

Assertiveness and You

by Marcia Eager, LCSW, CEAP & Vivien Bergl, LCSW, CEAP
Solutions EAP Coordinators

Assertive vs. Aggressive

What is the difference between being assertive and aggressive? How do we know when we are negotiating or being passive? Why am I accused of being aggressive when I think I am being assertive?

The two most important tools to assertive communication are listening and clearly stating your position. Good listening skills include hearing with your ears, seeing with your eyes and sensing with your intuition.



The goal of assertive communication is to have a “win-win” outcome. The assertive solution is when the rights of those involved are respected, recognized and employed when reaching a compromise.

Nonassertive (passive) behavior is the withdrawing from a situation. When a person reacts to a situation by being passive they deny their own feelings and allow others to choose for them, which can then lead to guilt, anger and frustration. Some of the language related to a passive approach “Oh, its ok.” “My ideas aren’t very good anyway so you go ahead and do it”. Body language also conveys the nonassertive message – imagine the person standing in front of you, shoulders hunched over, arms tightly crossed and no direct eye contact - does this person make you think they are going to stand up for themselves?

On the other hand the person displaying aggressive behavior is overreacting emotionally to the situation and may be misrepresenting the facts and building up their own ego at the expense of another person. This results in a win-lose situation and can ultimately result in a lose-lose situation. Aggressive behavior necessarily means putting the other down, taking control of a situation when it isn’t called for (like not allowing others to choose for themselves, and choosing for them). This behavior is usually regarded as hostile, manipulative and controlling. People tend to avoid an aggressive communicator without explanation. Some of the language used by an aggressive communicator can be “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” or “You’re crazy”.

Assertiveness in the Workplace

Did you know that out of the three behaviors (non-assertive, aggressive and assertive), assertive behavior is the healthiest? It implies that you know the subject and have ideas but are also open to others thoughts and ideas. What it says is this is who I am, this is what I think, feel and want. It involves open and direct communication from both parties. Assertive communication results in the mutual satisfaction at achieving the desired goal. “I”

statements are important to clear respectful communication. It shows respect for the other person involved. When you are using “I” statements you are not putting the other person down or attacking



their self-esteem. This only serves to advance your cause. It also states clearly how you feel about yourself.

The body language associated with assertive behavior involves direct eye contact, appearing interested in what the other person has to say and not getting into the other person's space. Keep your gestures relaxed and conversational. Use your normal conversational tone of voice. Shouting or pouting will not get the appropriate message across. Speak clearly and with conviction.

Imagine you have been assigned to a team given the task of developing a new program. There are six members to the team. Everyone agrees what the goal is and then you settle down to develop the plan to reach the goal. One member of the team has very different ideas about how to go about achieving the plan. She begins to interrupt people when they are talking and telling team members that they don't know what they are talking about. People are beginning to get very quiet in the meetings and some are no longer showing up. The project is about to stall and not meet the deadline. Is the one team member being assertive or aggressive? Are the other team members being passive or conciliatory?

Now take that same scenario but instead of the team members quietly getting angry or frustrated they begin to speak up. The discussion develops about teamwork and respect for co-workers. Someone may gently remind others about not interrupting each other. Everyone's ideas are put on the table and the project moves ahead with efficiency and creativity. Which team would you rather be on?

A co-worker overhears you on the phone with a customer and comes to you as soon as you hang up the phone. He starts shouting at you that your approach is all wrong. It's no wonder your sales are in the dumpster and you should do it the way he does. He does not let the customer off the phone until the customer agrees with him. What is your response? Should your response be different? How would you like this interaction to be different?

Think about the co-workers you trust and go to for consultation. How do they respond to you? What is your style in the workplace? Do you aggressively approach situations you are involved in and then wonder why people do not respond to you positively? Do you let others tell you what to do and then sit at your desk seething internally? Do you then wonder why people seem to be irritated or frustrated with you? Or do you listen to the opinion of others, make your own decisions and respect the value of your co-workers?

Assertiveness In Your Personal Life

Consider how you would respond in the following scenarios.

