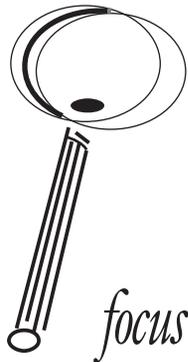*1*

Assertiveness—What It Is and Why It Matters

focus

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define passivity, assertiveness, and aggression.
- Explain how organizations that depend on employee empowerment and team-based work benefit from assertive employees.

What do we mean by assertiveness? Why should it matter to you and to your organization? How does it different from other modes of behavior and communication? This chapter defines what is meant by assertiveness and how it contrasts with passive and aggressive modes, which can reduce a person's workplace effectiveness and career success.

ASSERTIVENESS DEFINED

Assertiveness is a mode of personal behavior and communication characterized by a willingness to stand up for one's needs and interests in an open and direct way. The assertive person stands up for things that matter to him or her while at the same time respecting the things that matter to others. You've probably known people who live this definition: the boss who is open to your ideas, but who reserves the right to make final decisions; the co-worker who isn't afraid to speak up during meetings and to defend her viewpoints.

The Assertive Mode

People who function in the *assertive* mode look after their own needs and interests *and* recognize the needs and interests of others. They do this in the proper balance. Assertive people have a strong sense of self-esteem that allows them to protect their rights. They use open, direct, and honest communication with others. When they feel angry or upset, they confront the source of their anger immediately in an objective way. They make themselves visible in organizations and work collaboratively with others. They take responsibility for their decisions and behavior, and own up to their mistakes. They are calculated risk-takers.

Some assertive people were raised in affirmative, nurturing environments that provided role models for career success. Others did not have the advantage of positive childhoods or role models. They chose to overcome obstacles and become assertive, seeing that mode of behavior and communication as the best way to operate and to reach their goals.

Assertiveness is best understood in relation to two very different and opposing forms of personal behavior and communication: passivity and aggression.

Passivity

Passivity is an unassertive condition characterized by submissiveness and a fear or unwillingness to stand up for one's needs and interests. The passive person holds back from attempting to influence others, and instead allows others to influence him or her and disrespect his or her rights and boundaries. Because the passive person does not assert his or her views or argue on their behalf, his or her views are generally unclear or unknown to others, making dialogue and idea sharing difficult.

People who function in the passive (or non-assertive) mode often address the needs and concerns of others before they address their own. They will be quick to apologize, sometimes for things they didn't do. They're inclined to be quiet, soft-spoken, and even timid. They prefer to be invisible, rather than visible in organizations. They find it difficult to speak up in meetings or speak out about things that upset them. They have trouble accepting compliments. Rather than confronting a person or situation directly, they will hold their feelings inside or complain about the problem to someone else. When they feel angry, they're apt to suppress it.

Passive people find it hard to stand up for their rights and may allow people to violate their boundaries. These individuals may come from nurturing cultures that foster personal relationships over individual achievement. They may have spent their formative years in collectivist rather than in competitive situations. In general, more women than men are non-assertive, but that's been changing as women take on higher positions in the workplace—and new generations of women graduate from professional education programs.

What does a passive person sound like? Consider this example:

> Rachel was given a project I deserved to get. I have more experience and, I believe, am better qualified. I even suggested ideas on how to get the project going. Now Rachel will use my ideas and

get the credit. I'll admit, she lobbied Mr. Cullen pretty hard for the assignment. I didn't. I just didn't feel comfortable promoting myself like that.

Are you a passive person at work—either out of disinterest, fear, or lack of confidence? Do you know others who demonstrate the characteristics of passivity: a colleague who seldom speaks up during meetings or when decisions that affect him are being made; a subordinate who is reluctant to share her ideas with you?

Aggression

As a form of personal behavior or communication, *aggression* is the opposite of passivity. The aggressive person has no reluctance in imposing his or her views on others, or harming their interests in the pursuit of his or her own. Rather than collaborate with others, the aggressive person prefers to dominate, using threats, organizational authority, or bullying when necessary. He or she tends to micromanage the work of subordinates; things must be done his or her way. This person resists the influence of those seen as less powerful. In many cases, the aggressive person is unaware of his or her effect on others—this person thinks that he or she is simply being assertive. Consider this example:

> I just got a 360-degree performance review from my staff, boss, and peers. They said that I seem obsessed with micromanaging the department. My direct reports claim they have little input into decisions and that I look for someone to blame when things go wrong. They claim that I use my power to belittle them. Someone even used the word "toxic" to describe me. Toxic! Where did that come from? I don't see myself that way. I push my staff to perform at a peak level, as any good manager would. Even so, our numbers have been down for the last two quarters. My boss thinks there's a link between my style and those disappointing results.

