Leadership Resources

Assertiveness: Telling It Like It Is ... Without Stomping On Others

What is assertiveness? What is the difference between being assertive and being aggressive? Here are some pointers to help clarify what assertiveness is really all about.

Assertiveness is ... expressing our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, honest, and appropriate way. It means that we have respect both for ourselves and for others. Being assertive is not about being pushy or superior. It's about communicating what you want in a clear, level-headed manner. An assertive person effectively influences, listens, and negotiates so that others choose to cooperate willingly.

**Assertiveness is not ...** aggressiveness. Aggressiveness involves expressing our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way that is inappropriate and violates the rights of others. It can be either active or passive, but no matter which, it communicates an impression of disrespect. By being aggressive, we put our wants, needs, and rights above those of others. We attempt to get our way by not allowing others a choice.

**USE “I” MESSAGES**

An “I” message is a good way to let people know what you are thinking. It is made up of 3 parts.

•  Behavior ... what it is, exactly, that the other person has done or is doing

•  Effect ... what is happening, because of their behaviors

•  Feelings ... what effect does their behavior have on your feelings.

By using this kind of message, you are giving another person complete information, leaving no room for second guessing or doubt. **An example** : “When you com late to the meeting (behavior) I feel angry (feelings) because we have to repeat information the rest of us have already heard (effect).” This is much more productive and assertive than simply ignoring the problem or just expressing your anger or frustration.

**CHECK-UP**

The following questions will help you to assess your assertiveness: \*

•  When you differ with someone you respect, are you able to speak up and share your own viewpoints?   
•  Are you able to refuse unreasonable requests made by friends or co-workers?   
•  Do you readily accept positive criticism and suggestion?   
•  Do you ask for assistance when you need it?   
•  Do you usually have confidence in your own judgment?   
•  If someone else has a better solution, do you accept it easily?   
•  Do you express your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct and honest way?   
•  Do you try to work for a solution that, to the degree possible, benefits all parties?

\* A **yes** response indicates an assertive approach.

**CHOOSE ASSERTIVE WORDS CAREFULLY**

**Use factual descriptions instead of judgments**

•  “This is sloppy work.” (aggressive)

•  “I believe the pages in this report are out of order.” (assertive)

**Avoid exaggerations**

•  “You are never on time!” (aggressive)

•  “You were 15 minutes late today. That's the third time this week.” (assertive)

**Use “I” not “You”**

•  “You always interrupt my stories!” (aggressive)

•  “I would like to tell my story without being interrupted.” (assertive)

**Express thoughts, feelings, and opinions reflecting ownership**

•  “He makes me angry.” (denies ownership of feelings)

•  “I get angry when he breaks his promises.” (assertive and owns feelings)

**ACTION PLAN**

Here are some communication techniques that can help you convey a positive assertive attitude.

•  Use suitable facial expression, always maintaining good eye contact.

•  Keep your voice firm but pleasant.

•  Pay careful attention to your posture and gestures

•  Listen ... and let people know you have heard what they said.

•  Ask questions for clarification.

•  Look for a win-win approach to problem solving.

**Adapted from Original Source:** “Assertiveness” - UT-Knoxville Leadership Guides. Source notes indicate adaptation from Tip Sheet by Organizational Development and Training, Department of Human Resources, Tufts University, 169 Holland Street, Somerville, MA 02144