

Important assertiveness tips

The workplace is full of conflicting goals and priorities. Sometimes it's hard to have your say and be heard, or even to begin to navigate through the minefield of other people's demands and deadlines. As much as we strive to have every individual working towards the same company goals, there will always be smaller scale disagreements about what is the best course of action. There are personality differences between people – some more easily able to put forth a point of view and convince others. There are differences in rank, which further complicates the exchange of opinions and suggestions. These suggestions might just help you have your say, and avoid unnecessary pain in conflict situations:

1. Small things matter

Most large disagreements start off as a minor dispute, a seemingly insignificant disparities of opinion. It's easy to think to yourself "I don't really agree with him/her, but it's no big deal so I'll let it go". But one little allowance leads to another; so too does the habit of not providing your opinion.

Setting boundaries in your life, whether it be in your personal life or your working life, is important. If someone passes off a few minor tasks to you that will only take a few minutes – it's important that you express your position, whatever it may be. You might say, "Alright, but you're lucky that I've got a bit of spare time, next time I won't be able to help you" or you may have to say, "I'm sorry – I'd love to help but I just have too much of my own work here, and the deadline is much more important". Or "let's go through this and get a realistic estimate of how long it will take, then decide how it can best be done given all our priorities."

Practicing this type of assertiveness with the smaller issues will make it much easier when you have cases of more pressing concern that you need to express yourself. Assertiveness is a habit – start with small steps!

2. Conflict is a healthy thing

Those who are described as not being assertive are often trying to avoid conflict. They see the issue as not worth any emotional exchange. Sometimes they are scared of the repercussions that may result from pushing their point. This fear may be a concern that the working environment will be disrupted, a fear that they may be alienating co-workers or even that a boss may think less of them. However this approach, which is based on fear, is ignoring the benefits of conflict. It may sound strange but conflict is a very important part of healthy relationships, particularly working relationships. Without conflict we travel unquestioningly along the path we're on. Conflict, or a "difference in opinion" is the way in which we raise our hand to present another point of view, to question the path we're on. A good manager respects the team member that questions the current plan as it gives the manager a chance to consider other options, or to reinforce the reasons behind the current approach.

Another problem with approaching assertiveness with a fear mindset is that we focus on the immediate reaction rather than the long-term result. If you tell someone that they are acting in an unacceptable manner you can expect a negative short-term reaction, but over time you will see that the boundary has been reset and that you have influenced the behaviour of those around you.

The idea that avoiding conflict is an easy way out is very short sighted. While you may be avoiding a conflict right now, you are actually encouraging prolonged dissatisfaction and stress within yourself. It can be hard work holding onto frustrations and opinions without airing them at all. Even worse – if we don't express ourselves at the right time then we may just tip over the edge in an emotive explosion at some point, venting aggressively and disproportionately at someone.

Life is easier when you speak your mind!

3. Creating an assertiveness culture

We can control whether we are assertive and by choosing to be so we help create a culture of assertiveness. But what about the people around you? What are you doing to facilitate open and frank discussions in your team? If you see an argument building do you step in to assist? The culture of the workplace is built on how the entire team acts, and everyone within the team has a right to speak out, and everyone also has the responsibility to make sure they do their utmost to allow everyone else to speak out.

4. Assertiveness does not equal aggression

The words aggressive and assertive seem to be used interchangeably but there is an important distinction. Aggression is an emotive act, its aim is to hurt, intimidate or embarrass the person it is aimed at. This kind of behaviour in the workplace is toxic. If it is presented to someone who is also aggressive then an unhealthy conflict escalation will arise. If it is directed at someone who is more reserved then that person will most likely lose confidence and it will affect future interactions. If the aggression continues it becomes bullying.

Assertiveness is about presenting opinions or marking boundaries in a firm and fair way, based on clear discussion. The aim should be to change the behaviour for a better working outcome rather than trying to hurt the other person. "I think we should reconsider our approach" is an assertive comment whereas, "You'd have to be an idiot to keep doing this" is an aggressive one.

Think about some of your interactions over the last few days. Have you been assertive? Aggressive? Perhaps you're on the other end of the scale and you've been too reserved?