People who function in the aggressive mode look after their own needs and interests first. The needs and interests of others are always secondary. Reminiscent of the old Soviet line that "What's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable," they stand up for their rights, but often at the expense of others.

Aggressive people have little trouble accepting compliments and may take credit for other peoples' work. They're often loud and visible in organizations. They have difficulty controlling their anger and may humiliate others in public. They violate other people's boundaries. Indirect forms of aggression, such as sarcasm, are used to put down or control others.

Some aggressive people come from achieving cultures that value individual success more than personal relationships. They may have spent their formative years in competitive rather than in nurturing social structures. In general, more men than women are aggressive, although that's changing, especially in highly competitive fields.

A Mixed Mode: Passive-Aggressive Behavior
A subset of the passive mode is worth mentioning here—*passive-aggressive* behavior. As we've discussed, people who are passive often have trouble confronting situations that upset them in open and direct ways. Instead, they are inclined to stifle their anger, and then complain about the person or situation to someone else—or unleash their anger down the road at someone who had nothing to do with the problem. In short, people who behave in a passive-aggressive way are passive when a troubling situation arises, but aggressive in venting their anger.

The attributes of passivity, assertiveness, and aggression are summarized in Exhibit 1-1.

You can probably see the superiority of the assertive mode of behavior and communication over passivity and aggression—both from a personal career and organizational effectiveness perspective. By being open to influence, assertive people are able to influence others in return. By defending their views and rights from infringement, assertive people maintain their position.

E | xhibit 1-1
The Passive-Assertive-Aggressive Continuum

Passivity	*Assertiveness*	*Aggression*
• Does not stand up for his/her interests and viewpoints, but submits to those of others • Does not share his/her views on what's important • Allows others to disrespect his/her opinions and rights • Does not try to influence others • Demonstrates a lack of confidence in dealing with more assertive people • More inclined to react than to act	• Speaks his/her mind • Makes his/her agenda clear • Not afraid to attempt to influence others • Respects the views and rights of others • Defends his/her views, rights, and boundaries against infringement • Controls anger • Uses aggressive behavior defensively • Is open to influence even as he/she seeks to influence others	• Aims for dominance over others • Imposes his/her views on others • Does not respect views or boundaries of others • Resistant to influence by others • May lose control of his/her anger • Uses threats to get his/her way • Is "in your face" • Aims to be highly visible

Aggressive co-workers recognize that assertive people must be taken seriously and approached with respect. When assertive people speak their mind on issues that matter to them and to the organization, they contribute to important decisions—thereby shaping the organization and influencing its direction. Higher management, peers, and subordinates alike see assertive individuals as people to be reckoned with—people with something to contribute. This often translates into greater career opportunities.

In contrast, passive people are like leaves floating in a stream, drawn along by the current, but making no impact on the direction or speed of the flow. They will have few opportunities for advancement. Aggressive people, on the other hand, may create problems for the organization and for those around them. While aggression may get them what they want in many cases, their behavior will prove costly in the long run. Co-workers whose views and insights are not respected will stop offering help. Peers whose rights are infringed will become enemies and may actively undermine the aggressors. When office bullies make serious mistakes or get into tough situations, no one wants to come to their aid.

ASSERTIVENESS AND THE NEW WORKPLACE

The typical workplace has been transformed—from a very controlled and stratified environment to one that is more open and dependent on the initiative of employees at all levels. This new workplace benefits from employee assertiveness.

Until a few decades ago, most organizations followed a command-and-control model in which information about customers and operations flowed upward through the chain of command to the top. Workers communicated with their supervisors. Those supervisors decided what information was relevant to pass up to the next level, and so on. Based on that information, decisions were made at the top level and then communicated downward through the same chain of command. The people at or near the top did all the thinking, deciding, and ordering; the people below followed their orders.

