else)
5. Because that way/this would mean . . .
6. I/you/they would feel . . .
7. So, what do *you* think?

Here is a sample of the Feedback Sequence and Verbal Skills at work:

- When you criticized me in front of the other staff,
- You mentioned a lot of confidential material that should not have been revealed.
- And I feel personally humiliated, and also angry that I have to now explain situations to them that should have been kept private.
- Would you please discuss these matters with me in private.
- That way, we can discuss our differences in a calmer setting, and confidential things can stay confidential.
- I would have the confidence that you are respecting me professionally, and that we can keep a lid on what we are trying to do.
- So, what do *you* think?

Once you have become familiar with the Feedback Sequence and ways to say what you need to say within its guidelines (Verbal Skills), you will be well on the way to preparing a script for your next encounter with one of your problem people.

Another skill that is useful at this stage is that of Visualization. Visualization involves imagined thoughts of success:

Imagine yourself in a location where an encounter is likely to take place. Imagine yourself using the Feedback Sequence and Verbal Skills to control and dominate in the encounter. The process of imagining the encounter—creating a mental picture and dialogue—might in fact trigger new associations in your mind. You might think of new things to say and do that would help you get through it effectively. Finally, imagine yourself walking away from the encounter, having achieved your goals. Hang on to that image of success, and replay it continually in your mind.

3

Show.

Role-playing is a very important way to build your skills. The more you do it, the more ideas you will get for new words, new body language, and new strategies that will help you get what you want. The essence of any victory, however, is to think like your opponent, and “outsmart” them. The best way to get a permanent resolution to your problem is not so much to see your “problem” person as an opponent, but as a partner. But let’s refer to this person, for the moment, as an opponent.

Realistic knowledge should never depend on stereotyped or extreme opinions of that person (“He/she is the worst in the world,” etc.). Thinking of someone in these terms can make you feel better in the short run (because it helps reinforce the “rightness” of your position), but such an approach will ultimately weaken you and paradoxically help you to fail or only achieve a less-than-good outcome.



To avoid this unrealistic approach, take the role of your opponent: Use their words and their body language, and operate from their position with their values and strategies. It will feel uncomfortable at first, but persevere. What’s the point? **The point is to try to get inside your opponent—to understand their motivations and perceptions, and particularly their perceptions of you.** This role-playing will give you insights into the viewpoints, weaknesses, and strengths of your opponent; you might also get insights into your own viewpoints, weaknesses, and strengths. Such insights can help you to modify your approach so that you will be less vulnerable and more successful in your real encounter.

Make sure the encounter takes place in a space where you are less likely to be interrupted. If it appears that the other person’s office or living room or wherever will be distracting or that you’ll be interrupted, arrange for the encounter to take place elsewhere—in the garden, a meeting room, an office not currently being used, etc. In fact, the more you are involved in choosing the location of the encounter, the more you will be seen by the other person as more powerful and influential than they originally thought.

The location is the “where” and the “space” of the encounter. But you also need to control or at least influence the “when” and the “time” of the encounter. An appropriate block of time should be set aside to “process” the problem. The other person, when confronted with your new-found assertiveness, might choose to get out of it by saying that there is no more time available—things have come up. Make an appointment with the other person, and see that the appointment is long enough for you to cover everything.

4

Evaluate.

Now you're in your encounter with the problem person. You want to perform at your best and succeed at achieving your goals, so check and observe yourself on an ongoing basis. How are you doing? Do you look competent and confident? Is your body language sending out the right assertive signals? Do your gestures, posture, eye contact, and physical distance from the other person send out the right messages? If not, slowly, deliberately, and inconspicuously make the necessary adjustments. Let your body language match and reinforce the words in your script. Remember, in some situations with some people, your body language is more important than the words in your script.

In the heat of the encounter, don't neglect your stress-management skills—they are needed now more than ever. Remember to slow down your breathing and relax your muscles. Pay particular attention to your shoulders: Raised shoulders can convey a visual threat to the other person (and might even provide some useful intimidation), but they can also indicate that you are too stressed and not able to concentrate on your script and the rest of your body language. Be careful also of negative thoughts, and always keep your visualizations of success at the forefront of your mind. Remember, the more you practice stress-management techniques before a stressful encounter, the more successfully you can deploy those techniques when the stressful encounter arrives. You will be able to go into “automatic pilot” mode, and concentrate on other things.

