



Nottinghamshire
County Council

Corporate Learning & Development Good Practice Guide



Assertiveness Skills

Learning & Organisational Development
2011



“... It’s OK to be Me...”

Assertiveness Skills: Good Practice Guide

Introduction

How often have you heard people say? – *I wish I were more assertive sometimes*

What lies behind this sentiment? For many it is the feeling that circumstances or others have influenced us to do something we do not really want to do.

How we respond to events and the people around us comes from the complex mix of factors including:

- Personality
- Values and beliefs
- Self confidence and self belief
- Sense of self worth
- Relationships with others
- Knowledge, skills and experience

We have all had experiences where we:

- have felt powerless in a situation,
- find that things are happening around us or to us
- want to change the situation we are in but are not sure how
- are being influenced to do one thing – when we want to do something else

We live in an ever-changing world. Our lives are lived around other people who may have very different ideas or ways of doing things than we do ourselves.

It is hard to think of aspects of our lives that do not involve other people in one way or another

So when we think that we want or need to be more assertive, we cannot think purely in terms of behaviour or communication techniques – we also think about ourselves and who we are.

When we are assertive we feel **positive** about ourselves, in **control** and able to positively **influence** our lives

This guide has been developed specifically to help you become more assertive - the information, tips and hints and self reflection activities contained may be used by you individually or used and discussed with colleagues and your team.

The aims of the guide are to:

- Provide information about what assertion is
- Help you reflect on your personal style
- Show how to develop your assertion skills



It's OK to be me!

Some people think that asserting yourself means being bossy, controlling or pushy. It doesn't. Asserting yourself involves saying and standing up for what you feel and believe. It means seeing that your needs are met. In doing this you are recognising the rights you have as an individual.

Assertiveness is based on principles or rights. They include:

- the right to our own values, beliefs, opinions and emotions
- the right to tell others how we wish to be treated
- the right to express ourselves
- the right to ask for information or help
- the right to change our minds
- the right to like ourselves even though we aren't perfect

So it is important to recognise your rights when dealing with others. But, if you have rights – so do they! So being assertive also recognises the rights of others.

This means:

- respecting the values, beliefs, opinions and emotions of others
- treating others as they wish to be treated
- listening to and seeking to understand others
- responding positively to requests for information or help
- allowing people the time and space to change their minds
- not thinking and feeling less of others because of their 'imperfections'

So if I have **the right to be me** then you have **the right to be you**.

This will mean that at times that we **disagree** – and that is OK too!

What is important is how we choose to exercise our rights – and for assertiveness that means thinking about:

- **how** we choose to behave and communicate with others
- knowing, understanding and being honest with ourselves about the **motives** and **intentions** underlying our behaviour

It is natural to want to be **liked** and be thought of as '**nice**' or '**easy to get along with**', But if you withhold your opinions, especially those that conflict with other people's - this sometimes leads to being taken advantage of by people who are not as nice or considerate. Asserting yourself will stop others from cheating you and you from cheating yourself out of what you deserve.



What do I want, really, really want?

When working with others and being faced with a challenge or a series of hard choices we could take up a number of **different positions** that influence how we behave.

For example, we could be:

- **Competitive**

I know what I want, and am going to do all that I can to get it knowing that will mean the other person will not get what they want.

- **Accommodating**

I know what I want, but I am going to let you have what you want even if that means I lose out

- **Compromising**

I know what I want, recognise what you want – so let's meet in the middle so at least we both get something

- **Avoiding**

I do not know what I want but I do not do anything about it now. We both get nothing – as the issue is unresolved

- **Collaborative**

I know what I want, recognise what you want – but I am open to new options that means we both get the best result possible. We both WIN!

So what do I want? This could be:

- To receive information
- To agree an action
- Influence a persons views
- To get something

So what does this mean in terms of behaviour?

A person can react three ways to any situation. They can be **aggressive, passive or assertive**. Being assertive is the most effective, and the healthiest choice to make.



Assertion, Aggression & Passivity

We recognise the behaviour of others in terms of:

- What they say, How they say it, Their body language

Many people are concerned that if they assert themselves others will think of their behaviour as aggressive. But there is a difference between being assertive and aggressive.

