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What is Assertion?



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What is Assertion?

There are many definitions of the word assertion. Indeed, people often attend assertiveness training to get more of their own way or to be more forceful.

Our view is that assertion is about something quite different:

Assertiveness is a behaviour that seeks to achieve a win-win – a satisfactory outcome for both parties.

When you adopt assertive behaviour you get more of what you want, but only when you acknowledge and give consideration to what the other person wants or needs. It's the paradox of win-win that makes it possible.

If you want to be a success in your personal life, business, career, or anything you choose to mention, you need to be assertive in your communication and take responsibility for your life.

Assertive people are successful because they are considered as authentic, “what you see is what you get,” straight shooters who you can rely on to be honest and forthright – you know where you stand.

Behaving more assertively will increase your happiness in life and you are likely to have a longer life span than someone who is communicating aggressively or passively.

Assertion gives you permission to state your needs clearly and allows you to ask others to acknowledge them. Assertion requires you to listen to others' needs and to acknowledge them.

You need a number of tools and resources to maintain your confidence, feel strong yet flexible, trust in your abilities and work in ways that bring you enjoyment and pleasure in what you do. You need to know you are not a prisoner of events or circumstances

and that you can positively influence and change the world in which you live.

We believe behaving assertively helps you achieve this and so much more. Behaving in an assertive way allows you to focus, and to achieve what is possible, rather than preoccupying yourself with doubt, misgivings and focusing on what you think is not possible.

Three ways of behaving

We can behave in any of three ways:

- aggressively
- non-assertively (sometimes called passive aggression)
- assertively.

We are not our behaviours, even if we are sometimes described as such. No one behaves assertively, aggressively or non-assertively all the time.

People vary their behaviour between all three and are more likely to react aggressively or non-assertively when they feel under pressure or stressed.

There may be certain situations in which you find it more difficult to be assertive, or people who are more difficult to be assertive with. Your assertive behaviour may break down at work, at home or when you are out with friends. It may happen more often with certain types of people e.g. those in authority, people you think are smarter or more competent than you, relatives, or members of the opposite sex.

All three behaviours work and that is why we keep repeating them.

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1. **Aggression**

Aggressive behaviour is when you:

- Stand up for your own rights in such a way that you violate the rights of another.
- Express your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in unsuitable and inappropriate ways, even though you may honestly believe those views to be right.

Aggression enhances your own position at the expense of others and can be used to put another person down. Aggression is based on the belief that your opinions are more important than other people's. It is characterized by blaming other people or outside factors, by showing contempt, and being hostile, attacking or patronizing.

Aggression can sometimes be confused with assertion.

If someone communicates in an aggressive way, such as raising their voice, staring people down, or constantly interrupting, others may remain quiet and acquiescent and give in. The aggression can be perceived as confidence: "you really told them there!" – with such feedback reinforcing the idea that this behaviour is assertive.

If you have been non-assertive and compliant and held back your emotions the dam may burst and you decide, "that's it – enough is enough – no more."

You may, in the first instance, overstep the mark and express all the pent-up emotion by demanding your rights, insisting your needs be met *now*, and communicating in an aggressive way.

If this behaviour succeeds, where your non-assertion in the past did not, this "success," this new-found power, may seduce you into thinking you are being assertive.

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A good example of this was John, who came on one of our assertiveness programmes. After the first day he was so impressed with the material and his new-found assertive skills, he decided to go out for dinner and practise what he had learned from day 1 of the programme.

John pitched up the next day looking all forlorn and thoroughly dejected.

The programme hadn't properly kicked in yet, and I asked him if he'd enjoyed his evening out and whether he had any chance yet to put his new-found learning to use.

"This assertiveness doesn't work for me," he said. "I tried it last night and it was a complete failure. I'm one of those guys who goes in to a crowded bar, shuffles up to the front and tries to order a drink. Invariably I am the very last person served even though other people have arrived long after me."

"It's not only in pubs but also in restaurants, where I'll be the last one to get served despite being there before others."

"Last night I thought I'd change all that. I remembered all that you said about body language, voice control and using assertive language, and it still didn't work."

