



Assertiveness

Learning guide

Assertiveness

Introduction

We can all recall occasions where we wished that we had handled a situation differently, where we felt that we should have spoken up when we remained silent, or conversely where we lost our temper and said more than we would have wished. Whatever the circumstances such situations leave us feeling uncomfortable. We feel helpless and frustrated, *'if only I...'*, *'I should have said ...'* Why did we remain silent? What was it that stopped us from speaking our mind? What made us lose our temper? Such examples illustrate two different behaviour types, both of which are ineffective and dysfunctional, and demonstrate a breakdown in basic communication. An alternative response, the assertive response, offers an effective approach in such situations, whether at work, with the family or at social occasions. We all respond to circumstances and events in our lives in our own unique way. The way we respond is dependent on many factors; our perceptions of the event, the context, the people involved, the relationship, and how we have been conditioned to behave. We may not always feel happy about our response and the way it makes us feel, but with the application of some simple techniques and with a little practice, we can do something positive to change our behaviour to more assertive behaviour.

This learning guide will explore the key principles of assertiveness. It will consider ways in which you can apply assertion theory to everyday situations at work, in family and social life. The merits of assertive behaviour as a positive method of communication over alternative behaviours will be explored and strategies suggested for applying the assertiveness model to a number of common situations. Techniques for influencing aggressive and passive behaviour will also be outlined.

Where to start?

1. If you have less than an hour, read through the overview and try some of the development activities.
2. If you have more than an hour, choose from the videos in the resources section. *Straight Talking* explains the key principles of assertiveness using a wide range of everyday examples including illustrations. Also, read the journal article by Loftus.

If you would like to explore assertiveness in more depth, have a look at the interactive CD-i package *Say What You Want* available from the Ashridge LRC reception.

Resources

Videos/ CD-i

Straight Talking: The Art of Assertiveness (1992), Video Arts, 27 mins.

This John Cleese video explains the key principles of how to be assertive rather than aggressive or submissive. This message is illustrated by using a range of everyday examples, including scenes in management meetings, sales meetings and accounts.

Working with Assertiveness (1988), BBC, Part I: 20 mins, Part II: 25 mins.

This video examines the meaning and techniques of assertiveness and outlines three steps for basic behaviour which are then illustrated in two scenarios: the monthly meeting and an appraisal interview. In Part II, more specific techniques are discussed.

Say What You Want (1995), Melrose CD-i (Video is 26 minutes).

This interactive programme works on six basic points: decide what you want; say it clearly and specifically; support what you say by how you say it; don't be manipulated or side-tracked; listen; aim for win/win.

Audio cassettes

Shapiro, Mo (1999), *Assertiveness at Work*, Audio Briefings.

In this briefing you will learn: what assertiveness is; how you can tell when someone is behaving assertively, aggressively, passively or as a sniper; why we behave in different ways; how to go about behaving more assertively and the tools you can practice; how to cope with a person who is not cooperating and the effect of non-assertive behaviour in your communications; how to achieve greater choice in when to change your own behaviour so you feel more in control.

Assertive Communication Skills for Professionals (1994), Carol Price. CareerTrack x 4 cassettes, 3 hours 31 mins.

This audio is designed to help you combine strength with sensitivity to get more of what you want. Assertive people are honest and forthright while still respecting the feelings of others. Their skills and style earn them respect and co-operation at every level. This programme will show you how to handle your communication challenges with confidence, openness and competence.

The Business of Assertiveness (1991), BBC.

Written by Rennie Fritchie and Maggie Melling, this self help book and audio cassette is designed as a practical guide to developing assertive behaviour, offering advice on tackling difficult situations, preventing problems, creative thinking and being an integrated team member.

Journal articles

Back, Ken et al. (1991), *Winning Teams at Work*, Training Officer, Vol. 27 (10), December, p308-310.

Furnham, Adrian (2001), *Industry needs more captains courageous*, Financial Times, September.

Honey, Dr. Peter (1991), *Straight Talking: The Art of Assertiveness*, Training Officer, Vol. 27 (10), December, p303-307.

Hunt, J.W. (2001), *Command and control the boss*, Financial Times: Inside Track, November.

Levy, Mike (1998), *Stand up and be counted*, Director, Vol. 52(5), p15.

Loftus, A. P. P. (1992), *Communicating Assertively*, Industrial and Commercial Training, Vol. 24 (2), pIV-VI.

Raudsepp, Eugene (2003), *Are you properly assertive?*, SuperVision, May, Vol. 64 (5), p18 (3).

Rouse, Rose (2001), *Assertiveness doesn't mean making enemies*, The Times, May.

Information files

There are information files containing a number of newspaper and journal articles on the following subject areas:

- Assertiveness
- Conflict management
- Influencing
- Interpersonal skills
- Negotiating.