From what we have discussed so far, you can see that:

- Assertive people state their opinions, while still being respectful of others.
- Aggressive people attack or ignore others' opinions in favour of their own.
- Passive people don't state their opinions at all.

So what might we see and hear people do and say?

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Is afraid to speak up
Aggressive Behaviour:	Interrupts and 'talks over' others
Assertive Behaviour:	Speaks openly

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Speaks softly
Aggressive Behaviour:	Speaks loudly
Assertive Behaviour:	Uses a conversational tone

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Avoids looking at people
Aggressive Behaviour:	Glares and stares at others
Assertive Behaviour:	Makes good eye contact

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Shows little or no expression
Aggressive Behaviour:	Intimidates others with expressions and gestures
Assertive Behaviour:	Shows expressions that match the message

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Slouches and withdraws
Aggressive Behaviour:	Stands rigidly, crosses arms, invades others' personal space
Assertive Behaviour:	Relaxes and adopts an open posture and expressions

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Isolates self from groups
Aggressive Behaviour:	Controls groups in own interest
Assertive Behaviour:	Participates in groups

<i>Passive Behaviour:</i>	Agrees with others, despite own feelings
Aggressive Behaviour:	Only considers own feelings, and/or demands of others
Assertive Behaviour:	Speaks to the point



Look at the following examples and think about situations where you have noticed this behaviour in your self or others.

- *Hello... er. um ... I hope I am not disturbing you... your probably busy... perhaps this is not a good time... well, it was not that important... perhaps I could catch you another time... if you were free... I was just wondering... if it was not too much trouble... oh, it does not matter really... silly of me... no, of course – anything you say... yes, I'll drop everything and do that for you now... sorry... I did not mean to...*
- *Look, I have **told** you before... how could **you** have been so stupid... what a ridiculous idea... I have never heard such rubbish...
No! you can't... I want this and I want it now... listen to me now... do as you are told... do it like this or there will be trouble... I've been doing this job for years, there is nothing you can tell me...your **always** are late... you **never** get it right*
- *I need to talk to you about... this needs to happen, how can we do that?... I can see you feel strongly about that, please tell me more so I understand... this why I feel like I do on this matter... I propose we do this... what ideas do you have?... I think this would be better because... let's work together on this... thank you for giving me the time to explain my position... I value your help and support*

How easy is it to identify passivity, aggression and assertiveness?

If we are honest with ourselves, we are all passive, aggressive or assertive to one degree or another in different situations.

When you think about your own behaviour –

- How do you behave **most**?
- **How** would you **like** to behave most?

Some people think that their behaviour is dictated by the situation. Actually this is not so:

- We might not be able to choose the situation – events may happen around that we cannot control
- We have natural feelings in response to situations – sad, happy, hurt, proud, angry...
- **However**, we can always **choose how we respond** – our behaviour – because that is something that is 100% in our control.



Making the Change

Assertion is not a trait that people are born with. It is something that is learned and developed over time. It is also dependent upon the individual and situation - people react differently to different situations. The same incident may cause one person to respond in an aggressive manner, while someone else may be passive, while yet another person may be assertive.

Even if you think that you are **too passive** or **too aggressive** and don't know how to be assertive, chances are, you do respond assertively to at least some things in your life. For example, you may:

- Feel comfortable speaking up when a cashier in a store gives you the wrong change,
- Not say anything if a waiter in a restaurant brings your food late or cold.

The trick is to recognize those areas where you are assertive, identify your skills, and apply them to other areas of your life.

Everyone can build upon their assertiveness skills, no matter how limited they think they are.

You just need the **desire to change** your behaviour and value yourself more.

Ask yourself these questions:

- **Do I want to change my behaviour?**
- **Do I believe in myself, as well as others?**
- **Am I willing to set reasonable goals and take reasonable risks?**
- **Am I open to new ideas?**
- **Can I accept the facts that things may not change overnight and not everything will always go my way?**
- **Am I willing to make the effort, practice, and have patience while building my new skills?**

If your answers to the questions above are "Yes", then you are already on your way to being a more assertive person!



Tips for Behaving More Assertively

Expressing negative emotions Speak up when you have an idea or opinion.

