

Assertiveness techniques

Assertiveness is about balancing your needs, values and opinions with the needs, values and opinions of others. Assertive behaviour involves expressing and claiming your needs whilst listening to, understanding and taking into account those of other people.

Laying the groundwork for assertive behaviour

Commit yourself to certain key principles.

I will value myself and others

- Remind yourself of your core strengths and values. This will bolster your sense of identity and increase your ability to face difficult social interactions.
- Seek to understand and appreciate the strengths and values of others. People are more likely to respond to you expressing your needs if you show that you understand their needs.
- Know your rights and your responsibilities. Remember that you have a right to respectful treatment and a responsibility to treat others with respect.

I will be increasingly aware of my reactions and my choices

- Maintain a mindful awareness of your emotional responses to situations. Notice patterns in how you react in various circumstances.
- Take responsibility for your emotional states and reactions and learn to manage your emotions by becoming aware of the choices you have in any situation.
- Do not be afraid to express your feelings if it helps someone to understand the impact of their words and actions on you.
- Question any of your beliefs and assumptions that might limit the choices you have in particular situations.
- Do your best to respect other people's feelings but do not take responsibility for their emotional states and reactions.

I will focus on solutions and learning

- Concentrate on finding ways forward that balance the valid needs of all concerned whenever possible (win-win solutions).
- Avoid blame and guilt as these are rarely constructive.
- Look at what you can learn from every situation, even if it goes badly. Remember that assertiveness is something that you can improve on over time as you practise it.
- Allow yourself to make mistakes and do not be afraid to ask for help if you need it.
- Give a positive response to constructive feedback both positive and negative, but also be prepared to disagree with unhelpful comments.

Techniques

Basic assertions ("I" statements)

Express your needs, feelings and opinions directly and unambiguously.

"I need to leave on time today."

"I would prefer to have this discussion later."

"I find it more helpful when you present feedback in the form of suggestions for future action."

"I was disappointed that you didn't acknowledge my contribution to the report in that meeting."

Give reasons for your statements, but do not feel you have to justify everything.

"I would like to go on this training as I feel it would be beneficial to my day-to-day work."

Try to express your needs in a positive and constructive way instead of one that could be perceived as blaming.

"I would prefer to discuss this in our regular meeting" rather than "I don't want to talk about this now. Can't it wait?"

You can use "I" statements to yourself to acknowledge and take responsibility for your feelings and reactions.

"I feel nervous/angry/undervalued."

Empathic assertions

Demonstrate that you understand the needs, feelings and opinions of others even if you are not able to accommodate them fully.

"I understand that you are uncomfortable with the current working arrangements, but I would like you to persist with them for the moment."

"I know you are busy at the moment, but I need you to get that report to me by the end of the week."

The formula "I appreciate... but..." can quickly become meaningless if overused. A more constructive formula of {appreciation} + {commitment} + {request} or {appreciation} + {request} + {concession} demonstrates that you are actively considering their needs rather than just pretending to care.

"I know that you are busy at the moment and I'm looking at getting you some help as soon as I can, but I still need you to get that report to me by the end of the week."

"I know that you are busy at the moment, but I need you to get that report to me by the end of the week. I would be happy to relax the deadline on this other task to give you some space."

Consequence assertions

These statements make clear the positive and negative implications of complying or not complying with your requests. They are usually expressed as “If... then” statements.

“If I have to work extra hours, then I will need to recover the hours next week.”

“I am more likely to be able to deal with your request effectively if you send me an e-mail with the details.”

“If you insist on imposing this way of working on our department, then I will need to review the performance targets we agreed earlier.”

“If you continue to arrive late for shifts despite my warnings, I will have to start formal disciplinary procedures.”

Use them with care as they can easily be interpreted as threats.

Discrepancy observations

These statements point out any differences between previous agreements and current actions or between words and behaviours. The aim is to remove misunderstandings not to criticise or allocate blame.

“We agreed last week that this task should be my top priority. Now you have said you would like me to focus exclusively on this other task. I would like to clarify whether the priorities have changed.”

“You have said that you want to improve staff morale, but you have sent this e-mail which openly criticises my team and offers no constructive suggestions for improvement. I would like you to meet my team in person to apologise.”

Make sure you include an assertion or request so that you are focusing on moving forward rather than just criticising.

Repeated assertions (broken record)

This technique involves repeating your assertion calmly throughout a conversation to ensure that you are heard. You can respond to their objections with reasoned argument if they have merit, and you can use any of the techniques above, but always return to your basic assertion.

You: *“I would like to attend this training course as it is important for my development.”*

Them: *“It’s going to be really difficult to let you go on it at the moment.”*

You: *“I understand that it is difficult to release staff for training, however this course will not be available again soon and I would like to attend it.”*

Them: *“I’m sure we could arrange something similar in-house if you really need it.”*

You: *“I have looked at the programme and there are a number of benefits that I could not get from in-house training. I would like to attend this training course.”*

Holding statements

If you are unprepared to respond or not sure you will be able to manage your emotions in the moment, it may be a good idea to see if you can delay the assertive interaction until you have had time to prepare yourself.

“I am unhappy with this situation, but I would like to talk about it when I am feeling calmer.”

“I need a little time to think about that request, I will get back to you in half an hour.”

Saying “no”

Being able to say “no” to unreasonable or unwelcome requests is an important part of assertiveness. Be honest and give brief reasons for your refusal, but do not feel that you have to apologise or justify your choice.

You can use empathic statements and consequences statements alongside saying “no”.

You may also have to employ the “broken record” technique to deal with objections.

You can use some alternative constructions for situations in which a blunt “no” might be too confrontational.

Not now — refuse on this occasion but keep open the possibility of a “yes” in the future.

“I can’t do that now, but do ask me again next month.”

Not unless — make clear what conditions would make it possible for you to agree.

“I will have to say ‘no’ unless you could take this other responsibility off me.”

Not that, but this — offer an alternative to the other person’s request.

“I won’t be able to complete the full research report by that date, but I could give you a brief note of my initial findings.”