"I sat down at my table and tried to engage the waitress as she walked by, but she never stopped at my table. She handed out menus to everyone but me; even people who came long after me got the menu first."

"After 10 minutes or so I had had enough. As the waitress walked by I gently held out my hand, stared her down and said, 'Excuse me Miss, but I've been waiting here for about 15 minutes and you've handed out the menu to everyone but me. This is making

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me very annoyed and unless I get my menu straight away and my food even quicker I am going to leave.’

“And you know what? She turned round and said ‘I’m sorry you’re disappointed, sir, but it is your prerogative to do what you want.’

“So I did. I got up and walked out.”

Although John stood up for his needs in no uncertain manner his first interaction with his waitress was hostile and threatening and it was no wonder the conversation resulted in a failure.

“She is very assertive,” people say, “I wouldn’t mess with her or get in her way.” “He’s very assertive and always gets what he wants no matter what.”

When you adopt this behaviour, sometimes you get what you want and, at other times, you will invite opposition and dislike.

Society and some cultures reward aggressive behaviour. Those who are aggressive can succeed. As with assertion, aggression can represent standing up for yourself and your views but at the expense of others. Others seem to admire you for your strength, confidence, and commitment – provided they are not at the receiving end!

2. Non-assertion

Non-assertive behaviour is when you:

- fail to stand up for your rights or do so in such a way that other people can easily disregard them;
- express your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in apologetic, cautious or self-effacing ways; or
- fail to express your views or feelings altogether.

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Submission is based on the belief that your own needs and wants will be seen by others to be less important than their own. Typical examples of submissive behaviour are long, justifying explanations, and putting yourself down whilst attempting to accommodate the needs and views of others.

Non-assertion may appear to be harmless but can equally deny your rights and the opportunity for a win-win. A lack of desire to take responsibility is often the root cause of non-assertive behaviour and can encourage us and others to behave aggressively. It is less dramatic than aggressive behaviour but nevertheless pervasive.

Sandra was an energetic and achievement oriented kind of a lady. She described herself as a “can do” sort of a person, who liked nothing better than to be given an impossible or very difficult job to do, and a straight talker who let people know how she felt.

She expected others to respond in the same way and was often frustrated when they didn’t share the same concern, sense of urgency or commitment. If the job demanded she work harder, she did; if she needed to stay later, she did, and she pulled out all the stops to deliver on her and the company’s promises.

What Sandra found most frustrating and annoying was the reluctance of her staff to take the initiative. She would approach them and agree a commitment to do a job, only to find out too late that the deadlines were not going to be met. Sandra suspected that, despite their apparent agreement, there never was a real intention to comply.

Sandra would first become frustrated, then angry and then those staff involved would feel the sharpness of her tongue:

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“I ask them quite politely: can they do the job, do they know how to do the job and can the job be done in the timescales?

“Everyone says ‘yes’, I even check – ‘are you sure?’, and they still say ‘yes’, so I have to believe them.

“Why don’t they say the time is too tight or I don’t know how to do it, or I need extra help, I’d be only too willing to support them but they keep their heads down and just say yes? No wonder I lose my temper and am aggressive towards them!”

When you adopt non-assertive behaviour you can be at your most manipulative in order to avoid confrontation, rejection, criticism and even praise.

Non-assertion is based on fear, avoidance and, from our experience, is most damaging to our confidence and self-esteem.

3. Assertion

Assertive behaviour is when you:

- stand up for your own rights in a way that does not violate another person’s rights;
- directly express your point of view, say what you want openly and without manipulation; or
- seek to understand and engage with others in a way of genuine mutuality.

It leads to an honest, open and direct expression of our point of view which, at the same time, shows that we understand the other person’s position.

Rebecca was a strong-minded individual, definite about what she wanted. She was never one to hold back on her point of view. She was a caring person who listened and spoke in equal measure and

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was respected for being calm and assured. Such authority and assurance was soon noted and Rebecca found she was repeatedly promoted until she hit the heady heights of the senior management team.

Every Monday morning the team was expected to come in early and take part in the Monday morning meeting to look ahead at the week's opportunities and problems.

Rebecca had to get up extra early to make these meetings, and organize special childcare arrangements as she couldn't take her children to school as she would normally do.