Books

** Books marked with asterisks are available for sale from the LRC bookshop. Mail order service available. Tel: +44 (0)1442 841159. Fax: +44 (0)1442 841211. Email: celia.tucker@ashridge.org.uk.

Back, Ken; Back, Kate (1999), *Assertiveness at Work: A Practical Guide to Handling Awkward Situations*, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill.
Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (BAC)**

Set firmly within the realities of modern business life, this book tackles all the awkward situations that arise with flatter structures, tough workloads and the need to exert influence across traditional boundaries. In these situations, where aggression is unacceptable and nothing will be achieved through non-assertion, successful people need assertiveness. Whether you are a line manager, project leader, specialist or key member of a team, 'Assertiveness at work', third edition is a practical guide for developing your own natural assertiveness to benefit both yourself and your organisation.

Beels, Christine et al (1991), *Assertiveness: A Positive Process*, Mercury.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (BEE)****

This book explains the differences between assertive, aggressive and passive behaviour. The book goes on to describe the benefits and drawbacks of being assertive, and outlines skills which help in being assertive.

Bishop, Sue (2000), *Develop Your Assertiveness*, Sunday Times/Kogan Page

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (BIS)**

Fully updated and revised, this second edition of "Develop Your Assertiveness" offers basic techniques on how to become more assertive. The text is packed with examples and exercises and covers topics such as: the importance of appropriate behaviour; tension control; self-awareness and self-esteem; relationships; making and refusing requests; dealing with problem people; and tricky situations.

Civil, J. (2003), *Assertiveness*, Spiro Press.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (CIV)**

Part of the 'Your Personal Trainer' series designed to help develop key business skills, this self-help guide aims to aid the reader become more assertive at work and at home. With straightforward questionnaires and exercises, readers are encouraged to assess current skills fitness and improve on weak areas through suggested 'work-outs'.

Davies, Phillippa (1999), *Total Confidence: The Complete Guide to Self-Assurance and Personal Success*, Piatkus.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (DAV)****

Confidence is that priceless quality which helps us to live our lives to the full, rather than as mere shadows of what we might be. Using psychological principles and easy-to-follow exercises this book gives guidelines on how to build confidence.

Dickson, Anne (1982), *A Woman in Your Own Right: Assertiveness and You*, Quartet Books.

Ashridge shelf reference: **AJB (DIC) ****

The author defines assertiveness as the art of clear, honest, direct communication. Assertiveness helps you kick the need for approval; helps you make your own decisions. It helps you evaluate your behaviour in the light of others' criticism, rather than denying it defensively or being demolished by it.

Eggert, Max (1997), *The Assertiveness Pocketbook*, Management Pocketbooks.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (EGG)****

A pocketful of tips, tools and techniques for those who want to set their own agendas and take control of their lives.

Ferguson, Jan (2003), *Perfect Assertiveness*, Arrow Books.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (FER)****

All you need to get it right first time, Perfect Assertiveness helps you to understand more about assertiveness and aggression, and teaches you to understand more about yourself, the possibilities of change and the potential for improvement in personal, social, family and workplace relationships.

Fleming, James (1997), *Become Assertive*, David Grant Publishing.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (FLE)**

Become Assertive is packed full of useful tips and practical guidance that will demonstrate how to master and take effective control of your relationships with others. Topics covered include: being assertive, not aggressive; standing up for your rights; doing things your way; giving and taking criticism; looking and sounding confident and controlling relationships.

Fritchie, Rennie; Melling, Maggie (1991), *The Business of Assertiveness*, BBC Books.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (FRI) and LRC Reception****

Aimed at people who feel that they could be more effective by becoming more assertive in their business life, this book claims that improvement can be achieved by becoming either less aggressive or less passive. It deals with body language and tone of voice, and includes practical exercises.

Gillen, Terry (1997), *Assertiveness*, Training Extras.

Ashridge shelf reference: **Information Files.**

This booklet covers: understanding why you behave as you do and, when that behaviour is counter productive, knowing what to do about it. Understanding other people better, keeping your emotions under control, preventing others from manipulating you against your will, acquiring easy to learn techniques that you can use immediately, developing your personal Assertiveness strategy.

Michelli, Dena (1998), *Successful Assertiveness in a Week*, Institute Of Management.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (MIC)****

This book aims to start the reader on a self-empowering path to improved communication in all areas of life. It offers some powerful tools that will enable development of a winning personal strategy which will lead towards a building of confidence and self-esteem.

O'Brien, Paddy (1992), *Assertiveness: A Working Guide*, Nicholas Brealey

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (OBR)**

This book explains the aims of assertiveness and shows you how simple assertive techniques can help you be more effective, and more clearly understood, at work. Exercises designed to help you develop your assertiveness are also included.