That command-and-control form of management has largely given way to a new world of employee empowerment and team-based work, both of which depend on the initiative and collaboration of employees at all levels. *Employee empowerment* refers to a management style that gives subordinates substantial discretion in how they accomplish their objectives. Managers explain what needs to be done, but leave it up to subordinates to find the best way to do it. These same managers look to their employees—who are much closer to the action—for the ideas and data on which their decisions will be made. Empowered employees are also given greater authority over company resources. For example, an employee who deals directly with customers may be authorized—without first checking with his or her boss—to give rebates, discounts, refunds, or other services in order to resolve problems or correct errors. Research suggests that empowerment contributes to greater employee motivation, productivity, and workplace satisfaction.

Team-based work is work performed in a coordinated manner by a set of employees, often individuals with very different skills. Many important customer accounts are now handled by teams that include, for example, a salesperson, a technical support specialist, and a customer service representative. These team members share information and ideas, and work together to get and keep the account. Likewise, new products are often developed by cross-functional teams that include engineers, marketing and manufacturing personnel, and financial specialists.

Passivity and aggression are destructive of both employee empowerment and team-based work. Employee empowerment depends on people taking charge and speaking up; assertiveness on behalf of operational improvement is required. And because empowered employees are held responsible for results, they must have the confidence and backbone to protect their ability to think and act. Teams also depend upon their success on the assertiveness of their members. Even when there is a formal leader, team members must have the confidence to share ideas and information, and make a strong case for new and better ways of doing the work. When team decisions are made, each member's voice matters. An aggressive, self-aggrandizing individual is toxic to a smoothly functioning team. There's no room for a person with a "drill sergeant" personality. Likewise, a passive team member is unlikely to contribute as much as he or she should.

？ Think About It . . .

Do you work in a team-based workplace? If you do, reflect for a moment on the behaviors and communication styles of both you and your teammates. Would any fit our description of passivity? If they do, briefly describe the impact of that passivity on the effective functioning of your team.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Does anyone on your team display aggressive behavior? Describe how that behavior affects the work of your team and its operational results.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Assertiveness as a Signaling Mechanism

The new workplace depends on people being able to articulate their concerns and respond appropriately to others. Do you communicate with an appropriate level of assertiveness?

Assertiveness has a situational component because we view some things as more important than others. We're naturally more willing to speak up for some things than for others; we let go of things that aren't worth the effort so that we can commit our full energy to those that are. In this sense, assertive communication sends a signal about what we value and consider important. For example, you may not care where your company holds its annual holiday party, but you *do* care about the company's formula for determining its annual bonus. Or perhaps it's the other way around. You may care greatly about the former because a more elaborate affair sends a message about how much the company values you and your team. In any event, you're the only one who has the right to decide these things. Being assertive on issues like these lets other people know where you stand and what you view as important. A passive person who never stands up or speaks out also sends a signal to others—often the wrong one: "Whatever you decide is okay with me," or "I don't care one way or the other." What signals do these statements send?

Assertiveness as Learned Behavior

Are you passive in your communications at work and frustrated by how it's holding you back? Do you have an habitually aggressive approach to dealing with others—an approach you'd like to change? If you answered "yes" to either question, there's good news. It's possible to change. You can learn to be assertive—whatever your experiences and emotional makeup—and no matter how anxious you might feel about giving it a try. You can change patterns of behavior that prevent you from becoming the assertive person you want to be. It's similar to the question, "Are leaders made or born?" Some people have natural leadership skills, while others must work to acquire those skills through learning and practice. And so it will be with your quest to become more assertive. The knowledge you gain in this course, combined with regular practice, will make assertive behavior and communication second nature to you. The first step toward that goal is self-understanding, the subject of the next chapter.

Exercise 1-1
Identify the Mode

Read the following scenario, then answer the questions.

The monthly sales meeting followed its usual pattern. Rolf, the district sales manager, chaired the meeting from his seat at the head of the conference table. He glared at his subordinates over the rim of his glasses and said, "Well, you have last month's results in front of you. They're pathetic." Then raising his voice, he yelled, "They stink!"

