



Assertiveness training

A practical guide

Assertiveness training



Assertiveness

Assertiveness is an area often referred to in communication skills training. It can sometimes be wrongly confused with aggression; assertive individuals aim to be neither passive nor aggressive in their interactions with other people.

Although everyone acts in passive and aggressive ways from time to time. Such ways of responding often result from a lack of self-confidence and, therefore, are inappropriate expressions of what such people really need to say.

Passive, aggressive and assertive

BEING PASSIVE

Responding in a passive (non-assertive) way tends to mean compliance with the wishes of others and can undermine individual rights and self-confidence.

People who adopt a passive response do so because they have a strong need to be liked by others. Such people do not regard themselves as equals because they place far greater weight on the rights and feelings of others. Being passive often results in failure to communicate how you are actually feeling and can lead to people doing things they really do not want to do in the hope that they might please others. This also means that they allow others to take responsibility, to lead and make decisions for them.



A classic passive response is offered by those who say 'yes' to requests when they actually want to say 'no'.

For example:

'Do you think you can find the time to complete those reports today?'

A typical passive reply might be:

'Yes, I'll do it after I've checked my emails, made an important telephone call, finished the filing and found some time for lunch!'

A far more appropriate response would have been:

'No, I can't do it today as I've got lots of other things I need to do.'

It is obvious that the person responding passively really does not have the time, but their answer does not convey this message. The second response is assertive as the person has considered the implications of the request in the light of the other tasks they have to do.

By responding passively, individuals are more likely to come across in a negative light or put themselves down and, as a result, may actually come to feel inferior to

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others. Responding passively can encourage behaviour and treatment that reinforces a passive role. While the underlying causes of passive responding are often poor self-confidence and self-esteem, passive responding itself can serve to yet further reduce feelings of self-worth.

You may find that you respond passively, aggressively or assertively when you are communicating in different situations. It is important to remember that any interaction is always a two-way process and therefore your reactions may differ, depending upon your relationship with the other person in the communication. You may, for example find it easier to be assertive to your partner than to a senior work colleague, or vice-verse.

BEING AGGRESSIVE

By responding in an aggressive way, the rights and self-esteem of the other person are undermined. Aggressive responses can include a wide range of behaviours, like rushing someone unnecessarily, making demands, telling rather than asking, ignoring someone, or not considering another's feelings.

Good interpersonal skills mean you need to be aware of different ways of communicating and the different response each approach might provoke. The use of either passive or aggressive behaviour in interpersonal relationships may have negative outcomes for those you are communicating with and it may well hinder positive moves forward.

Aggressive behaviour fails to consider the views or feelings of others. Rarely will praise or appreciation of others be shown and an aggressive response tends to put others down. Aggressive responses encourage the other person to respond in a non-assertive way, either aggressively or passively.

It can be a frightening, distressing or undermining experience to be spoken to aggressively and the receiver can be left wondering what instigated such behaviour or what he or she has done to deserve the aggression.

If thoughts and feelings are not stated clearly, this can lead to individuals manipulating others into meeting their wishes and desires. Manipulation can be seen as a covert form of aggression whilst humour can also be used aggressively.

BEING ASSERTIVE

Being assertive involves taking into consideration your own rights, wishes, wants, needs and desires, while taking into account those of the other person. Assertive behaviour means encouraging others to be open and honest about their views, wishes and feelings, so that both parties act appropriately.

Assertive behaviour includes:

- being open in expressing wishes, thoughts and feelings and encouraging others to do the same
- listening to the views of others and responding appropriately, whether in agreement with those views or not
- accepting responsibilities and being able to delegate to others
- regularly expressing appreciation of others for what they have done or are doing
- being able to admit to mistakes and apologise for them
- maintaining self-control
- behaving as an equal to others.



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Dealing with aggressive behaviour

Handling aggressive behaviour in others is particularly difficult when it is accompanied by negative attitudes. To avoid responding defensively or aggressively, self-control is required. It should be noted that aggressive behaviour here refers to verbal and non-verbal messages and not to any form of physical violence.



