
**Managing Agreement:
Assertion Skills**

Introduction

What is Assertion?

Assertion is respectfully expressing your thoughts and feelings to another person with the purpose of influencing the behavior of that person. Assertion is used to respectfully influence others to change, so as to meet your needs. It is used when others have upset you in some way and you want to do something about it.

Assertion helps you deal with your strong emotion and stand up for your own rights without infringing on the human rights of others. It is essential for the development of high quality relationships.

In this definition, the word *right* refers to something to which you have some just and proper claim. A human right in the assertion context is anything that you consider that all people are entitled to be virtue of their existence as human beings. Respect and care about one another as persons is an underlying premise.

Assertion has to do with what you say to yourself about yourself, with your image of how others see you, and with your feelings about conflict. Assertion is an expression of whether you regard yourself as OK or not OK. In order to assert well, you need a sense of your own worth, of power. You need to be centered and balanced. You need to see yourself as a person with choices - a person who owns and shapes his or her own life and is able to influence others.

Developing this sense of self is a life's work. As you learn to be assertive and become proficient in the assertion process you will be able to increase your awareness of assertion as a life work and become better able to influence others to get your needs met with integrity.

Personal Space

An understanding of the concept of personal space is useful in assertion. While people seem to have an innate sense of the physical and psychological space around them, needs for personal space differ:

One person might be comfortable spending a lot of time in a room crowded with people, not minding a high noise level, jostling, many conversations at once, a lot of smoke. To another person, this could be anxiety-producing. He or she might be thinking: "I'm going right up the wall!" - a description of a frantic effort to escape and get more space.

Some people don't mind being touched, while others feel invaded by uninvited touch, slaps on the back, nudges in line, etc.

Some people need a lot of privacy and alone time. Others want to be with people as much as possible.

Some people are very uncomfortable and feel infringed upon by a display of negative emotions in their presence. Others don't mind and can get right in on a good argument.

Much of your sense of personal space has to do with the culture and environment in which you were raised. The important realization is that we all have invisible boundaries, which means that when someone comes inside your space uninvited, you feel invaded in some way; when you go uninvited into someone else's, they generally feel violated. Consistently allowing someone to invade your space physically or psychologically is called submission. Invading another person's space is called aggression. In between the extremes of submission and aggression is the wide range of behaviors called assertion.

Figure 1 illustrates the contrast between submission, aggression, and assertion behavior. When a person is submissive they allow the other person to invade their space. When a person is aggressive they infringe or invade the other person's boundaries. Assertive behavior is a form of influence that respects the boundary lines of others and yourself.

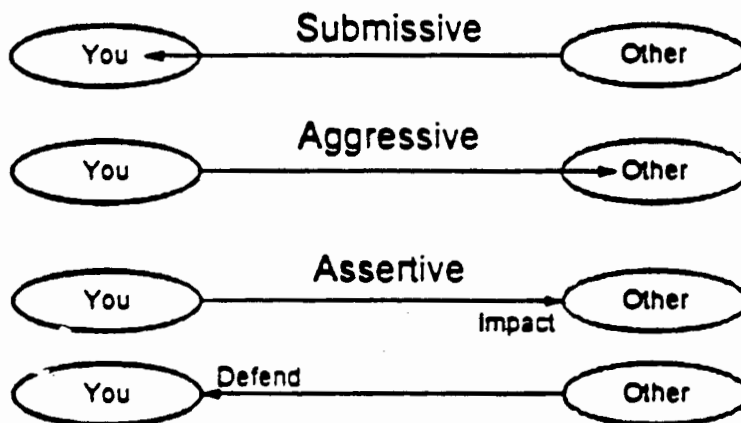


Fig. 1. Submissive, Aggressive, Assertive Behavior

The range of behaviors related to personal boundaries can be seen as a continuum. To the far left is submission - behaviors that allow the other to invade your space in some way. At the far right is aggression - behaviors in which you invade the other's space. In between is the wide range of behaviors called assertion. People who are typically submissive, assertive, or aggressive demonstrate predictable behavior (Table 1).