Except for Ellen, the five salespeople at the table and Rolf's secretary all avoided eye contact with their boss. They found it safer to look down at the report in front of them. Unlike Rolf, the report wouldn't bite them.

Exercise 1-1 continues on next page.

Exercise 1-1 continued from previous page.

Then Ellen spoke up. "Yes, we've had a bad month overall," she said directly to Rolf. Then diverting her gaze in turn to each of the others, she continued. "Each of us can certainly do better. And we have a number of opportunities to do so. Let me list them briefly, starting with the Acme account, where an order decision is pending."

Ellen's confidence in speaking about several opportunities to bring in sales relieved some of the tension and fear that Rolf had cast over the group. Nevertheless, the others remained silent, speaking only to answer questions put to them directly by Rolf or Ellen. When the meeting ended, Ellen stayed behind to talk with Rolf; the rest quickly exited the conference room and scurried back to their cubicles.

Later that day, Jim and Suzanne, two of Rolf's sales people, encountered each other in the coffee room. "That meeting was appalling. Rolf is such a jerk," Jim opined. "If I didn't need the commission income so badly, I'd let my sales go to pot next month just to make him look bad as sales manager. If we all did that, do you think they'd fire him?" This was dangerous talk. Suzanne finished pouring her coffee and quickly left the room.

1. Which of the characters in this scenario would you describe as aggressive? Explain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Which character demonstrated assertive behavior and communication? Explain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Which character displayed passive-aggressive behavior? Explain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. What passive behavior did you see in the scenario?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

recap

Assertiveness is a mode of personal behavior and communication characterized by a willingness to stand up for one's needs, concerns, and interests in an open and direct way. Assertiveness stands in contrast with two other modes: passivity and aggression. Passivity is an unassertive condition characterized by submissiveness, and a fear or unwillingness to stand up for one's needs and interests. The passive person holds back from attempting to influence others, and instead allows others to influence him or her and disrespect his or her rights and boundaries. On the opposite end of the behavior continuum is aggression. The aggressive person has no reluctance in imposing his or her views on others, or harming their interests in the pursuit of his or her own. This person prefers to dominate others than to collaborate with them. Threats, micromanaging, and bullying are used to get his or her way.

Because the assertive mode of behavior and communication is more compatible with workplaces that embrace employee empowerment and team-based work, it has career and organizational benefits that passivity and aggression lack. Assertiveness also acts as a signaling mechanism, telling others what the assertive person considers important. A person's natural mode of behavior and communication may be a product of his or her upbringing. However, that natural mode can be changed through learning and practice.

⁇ Review Questions

INSTRUCTIONS: Here is the first set of review questions in this course. Answering the questions following each chapter will give you a chance to check your comprehension of the concepts as they are presented and will reinforce your understanding of them.

As you can see below, the answer to each numbered question is printed to the side of the question. Before beginning, you should conceal the answers by placing a sheet of paper over the answers as you work down the page. Then read and answer each question. Compare your answers with those given. For any questions you answer incorrectly, make an effort to understand why the answer given is the correct one. You may find it helpful to turn back to the appropriate section of the chapter and review the material of which you were unsure. At any rate, be sure you understand all the review questions before going on to the next chapter.

1. Assertiveness can be a _____ for letting other people   1. (a)
know what you think is important.
(a) signaling mechanism
(b) subterfuge
(c) proxy
(d) trailing indicator

2. A person's behavior and communication mode: 2. (c)
(a) is an unalterable consequence of socialization.
(b) is unrelated to upbringing and experience.
(c) can be changed through learning and practice.
(d) has no career consequences.

3. Which of the following types of workplaces depends on employee   3. (d)
assertiveness for success?
(a) A hierarchical workplace
(b) A command-and-control workplace
(c) A stratified workplace
(d) A team-based workplace

4. You are in the aggressive mode if you: 4. (b)
(a) listen to others and smooth things over to keep the peace.
(b) aim to dominate others.
(c) are quick to admit your mistakes.
(d) give balanced compliments and constructive criticism.

5. Being assertive means: 5. (b)
(a) putting other people's needs and interests first.
(b) standing up for one's needs and interests in open and direct ways.
(c) always playing to win, no matter what the cost.
(d) combining features of both the passive and aggressive modes.