This is one of the biggest steps toward being more assertive and can be easier than you think. It may be as simple as raising your hand in a meeting when you know the answer to a question, suggesting a change to your boss or colleagues, or offering an opinion at a party (even if it's just your opinion of a new movie or book.)

Stand up for your opinions and stick to them.

It can be a little harder to express opinions and stick to them when you know that others may disagree, but try to avoid being influenced by others' opinions just out of the desire to fit in. Be open too - you may change your mind when someone presents a rational argument that makes you see things in a new light.

Remember, you shouldn't feel a need to change your mind just because you're afraid of what others may think. You are more likely to gain respect for standing up for yourself than you will for not taking a stand.

Make requests and ask for favours.

Most people find it hard to ask for help when they need it, but people don't always offer without being asked. It is important that any requests are reasonable. For example, there is a difference between:

- Would you mind holding the door while I carry my suitcase to the car?
- Would you mind carrying my suitcase to the car while I sit and watch TV?

Most people are willing to help out. Indeed, people often like to help. If your requests are reasonable - meaning, would you agree or respond kindly if someone asked the same of you - don't feel bad about asking.

Refuse requests if they are unreasonable.

It's perfectly appropriate to turn down requests if they are unreasonable or if you don't have the time or resources. Also, if someone asks you to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable or you think is wrong, it's fine to simply say "no"

- "I'm sorry but I don't feel right doing that"
- "I'm sorry but I can't help you with that."
- "I'm sorry but I don't have time to help you with that today, but I could help you tomorrow"
- "I won't write your report for you, but I'd be happy to talk to you about it and read it over when you're done."

As long as you don't turn down every request that comes your way, you shouldn't feel guilty.



Accept both compliments and feedback.

Accepting compliments seems easy, but people often make little of them because they are embarrassed or seek to ensure they are not in the 'spotlight' of attention

- "Oh it was nothing"
- "It's not a big deal"
- "Please – do not make a fuss"

Value your own success and thank others for their recognition. It's fine to simply say "thank you" or "I am glad you liked it" when people give you compliments – however, that is different from "You're right, I AM great!"

Also, be prepared to accept feedback from others that may not always be positive. If someone gives you helpful advice in the right context, accept it graciously and act upon it. Accepting feedback (and learning from it) will often earn you respect and future compliments.

Question rules or traditions that don't make sense or seem unfair.

Just because something *has always been that way* doesn't mean it's right or fair. If you feel a tradition or rule is unfair to you or others, don't be afraid to speak up and question why that rule exists.

Rather than break a rule or law, find out the reasoning behind it. If you still think it's wrong, talk to friends or colleagues, work with official representatives, and see if there is a way to change it.

In your desire to be assertive you can ensure that you are not inadvertently seen as being aggressive by remembering to:

- Give others a chance to speak.
- Respect others' opinions.
- Be diplomatic.
- Choose assertive (not aggressive) language.
- Avoid bullying and demanding behaviour.
- Avoid physically aggressive behaviour.



Becoming More Assertive: role playing and sample Situations

The best way to learn assertive behaviour is through practice. But not everyone is ready to practice in real life.

Below are a number of experiences people may run into that require assertiveness. Try practicing your responses to the situations below with a relative, friend, your manager or a colleague who you feel is assertive.

Role play the situation, **what** would you say, **how** would you say it – even **where** and **when** would you say it – as it is important to pick your moment too. Discuss with them what they would do and say. Find out about their experiences in similar situations.

Asserting Yourself With Friends and Family

- You lend a friend one of your books. She returns it with pages missing.
- Your friend always asks to borrow some money when you go out, but they never repay you. You begin to resent that they do this all the time.
- A relative calls you late at night just to talk. You are tired and have to get up early in the morning.
- Your friend comes to you with a problem you don't know how to handle.

Asserting Yourself in Medical and Personal Safety Situations

- Your doctor prescribes a medicine but doesn't tell you what it is for or if there are any side effects.
- You are eating lunch and the person next to you smokes throughout the meal; this really bothers you.
- You are the passenger in a car and the driver is driving faster than you think is safe.

Asserting Yourself in Everyday Situations

- The new shoes you bought three weeks ago are already starting to fall apart. You take them back to the store where you bought them.