Key strategies that can help to deal with aggressive behaviour

- Maintain self-control. Although anger can sometimes be a positive force, responding in a similarly angry manner will do little to discourage aggression. If appropriate, be prepared to take time to think over issues before entering into discussion. It might be helpful to say something like, 'I need time to think about that' or 'Can we talk about this tomorrow when we have more time?'.
- Remember that other people have a right to their emotions, including anger. Try to understand why they are angry and aggressive.
- Pausing, or counting to 10, before responding to an outburst can help to avoid answering in an automatic, defensive or aggressive way.
- Avoid argument and defensiveness and try to maintain calm.
- Try to find areas of agreement with the other person, rather than focusing on the disagreements.
- Find and demonstrate ways in which decisions and solutions can be shared, for example, 'How can we find a solution to this?'.
- Try to show some empathy with the other person; how do you feel when you are angry with others?

Often it is difficult for a person behaving aggressively to calm down and see things from a broader point of view, since anger can be an expression of personal frustration. The application of the above techniques should help you to express yourself assertively rather than aggressively. This should help to defuse the situation and result in more positive and effective communication.

Dealing with demands

Dealing with unacceptable demands can be a daunting experience, and having the courage to be assertive in such circumstances is not easy for some people. It must always be acknowledged that everyone has the right not to fulfil a demand.

When faced with a demand, consideration should be given to the following:

- Most people are strongly influenced by stereotypes, for example those of the efficient manager or the selfless mother. Such generalisations can sometimes place unreasonable demands, expectations and unfair burdens upon those holding particular roles. Everyone has the right not to accept the demands associated with such roles.
- When rejecting a demand, it is important to explain that it is the demand that is being rejected and not the person.
- People often feel that others have a right to their time and effort. You have a right to say 'no' without having to justify yourself.

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- Having rejected a demand, it is important to keep to that decision. If you crumble under pressure, others will learn you can be swayed, so be firm. You do, of course, have the right to change your mind if circumstances change.
- In making demands, people often resort to passive or manipulative responses and may also assume a dependency upon the efforts of others. Apart from certain exceptions, for example dependent children, everyone is responsible for themselves and undue reliance should not be placed upon others.



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General techniques of assertiveness

Two key techniques that can aid assertiveness are known as ‘fogging’ and the ‘stuck record’ technique.

FOGGING

Fogging is a useful technique if people are behaving in a manipulative or aggressive way.

Rather than arguing back, fogging aims to give a minimal, calm response using terms that are placating but not defensive, while at the same time not agreeing to meet demands.

Fogging involves agreeing with any truth that may be contained within statements, even if critical. By not responding in the expected way, in other words by being defensive or argumentative, the other person will cease confrontation as the desired effect is not being achieved. When the atmosphere is less heated, it will be possible to discuss the issues more reasonably.

Fogging is so termed because the individual acts like a 'wall of fog' into which arguments are thrown, but not returned.



Example situation

‘What time do you call this? You’re nearly half an hour late, I’m fed up with you letting me down all the time.’

Fogging response:

‘Yes, I am later than I hoped to be and I can see this has annoyed you.’

‘Annoyed? Of course I’m annoyed, this has left me waiting for ages. You really should try to think about other people a bit more.’

Fogging response:

‘Yes, I was concerned that you would be left waiting for almost half an hour.’

‘Well... why were you late?’

THE STUCK RECORD TECHNIQUE

The ‘stuck record’ technique employs the key assertive skill of ‘calm persistence’.

It involves repeating what you want, time and time again, without raising the tone of your voice, becoming angry, irritated, or involved in side issues.



Example situation

Imagine that you are returning something that is faulty to a store. The conversation may go as follows.

‘I bought this jacket last week and the zip has broken. I would like a refund please.’





'It looks like you've worn the jacket a lot and been heavy handed with the zip.'

Stuck record technique response:

'I have only had it a week and it is faulty. I would like a refund please.'

'You cannot expect me to give you your money back after you've worn it so much and been heavy handed.'

Stuck record technique response:

'The zip has broken after only a week and I would like a refund please.'

... and so on.

Continually repeating a request will ensure the discussion does not become side-tracked and involved in irrelevant argument. The key is to stay calm, be very clear in what you want, stick to the point and not give up. Accept a compromise only if you are happy with the outcome.