#1 - You go into a store to make a purchase and you have questions regarding the item. You wait for a salesperson to be free. You spot two salespeople talking and approach them to ask your question. I was recently in a store and was next in line to be waited on. I found an item that was just what I wanted, but it was wrapped with a paper with numbers on it. I wanted to ask if it needed to be measured or was ok the way it was. I waited for one of the salespeople to be free and proceeded to go to her and ask my question. In my mind I thought that was the best way to approach the problem. If I did not have to wait I could move on and if the item needed to be measured I would wait in line. When I approached the salesperson I was told in no uncertain terms that she now had to help the other sales person and then proceeded to give me a lecture on the virtue of patience. I waited for her to finish helping her co-worker and when she approached her I told her I was just asking a question and was happy to wait my

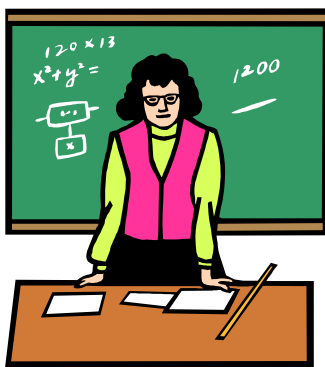


turn if necessary. When we finished our transaction I told her I hoped her day would get better. I don't know how her day started out, but I felt I did nothing to create her angst. I did not want to get into an argument with her, but did want her to know I would not take that kind of treatment from her. If I had chosen an aggressive response we could have gotten into an argument, I could have reported her to the manager and everyone would have been dissatisfied. Had I taken the passive approach I would have left the store, possibly without my item, perhaps saying I was never going to return there again. I might have thought about it for days after thinking up ways in my mind to do it differently. Being assertive can finish the event right then and there allowing you to go on and not drag the event along with you for days.

#2 - You and your partner have agreed to divide up the chores around the house and how often they will be done. You both have agreed to rinse off dishes and put them in the dishwasher and not let them sit in the sink. You come home from work three days in a row and find the same dishes sitting in the sink. How are you going to handle the situation? Will you rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher and remember this event for future reference? Will you wait for your partner to come home or call them at work to express your anger about them not carrying their load and how could they do this to you?



#3 - Your child's teacher wants to speak to you about your child's behavior towards others in the class. She has concerns about his aggressive behavior. You immediately go on the defense and start attacking her teaching abilities and lack of control in the classroom. If you have not established a relationship with your child's teacher at the beginning of the school year and you react to the teachers concerns this way both you and your child may be in for a rough year. Understanding the teacher's style will help communication occur positively for both. Also think back to your experiences in school. How did your parents respond to your teachers? How did this affect your relationship with your teachers?



Thinking about the way you approach situations and working towards being assertive can only improve your life. Passive or non-assertive behavior creates frustration, anger and disrespect for all involved. Aggressive behavior alienates others, creates frustration, bitterness and defensiveness for all parties concerned.

Win-Win Negotiations

"In a successful negotiation, everyone wins. The objective should be agreement, not victory."

Being aggressive when buying a car or a house may work but, when you have to negotiate the resolution of a situation at work (for example) aggressiveness usually does not create a positive situation. There are some guidelines that are important for successful negotiations in the work place. This week we will discuss ways to respond to a conflict that will result in a positive outcome. Entering into a negotiation prepared is important for a successful outcome. Some things to think about in preparing are listed below.

1. **Goals** – know what you want to get out of the negotiation and think about what the other person may want.
2. **Know yourself** – Do you want to get it over with in a hurry or do you want to win at all costs? What is your style of negotiation?

3. **Exchanges** – What do you have that you are willing to trade? What might the other person have that you would be willing to trade for?
4. **Alternatives** - If you cannot reach an agreement with the other person what are your gains and losses? What alternative might the other person have?
5. What is the **relationship** between you and the other person? If you have an adversarial relationship how will you get to a win-win negotiation? Are there hidden issues between the parties involved?
6. **Be trustworthy** – A very real part of successful negotiation is honesty and respect. If you are not honest, do not honor confidentiality or are disrespectful to the other person or the process you will not have successes in the negotiation process.
7. **Listen** – Sometimes we are so involved in our own dialogue or goals we miss an opportunity to reach a successful outcome because we do not listen to the other person.
8. **Consequences**- what are the consequences for your win or loss? What are the consequences for the other party in the win or loss column?
9. **Power** – Be aware of the power in the situation. Who has the external power – who controls resources, who stands to lose the most, how much power does the other person have to provide what you want? Do not forget about your personal power or the personal power of the other person.
10. **Solutions** – All things considered what compromises can be achieved?



In a negotiation all parties do not get what they wanted to get when entering into the negotiation, but they can end feeling positive and successful. When that happens there is less likelihood of retaliation or resentment. If this is someone you will have to interact with in the future a win-win situation will make it easier to negotiate with in the future.

If you would like to talk to someone about this or any other issues, please call **Solutions Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** at **800-526-3485** for free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling and referral when needed.

www.solutions-eap.com