

# Communicating Assertively in the Workplace

## GETTING STARTED

Do you find that people get the better of you at work, that you're always the one that gets pushed around and ends up doing things that you'd rather not do? Does this make you resentful or unhappy because you feel helpless and unable to represent yourself strongly enough in the way you communicate?

Assertiveness is an attitude that honors your choices as well as those of the person with whom you are communicating. It's not about being aggressive and steamrolling your coworker into submission. Rather, it's about seeking and exchanging opinions, developing a full understanding of the situation, and negotiating a win-win situation. Ask yourself these questions to determine your level of assertiveness:

- Do you feel “put upon” or ignored in your exchanges with coworkers?
- Are you unable to speak your mind and request what you want?
- Do you find it difficult to stand up for yourself in a discussion?
- Are you inordinately grateful when someone seeks your opinion and takes it into account?

If you answer “yes” to most of these questions, you may need to consider becoming more assertive.

## FAQs

### Won't people think me aggressive if I change my communication style?

There are four types of communication style:

- aggressive—where you win and everyone else loses
- passive—where you lose and everyone else wins
- passive/aggressive—where you lose and do everything you can (without being too obvious) to make others lose too
- assertive—where everyone wins

If you become more assertive, people won't necessarily think that you've become more aggressive because their needs are met too. All that will happen is that your communication style becomes more effective.

### **I have had a lifetime of being passive. How can I change that now?**

If you don't change what you do, you'll never change what you get. All it takes to change is a decision. Once you've made that decision, you'll naturally observe yourself in situations, notice what you do and don't do well, and then you can try out new behaviors to see what works for you.

### **I just don't have the confidence to confront people. Will becoming assertive help me?**

This is a bit like the "chicken and egg." Once you become assertive, your confidence level will be boosted, yet you need to have sufficient levels of confidence to try it in the first place. Just try the technique out in a safe environment first so that you get used to how it feels, then you can use it more widely.

### **It's all right for people who have presence, but I'm small so I'm often overlooked. How can I become assertive?**

Many of the most successful people, in business and in entertainment, are physically quite small. Adopting an assertive communication style and body language has the effect of making you look more imposing. Assume you have impact, visualize it, feel it, breathe it, be it.

### **I find it hard to say "no" to people. How can I change this?**

Until you get used to being assertive, you may find this difficult. However, one useful technique is to say, "I'd like to think about this first. I'll get back to you shortly." Giving yourself time and space to rehearse your response can be really helpful.

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

### **Choose the Right Approach**

Becoming assertive is all about making choices that meet your needs and the needs of the situation. Sometimes it's appropriate to be passive. If you were facing a snarling dog, you might not want to provoke an attack by looking for a win-win situation! There may be other occasions when aggression is the answer. However, this is still assertive behavior as *you*, rather than other people or situations, are in control of how you react.

You may find it helpful to investigate some specially tailored training courses so that you can try out some approaches before taking on a coworker or manager in a "live" situation. This sort of thing takes practice.

### **Practice Projecting a Positive Image**

Use "winning" language. Rather than saying "I always seem to get the bum deal!" say "I've learned a great deal from doing lots of different things in my career. I'm now ready to move on." This is the beginning of taking control in your life. Visualize what you wish to become, make the image as real as possible, and feel the sensation of being in control.

Perhaps there have been moments in your life when you naturally felt like this, a time when you've excelled. Recapture that moment and "live" it again. Imagine how it would be if you felt like that elsewhere in your life. Determine to make this your goal and recall this powerful image or feeling when you're getting disheartened. It will reenergize you and keep you on track.

### **Creating a Positive Impression Prompts Others to Take You Seriously**

This can be done through nonverbal as well as verbal communication. If someone is talking over you and you're finding it difficult to get a word in edgewise, you can hold up your hand signaling "stop" as you begin to speak. "I hear what you're saying but I would like to put forward an alternative viewpoint..." Always take responsibility for your communication. Use the "I" word. "I would like...", "I don't agree...", "I am uncomfortable with this..." Being aware of nonverbal communication signals can also help you build rapport. If you mirror what others are doing when they're communicating with you, it will help you get a sense of where they're coming from and how to respond in the most helpful way.

### **Use Positive Body Language**

Stand tall, breathe deeply, and look people in the eye when you speak to them. Instead of anticipating a negative outcome, expect something positive. Listen actively to the other party and try putting yourself in their shoes so that you have a better chance of seeking the solution that works for you both. Inquire about their thoughts and feelings by using "open" questions, that allow them to give you a full response rather than just "yes" or "no." Examples include: "Tell me more about why...", "How do you see this working out?", and so forth.

Assertiveness also helps you learn to deal with people who have different communication styles. If you're dealing with someone behaving in a passive/aggressive manner, you can handle it by exposing what he or she is doing. "I get the feeling you're not happy about this decision" or "It appears you have something to say on this; would you like to share your views now?" In this way, they either have to deny their passive/aggressive stance or they have to disclose their motivations. Either way, you're left in the driver's seat.

If you're dealing with a passive person, rather than let them be silent, encourage them to contribute so that they can't put the blame for their discontent on someone else.

The aggressive communicator may need confronting but do it carefully; you don't want things to escalate out of control. One option is to start by saying "I'd like to think about it first": this gives you time to gather your thoughts and the other person time to calm down. When you're feeling put upon, it's important to remember that you have as much right as anyone to speak up and be heard.

Conflict is notorious for bringing out aggression in people, but it's still possible to be assertive in this context. You may need to show that you're taking them seriously by reflecting their energy. To do this, you could raise your voice to match the volume of theirs, then bring the volume down as you start to explore what would lead to a win-win solution. "I CAN SEE THAT YOU ARE UPSET and I would feel exactly the same if I were you...however..." Then you can establish the desired outcome for both of you.

## **COMMON MISTAKES**

### **You Go Too Far at First**

Many people, when trying out assertive behavior for the first time, find that they “go too far” and become aggressive. Remember that you’re looking for a win–win, not a you win and they lose situation. Take your time. Observe yourself in action. Practice and ask for feedback from trusted friends or colleagues.

### **Others React Negatively to Your Assertiveness**

Your familiar circle of friends will be used to you the way you were, not the way you want to become. They may try and make things difficult for you. With your new assertive behavior, this won’t be possible unless you let them get away with it. If you find you’re in this situation, try explaining what you’re trying to do and ask for their support. If they aren’t prepared to help you, you may choose to let them go from your circle of friends.

### **You Bite Off More Than You Can Chew and Get Yourself into Situations That Are Difficult to Manage**

If this happens to you, find a good way of backing down, go away and reflect on what went wrong, rehearse an assertive response, and forgive yourself for not getting it right every time. The more you rehearse, the more assertive responses you’ll have in your tool kit when you need them.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

### **Books:**

Alberti, Robert E., and Michael L. Emmons. *Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in Your Life and Relationships*. 8th ed. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2001.

Paterson, Randy J. *The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2000.

### **Web Sites:**

Assertiveness.com: [www.assertiveness.com](http://www.assertiveness.com)

Oak Tree Counseling: [www.oaktreecounseling.com](http://www.oaktreecounseling.com)

TUFTS University: [www.tufts.edu/hr/tips/assert.html](http://www.tufts.edu/hr/tips/assert.html)