Table 1

Typical behaviors on the assertion continuum

Submissive	Assertive	Aggressive
Tendency to:	Tendency to:	Tendency to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow self to be interrupted, subordinated, and stereotyped. • Have poor eye contact. • Have poor posture and defeated air. • Withhold information, opinions, and feelings. • Be an ineffective listener. • Be indecisive. • Apologize, avoid, and leave. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State feelings, needs, and wants directly. • have good eye contact. • have straight posture and competent air. • Be able to disclose information, opinions,, and feelings. • Be an effective listener. • Initiate and take clear positions. • Confront with skill, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupt, subordinate, and stereotype others. • have intense and glaring eye contact. • Have invading posture and arrogant air. • Conceal information, opinions, and feelings. • Be an ineffective listener. • Dominate. • Be loud, abusive, blaming, and sarcastic.

Based on Robert E Alberti and Michael L. Emmons, *Stand Up, Speak Out, Talk Back!* [New York: Pocket Books, 1975], p. 39; and Colleen Kelley, *Assertion Training: A Facilitators Guide* [San Diego, Calif.: University Associates, Inc., 1979], p. 105.

Most of you probably will find yourselves comfortable to some extent with the right, or appreciating, end of the assertion zone. This does not mean that there is no room for personal growth at this end of the continuum, since you can learn to relate to people better, to help others, to make suggestions more productively, to speak up more succinctly in meetings, and to influence others. You can also become less shy and get better at asking someone to spend time with you. As you come to feel more powerful, you will have more impact. Although you can grow more skillful in these areas, you probably will not have trouble with this aspect of assertion.

What you may have a lot more trouble with is the left, or defending, end of the assertion zone. This is the are in which you need defending skills, protecting skills, and resisting skills when conflict exists and someone is about to invade you space or is pushing against you. The situation in this case is already unpleasant to some extent, and skillful ways of behaving in these circumstances do not come so naturally.

In fact, while growing up, it is likely that most of you were richly rewarded for giving in, for not making waves, for not defending. For example: "You're such a good little girl; you never make a fuss." Or, "You're the boy who always gets along with everyone. I know I can count on you." In short, you may have been taught that it is selfish not to do what someone else wants you to do - selfish to object when someone is playing loud music when you are trying to sleep; "making a big thing out of nothing" to speak up when another person agrees with you to come to

meetings and then repeatedly arrives late; "not being cooperative" when you resist being assigned another big project on top of your already packed schedule.

Because this aspect of assertion is more difficult for most of us, much of our time in this segment of the learning experience will be spent dealing with ways of productivity defending yourself; ways of getting your personal goals and needs met. It is crucial, however, that in the process of getting your own needs met, you do not aggress against the other person. This learning experience will present ways to get your needs met that are also respectful of the other person - ways that have the least chance of lowering the other's self-esteem or damaging your relationship with him or her.

Choosing Behaviors

The essence of assertion is choosing. In assertion you experience yourself as a person of power. Your future does not just happen to you: you shape it with choices. You do not just respond automatically to an outside stimulus: you reflect on your experiences. In other words, you see yourself as having alternatives, and you choose how you wish to act.

It is helpful to visualize your response behavior as either "stimulus-response" or "stimulus-reflection-response" behavior. In stimulus-response behavior, a stimulus impacts you, and you react automatically. If the phone rings, you jump and answer it. If someone says he or she wants you to do something, you agree. If someone brings you food that is not what you ordered, you eat it anyway.

Much of our moral training encourages this kind of behavior. People have been taught exactly what to do in every circumstance, as if there were a prescribed way of behaving for every given situation. As a consequence, many people have remained immature, merely doing as they are told.

In *stimulus-reflection-response behavior*, a stimulus impacts you, and you reflect on a response before acting on it. You put yourself through a process of reflection before you act. You choose. This is assertive behavior. If the phone rings, you consider whether or not you want to allow the interruption at this time. If someone asks you to help with a project, you really think over whether or not you want that added responsibility. If a waitress brings your steak rare when you had ordered it well done, you consider the matter and decide whether you want to accept and pay for what you did not order.