O'Brien, Paddy (1992), *Positive Management: Assertiveness for Managers*, Nicholas Brealey.

Ashridge shelf reference: **APA (OBR)**

A hands-on approach demonstrating how assertiveness can help manage high stress or high emotion situations.

Stubbs, David R (1997), *Assertiveness at Work: A Necessary Guide to an Essential Skill*, Pan.

Ashridge shelf reference: APA (STU)

Takes into account the changes in society since this book was first published. Two new chapters have been added: one specifically dealing with difficult people; and one on establishing good working relationships on the basis of mutual respect.

Tingley, Judith C. (1996), *Say What You Mean, Get What You Want: A Businessperson's Guide to Direct Communication*, American Management Association.

Ashridge shelf reference: APA (TIN)

Assertive communication is the key to getting people to pay attention to you when you are speaking. The author explains how you can learn to speak directly & effectively in a variety of business situations.

Townend, Anni (1991), *Developing Assertiveness*, Routledge

Ashridge shelf reference: APA (WAL)**

Developing Assertiveness is written to help managers learn how to develop assertiveness in themselves and others at work. Designed in an attractive workbook format, the book provides a step-by-step, structured approach to help readers assess and develop their own assertiveness.

Walmsley, Claire (1991), *Assertiveness: The Right to be You*, BBC Books.

Ashridge shelf reference: APA (WAL) **

Written to accompany a BBC TV series, this book is a highly practical book on assertiveness. The book contains helpful exercises and questionnaires and is designed to encourage readers to first look at their problems - whether at home, with friends or at work - and then at ways to deal with them.

Willcocks, Graham; Morris, Steve (1996), *Putting Assertiveness to Work: A Programme for Management Excellence*, Pitman Publishing.

Ashridge shelf reference: APA (WIL)

Putting Assertiveness to Work will enable you to make your own views clear, stand your ground and stay in control. It empowers you to find solutions which will drive you and your team forward. The book provides: advice on how to recognise the signs and results of aggressive, passive and assertive behaviour; insights into techniques for developing assertiveness skills as a natural approach; real-life scenarios that you will recognise and can relate to; and exercises, enabling you to put your new skills into practice.

Useful websites

<http://www.tufts.edu/hr/tips/assert.html>

Tufts university organizational development and training tip sheet.

Overview

Assertiveness could be said to be the art of effective communication. From the day we are born we are interacting and communicating with our environment and with those who inhabit it with us. How we interact and communicate is unique and individual, and is dependent on many factors including culture, gender and social conditioning. All of these affect our ability to take criticism, refuse demands or to ask for what we want. Although cultural and gender issues influence our lives and strongly shape and influence our patterns of behaviour, we are not totally at their mercy. There is an important determinant to consider here, that of personal choice. When all is said and done, we are responsible for our own behaviour. We can choose to act assertively (if we know how) or we can choose alternatives. Assertiveness is basically about knowing you have a right to choose your response and exercising that right when you choose to do so, without infringing the rights of others.

The principles of assertion

The importance of feeling and behaving assertively, and its subsequent positive effects on feelings of personal well being and general psychological health, was recognised in the 1960s. Wolpe and Lazarus (1) used what they called 'assertiveness training' with individuals who found difficulty with a variety of interpersonal situations. They defined the term 'assertive behaviour' to mean:

'..quite broadly to cover all socially acceptable expressions of personal rights and feelings. A polite refusal to accede to an unreasonable request; a genuine expression of praise, endearment, appreciation, or respect; an exclamation of joy, irritation, adulation, or disgust - may all be considered examples of assertive behaviour'.

In the 1960s notions of acceptable behaviour were changing. The idea that there could be different ways of thinking and living became more acceptable. Freedoms of speech, behaviour and thinking were seen as an individual right. However, many people lacked the skills to defend their opinions and voice their views in ways that were effective (2). In the 1990s the importance of effective communication is more important than ever. In today's organisations, great emphasis is put on communication skills at all levels, not surprising perhaps

when managers spend 80% of their time communicating (3). Organisations offer courses to employees on negotiating skills, managing conflict, and handling diversity, all of which are based on assertion theory. The ability to communicate with a variety of individuals in different situations, from different backgrounds and cultures is becoming increasingly important in the fast moving world of today. The ability to draw from a repertoire of assertion skills is a valuable personal asset, not only in our professional lives but also in our personal and social environments.

Assertive rights

The notion of personal *rights* is integral to behaving assertively (4). We all have basic human rights which should be respected by ourselves and others. Assertiveness is about getting the balance right between acknowledging and requesting your individual rights, while considering the rights of others. By doing this we communicate openly and honestly. Some basic rights include the following - you may be able to suggest others.

