

Assertiveness

Being assertive is a state of mind that comes from being comfortable and confident with being your open, honest, determined and considerate self, in any given situation. This state allows you to explore and discuss possibilities and opportunities that would be missing from the discussion if you came into it assuming that either you or others present had the ‘correct’ answers.

Here are some tips to help you develop your assertiveness

Know what you want

There is a huge element of assertiveness that comes from carrying out purposeful activities. It’s very difficult to feel a strong sense of purpose if you don’t really know what you are trying to achieve. So if you haven’t already done it, stop, take some time out and work out:

- What do you want?
- What would be your ideal?
- What would be the minimum acceptable?
- What are your non-negotiables or deal breakers?
- What are your alternatives?

Once you have taken time to work this out for yourselves, not just for any given project, but for your whole career, or life, then obstacles and what you need to do about them, become much clearer.

Take responsibility for yourself and your outcomes

Many people spend their lives waiting for permission or hoping to be rescued. When things go wrong, they feel helpless. We all have the right to make our own decisions, set our own priorities and make our own mistakes, and we are all responsible and accountable for those at the end of the day. Whatever decisions you make in your life, only you have to live with the consequences of your actions or inaction. Recognising that can be very empowering.



Let others take responsibility for themselves

Of course we all have times in our lives when we have people who depend on us, like children, sick or elderly family and friends. That is part of life, and we do what we need to.

However, sometimes we underestimate the strength and resilience of those around us. We hold ourselves back because we think they can't handle or accommodate what we want. It's always worth remembering that they are also responsible for themselves, and you don't need you to protect them, show them the right way, or rescue them. That's their job.

Let go of being right

Accept that others don't have to agree with you, or even like what you are doing. Accept and work around differences of opinion and outlook. The world would be a boring place if we all agreed. What's important is that you can find a way to work with people so that you all get something you want from the situation. Don't think in terms of winners and losers – in assertive relationships, everyone is a winner.

Use 'I' statements rather than 'you'

We all have a much greater understanding about what is going on in our own world that we do in others. Therefore it is usually better to reference that when we are trying to draw others along with us.

If you use sentences like "I feel confused," "I believe this is really important," or "I think we can find a solution," it is difficult to argue with any of these and the conversation feels constructive.

When you use sentences like "you're confusing me," "you don't realise how much this matters to us," or "you need to think laterally about this problem to find a solution," – you can see how accusatory and blameful these sound, and how much less likely you are to get a constructive response.

Ask questions

On the subject of not knowing what is going on in someone else's situation, it is always a good strategy to ask questions. The more you understand about what someone else is trying to achieve, what their priorities are, and what their pressures are, the more able you will be to consider what you can be flexible about, that still lets you get what you need.

Stick to the point

When you are trying to find a solution with someone who is not being assertive, it is not uncommon for them to start bringing up other matters or past issues. It is important to stick to the point and not be deflected. You can acknowledge it then park it by saying something like: "Yes, I know that has been an issue, and we do need to talk about it, but can we deal with the issue we were discussing first please?"



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Manage your emotions

It can be really useful to express your emotions in a difficult situation. For example, if someone is being really awkward, and they are not responding to all your attempts to draw them into a more constructive mode, it can be appropriate to say: "I'm feeling frustrated, I believe we can find a way through this, but I'm not sure if that's what you would like?"

While it may be appropriate to comment on your emotional state, it is rarely useful to express that emotion by actually getting frustrated or angry. If you feel you are not going to be able to manage this, this would be a good time to say you'd like to give it some thought and reconvene the discussion.

Saying no

Most of us have times when we find it really hard to say no. We can be as assertive as you like in all sorts of situations but when a friend asks a favour, you crumble and say yes, even when you are desperate to say no.

A useful question to ask yourself when you are in this situation is: "When I say yes to X, what am I saying no to?" Often when you recognise what you have to give up to do this, it becomes easier to say no.

When aggression tips into bullying

Assertive behaviour is a great way to deal with people who are behaving aggressively. Very often, if you stay calm and focussed, you will calm and focus them.

When we talk about people being aggressive, we mean the kind of aggression that comes from people under pressure, or who are tired, stressed, frustrated etc. It is never OK for people to take out their anger or frustration on others, but as we are all human, we usually give people a little leeway.

However, it is not OK to feel afraid, attacked or that you are being bullied. If this is the case, it is important that you seek advice on how to deal with the situation – your union reps can help.

(* The FEU has launched a major campaign on dealing with bullying in the arts. For more info: <http://www.equity.org.uk/news-and-events/equity-news/creative-industries-are-hotspot-for-bullying/>)



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