You may in fact think it over and choose to do the same thing you would have done if you had responded automatically. The point is that you have chosen to. The basic question in stimulus-reflection-response thinking is: which way of responding expresses how you most want to behave in this particular situation? In other words, the act of reflection and choice determines the assertiveness of a particular behavior. A response that might be viewed by another as submissive or aggressive might very well be assertive for you in a given situation as a consequence of your reflection and choice.

Table 2 provides an overview of submissive, assertive and aggressive behaviors, comparing how the three types of behaviors affect the feelings both you and the other person have about the interaction.

Table 2

Feelings elicited by submissive, assertive, and aggressive behavior.

	Submissive Behavior	Assertive Behavior	Aggressive Behavior
Characteristics	Emotionally dishonest, indirect, self-denying, inhibited	(Appropriately) emotionally honest, direct, self-enhancing, expressive	(Inappropriately) emotionally honest, direct, self-enhancing at the expense of another, expressive
Your feelings when you engage in this behavior.	Hurt, anxious at the time, and possibly angry later	Confident, self-respecting at the time and later	Righteous, superior, powerful at the time, and possible guilty later
The other person's feelings about self when you engage in this behavior.	Guilty or superior	Valued, respected	Hurt, humiliated
The other person's feelings about you when you engage in this behavior.	Pity, imitation	Generally respected	Angry, vengeful

(Adapted from Robert E. Alberti and Michael L. Emmons, *Stand Up, Speak Out, Talk Back!* [New York: Pocket Books, 1975], P.39.

Assertiveness is related to self-esteem. People who habitually behave either submissively or aggressively generally have low self-esteem; people who are normally assertive have high self-esteem. The essential insight to be gained from this relationship is that when assertive skills are learned and practiced, self-esteem increases. Assertive people generally feel good about themselves. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the level of assertiveness (assertion continuum) and self-esteem.

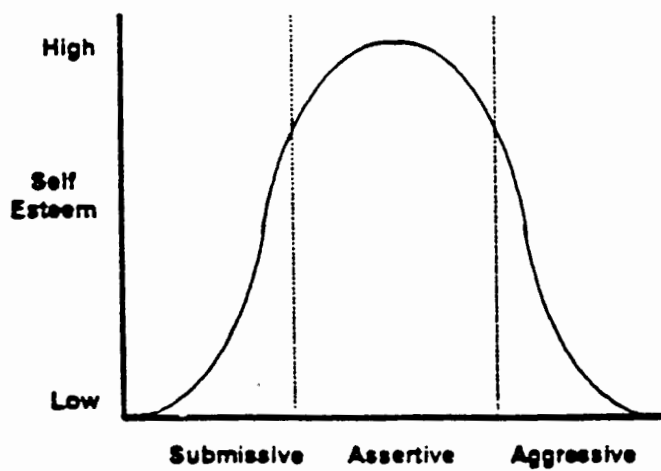


Fig. 2. Assertion and Self Esteem

Assertion Working Model

Although assertion messages can be used to defend yourself against infringement or express appreciation for behavior that has had a positive effect on you, most of the time they are used to invite another to modify infringing behavior. An assertion message, described in greater detail in the next section, is often called a "behavior-change message." The assertion working model described in this section is a process that invites behaviors change and is used in defending situations.

Whenever you are infringed on you have five choices. You can:

1. *Be aggressive* – confront the other without the use of skills, thereby infringing on the other in return. For example, you are just falling asleep, and someone in the adjacent, interconnecting hotel room turns the television on loud. You might then beat on the interconnection door, yelling "Turn the TV down!"
2. *Modify yourself* – choose to mediate or quiet yourself and hope you can transcend the effects of the infringement. In the case of the example above, you might grit your teeth and count sheep.
3. *Modify the environment* – change the immediate surroundings in some way so as to lessen the effects of the infringement. In the example, you might hang a blanket over the interconnecting door and stuff a pillow under the door.
4. *Withdraw or be submissive* – remove yourself from the environment and find one more suitable to your needs. In the example, you might call the desk, complaining about the situation, and ask that you be transferred to another room.
5. *Assert with skill* – use the assertion skills presented in this learning experience to bring about a change in the other's behavior. In the example, you might go to the door of the adjacent room, knock, and when the other answers, ask, "Please turn the television down. The noise is interfering with my sleep."