You have the right:

- to state how you feel
- to be wrong sometimes
- to make a request
- to make a mistake
- to say you don't understand
- to say you don't know
- to be listened to
- to fail
- to succeed
- to feel and express anger
- to live your life the way you want
- to change your mind
- to not be assertive
- to be you.

Along with personal rights, you have responsibilities and these include the responsibility:

- to acknowledge the rights of others
- to listen to others and to acknowledge their feelings
- to assert your rights appropriately

Behaving assertively means that you do not become fixated on your own rights to the extent that you are oblivious to the rights of others. Assertiveness is about communicating on an equal footing. You have the right not to understand something, but equally you have the responsibility to try and improve your understanding. You have the responsibility to allow others not to understand without embarrassing them. Therefore, assertiveness is about open, honest communication. It is about rights but these rights bring responsibilities. Let's consider assertiveness in the context of alternative behaviours.

Types of behaviour

Assertion theory distinguishes between three types of behaviour:

- Passive or submissive behaviour, where the individual subordinates their rights and responsibilities to those of others
- Aggressive behaviour, where the individual imposes their rights on others without considering or respecting the rights of the other person
- Assertive behaviour, where the individual asserts their rights while considering and respecting the rights of others.

Consider the following scenario:

Peter: *'Mike, we've got a problem. I'm afraid you'll have to cancel your week off in August. We've just heard the auditors are coming and Sue is already off that week. We'll never cope otherwise.'*

Mike: *'What? ... well... I was meant to be having that week off.'*

Peter: *'I'm sorry, Mike, but you're the only one available, just think of the extra money.'*

Mike: *'eh... yeh .. well, I suppose that's something'*

This example demonstrates one type of behaviour choice, passive behaviour. We can see that in this situation Mike has not asserted his rights or feelings, but subordinated them. In fact he has traded them in, perhaps to avoid confrontation or for an easier life.

Passive behaviour

Passive behaviour is often seen as the easy option, but in reality it is not. People may behave passively because of fear of confrontation, being seen as 'awkward', or because of a need to be liked. Paradoxically, it leads to the individual being accorded less respect. In the long term, passive behaviour leads to feelings of low self esteem, loss of confidence and feelings of frustration and resentment. The individual's point of view is ignored and he/she begins to feel undervalued and inferior. People who behave passively are also prone to self put downs. When we act submissively we are giving our power away, people do not take it. We train people how to treat us. In a vicious cycle, passive behaviour reinforces passive behaviour.

The passive response

- will agree to anything for a quiet life
- 'victim' behaviour
- demonstrates little self respect, poor self esteem, low confidence
- is dishonest
- can only see a lose/win situation.

An alternative response?

Peter: *'Mike, we've got a problem. I'm afraid you'll have to cancel your week off in August. We've just heard the auditors are coming and Sue is already off that week. We'll never cope otherwise.'*

Mike: *'What! Are you kidding or something! I've had that time booked for months and you know it. You must think I'm a real soft touch if you think I'm going to accept that!'*

This response demonstrates another type of behaviour, aggressive behaviour. It is a reactive response which is likely to incur a similarly aggressive response or a passive response from the other person, leaving both parties feeling frustrated and angry. By using aggressive behaviour the person may get what he/she wants in the short term but it will not help him/her in the long run. He/she risks alienating people, losing their support, respect and co-operation in the long term. Aggressive individuals usually fear losing control. They are concerned with their own feelings first and foremost, and act insensitively, with the result that it alienates and demotivates the other person.

The aggressive response

- shows no respect for others
- is often manipulative
- getting own way is paramount
- win/lose situation.

Let's consider a more appropriate response.

Peter: *'Mike, we've got a problem. I'm afraid you'll have to cancel your week off in August. We've just heard the auditors are coming and Sue is already off that week. We'll never cope otherwise.'*

Mike: *'Peter, I can see you've got a problem, however I'm sorry I can't help you out on this occasion. I'm on holiday that week and will be unavailable.'*

In this scenario, Mike has acknowledged Peter's problem, but he has not subordinated his right to say no. He has refused the request with confidence, clarity and directness. He has communicated in an unemotional manner. He has asserted his rights. All too easy? What happens when the other person exerts pressure and continues to demand?

Peter: *'Mike, we've got a problem. I'm afraid you'll have to cancel your week off in August. We've just heard the auditors are coming and Sue is already off that week. We'll never cope otherwise.'*

Mike: *'Peter, I can see you've got a problem, however I'm sorry I can't help you out on this occasion. I'm on holiday that week and will be unavailable.'*

Peter: *'Yeh, I know, but come on, you're not going away are you and I'm going to be in a real mess if you don't help?'*

Mike: *'Peter, I'm sorry but I can't help you. I'm taking my holiday as planned, however I do know that Kate wanted to be around on the days they were here so she might be willing to help out.'*

In this follow-on, Mike has restated his position, no 'buts' and no sign of him giving way under pressure. What he has also done is made a positive suggestion to Peter demonstrating an understanding of his position, and a willingness to work with him on the problem. They are communicating on an adult to adult basis. Notice Mike's use of *'however'*. This is a good linking word to use in preference to *'but'*, which allows the other person space to come back and reinforce his/her point.