Asserting Yourself in Work Situations

- A colleague on the next desk is very untidy and their things spill over onto your desk
- You are constantly taking calls for a colleague who prefers to work 'away from their desk' and this is affecting your ability to do your own work.



Assert Yourself Regularly!

Assertiveness is something that you develop and strengthen over time. Once you have gained confidence through practice and role play – you can turn to real situations in your life.

You can then reflect on how things have gone – and discuss your thoughts and conclusions with a friend, mentor, colleague or line manager

Practicing assertive behaviour regularly and reminding yourself that you have value is an important way to build that assertiveness.

When thinking about the situation you can **ask yourself the following questions**. If appropriate – you could also ask the person you were being assertive with how they felt.

On Assertiveness

- Was I confident without being overbearing?
- Did I say what I felt without being hostile to others?
- Did I resist peer pressure?
- Did I give and receive compliments gracefully?
- Did I ask for what I wanted - without demanding or apologizing?

On Passiveness

- Was I afraid that others would not like me when I disagreed with them?
- Did I remain silent when something bothered me?
- Did I feel guilty when saying "no" ?
- Was it difficult for you to give or receive criticism?
- Was I reluctant to ask for help?

On Aggression

- Did I demand rather than ask?
- Was I verbally or physically abusive?
- Did I feel angry when others disagreed with me?
- Did I explode when someone criticised me?
- Did I feel that I had to win; that to compromise is to lose?
- Were people afraid of me?

On Passive Aggressiveness - that is a sense of sullenness, resentment, and resistance to others' suggestions. It is holding onto grudges and getting even at a later date.

- Did I feel resentful when people asked me to take on responsibility?
- Did I find someone to blame when things went wrong?
- Did I sabotage someone or their plans after they have ignored my advice, or was intentionally inefficient?
- Did I hide my inner hostility or anger?
- Did I fear authority?
- Am I holding onto negative feelings about any perceived injustice?

What about other people?

Now you have had the chance to reflect on yourself and your own behaviour – you are now in a position think about, interpret and **respond** to the behaviour of others in a more insightful way.

If you encounter someone who is being **passive** is it because they:

- Have a fear of
 - Displeasing you
 - Being rejected by you
 - Fear being punished by you for making a mistake
- Feel that
 - They are unworthy relative to you
 - Their rights are secondary compared to yours

If you encounter someone who is being **aggressive** is it because they:

- Feel insecure
- Feel powerless
- Think being aggressive will benefit them
- Have a lack of experience of expressing their feelings or needs

Understanding the motives behind others behaviour means you will be able to:

- better choose how to respond to them
- reassure them that you are ready to respect them and listen to them
- help them to express and communicate effectively
- relax them so they become more open to be positively influenced by you.

So Where do I start?

Start your journey by reflecting on where you are now. Included in this guide is an **assertion skills questionnaire**.

Answer the questions honestly – this will give you a benchmark to work from.

Discuss the results with a friend, mentor or your line manager.

Use the **assert yourself regularly** review questions to reflect on key events and situations you face in your work and home life.

Keep a learning diary – so you can see how you develop over time.



Assertion Questionnaire:

Be honest in your response and draw a circle around the number that describes you best.

Key:

0 means no or never;

1 means somewhat or sometimes;

2 means average;

3 means usually or a good deal;

4 means practically always and entirely

- | | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| 1 | When you feel a person is being highly unfair to you, do you call it to his/her attention? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 2 | Do you find it difficult to make decisions? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 3 | Are you critical of others' ideas, opinions, behaviour? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 4 | Do you speak out in protest when someone takes your place in line? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 5 | Do you often avoid people or situations for fear of embarrassment? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 6 | Do you usually have confidence in your own judgement? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 7 | Do you insist that your spouse or room-mate take on a fair share of household chores? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 8 | Are you prone to 'fly off the handle'? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 9 | When a salesperson makes an effort to sell you something, do you find it hard to say 'No' even though the merchandise is not really what you want? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 10 | When a latecomer is waited on before you are, do you call attention to the situation? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 11 | Are you reluctant to speak up in a discussion or debate? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 12 | If a person has borrowed money (or a book, garment, or thing of value) and is overdue in returning it, do you mention it? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 13 | Do you continue to pursue an argument after the other person has had enough? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 14 | Do you generally express what you feel? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 15 | Are you disturbed if someone watches you work? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 16 | If someone keeps kicking or bumping your chair in a movie or a lecture, do you ask the person to stop? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 17 | Do you find it difficult to keep eye contact when talking to another person? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 18 | In a good restaurant, when your meal is improperly prepared or served, do you ask the waiter to correct the situation? | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 19 | When you discover merchandise is faulty, do you return it for an adjustment? | 0 1 2 3 4 |

