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DEVELOPING ASSERTIVENESS

It's not always easy to identify truly assertive behavior. This is because there is a fine line between assertiveness and aggression. Some definitions are helpful when trying to separate the two:

- Assertiveness is based on balance. It requires being forthright about your wants and needs while still considering the rights, needs, and wants of others. When you are assertive, you ask for what you want but you don't necessarily get it.
- Aggressive behavior is based on winning. It requires that you do what is in your own best interest without regard for the rights, needs, feelings or desires of others. When you are aggressive, you take what you want regardless, and you don't usually ask.

Being assertive is not necessarily easy, but it is a skill that can be learned. Developing your assertiveness starts with a good understanding of who you are and a belief in the value you bring. Assertiveness helps to build on that self-confidence and provides many other benefits for improving your relationships at work and in other areas of your life as well. In general, assertive people:

- Get to "win-win" more easily – they see the value in their opponent and in his/her position, and can quickly find common ground.
- Are better problem solvers – they feel empowered to do whatever it takes to find the best solution.
- Are less stressed – they know they have personal power and they don't feel threatened or victimized when things don't go as planned or expected.
- Are doers – they get things done because they know they can.

When you act assertively you act fairly and with empathy. The power you use comes from your self-assurance and not from intimidation or bullying. When you treat others with such fairness and respect, you get that same treatment in return. You are well liked and people see you as a leader and someone they want to work with.

Developing Your Assertiveness

Some people are naturally more assertive than others. If your disposition tends more towards being either passive or aggressive, you need to work on the following skills:

- Value yourself and your rights
- Understand that your rights, thoughts, feelings, needs and desires are just as important as everyone else's. But remember they are not more important than anyone else's, either.
- Recognize your rights and protect them.
- Believe you deserve to be treated with respect and dignity at all times.
- Stop apologizing for everything.
- Identify your needs and wants, and ask for them to be satisfied
- Don't wait for someone to recognize what you need (you might wait forever!)
- Understand that to perform to your full potential, your needs must be met.
- Find ways to get your needs met without sacrificing others' needs in the process.
- Acknowledge that people are responsible for their own behavior
- Don't make the mistake of accepting responsibility for how people react to your assertive statements (e.g. anger, resentment). You can only control yourself.
- As long as you are not violating someone else's needs, then you have the right to say or do what you want.
- Express negative thoughts and feelings in a healthy and positive manner

- Allow yourself to be angry, but always be respectful.
- Do say what's on your mind, but do it in a way that protects the other person's feelings.
- Control your emotions.
- Stand up for yourself and confront people who challenge you and/or your rights.
- Receive criticism and compliments positively
- Accept compliments graciously.
- Allow yourself to make mistakes and ask for help.
- Accept feedback positively – be prepared to say you don't agree but do not get defensive or angry.
- Learn to say "No" when you need to
- Know your limits and what will cause you to feel taken advantage of.
- Know that you can't do everything or please everyone and learn to be OK with that.
- Go with what is right for you.
- Suggest an alternative for a win-win solution.

Assertive Communication Techniques

There are a variety of ways to communicate assertively. These can easily be adapted to any situation you are facing.

- **I statements:** Use "I want.", "I need." or "I feel." to convey basic assertions. I feel strongly that we need to bring in a third party to mediate this disagreement.
- **Empathy:** First, recognize how the other person views the situation- I understand you are having trouble working with Arlene. Then, express what you need - ...however, this project needs to be completed by Friday. Let's all sit down and come up with a plan to get it done.
- **Escalation:** This type of assertiveness is necessary when your first attempts are not successful in getting your needs met. The technique involves getting more and more firm as time goes on. It may end in you telling the person what you will do next if you do not receive satisfaction. Remember though, regardless of the consequences you give, you may not get what you want in the end. John, this is the third time this week I've had to speak to you about arriving late. If you are late one more time this month, I will activate the disciplinary process.
- **Ask for More Time:** Sometimes, you just need to put off saying anything. You might be too emotional or you might really not know what you want. Be honest and tell the person you need a few minutes to compose your thoughts. Dave, your request has caught me off guard. I'll get back to you within the half hour.
- **Change Your Verbs:** Use 'won't' instead of 'can't'; Use 'want' instead of 'need'; Use 'choose to' instead of 'have to'; Use 'could' instead of 'should'.
- **Broken Record:** Prepare ahead of time the message you want to convey - I cannot take on any more projects right now. During the conversation, keep restating your message using the same language over and over again. Don't relent. Eventually the person is likely to realize that you really mean what you are saying.
- **Scripting:** This technique involves preparing your responses using a four-pronged approach that describes - The event: tell the other person exactly how you see the situation or problem. Jacob, the production costs this month are 23% higher than average. You didn't give me any indication of this, which meant that I was completely surprised by the news.
- **Your feelings:** describe how you feel about the situation and express your emotions clearly. This frustrates me and makes me feel like you don't understand or appreciate how important financial controls are in the company.
- **Your needs:** tell the other person what you need so they don't have to guess. I need you to be honest with me and let me know when we start going significantly over budget on anything.
- **The consequences:** describe the positive outcome if your needs are fulfilled. I'm here to help you and support you in any way I can. If you trust me, then together we can turn this around.