By now you might be thinking that assertiveness is all about confidence. When we feel confident we feel and act more assertively. We are happy with our abilities and with ourselves and this allows us to be more assertive. People who feel they need help with assertiveness frequently lack self confidence, finding it hard to articulate their wants, and often end up going along with the wishes of others.

Lack of self confidence can have far-reaching consequences. People with poor self confidence tend to avoid responsibility. They feel a lack of commitment to people and ideas. This lack of commitment is replaced with compliance which ultimately results in excessive demands from others reinforcing their poor self-esteem. To break the cycle the individual must realise that they are responsible to a large extent for how they are treated, or more correctly for how they allow themselves to be treated.

Confidence is also an issue for those who are aggressive, where it is used to cover up a lack of confidence. Assertive behaviour should not be confused with aggressive behaviour. Managers frequently believe that being aggressive is the only way to get things done. Some managers may consider that they are assertive enough, but on examination their behaviours are aggressive and not assertive.

You may now be thinking that if you are not a naturally confident person, why pretend otherwise? Why act out of character? Try to be someone you are not? Well, you would be right to think that assertiveness is about confidence, however you would be wrong in thinking that to achieve assertiveness you must undergo a major personality change. Assertiveness is about changing patterns of thinking, it is about changing behaviour, not personality. You can change your thinking and subsequent behaviour without changing who you are. Assertive behaviour is not aggressive behaviour. You have in fact identified the first hurdle to personal change, an 'I can do' philosophy. Recognition that you can influence the behaviour of others by your behaviour is an important first step.

'Learn to carve your strengths in marble and write your weaknesses in sand.' (5)

The assertive response

- it may not always work first time
- is self confident
- recognises rights and responsibilities and those of others
- states opinions clearly
- win/win situation

A fourth type of behaviour called passive aggressive, is a hybrid of passive and aggressive characteristics. Behaviour can be manipulative, sarcastic and sniping. The person avoids a direct response, choosing instead indirect criticism and insinuation.

The benefits of becoming more assertive

When people learn to be assertive they realise a number of benefits :

- feel more at ease with oneself
- more likely to get what they want
- increased confidence in handling difficult situations
- feel more valued as an individual
- a greater ability to recognise manipulative, aggressive and submissive behaviours in others and respond to them effectively

- better able to handle confrontation
- feel more comfortable in giving and accepting praise
- greater confidence in giving personal opinions without the fear of affecting relationships
- more likely to be taken seriously
- feel less stressed.

Pause for a moment and consider the benefits for you in becoming more assertive with colleagues, family, friends. Write them down.

How assertive are you?

We all have occasions where we feel good about our behaviour and times when we may feel we let ourselves down. No one acts the same all the time, but we can generalise about our behaviour in terms of how we are likely to respond to certain situations given our usual response. Have a go at the following questionnaire (table 1) which considers your response in certain situations.

Do you :	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Always 5
Feel comfortable when confronting someone with a problem?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speak up when you want to contribute at meetings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Find it easy to ask a friend or colleague for a favour?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Admit that you don't understand when something is confusing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you :	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	1	2	3	4	5
Feel that you are as good and capable as most people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Happily state your own opinion before others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel confident in taking on extra responsibility?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assume that you can get what you want?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maintain eye contact when conversing with others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel able to say 'no' to unreasonable requests?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Give praise to others when they have done well?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel able to accept criticism without taking it personally?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Remain in control in the face of aggression?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Acknowledge the views and opinions of others even if they differ from your own?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel comfortable in expressing how you feel or asking for what you want?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you :	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	1	2	3	4	5
Feel able to apologise when you are in the wrong?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mix easily at social events?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Now look at those items where you scored 1 - 3. These are situations where you tend to behave in a non-assertive way. Do they highlight a problem in handling particular situations? What can you do to become more assertive in these situations? Have a go at the development activities on p25-30.

Assertiveness - how to do it

First of all let's look at what determines our current behaviour. Culture, gender and social conditioning all affect behaviour. In some cultures strict codes of conduct apply to certain professional and social situations which would make it inappropriate to behave in certain ways. Certain characteristics that are admired and respected in men may be frowned upon in women. For instance, girls are brought up to consider that it is not very feminine to be too pushy, to speak your mind, to put personal wants above the needs of others. Men on the other hand are encouraged to be go getters, to have strong opinions etc. Such social conditioning can lead to very confusing and conflicting messages, resulting in some women adopting submissive behaviour and men adopting aggressive behaviour. Something of a generalisation, perhaps, but one with which we can generally identify.

