

Respectful and Assertive Communication

There are some skills that can be learnt in order to communicate respectfully and assertively. At some point in life, we feel the need to tell another person what our thoughts, opinions, feelings, attitudes or what our needs actually are. In order to keep this relationship intact our assertiveness will need to be used. Assertiveness is the ability to honestly express your thoughts, opinions, feelings and ideas in a respectful way to another person.

For some people their thought patterns are that we should avoid conflict or defer to another person's ideas because it is polite, appropriate or even correct to do so. However, assertive communication can help avoid resentment, frustration, avoidance or feelings of being uncomfortable in the presence of the person. This can have long term effects on our outlook on life because there may be a decline in participation of fun events, job opportunities or social occasions, because there is no clear way to communicate thoughts, opinions or ideas clearly to a person that may need to hear them.

For others, being assertive is seen as also being aggressive. This is not true. Aggressiveness is where a person behaves in an actively hostile fashion. In contrast, assertiveness is where a person behaves in a confident, self-assured positive way.

To be skilled in assertive communication, three key components should always be used; empathy, a statement of the problem, and a statement of what you want to see in the other person.

Empathic communication is expressing to the other person your understanding of their feelings. This can show the other person that you are reaching out rather than picking a fight with them. An example of this is;

"I can imagine that you might be stressed at work now that we have lost two staff members in our team".

A **statement of the problem** is where you can clearly explain your difficulty or disappointment with the situation and says why you need something to change. For example;

"...but when you do get stressed, you start to raise your voice and tell me things about procedures that I already know and then I get tense and annoyed that you are looking at my work and picking it apart. Then, we are both mad at each other and nothing gets done".

A **statement of what you want** is a precise request for a specific change in the other person's behaviour. For example;

"it would be great if we could work together now and see what work we can split up and get done. I am committed to working with you as I know you do a good job. From now on will you please tell me when you are stressed and perhaps take a break for five minutes? Then when you feel ready we could sit down and work out a plan, together".

In order to be effective in our assertiveness, our body language helps. Look the person in the eye, stand or sit tall, uncross your arms and have a friendly but serious facial expression.



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In a conversation with the person try to actively use some of the following behaviours:

- Speak politely, use their name and try to be smooth and calm when talking.
- Use “I” statements and focus on the problem behaviour that you are experiencing, not their personal appearance. For example, *“I would like to tell you something today please, without disruption”*. This is more helpful than, *“You are always interrupting me!”*.
- Focus on the facts, not the emotional component or your personal judgments. For example, *“Your report writing is inconsistent as there are some errors in grammar and punctuation”*. This is more respectful and clear when compared to, *“Your reports are a mess!”*.
- When explaining your thoughts, take full ownership of them. For example, *“You make me so frustrated”* can be rephrased as, *“I feel really frustrated when you are not clear about what you want in that report”*.
- Aim to understand the other person’s point of view. It is just as important that you listen to them as they listen to you.
- Before advocating your point of view, allow them time to speak it without interruption.
- Listen.
- Once you have heard their point of view, respect it. This does not mean you have to agree with it.
- If you can, find common ground, as it will be much easier to come to a solution that you are both happy with. This takes careful listening but open questions around their interests, values and needs can help.
- Be honest. If you can’t achieve something by their deadline, say so.
- Communicate clearly. If you are making a direct request, don’t invite a question where the person can say “no”. It is more useful to say, *“Would you mind...?”* rather than, *“Will you...?”*.
- Do not speak behind someone’s back, say it to their face. Always be polite.
- Thank the person for giving you sometime to speak, hearing you and giving you their opinion on the matter.

When seeing a person again after an assertive but respectful conversation, it is important to remember that a healthy relationship (personal or professional) is one that evolves, and is flexible and able to adapt to changing needs. Try to not to go over the same conversation again and again, but find new common ground with them. Talk to them about their interests and hobbies to create a different kind relationship, one that is based on clear communication and respect.

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