- 20** Do you show anger by name-calling or obscenities? 0 1 2 3 4
- 21** Do you try to be a wallflower or a piece of furniture in social situations? 0 1 2 3 4
- 22** Do you insist that your landlord (mechanic, repairman, etc.) make repairs, adjustments or replacements which are his responsibility? 0 1 2 3 4
- 23** Do you often step in and make decisions for others? 0 1 2 3 4
- 24** Are you able to openly express love and affection? 0 1 2 3 4
- 25** Do you think you always have the right answer? 0 1 2 3 4
- 26** When you differ with a person you respect are you able to speak up for your own viewpoint? 0 1 2 3 4
- 27** Are you able to refuse requests made by a friend if you do not wish to do what the person is asking? 0 1 2 3 4
- 28** Do you have difficulty complimenting or praising others? 0 1 2 3 4
- 29** If you are disturbed by someone smoking near you, can you say so? 0 1 2 3 4
- 30** Do you shout or using bullying tactics to get others to do as you wish? 0 1 2 3 4
- 31** Do you finish other people's sentences for them? 0 1 2 3 4
- 32** Do you get into physical fights with others? 0 1 2 3 4
- 33** At meals, do you control and dominate the conversation? 0 1 2 3 4
- 34** When you meet a stranger, are you the first to introduce yourself and begin a conversation? 0 1 2 3 4
- 35** Do you compliment or praise others when they do something you like or appreciate? 0 1 2 3 4
- 36** Do you say "I am sorry" a good deal of the time when you do not really mean it? 0 1 2 3 4
- 37** Can you tell someone directly that you do not like what he is doing? 0 1 2 3 4
- 38** Do you usually try to avoid 'bossy' people? 0 1 2 3 4
- 39** Do you usually keep your opinions to yourself? 0 1 2 3 4
- 40** When you receive a compliment, do you tend to discount it in your own mind? 0 1 2 3 4
- 41** If a person is criticising you unjustly, can you defend yourself verbally rather than hitting the person or walking away angry and upset? 0 1 2 3 4
- 42** Can you tell things about yourself that you like in front of others? 0 1 2 3 4

Answer Key: Transfer your scores to the appropriate item number below and calculate your totals:

<u>Aggression</u>	<u>Assertion</u>	<u>Non-Assertion</u>
	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>
3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>	5 <input type="text"/>
	6 <input type="text"/>	
	7 <input type="text"/>	
8 <input type="text"/>		9 <input type="text"/>
	10 <input type="text"/>	11 <input type="text"/>
	12 <input type="text"/>	
13 <input type="text"/>	14 <input type="text"/>	15 <input type="text"/>
	16 <input type="text"/>	17 <input type="text"/>
	18 <input type="text"/>	
	19 <input type="text"/>	
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	22 <input type="text"/>	
23 <input type="text"/>	24 <input type="text"/>	
25 <input type="text"/>	26 <input type="text"/>	
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	37 <input type="text"/>	
		38 <input type="text"/>
		39 <input type="text"/>
		40 <input type="text"/>
	41 <input type="text"/>	
	42 <input type="text"/>	
* Total x 2.5 = <input type="text"/>	* Total x 1.9 = <input type="text"/>	* Total x 1.92 = <input type="text"/>

* Now Transfer your scores to the scale table overleaf.

What is the balance between the scores? Do you recognise this as a reflection of your behaviour? How would you like the scores to change going forward?

	Aggression	Assertion	Non-Assertion
95			
90			
85			
80			
75			
70			
65			
60			
55			
50			
45			
40			
35			
30			
25			
20			
15			
10			
5			
0			