The meetings seemed to have a consistent pattern and, being a newcomer to the team, Rebecca sat back respectfully and observed, participating when appropriate.

The boss would stand up at the start of the meeting and give a 20 minute monologue. He would then invite participation from everyone. The meeting would ramble on directionless, taking as many detours as the number of people who spoke.

Some two hours later, with nothing decided, everyone would shuffle off to their departments to start their morning's work, muttering, and complaining under their breath that the last two hours had been a thorough waste of time.

At the next meeting, after the boss' monologue, Rebecca stood up and calmly asked her boss.

"Brian, I have been to three meetings now and I am not sure what they are trying to achieve. I really want to contribute in a meaningful way and use the time most productively. I feel I can't at the moment so can you set some objectives for these meetings so that I feel it is a good use of my time? And could we put a time limit to it so it's not so open-ended?"

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Brian sat back stunned, as if in shock. The rest of the management team waited for Brian's reply, secretly thinking that this had been one of the finest career limiting speeches they had ever witnessed.

To his everlasting credit Brian hauled himself up to his full height and slowly and deliberately thanked Rebecca for her honesty and forthrightness. The meetings had drifted, he admitted, from their original purpose and he carefully crafted three objectives for the meeting. The meeting then proceeded to take an hour to complete.

That wasn't the end of Rebecca's story. If any of the senior managers went to a meeting they would ask, "I'd like to fully participate but don't think I can unless we have specific objectives. What are they?" And when they ran their own meetings they made sure they had objectives.

Soon it became a part of the culture of that organization to ask this question at every meeting.

Consequently, meetings had greater focus, were more satisfying, decision based and took less time. The biggest pay-off, however, was that the number of meetings decreased by a third in that company.

Rebecca continued at the company, her value and respect enhanced.

Recognizing the three behaviours

Each of the three behavioural types, aggression, non-assertion and assertion, encapsulate a different way of perceiving the world, a different world view.

Let us look at the world view and language patterns of each behavioural type.

Aggression

World view

The world is a hostile place, and the only way to survive is to be stronger and display strength – there are no medals for losers – strike first, the best defence is attack – my needs are important, not so sure about yours.

Best summarized by “I win, you lose.”

Language patterns

- Attacking: “Only *you* could think of something like that!”
- Excessive use of and overemphasis on “I” and “my” statements: “*I’d* like it done *my* way in future because *I’m* paying the bill.”
- Expressing opinion as fact: “The world’s a dangerous place and it’s always going to be like it.”
- Exclusive focus on your needs and disregarding others: “I need it done now so you need to get on with it straight away.”
- Blaming: “It’s your fault we’re in this mess, I said no good would come of it but you wouldn’t listen.”
- Threatening: “If you don’t do that right I can guarantee that I’ll have to take measures you won’t like.”
- Excessive use of “ought,” “must,” “should”: “You must appreciate that we should do it this way – it’s something we all ought to do.”
- Exaggeration: “Everybody would agree that we all need everything in order before we start.”
- Denigrating: “Only a fool would think that could possibly be acceptable.”
- Manipulating: “If you really cared for me you wouldn’t leave me alone like this.”

Non-Assertion

World view

I am not important, my views, needs and wants are not as important as those of other people. I am fearful and anxious about standing up for my needs etc., and if I do stand up for them I am likely to do so in a way that makes it easy for others to override or ignore them. I can stand up for them, however, by being manipulative or making others feel guilty or sorry for me.

Best summarized by “I lose, you win” or “if I lose, you lose too!”

Language patterns

- Tentative and reluctant agreement: “Well maybe I can try.”
- Hinting at doubts: “Well I don’t know if that’s the right thing to do, what would others say?”
- Unwilling to state a preference: “We could go out, or we could stay in or maybe we could get a take away? What do you think?”
- Moaning or complaining: “Why me? It always happens to me.”
- Fishing: “It’s the first time I’ve done something like this, not very good is it?”
- Seeking permission and approval: “Should I really go ahead and should I just be quiet?”
- Self-pity: “Why is it always me that has to tell the kids off?”
- Self-effacing: “I’m no good at something like this, you do it so much better.”
- Suggestions at your expense: “Oh, I’ve said you would help out tomorrow, I know you wouldn’t mind.”
- Long, rambling sentences: “Well you know how it is with that lot . . . they come along and ask you for a favour without even considering whether you want to do it or not . . . well, I tried to explain . . . how come they don’t know that I can’t

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drop everything? . . . and that I might need more notice? . . . well, if they think I'm happy about it they can think again . . . I suppose I should tell them . . . but then they should know shouldn't they? I've a good mind to tell them but they wouldn't listen, would they?"