The importance of perception

Perception of events is important because it affects how we feel, our behaviour and the subsequent outcome (fig 1). Internalising or taking personally events and situations reduces our ability to behave assertively.

Figure 1

Situation	⇒ Perception	⇒ Interpretation	⇒ Feelings	⇒ Behaviour	⇒ Outcome
Saying no.	Confrontation	Argument	Uncomfortable	Say yes (passive)	Loss of rights
Saying no.	Lose control	Soft touch	Angry	Refuse (aggressive)	Deny others rights
Saying no.	Personal rights	Discussion	Confident	Say no (assertive)	Assert rights

How we perceive events or situations depends on many factors. The context in which they occur, the language used, tone of voice, body language etc. Our subsequent interpretation is affected by our self talk, past experience, self confidence and the view we take of our personal rights and responsibilities. This is an important stage in the cognitive process as how we view and interpret events is crucial. Developing an assertive frame of mind and thinking assertively will greatly enhance our potential to behave assertively. Our behaviour does not solely dictate the outcome. Someone else's behaviour can also affect the outcome, however *our* behaviour is the only one we can control. We can only try to influence the behaviour of others. If we behave assertively we allow others to respond similarly.

Communication skills

Townend (3) suggests that our ability to behave assertively is enhanced by the utilisation of the following communication skills:

- listening
- clarifying
- checking assumptions
- use of questions
- 'I' statements
- being honest about what you think and feel
- being clear about what is fact, what is unknown
- being positive
- mirroring non-verbal behaviour.

There is never just one way of handling a situation. As individuals, we will all react differently, but there are some key principles relevant to dealing with people or situations in an assertive way:

- be honest and clear about your feelings, *'I feel ...', 'I have to disagree*
- do not lose sight of what you want
- be willing to offer options - look for a win/win solution
- weigh up what is negotiable and what is non negotiable. When you are happy with your decision stick to your bottom line, hold your ground.

Being honest and open about our feelings is a key principle of assertiveness. It is amazing how many of us find this difficult - why? Fear? Fear of what? We have already considered that people are often afraid of confrontation, of not being liked, of appearing to be awkward or aggressive. Also, many have concerns about appearing to be selfish, always wanting to get their own way. Let's check this out. Consider the following scenario and imagine that you are Jo in this situation.

Bill: *'That was a good meal, you don't mind if I smoke do you?'*

Jo: *'Eh ... no.. of course not.'* (Jo hates smoking)

As Jo, how do you now feel? Angry with Bill for asking? Frustrated? Annoyed with yourself for not standing up to him? Depressed? A wimp? What could Jo have said? Now imagine that you are Bill in the following scenario.

Bill: *'That was a good meal, you don't mind if I smoke do you?'*

Jo: *'You're right that was a good meal, however I would rather you didn't smoke. Would you like to have a cigarette in the bar while I order us coffee?'*

As Bill how do you feel? Do you like Jo any less as a person? Do you feel that Jo is being unreasonable? Do you feel like confronting the issue further? It is more likely that you have accepted Jo's perspective and respect her for her frankness. You may even admire her response. Clearly stating your feelings while accepting the needs of others allows for rational discussion. However, do not get too carried away. Some individuals may consider that they do act assertively, always speaking their mind, not afraid of being 'up front' and not 'beating about the bush'. There needs to be a balance between bluntness, which may be seen as

aggressive, and submissiveness which is a passive response, the balance is being assertive. How you say something is as important as what you say. As well as considering what you say, you should also consider :

- tone of voice; should be confident, direct, clear
- context; stick to what is relevant, keep to the point
- body posture; relax, maintain positive eye contact.

These can all make a big difference to how your response is received. Depending on how it is delivered, the same response can sound aggressive if said in a threatening tone with intimidating body posture. Equally, you may be speaking assertively, but if eye contact is poor, tone of voice is hesitant and you appear uncomfortable, you will send confused messages (Table 2). Make sure that your body language does not contradict what you are saying. State feelings in the context of the situation, ie keep to the point. Responses should be directed towards behaviour and not towards the individual personally. Consider workable compromises.

Table 2 - Behaviour characteristics

	Assertive	Aggressive	Passive
Verbal	Direct, Clear, 'I feel...', 'I need...'	Dismissive, Sarcastic, Excessive use of 'I', Threatening	Apologetic, Rambling, 'I should...' 'I ought...'
Tone	Steady, Well Modulated, Sincere	Fast, Loud, Hard, Emphatic, Clipped	Weak, Muffled, Hesitant, Trails Off At End
Facial	Steady Eye Contact, Open Expression, Interested	Glaring Eye Contact, Staring, Tense,	Eyes Lowered, Head Down, Half Smiles
Posture	Relaxed, Open, Upright	Busy Gestures, Leaning Forward, Rigid, Fingers Pointing	Cowering, Nervous, Movements, Shrinking

Handling challenging situations

These are inevitable. We cannot avoid them but we can learn from them and choose how we respond to them. The following are common and familiar situations with some suggestions for how to respond to them assertively.

