

ASSERTIVENESS

“Don’t compromise yourself – you’re all you’ve got!” – Janis Joplin

Assertiveness is a form of communication that allows you to get your point across to others respectfully. It entails honestly expressing your thoughts and feelings while commanding dignity and respect from your listeners. Indications of assertiveness are found not only in what you say, but through your behaviors and actions as well.

People often confuse assertive behavior with aggressive behavior, giving it a negative connotation. There is a distinct difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness, however: assertive people respect others and appreciate their points of view, whereas aggressive people do not.

There are three common styles of behavior a person can possess:

- **Passive** - The passive person typically acts in whatever way necessary to avoid conflict. This often means hiding personal needs and avoiding situations that may lead to confrontations. A passive person may be easily hurt and upset, which can frequently lead to the frustration of other group members.
- **Aggressive** - A person with this behavior style makes sure everyone knows his opinions, but often does not allow others to voice their opinions in the same manner. Aggressive people may be able to accomplish short term goals by intimidating others, however this behavior will eventually lead others to feel anger and hostility toward the aggressor.
- **Assertive** - This is the “happy medium” between passive and aggressive behavior. Assertive individuals are direct and clear, yet relaxed and approachable. They make sure they are understood, but do not force their opinions on others. They utilize personable mannerisms such as eye contact, open posture and relaxed gestures when dealing with others. The benefits associated with eliciting assertive behavior are many. Studies have shown that assertive people feel more confidence in themselves and their abilities, are more liked and respected by others, have less stress and are more likely to achieve their goals than non-assertive people.

Like most other characteristics associated with effective leaders, assertiveness is a learned skill. Some guidelines to develop this skill include:

- **Practice makes perfect.** Begin practicing assertive behavior in low-risk situations, perhaps

with your family and friends. It may not be effective to begin developing your assertiveness skills by debating a controversial topic with a crowd of 600 people - you may find yourself becoming more aggressive or more passive in the process.

- Follow the Golden Rule. Is there ever a situation in which this doesn't apply? Treat others with the same respect you would expect in return. Remember, this means all people, not just those who are higher status than you are. Others will be more apt to help you achieve your goals if they consider you to be a respectful and honest person.
- Take the situation into account. There are cultural differences that exist within the realm of assertiveness. For example, some cultures believe acting in a passive manner exhibits more respect than assertive behavior. Someone else's upbringing may have taught them to be aggressive and more dominating. Keep your mind open and consider these differences when dealing with others.
- Don't hurt others. To be assertive means to express yourself, but in a sincere and respectful manner. Don't adopt an "it's my way or the highway" attitude when communicating with others. You can be confident and approachable at the same time.
- Avoid absolutes. Try to avoid words such as "always," "never," "every" and so forth. Be specific to the situation. If someone consistently leaves your office space or cubicle a mess, saying "I've picked up your papers four times this week" won't put her or him on the defensive as much as "You're always such a slob" might.
- Listen effectively. Assertiveness is achieved not only in the words you say, but in the way you carry yourself and how effectively you listen. It is difficult to let someone know how you feel about doing something if you haven't heard correctly. Working on your listening skills will allow you to communicate better. Keep in mind that assertiveness is not learned overnight - it is a skill that requires consistent practice and attention. While it may seem to require a lot of effort at first, the rewards are well worth it.

Reference: Wilson, Susan B. (1994). Goal Setting. NY: AMACOM.

Related Leader Readers: Effective Listening; Public Speaking; Self-Confidence

