

Simple Assertiveness Techniques

There are many techniques to develop assertive behavior. Most are based on 'the three-line assertion message', in which:

1. you understand and summarize the facts of the situation
2. you indicate your feelings towards the situation
3. you state your requirements, reasons and benefits to the other party, if appropriate.

Assertion normally comprises this three line assertive message. This technique enables you to confront the other person with your concern without being personally aggressive, but it is not easy and demands skilful conversation control. For example, you might say:

1. ***"When you....." (state facts)***
2. ***"I feel uncomfortable" (state feelings)***
3. ***"I would like.....(state requirements).....in this way we will be able to work together more productively because....." (benefits to the other party)***

Here the person relates the behavior that causes offence, says how he/she feels and then gives a reason. Note there are no such attributions as *'You are deliberately annoying me'*, there are no swear words, there are no put-downs of the other person. The emphasis is on indicating how you feel and thereby seeking to gain a positive rather than an aggressive response from the other person.

Here are some more guidelines for assertive delivery

- Acknowledge and be honest about your own feelings to yourself
- Adopt new positive inner dialogue for situations where you need to be more assertive
- Be clear, specific and direct in what you say
- If necessary, keep repeating your message if you encounter objections
- If necessary ask for clarification if you are uncertain about something
- If necessary, acknowledge diversion tactics, then again repeat your message
- Adopt appropriate body language to back up your assertion
- Keep calm and stick to the point
- Always respect the rights of the other person

And always ask yourself these questions

- How can I express my message more clearly?
- How can I be more specific about what I have to say?
- Am I likely to have to repeat my message? Will I feel comfortable doing this?
- Am I prepared to respond to their red herrings and at the same time stick to my message?
- What body language will I use to back up my message?

How to give praise and criticism

1. Comment on specific actions. For example, *'You handled that awkward customer very well by listening to her argument instead of interrupting'* rather than, *'You're quite good with difficult people, aren't you?'* The second comment was too general, it didn't give the other person specific feedback about what she/he did well. Another example is *'You missed the deadline for that report'*, rather than, *'You're absolutely hopeless at managing your time.'* Again the second statement is too general and subjective. *'Absolutely hopeless'* is not a good starting point for developing specific time management behaviors.
2. Follow this up with reasons for your comments. This is helpful whether the comments are positive or negative because we need to know what we are being praised for if we are to know how to use it as helpful feedback: *'You missed the deadline for that report, probably because you have been spending more time on telephone sales than we planned. Perhaps we should discuss how you should allocate your time in future?'*
3. Don't use praise as a way of manipulating people into doing something for you, e. g. *'You are the most hardworking member of the department and I really appreciate the effort you put in for the meeting this afternoon. Perhaps you could just write up the minutes for me?'* This manipulation makes the praise insincere.
4. When giving criticism, seek solutions, rather than commenting on somebody's personality. *'You're getting far too many complaints from members of the public recently. What the heck's the matter with you?'* is very unhelpful. Instead say: *'You seem to be getting complaints from members of the public in your section at the moment. Do you know what the problem is?'*
5. Above all, avoid public put-downs, or criticism in situations which will cause embarrassment.

Practice your assertiveness

Consider typical situations at work which require assertive behavior and practice your approach. Typical situations might include:

- giving criticism to a close colleague
- having to refuse to accept additional work
- asking help from a notoriously 'difficult' colleague.

Work through the following steps.

1. Explain the situation to a friend or colleague, briefing him/her about whoever you will be talking to.
2. Use role-play to talk through the situation. Make your points clearly. In this conversation the other person will respond as the appropriate character.
3. Ask the other person what you did well, and what you could improve. If it will help, talk through the situation again.
4. Finally, swap roles - this will give you the opportunity of picking up other ideas from the other person. At the same time you will experience the other side of the assertive approach.