The "assert with skill" choice presumes the use of the assertion working model. The sequence is a process for assertion in situations where you have a positive, relatively strong relationship with the other. This process is built on a basis of trust developed by being fair; treating the other with respect; being honest, open and direct; listening with skill. There are four stages in the working model.

- Stage 1. Working out an agreement – expectations and standards. This stage involves working out an agreement so that mutual expectations are clear. The clear communication of those expectations could take the form of agreements, contracts, standards, policies, procedures, rules or understandings.

- Stage 2.** **Monitoring** – If infringement occurs or a problem arises with the agreement, point out specifically any problem area or area of infringement. This is an opportunity to repair any loopholes in the original agreement. Sometimes this takes the form of a reminder conversation to point out the infringement and clarify the standard or prior agreement about behavior. This conversation can serve to clarify any misunderstandings about the agreement.
- If the agreement is being kept, you should take the opportunity to let the other person know that you notice and appreciate their behavior.
- Stage 3.** **Confrontation meeting** – If infringement occurs or a problem arises again, then hold a confrontation meeting. In the confrontation meeting you might review the history of the problem and use the assertion process to work out an agreement that meets your needs. If the assertion process doesn't bring about agreement, utilize a conflict resolution strategy to obtain a resolution. Either process should result in a renewal of the contract or agreement or a new contract, agreement, or action plan to ensure resolution of the difficulty.
- Stage 4.** **Decision Making** – In this stage you confront the other with the consequences of their actions. When the infringement or the problem persists, hold a decision meeting. In the decision meeting you might communicate to the person the need to examine the relationship itself and indicate that if the behavior continues to persist, the relationship will need to be modified or terminated - e.g., a person working for you will need to explore the possibility of a job change; a close friend will need to change the nature of his or her relationship with you; or an associate will need to consider terminating the professional relationship.

The assertion model is an education in commitment. People often agree to do things without really committing to do them. The assertion model helps people to understand what it means to keep their word. Most infringements or problems can typically be corrected by assertive behavior using this working model. In relationships built on mutuality and trust, the person is likely to modify his or her behavior before the third step, the initial confrontation meeting.

Message Formulation

Although both defending and appreciating assertion message are dealt with in this section, the emphasis is on the formulation of defending assertion message used to invite behavior change. The focus is on the accurate description of each of the parts of an assertion message. Defending messages are used in these sections because most often assertion involves inviting another who is infringing you to alter his or her behavior. The same format can be used in appreciating assertion to eliminate judgmental praise.

While there are several ways of confronting problem behavior, three-part assertion message are particularly effective in dealing with persistent problems - those behaviors that continue after several attempts have been made to change them. Well prepared and skillfully delivered assertion message can invite and motivate others to voluntarily change their behavior without spending time in unnecessary arguments.

As indicated earlier, three part assertion message consist of a description of:

- The problem behavior pattern.
- Your feeling about the situation.
- The concrete and tangible negative effect of that pattern of behavior on your life.

It can be formulated effectively in the following way:

- When you (problem behavior pattern)....
- I feel (your feeling)...
- because (negative effect on your life).

This structured format helps ensure that all three parts of the message are included. As you gain experience with this method of confronting others, you will be able to develop a style that is more natural for you and will convey the three necessary pieces of information in an integrated way.

The following sections present guideline and exercises to help you develop your ability to formulate each of the components of a three-part assertion message.

Describing The Behavior

When another person's behavior has a negative effect on your life, one of the three things you need to communicate is a description of the behavior that is causing you a problem. Even when a person wants to meet your needs, it is unlikely that he or she will change a behavior that is bothersome to you unless he or she knows exactly what is going on that troubles you.

Describing behavior is not an easy skill. Behavior is a person's actions - what he or she says or does. It is objective - what would be seen or heard. But people tend to describe "behavior" subjectively, from their own perspective - that is, they tend to interpret behavior, focusing on what they think the behavior meant rather than on what they saw or heard. When they do that, it is not a description of behavior. For example, one person might see another taking paper home from the office and "describe" that action as cheating the organization. That is a personal, subjective interpretation of what happened. The behavior actually known to be involved is that of "taking paper from the office." That is the behavior you saw. To attach your interpretation of the meaning of what a person does increases the likelihood that there will be a misunderstanding when you confront him or her. It is important to stick to a simple description of the actual behavior when you assert to others.