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World view

I have needs and wants as do others – I have as much right as others to express myself – I am responsible for my own behaviour and its consequences – I can stand up for what I believe without attacking others – I don't have to lose so that others can win. I can ask for what I need, want etc., openly and honestly.

Best summarized by "win, win."

Language patterns

- Ownership of ideas, views and feelings: "This is how I see the situation . . ." "In my opinion/view we need to tackle this first." "When I find myself in this situation I feel hesitant and cautious when putting forward my point of view."
- Stating what you want: "What I'd like/prefer/want/need is to do this with you."
- Focus on behaviour and facts instead of opinions: "I thought when you cheered and complimented Jill you showed how supportive you can be."
- Distinguishing opinion from fact: "In my view that's very unfair."
- Clarity: "I don't have a strong preference for either and will be genuinely happy whichever one we do."
- Brevity: "What do you think?"

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- Questions: Particularly open questions that invite others to give their views, ideas, needs or wants rather than just a “Yes/No” answer. “What, Why, When, How, Where, Which and Who.”
- Focus on what can be done: “I can see how difficult it is, we can take that into consideration and plan for it.”

Exercise

There are a number of situations in the following examples 1–9.

You will find three responses which we believe are typical of an aggressive, assertive and non-assertive reply in each situation.

Which option a) b) or c) would you chose? Which one do you think would be likely to:

- Achieve the better result?
- Is the assertive response?

Make a note of your answers and check against ours at the end of the exercise.

Example 1

Imagine you are watching a film at the cinema and some people behind you are chattering away and spoiling your enjoyment as well as others’.

- a) You could turn around and say: “Shut up! Can’t you see you’re spoiling everyone’s enjoyment?”
- b) You could say very loudly to your partner, so that those behind you chattering would hear: “I wish the people behind would speak quieter so we can enjoy the film.”
- c) You could say: “Excuse me, would you mind not talking, it makes it very difficult to listen to the film.”

(Continued)

Example 2

Your boss, at very short notice, asks you to complete a very important report that will mean you working throughout the weekend. You have already arranged to go away with family and friends for the weekend.

You could say:

- a) “You know I’d really like to help and usually I am more than happy to oblige – it’s only that this weekend isn’t very convenient . . . I mean it’s a bit short notice and I am not sure if I can really help that much – have you asked anyone else – what have they said?”
- b) “Lesley, I understand this is important – normally I am willing to help out in whatever way I can. This weekend I have arranged to go away with the family and won’t be able to work on this report. How else can I help?”
- c) “You’ve got quite a problem there but there is no way I am going to alter my plans for the weekend. I suggest you approach someone else.”

Example 3

It’s at the end of one of those long, hard weeks and you are looking forward to “me” and “us” time. You get a telephone call from a friend asking you over for a Saturday night meal and a bit of a celebration.

You could say:

- a) “Thanks for the invite, Nic, I really feel tired after a hard week and would appreciate time relaxing at home. Another time, but not this time.”
- b) “No, we’re doing something else so can’t come.”
- c) “Thanks very much for inviting us. I’m not sure, but I think we may be planning something else that evening, I’d have to check my diary because I have a feeling we have something arranged. Can I call you back later?”

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Example 4

A colleague, Sam, asks you for a lift home. It's inconvenient for you as you're late already and the drive will take you out of your way.

You could say:

- a) "You know I would if I could, only today is very difficult – I have got a lot of things to do and I said I would be home on time for once – so you see I am not sure I can help you. Maybe if you asked around someone else might be going in your direction – sorry, I hope you're not upset."
- b) "I am always going out of my way for you, but not this time."
- c) "Sam, I am already late and I want to get home on time today. Another time and I'd be more than willing but not today."