Once you are clear about what you want to say and express, it is much easier to actually do it.

The Benefits of Assertiveness

1. **Your relationships will improve.** Researchers who study marriage and relationships have found that assertiveness is one of the key attributes that both partners need in order for a relationship to be

strong and healthy. If one person feels they aren't getting their needs met, resentment for their partner ensues (even if it's the person's fault for not letting their needs to be known).

- 2. You'll feel less stressed.** Studies have shown that individuals who undergo assertiveness training experience less stress than individuals who don't. When you're assertive, you say no to requests that would otherwise spread you too thin. You also lose the anxiety and worry that comes with being overly pre-occupied with what others will think of your choices/preferences/opinions. You feel in control of your life.
- 3. You'll gain confidence.** When you're assertive, you have an internal locus of control. Your attitude and behavior are governed by your own actions or decisions, not the actions and decisions of others. Knowing that you can make changes to improve your own situation is a big-time confidence booster.
- 4. You'll become less resentful.** As you become more assertive, your relationships will become more enjoyable. You'll no longer have to swallow the bitter pill of resentment when you say yes to a request or decide to do a favor for someone. When you do something, you do it because you actually want to do it, or you're okay with doing it as part of the natural give and take of relationships.

Assertiveness in Action: Once you have the mindset, here's how to actually start being assertive.

- 1. Start small.** If the thought of standing up for yourself makes you downright nauseous, start with low-risk situations. For example, if you order a burger, and the waiter brings you a grilled cheese, let him know the mistake and send it back. If you're out running errands on the weekend with your wife and are trying to decide on a place to eat, don't just automatically defer, but chime in as to where you'd like to go. Once you feel comfortable in these low-risk situations, start upping the ante little by little.
- 2. Say no.** In your quest to become more assertive, "no" is your best friend. Start saying no more often. Does a request conflict with a personal boundary? Say no. At first, saying no may make you very anxious, but eventually it will come to feel good, and actually quite freeing. Will some people be disappointed when you turn them down? Probably. But remember that as long as you express your needs in a considerate way, you're not responsible for their reaction. No need to feel guilty for treating yourself like their equal.
- 3. Be simple and direct.** When you're asserting yourself, less is more. Keep your requests and preferences simple and direct. No need for elaborate explanations (see below) or meandering wind-ups. Just politely say your piece.
- 4. Use "I" statements.** When making a request or expressing disapproval use "I" statements. Instead of saying, "You're so inconsiderate. You have no idea how hard my day at the office was. Why would you ask me to do all these chores?" say, "I'm exhausted today. I understand you want these things done, but I'm not going to be able to get to them until tomorrow." When crafting your "I" statements, be careful not to embed accusations or try to interpret the person's behavior. Don't apologize or feel guilty for expressing a need/want/right. Unless you're asking for something that's patently unreasonable, there's no reason to feel guilty or ashamed for expressing a need or want. So quit apologizing when you make a request. Just politely ask for it and wait to see how the other person responds.
- 5. Use confident body language and tone.** Look confident when making a request or stating a preference. Stand up straight, lean in a bit, smile or keep a neutral facial expression, and look the person in the eye. Also be sure to speak clearly and loudly enough to make your point. Passive folks will tend to whisper and mumble when making their opinions or needs known; that will only serve to frustrate the other person.
- 6. You don't have to justify/explain your opinion/choices.** When you make a decision or state an opinion that others don't agree with, one way in which they'll try to exert control over you is to demand that you offer a justification for your choice/opinion/behavior. If you can't come up with a good enough reason (in the other person's eyes) you're supposed to go along with what they want. Nice Guys — with their need to please — feel obligated to give an explanation or justification for every single choice they make, even if the other person isn't asking for it. They want to make sure that everyone is okay with their choices — essentially asking for permission to live their life the way they want. Don't operate like that.
- 7. Rehearse.** Play out the scenario in which you plan to assert yourself. Sure, it's goofy, but practice what and how you'll say in front of a mirror. It helps.