In developing the "behavior" component of the three-part assertion message, the following guideline are helpful:

1. Specify the right behavior.
2. Describe the pattern of behavior.
3. Avoid using inflammatory words.
4. Avoid using generalizations.
5. Avoid using adjectives.
6. Don't use adverbs

These guidelines are elaborated below.

Specify the Right Behavior If you assert to someone about the wrong behavior - that is, if you are imprecise and assert about behavior other than that which is actually bothering you - the problem will not be solved. Surprisingly, this happens quite often, partly because people tend not to speak clearly when confronting others. In addition, problem situations are not always easily described, and it may be difficult to pinpoint the specific problem causing behavior.

Describe the Pattern of Behavior It is rarely useful to correct only one problem in a series of similar behaviors. You might get the change you want in the specific instance, but other identical problems might continue. For example, suppose you are upset about a peer's behavior pattern of usually starting meetings late. Today he began half an hour late, and you could have used that time to accomplish other tasks. Hope to change his behavior, you make an appointment to see him. Early in the conversation you tell him:

"Fred, when you start your meetings 30 minutes late...."

After some talking, Fred assures you that it won't happen again. Three weeks later, the meeting begins 18 minutes late. Fred thinks he has met your need (since he didn't start late), but you remain frustrated. You still have nearly the same problem you had originally. You got the behavior change you requested, but not the one you really wanted. To accomplish your purpose, you would address the pattern of behavior, using the 30 minute situation as an example:

"Fred, when you start your meetings after the scheduled time, such as this morning, when you began 30 minutes late..."

Avoid Using Inflammatory Words Inflammatory words used in an assertion message often trigger an emotional reaction in the person asserted to. If you say "When you failed to do...", the person you are talking with will probably focus on a different meaning of the word fail than the one you intended. The other might experience a higher emotional response around the word fail than is desirable. This high-energy response blocks his or her ability to really understand what you are saying and respond constructively to it.

"When you neglect to inform me about..." is another example of usage of an inflammatory word. To avoid using words such as failed or neglected simply substitute the words don't or didn't.

Profane words are highly inflammatory for many people, and, thus, are to be avoided in an assertion statement.

Avoid Using Generalizations The words always, never, and constantly are generalizations and imply that there are no exceptions to what you are saying. Generalizations are rarely true - especially when you are talking about someone's behavior. Few people are "always" late for work. There are usually some occasions when they arrive on time, although it might not seem so when they are frequently late. Using an absolute will probably be detrimental to your assertion. The other person is likely to argue with you about the few occasions when he or she was on time, rather than focus on your concern for the times the behavior caused you a problem.

Avoid Using Adjectives It is important to be as specific as possible in describing behavior. Adjectives are not specific and should therefore be avoided. Adjectives tend to lead to arguments about "how long is long?" or "how short is short?" To tell a person she "takes extended breaks" or "schedules long meetings" or "submits inaccurate reports" does not give her the kind of information she needs to change her behavior. "Long" can mean twenty minutes to one person and two hours to another. Rather than saying "When you take extended coffee breaks..." it would be more specific to say "When you take more than the agreed upon fifteen minutes for coffee breaks..."

Avoid Using Adverbs When confronting another, it is usually not helpful for you to focus on the number of times the problem behavior has occurred in the past. The words frequently, often, repeatedly, or regularly in an assertion message aggravate your problem with the other in two ways:

1. The words tend to add blame to the message, because the focus becomes more on the past history than on the current behavior.
2. The words open the door to unnecessary arguments, such as "How often is often?" - the same problem that occurs with the use of absolutes and adjectives.

Describe How You Feel

The second part of the three-part assertion message is a description of the feeling effect on you. It is a feeling word that captures your level of emotion about the problem behavior and its effect on your life. In developing the "feeling" component of the three-part assertion message, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Use a feeling word that accurately describes your internal emotional state.
2. Avoid using the same word to describe all your feelings.
3. Avoid using stronger feelings to build your case.
4. Avoid using "victim" words.

