



Introduction

Assertiveness is an elusive behaviour, because as much as the persons behaviour and thoughts are important, so is the social contexts, organisational culture, age, gender , position, and experience.

There is a difference between assertiveness and aggressive, but the line is generally wielded by the beholder, a perfectly assertive statement can be mistaken for being aggressive if the context is not right or if the demand is not perceived to be fair. What matters most, like in any communication situation, is the timing, tone, and non-verbal cues of the delivery more than the content of the statement.

For example, it commonly heard of bosses dumping work before an employee goes for vacation. It is generally said that the boss is being aggressive. However, how the employee responds to this situation will determine, if the employee is passive-aggressive, aggressive or assertive.

A classic passive aggressive response is to accept the work without rational and submissively, but being irritated, frustrated and angry, and then brood about it throughout the day and throughout the vacation, or worse is to take the work to the vacation.

Now conversely, the extreme aggressive response would be, the person would make a scene, fight out the demand irrationally and throw a tantrum on everybody and finally burn unnecessary bridges and create an unprofessional brand for themselves.

Now the response of an assertive person would be to first sort the work, priorities the work, and then rationally lay out the time frame and highlight the critical work that has to be completed and agree to complete it before going for the vacation, and to complete the rest immediately upon return, additionally, asking a colleague to put in some extra hours, that you would return the favour once you return from vacation. Once these demands are expressed to the boss, the work is accepted and the expectation is clear for both parties.

However, a boss who is passive-aggressive would generally accept this rational approach, but an aggressive boss may not respond to these demands positively, however that is where assertiveness become more tricky, it's about politely standing ground, all the while trying to accommodate the other persons demand, without infringing your own reality.

To succeed in being assertive:

- it take **practice** to remain rational and in control of your verbal and non-verbal communication,
- **discipline** to be polite and open to others reality and demands;
- and **wisdom** to discern between assertiveness and aggressiveness, and also to discern the actual need to be assertive



A word of caution, remember, the spectrum of assertiveness to aggressiveness is influenced greatly by culture, social perceptions and traditional roles. Which means, a perfectly assertive response in a work situation in one company may not be acceptable in another company, where you may be branded as an aggressive person. Hence it is very important to understand your situation, and adapt your assertiveness style according to it, because your aim is not to be right or win, rather it is to uphold your rights without infringing yours or others by expressing your rights.

There is no One-Size-Fit-All approach to assertiveness. But on an emotional, behavioural, cognitive and feeling level, it is the same, it comes from the place that you value yourself, your time, your talents, your experience, your space and your aspirations. Many a times, you are pushed over by others, because you do not express verbally or nonverbally that you value yourself. Without you first valuing yourself, others will not value you. Without you first expressing your rights, others will not understand your rights.

Self esteem/self worth and assertiveness have a directly proportional relationship. Which mean, an increase in one will increase the other, conversely, decrease in one will decrease the other.

What Is Assertiveness?

Dorland's Medical Dictionary defines assertiveness as:

a form of behavior characterized by a confident declaration or affirmation of a statement without need of proof; this affirms the person's rights or point of view without either aggressively threatening the rights of another (assuming a position of dominance) or submissively permitting another to ignore or deny one's rights or point of view.

It is not always easy to identify truly assertive behaviour. This is because there is a fine line between assertiveness and aggression, and people can often confuse the two. For this reason, it is useful to define the two behaviours so that we can clearly separate them:

- **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're assertive, you are self-assured and draw power from this to get your point across firmly, fairly and with empathy.
- **Aggressive behavior is based on winning.** You do what is in your own best interest without regard for the rights, needs, feelings, or desires of other people. When you are aggressive, the power you use is selfish. You may come across as pushy or even bullying. You take what you want, often without asking

Assertiveness is a social skill that relies heavily on effective communication while simultaneously respecting the thoughts and wishes of others. People who are assertive clearly and respectfully communicate their wants, needs, positions, and boundaries to others. There's no question of where they stand, no matter what the topic.

From a cognitive standpoint, assertive people experience fewer anxious thoughts, even when under stress. From a behavioral standpoint, assertive people are firm without being rude.



They react to positive and negative emotions without becoming aggressive or resorting to passivity.

Individuals who are high in assertiveness don't shy away from defending their points of view or goals, or from trying to influence others to see their side. They are also open to both compliments and constructive criticism. Assertiveness is often associated with higher self-esteem and confidence. People can improve their assertiveness through practical exercises and experience

Assertiveness is the quality of being self-assured and confident without being aggressive. In the field of psychology and psychotherapy, it is a learnable skill and mode of communication.

Wolpe's belief was that a person could not be both assertive and anxious at the same time, and thus being assertive would inhibit anxiety. The goals of assertiveness training include:

- increased awareness of personal rights
- differentiation between non-assertiveness and assertiveness
- differentiation between passive-aggressiveness and aggressiveness
- learning both verbal and non-verbal assertiveness skills.

As a communication style and strategy, assertiveness is thus distinguished from both aggression and passivity. How people deal with personal boundaries, their own and those of other people, helps to distinguish between these three concepts.

Passive communicators do not defend their own personal boundaries and thus allow aggressive people to abuse or manipulate them through fear. Passive communicators are also typically not likely to risk trying to influence anyone else.

Aggressive people do not respect the personal boundaries of others and thus are liable to harm others while trying to influence them.

A person communicates assertively by overcoming fear of speaking his or her mind or trying to influence others, but doing so in a way that respects the personal boundaries of others. Assertive people are also willing to defend themselves against aggressive people

Characteristics of Assertive people

Assertive people tend to have the following characteristics:

- They feel free to express their feelings, thoughts, and desires.
- They are "also able to initiate and maintain comfortable relationships with [other] people"
- They know their rights.
- They have control over their anger. This does not mean that they repress this feeling; it means that they control anger and talk about it in a reasoning manner.



- "Assertive people ... are willing to compromise with others, rather than always wanting their own way ... and tend to have good self-esteem"
- "Assertive people enter friendships from an 'I count my needs. I count your needs' position"

The Benefits of Being Assertive

One of the main benefits of being assertive is that it can help you to become more self-confident, as you gain a better understanding of who you are and the value that you offer.

Assertiveness provides several other benefits that can help you both in your workplace and in other areas of your life. In general, assertive people:

- Make great managers. They get things done by treating people with fairness and respect, and are treated by others the same way in return. This means that they are often well-liked and seen as leaders that people want to work with.
- Negotiate successful "win-win" solutions. They are able to recognize the value of their opponent's position and can quickly find common ground with him.
- Are better doers and problem solvers. They feel empowered to do whatever it takes to find the best solution to the problems that they encounter.
- Are less anxious and stressed. They are self-assured and don't feel threatened or victimized when things don't go as planned or as expected.

Conclusion

Being assertive means finding the right balance between passivity (*not assertive enough*) and aggression (*angry or hostile behaviour*). It means having a strong sense of yourself and your value, and acknowledging that you deserve to get what you want. In addition, it means standing up for yourself even in the most difficult situations.

What being assertive doesn't mean is acting in your own interest without considering other people's rights, feelings, desires, or needs – that is aggression.

You can learn to be more assertive over time by identifying your needs and wants, expressing them in a positive way, and learning to say "no" when you need to. You can also use assertive communication techniques to help you to communicate your thoughts and feelings firmly and directly.

It likely won't happen overnight but, by practising these techniques regularly, you will slowly build up the confidence and self-belief that you need to become assertive. You will also likely find that you become more productive, efficient and respected, too.