Receiving criticism

- respond to the facts, 'let's look at what actually happened
- ask for clarification, for example 'could you please tell me when I did that ...?'
- respond calmly
- agree actions.

Giving criticism

- ensure privacy
- choose your timing
- use 'I feel ...' not 'you have ...'
- focus on the behaviour not the person
- explain the consequences of continued behaviour
- be clear
- request ideas for solutions.

Handling aggression

- Stay calm
- Do not rise to personal comments or get angry in return
- Respond to the content not the emotion.

When faced with aggressive behaviour which is unexpected, you may need space to collect your thoughts and appraise the situation. Fogging is one method which helps to diffuse the aggression and allows for more time to consider your response. You are not agreeing with the content, simply reflecting back what the person has said. For example:

Sue : *'Why on earth did you agree to those ridiculous prices, are you crazy?'*

Bob: *'Yes, I do see that you think the prices were on the low side.'*

Bob has not agreed with Sue's summation of the situation, he has reflected back her own opinion and acknowledged her views. His response will help to diffuse her anger and give him more time to move to consider a fuller response.

Sue : *'Why on earth did you agree to those ridiculous prices, are you crazy?'*

Bob: *'Yes, I do see that you think the prices were on the low side, however let's have a look at the extra business we have won.'*

Saying no

Many people find it extremely hard to say no. For all sorts of reasons it becomes very difficult to refuse requests. There is a fear that the other person will be upset, that you will appear unreasonable and maybe it is just easier to say yes. If your inclination is to say no, think about your reasons for saying no. If you feel it is the right response, then say it clearly without feeling the need to justify your decision.

Remember you have the right to say no. We all need to get on with colleagues, family and friends and just saying no may not always feel appropriate. Finding a compromise that suits both parties is one answer. It accepts both positions and works together on finding a solution that will suit both.

Assertive approaches

Try some of the following approaches when you are next faced with a difficult situation:

Stuck record

When people are concerned with their own thoughts and feelings, it may be necessary to repeat your message in ways that do not sound like nagging or whining.

'I appreciate the urgency, but I cannot stay late tonight. I have other commitments - however I could work extra time tomorrow, what I can't do is work late tonight'.

Self talk

Our self talk can sometimes be our worst enemy. That little voice inside our head which can herald doom and disaster. For example :

'I'm over budget again this month....the boss has called me in and she won't like it....it was bad enough last month.....but what can I do we needed overtime to finish the job.....too much work really....just can't handle it anymore.....there goes my bonus.....perhaps I should go off sick....'

Alternative self talk might go something like this :

'I'm over budget again...this is going to be difficult....the reality is the department has taken on more work than we can handle...we need to examine key cost areas....prioritise activities...be realistic about deliverables....explore alternatives...this is a departmental issue not just mine....need to handle with care...be tactful...explore solutions...good. Now what do I need to prepare before the meeting.'

The alternative example is looking logically at the situation. Essentially, *'This will be difficult but I can do difficult things.'* There is no internalising of the problem. It focuses on solutions and suggests a platform from which to move forward.

Discrepancy assertion

This is useful to apply in situations where you are receiving contradictory messages. For instance, in today's fast moving organisations, situations arise quickly and events can change rapidly. Conflicting messages may arise which need clarification before they cause confusion and frustration. For example,

'Peter, last week we agreed that you would be responsible for the Smithson account. I got an email from Sue this morning saying that she had a useful meeting with them yesterday. Could we discuss what's happening with this account?'

There will be times when you will be unable to influence the outcome. For instance, your boss has authority and the power to override decisions. You may not agree with the decisions made. What can you do? You could show your dissatisfaction by behaving aggressively, sulking or losing your temper. You could remain passive, smile and agree while inside you are feeling angry and frustrated. Alternatively you could act assertively by stating your opinions and feelings about the situation. This way you will have stated your case and feel happy with yourself for allowing your voice to be heard.

Helping others develop assertiveness

By being assertive and having a positive attitude to others, you can help influence their behaviour. By being assertive with people you are more likely to engender an assertive response in return. As a manager, think about the times when you felt good about how you handled a particular situation. How were you feeling at the time? The likelihood is that you felt confident and behaved assertively. Think about the response from others. Usually people respond in a like minded way, ie assertively. But what about those with whom you work who behave submissively or aggressively; can you influence them? Townend (3) suggests some strategies for influencing such individuals.