Each of these guidelines is described below:

Use a Feeling Word That Accurately Describes How You Feel Describing your feelings in a three part assertion message is an effective way to convey to the other person the importance of what you are saying. A major consideration when choosing a feeling word is to be sure it appropriately captures your level of emotion about the infringing behavior. For example, you could be furious about the same behavior that would only irritate someone else. The feeling word is unique for each person who is infringed by another.

Avoid Using the Same Word to Describe All Your Feelings For many people, feelings are limited to such words as good, bad, happy, and sad. The range of anger words, from upset and irritated to furious and irate, usually all end up as "I'm angry." The words frustrated also tends to cover several levels of feeling.

It helps another believe that your life is negatively affected by his or her behavior if you can label the real feeling it causes in you.

Avoid Using Stronger Feelings to Build Your Case Again, the power of assertion lies in its simplicity. It is a statement of genuine concern about a problem behavior from one person to another. To convince another to change his or her behavior, you need to indicate a legitimate feeling about its effect on your life.

To say, "I am outraged that you are three minutes late for our meeting after we've discussed the importance of punctuality..." would make that situation laughable. It is better to use a word that expresses how you really feel, such as annoyed. This makes your whole message congruent and therefore more believable to the person whose behavior you want to change.

Avoid Using "Victim" Words The primary goal of assertion is to change another person's problem behavior. Words such as hurt, disappointed, and let down are not focused on that purpose. These words have a tendency to result in people feeling guilty instead of enabling them to change their behavior. "I feel hurt," for example, seems directed toward letting the other person know that he or she did not meet your expectations. The behavior change you want then becomes secondary.

Describe The Impact Their Behavior

The third component of the three-part assertion message is a description of the negative effect the problem behavior has on you. This is another piece of information you need to tell a person whose behavior is affecting your life in a negative way. Even when you describe the problem behavior itself accurately, if you don't communicate the problem that behavior is causing you in a way that helps the other person understand the negative impact the behavior has on your life, he or she is not as likely to change the problem behavior.

In developing the "negative effect" component of the three-part assertion message, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Specify the effect as concretely as possible.
2. State the effect on your life.
3. Avoid using reasons.
4. Avoid exaggerating the effect.
5. Avoid using an effect that "sounds good" but isn't true.

Each of these guidelines is elaborated below.

Specify the Effect as Concretely as Possible People are not easily persuaded to change their behavior. Their openness to change (other than in response to a threat of punishment) usually depends upon your ability to convince them that their behavior is somehow affecting your life in a negative way. The best way to do this is to state, as concretely as possible, what the effect is. Concrete and tangible effects usually involve your time, property, money, or health. Some ways to "measure" the effects on your life of someone else's behavior are in terms of what that behavior costs you, such as:

- Additional time spent ("I have to take longer to complete my work.")
- Increased expenditures ("I can't keep within my budget.")
- Damaged health ("I have an allergy and can hardly breathe.")

State the Effect on Your Life Unless you show the other person how your own life is directly affected by what he or she does, the other will probably not be motivated to change the behavior. Instead, the conversation will usually be diverted from your assertion to an argument about whether or not the effect really bothers you.

If the effect is on your life or work or the unit for which you are responsible, the other person will usually see that as an effect on you. Generally, you should avoid stating an effect on someone else. Examples of stating an effect on someone else are:

- "...because Ralph has a more difficult time writing his reports."
- "...because you won't meet your deadlines."

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- "...because Ralph has a more difficult time writing his reports."
- "...because you won't meet your deadlines."

"...because it disturbs George's sleep."

Avoid Using Reasons Explaining why you are upset about someone's behavior, rather than how it affects you, does not help persuade the other person to change the behavior. The other still might not see that his or her behavior makes any major, concrete difference in your life. For example, when another is repeatedly late for staff meetings, you might correctly assert: "When you are late for staff meetings, as with the meeting today, I feel annoyed, because I then need to take extra time to bring you up to date on material you missed." Using reasons of the negative effect decreases the effectiveness of the assertion message by obscuring the negative effect. Some reasons might be:

"...because knowing this material is important for your job."

"...because I can't be responsible for always keeping you up to date."