Example 5

Your partner has "volunteered" your help to a neighbour, not for the first time, without first asking you. You are very annoyed.

You could say:

- a) "So, you've done it again. You always pick on me to help just because I never complain or make a fuss. It's not right and I think it's very unfair – I suppose I'll have to help this time because now you have said I'll help and everyone will be upset if I don't turn up. It's really not considerate and takes advantage of my easy-going nature."
- b) "Please don't volunteer me in future without asking me. I feel very annoyed when you do. I think you need to speak to the neighbours and ask them to speak to me direct."
- c) "That's the last time you'll do that without asking me. You make me feel very angry that you just do it and don't bother to find out whether I will or not. Stop it!"

(Continued)

Example 6

Your manager gives you another chunk of work. You already have too much on, and the deadlines for this piece of work are very tight.

You could say:

- a) “It’s just too much, you can’t really expect me to handle all of this – not possible!”
- b) “Aubrey, I can’t do this work in the timescales you are suggesting. We need to talk further.”
- c) “Aubrey, thank you. Leave it with me and I will have a look at it and see what I can do.”

Example 7

You made a special effort to meet a friend at a particular time. Half an hour later they saunter up to you with a smile on their face.

You could say:

- a) “About time! What time do you think this is?”
- b) “I thought you were never coming – I thought I’d got the wrong time – the traffic I imagine has been bad.”
- c) “Jess, I thought we had agreed to meet at 1 o’clock. What happened?”

Example 8

You are ambitious and want to show everyone how competent you are, but the truth is you don’t know how to get started on a particular high profile job. Your boss notices your hesitancy and asks if everything is OK.

You could say:

- a) “I believe I can make a success of this project but I need help from you just to kick-start it.”
- b) “It’s quite a demanding project, very interesting with a number of different angles to it. I can see there are a number

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of different ways of starting it, each of them have their own 'pros' and 'cons' so it's a matter of which one is the best."

- c) "Absolutely no problem – I could do a dozen of these before breakfast."

Example 9

You are at a family gathering and you are enthusiastically defending the actions of a particular minority group when another family member says "that's typical of someone like you – you don't know what you are talking about."

You could say:

- a) Nothing, keep quiet and laugh along with everybody else.
- b) "What makes you so sure I don't?"
- c) "Oh yes I do, I certainly know a hell of a lot more than you!"

Answers 1–9

We are not suggesting that the responses would end or resolve the situation but the first response you make back can determine the "climate" or "tone" of the ensuing conversation. When you start well, you increase the chances of finishing well.

Example 1

a) aggressive; b) non-assertive; c) assertive

Example 2

a) non-assertive; b) assertive; c) aggressive

Example 3

a) assertive; b) aggressive; c) non-assertive

Example 4

a) non-assertive; b) aggressive; c) assertive

(Continued)

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Example 5

a) non-assertive; b) assertive; c) aggressive

Example 6

a) aggressive; b) assertive; c) non-assertive

Example 7

a) aggressive; b) non-assertive; c) assertive

Example 8

a) assertive; b) non-assertive; c) aggressive

Example 9

a) non-assertive; b) assertive; c) aggressive

All of us behave in all three ways in some situations, and in others we act more aggressively or non-assertively – which of course doesn't mean that we are only aggressive or non-assertive people. Assertion is about behaviour not people.

The aim of this book is to help you increase your assertion in more and more situations where it's appropriate for you to do so.

Now tally up your responses as a simple way of seeing what way you tend to behave most.

Summary

When we behave assertively we are putting our own needs on an equal basis with the needs of others. It is important for our own well-being to do this. This is also helpful for other people since we are not doing anyone a favour by letting them take us for granted or get whatever they want from us.

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When you can find a solution that maintains the dignity, respect and needs of others you are more likely to achieve a long lasting result that all parties can sign up to.

Of course this is not always the easy option, it's easier sometimes just to give in or put your foot down and stick to your guns no matter what.

If you want to be happier, healthier, more successful – in whatever terms you define success – you must take greater responsibility for yourself and behave in an inter-dependent way. That could inevitably mean changing your perspective about the world you live in but, more especially, how you perceive yourself.