As per your script, use the Feedback Sequence to get across your analysis of the problem situation and the way in which this situation affects you:

1. **When you . . . (do something)**
2. **This happens . . .**
3. **And I feel . . .**
4. **Would you . . . (do something else)**
5. **Because that way/this would mean . . .**
6. **I/you/they would feel . . .**
7. **So, what do *you* think?**

Don't be afraid to adapt this sequence to thoughts and perceptions that arise during the encounter itself. Once you are comfortable with the sequence, you can use it to process your feelings and give others much-needed feedback on the impact of their words and actions. You might even be the first person who has ever pointed this out to them.



5

Review.

The encounter with your “problem” person is now almost over. Many people find themselves trying to work out a compromise as they search for a practical and desirable solution to a problem. If you use this assertive verbal skill, then you need to realistically evaluate the compromise or compromises being discussed. How permanent might such compromises be?

Perhaps in role-playing your opponent, you got an insight into his/her motivations and perceptions. Hold on to those insights, and use them to try for some type of win-win outcome. What’s in it for them? What’s in it for you? Do their gains outweigh their losses? What about the question of “face”?

No one likes to be humiliated or to lose face, or look like they got the worst end of a deal. It’s in your interests to make sure that your partner walks away with something he or she wants, with pride and self-esteem intact.

It is also important that you both agree to what has been agreed to. Otherwise, there will be misunderstandings, genuine or deliberate. Verbally, this verification can be done with phrases such as:

- **Okay, let me summarize what I think we’ve agreed upon . . .**
- **As I see it, our situation now is . . . Is that the way you see it?**

Seek confirmation from the other person, and resolve to keep the agreement.

In some circumstances, it will be necessary or worthwhile to confirm an agreement in writing. Spell out what both parties agree to do and say in the new, post-encounter situation. If appropriate, have the agreement witnessed by another party.



6

Talk.

So, how do you think it went? Hindsight can give you insights into whether the encounter was a complete or partial success, or a failure.

Replay the encounter in your mind, trying to recall what you and the other person said and did. What recurrent patterns were there? How did you react when things did not go as planned? Did stress help you or hinder you, or both? How would you rate the encounter on a scale of 1–10 in terms of achieving your goals?


You might not give yourself a perfect 10, but try to imagine what score you'd give yourself without some of your new assertive skills. You will probably find that this score will be significantly lower than the first mark. If there is a difference, this is a sign of how much you have learned and have grown, and the extent of your success. Use the following sheet to help you analyze the encounter.

Post-Encounter Analysis	
What I said well	What I could have said better
What I did well	What I could have done better
What I learned from the other person	

One of the advantages of being assertive is that you begin to be more in charge of your own life, and less dependent on the decisions and actions of others in initiating changes in your personal and work world. In other words, the more assertive skills you master, the more proactive and less reactive you will be in dealing with others. This will make you more confident and more assertive in a whole range of situations. You will think and be more in control, and be more of a leader and more of an initiator and a starter than a follower and a finisher.

Assertiveness Skills: Template

Talk:
About your experience
About tactics used
About better methods



How?

Analyze:
Your style
Your method
Your environment



How?


Review:
Solution fit
Is it win/win?
Outcome quality



How?

Feedback Sequence
1. When you . . . (do something)
2. This happens . . .
3. And I feel . . .
4. Would you . . . (do something else)
5. Because that way/this would mean that . . .
6. I/you/they would feel . . .
7. So, what do <i>you</i> think?
Verbal Skills and Strategies
Say no
Dismiss and redirect
Question and provide prompt awareness
Forcing a choice
Broken record
Ask for specifics
Workable compromise
Threaten

Evaluate:
Responses
Your own reactions
Your consistency



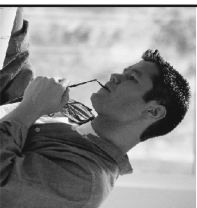
How?

Show:
Appropriate body language
The right tone
The right disposition



How?

Script:
Your message
Your room to move
Your actual words



How?