Avoid Using an Effect That "Sounds Good" but Isn't True Many people are strongly tempted to ensure the success of their assertion by making it stronger than it actually is. Their belief is usually that "my negative effect probably isn't good enough."

Do not search for the "best" effect. The more you try to increase the stakes, the more you will decrease the effectiveness of your message. Instead, determine the real effect on your life and state. Assertion generally works because of its simple honesty - one human being telling another, clearly and without a hidden agenda, about a specific behavior that is troublesome and how it affects his or her life. Most people respond to this sincere, straightforward approach.

Including Agreement and Examples People usually react defensively when someone confronts them about misbehavior. This defensive reaction (i.e. "I didn't do it") is natural and can therefore be expected. One way to diminish this natural defensive tendency is to mention a prior agreement (that the person made with you) about the problem behavior.

To include the agreement, you can add the phrase "as we agreed" or something similar to the assertion message. This will probably help the other recognize the facts of the situation more quickly. It need only be mentioned the first time the assertion message is sent to the other.

Another way to help diminish the other's defensiveness is to give an example of the kind of problem behavior you are talking about. Specific examples will help keep the situation being discussed in a clear perspective. Some ways to include examples are:

"...such as this morning, when..."

"...for example, the situation with Fred yesterday."

Message Sending

Push Back Response

After a defending assertion message has been thought out and carefully worded, it is important to rehearse the message. Arrange an appropriate time and place to deliver it to the other who is infringing on you and be prepared because the other person won't like hearing it. People are uncomfortable with criticism and being asserted to is usually perceived as criticism. Thus the common response to assertion is to push back or defend. The other person will get upset, justify the actions, disagree with you about agreements, and in other ways fend off the perceived attack.

The sequence shown below is followed when delivering the defending assertion message. It is designed to manage the other's defensiveness as constructively as possible.

1. Send the assertion, or "I," message
("When you ____ I feel ____ because ____").
2. Silence (wait for a defensive response).
3. Reflective listen to the other's defensiveness.
4. Recycle the above three steps as often as needed until the other person is no longer defensive and is able to recommit to the original agreement.
5. Express appreciation for the solution.
6. Arrange a follow-up meeting as appropriate.

Emotional Energy

When sending an assertion message, it is important for you to remember to reflectively listen to the other's response, since that will help reduce defensiveness and lower his or her high energy level. Likewise, it is important for you to remember to re-send the assertion message after reflective listening, since the message will have a greater effect now that the other's "emotional energy" has been lowered by the reflective listening (that is, the other will hear the message more completely). Figure 3 illustrates the use of assertion and reflective listening skills to lower the other's emotional energy" during the assertion process. You will be able to pinpoint the exact timing to re-assert when you get a "yes" response from the other.

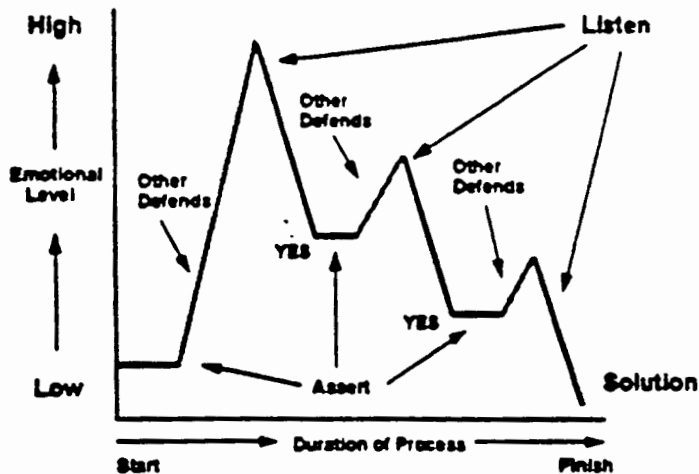


Fig. 3. Lowering emotional energy through assertion and reflective listening.

Altering the Three-Part Assertion Process

There are circumstances in which you should consider altering the assertion process. These include:

- When you provide additional information after which you return to the assertion process.
- When the other offers you an acceptable solution after which you express appreciation.
- When you receive new information from the other. In this case, you may:
 - modify you own position
 - problem solve.
- When the other brings up an irrelevant topic. In this case, you would listen to the content and then return to the original focus.
- When the other persists in treating you inhumanely. In this case, you will alter the message or end the conversation.
- When you move to problem solving because the other refuses to modify his or her behavior.