Influencing passive behaviour

People who behave in a passive way have low self confidence and often feel undervalued, so consider the following approach:

- consciously make an effort to look at them and show that you are listening
- ask for their ideas and include them in discussions
- show appreciation for their efforts however small
- allow them more responsibility for tasks that you know they can achieve
- be open and available for them when they need help.

Influencing manipulative behaviour

- consciously make an effort to look at them and show that you are listening
- challenge the person's comments without put downs
- do not ignore or discount their behaviour.

Influencing aggressive behaviour

- consciously make an effort to look at them and show that you are listening
- identify areas where you agree
- demonstrate that you are working with them for a win/win outcome
- show appreciation for their contribution
- use any opportunities that arise to demonstrate that control can be shared.

Summary

From today consider that you are going to become a more assertive person. You may not always get what you want, but every situation where you behave assertively will leave you feeling more positive about your behaviour, whatever the outcome. Before you behave assertively you need to *think* assertively. You can start being assertive immediately. When the next challenge comes along, think positively, think assertively. Remember your rights. We all have our comfort zone, those situations and activities that we feel comfortable with. To grow we need to stretch the boundaries of our comfort zone, this is necessary and inevitable. Start by undertaking small challenges to begin with, this will help build your confidence. What behaviours do you need to remove and which ones do you need to develop to help you move forward? Plan ahead. Remember we get what we settle for.

'Courage is the price that life extracts for granting peace.' Amelia Earhart

Development activities

The following development activities are intended to help you think about personal strategies for becoming more assertive. Choose those that you feel are most relevant or apply to your situation.

1. Choose the following situations that you have found difficult to handle in the past:

- receiving praise
- receiving criticism
- giving praise
- giving criticism
- saying no
- making a request
- disagreeing with something someone has said
- not understanding an issue fully
- handling customer complaints.

What did you do?

What will you do next time you are in a similar situation?

2. Think of a situation you want resolved or achieved.

- What outcome do you want?

- What right is threatened?

- What is the risk?

- How would you normally handle this?

- What assertiveness approach is appropriate?

- What can I do/say to achieve my outcome?

Assessment of outcome:

- What right did I achieve?

- What would I do differently?

3. Consider two people with whom you find it difficult to interact.

- i. Think about their behaviour
- ii. Think about your behaviour

Complete the following :

	Person 1	Person 2
Describe the behaviours of this person that you find most difficult to deal with		
What behaviours do you exhibit when you are with this person?		
How could you respond in future?		

4. Visualisation

Sit somewhere quiet and think about a situation where you behaved non-assertively, either aggressively or passively. How did you behave? Consider the following :

- your facial expression
- your posture
- eye contact
- hand movements
- your tone of voice
- your speed of talking.

What were your thoughts at the time?

Close your eyes and now consider the same situation again, but this time imagine that you are behaving assertively.

Think about your goal or the outcome you wanted.

Think about your behaviour which is assertive :

- What are you saying?
- How are you saying it?
- What is your body language saying? Consider posture, expression, eye contact, tone of voice
- How do you feel?

5. Consider the obstacles that prevent you from becoming more assertive :

- Cultural
- Gender
- Societal

What are the risks in becoming more assertive, ie security, self-approval, safety?

What are the advantages?

6. At the end of each day make a list of the situations where you did not achieve the outcome you wanted.
- What was your behaviour in each situation - passive/aggressive/assertive?
 - What could you have said or done differently that could have affected the outcome?
7. Identify an assertive response for each of the following situations :
- You are working with a colleague on a report for which you are responsible and he has not completed his part of the report by the agreed deadline. This now means the report will be late.

Your response :

- You notice that a colleague is regularly late for a meeting which you chair. You are unhappy about the disruption it causes and the time you have to spend updating her on progress.

Your response :

- A neighbour borrowed your garden rake two months ago and has not returned it. You don't need it at the present time but you would like it returned.

Your response :

- A more senior member of staff criticises you (you feel unjustly), in a meeting where your boss is present.

Your response :

- Your boss praises you for a report you have just completed.

Your response :

- A friend has asked if they can borrow a favourite suit for a special event. While you will not be wearing it that evening, you'd rather not lend it to him/her.

Your response :

This learning guide was written by Liz Carroll, an Ashridge associate.

References

1. Wolpe, J and Lazarus, A (1966), *Behaviour Therapy Techniques*, Pergamon Press.
2. Tingley, J C (1996), *Say What You Mean, Get What You Want*, AMACOM.
3. Townend, A (1991), *Developing Assertiveness*, Routledge.
4. Alberti, R and Emmons, M (1990), *Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living*, 6th ed. Impact Publishers.
5. Ferguson, J (1996), *Perfect Assertiveness*, Arrow Books.