Physical Components of Assertion

In assertion it is essential that your body language be congruent with your verbal messages. With both your words and physical components, you are wanting to communicate that the issue is important to you and that you want both yourself and the other party to attempt to deal with the issue now.

Listed below are a number of factors that contribute to the overall effectiveness of an assertion. In sending an assertion message, you should consider these carefully to be sure they support your intended message.

- Eye contact - Direct, concentrated eye contact that communicates: "This is important to me."
- Posture - Lean slightly toward the other, with a posture that communicates the seriousness of the message.
- Gestures - Should support the force of the communication.
- Facial expression - Needs to be congruent with the message.
- Voice - Appropriate tone, rate, volume and inflection should be used.
- timing and location - Select to ensure privacy and freedom from interruption.
- Content of message - Two or three-part "I message" rather than "you message." Reflective listen to responses.

Assertion Difficulties

Some common difficulties in using three-part assertion messages are:

- Undershooting or overshooting - reporting a mild feeling of "upset" when "furious" actually fits the situation or reporting a strong feeling when a mild one would be more appropriate.
- Sender too much in grips of anger - the level of anger is too high to reflective listen effectively.
- Hit and run - sending a single message and stopping.
- Forgetting to reflective listen - not remembering to reflective listen to the other's defensive response.
- Forgetting to reassert after reflective listening - not remembering to send the message a second and third time.
- Repetition - sending exactly the same message over again after the second assertion.
- Not asserting directly to the source - sending the message to a friend when another is the infringing party.

Handling Difficult Assertion Defenses

In some situations, the other responds to an assertion message in a nonverbal way, offering no words to which to reflective listen. In each of these cases, you need to

reflective listen not to the words but to what you observe in the other's behavior - e.g., silence, leaving, disgust, crying, or laughter.

- When the other is silent:
 - "I can see you're really overcome by what I've said."
 - "You're so jarred right now you can't think of anything to say."
 - "I've sort of wiped you out right now."
- When the other leaves:
 - "You're so upset by this that you're walking out."
 - "You really want to get away from me right now."
 - "You're so concerned about what I've said that you're leaving."
- When the other looks disgusted:
 - "It seems to you as if I'm making a big thing out of nothing."
 - "I really seem thin-skinned to you."
 - "It's as if I'm making a mountain out of a molehill."
 - "You think I've got a lot of nerve bringing this up when I've got my faults, too."
- When the other cries:
 - "This is really upsetting for you."
 - "You're feeling extremely hurt by this."
 - "I've really embarrassed you."
 - "My message brought a lot of pain for you."
- When the other laughs:
 - "This all seems pretty silly to you."
 - "I appear pretty funny to you."
 - "You seem to find my concerns quite amusing."

Listening to these more difficult responses will often result in re-engagement by the other person and proceed to a successful resolution of the assertion problem.

Conclusion

Assertion is a life task insofar as it is essential for fulfilling your needs and building your self-esteem. By asserting to others you increase the likelihood that you will both fulfill your commitments. Asserting in this way will strengthen your relationships with these other people. You will be more likely to maintain the integrity of your rights and your personal space. As such it is a core communication skill.

The assertion process we endorse is one in which agreements are made, agreements are monitored, confrontation meetings are used, and, as a last resort, decisions to end relationships are considered. To confront another successfully requires the three part assertion message. The message format we endorse focuses on the other person's actual behavior and the real consequences of that behavior, "When you ____, I feel ____ because ____." These messages avoid judging or blaming the other person as much as possible. They are as clean as possible.

The assertion model and three part message format preserves the integrity of both parties and keeps responsibility for acting where it belongs. People who engage in these processes are held accountable for their actions and learn what it means to commit to do something.

It isn't easy to assert to other people, even with the use of the skills we have described here. Each time you assert yourself, it is likely you will get a defensive response. People don't like to be held accountable and usually don't handle this sort of thing well. It is essential that each time you assert to someone, you listen to their responses.