

# stand up for yourself!



■ My experience as a manager and as a training consultant has revealed that most of us find two things really difficult to do in a work environment: to say no to a request for help and to stand up for ourselves when someone else is being unfair.

Why is this? It could be because we are professional services suppliers and so we see our role as being available to help and support others. It could be because we genuinely want to help the person who has asked for our assistance. It could simply be because we are worried about how the other person will react if we tell them what we really think.

The purposes of this article are: to encourage you to think about how you behave when faced with a difficult situation, to help you consider why you behave that way and to give you a model to use if you want to try behaving more assertively.

#### passive, assertive or aggressive?

When faced with a difficult situation, there are broadly three types of behaviour that we can adopt: passive, assertive or aggressive. Passive behaviour indicates that you feel less worthy than the other person. It subjugates your wants and needs to those of the other person. The key message you send is 'You're OK. I'm not OK.'

Aggressive behaviour indicates that you don't care about the other person at all. It puts your needs well ahead of the other person's. You are trampling on their feelings. The key message you send is 'I'm OK. You're not OK.'

Assertive behaviour comes between these two. It indicates that you are keen to protect your own rights and consider those of the other person if appropriate. The key message you send is 'I'm OK. You're OK.'

#### the story so far

Remember a time at work when someone was behaving in a way you found unreasonable. What did you do, say and feel? Tick the phrases in the table on the right that reflect what happened.

If the majority of ticks are on the left-hand side then you behaved in a passive manner. If

the majority of ticks are on the right-hand side then you behaved in an aggressive manner. It's worth reflecting further on why you behaved that way. If you behaved passively, it might be because you were:

- worried about upsetting or offending the person
- nervous about possible recriminations
- unsure of how to challenge what was happening.

Passive behaviour hides what you think and feel from the other person. The main consequence of this is usually to encourage the other person to continue to behave in an unreasonable manner. After all, why should they change? They are getting what they want from the situation. If you behaved aggressively, it might be because you were:

- irritated by the person's lack of interest in your problems
- frustrated by the person's ignorance of the true picture
- acting defensively to protect your position.

Aggressive behaviour usually escalates a problem and rarely resolves it. The main consequences of this are that your reputation will be tarnished and your relationship with the other person will be damaged. Understanding why you behaved in a particular way is a first step towards changing your behaviour next time.

#### finding the motivation to change

If you want to change the way that you behave you need to think about the benefits of behaving differently, neither passively or aggressively. Benefits that will have a direct impact on you include:

- increasing your self-esteem by standing up for yourself
- not wasting time on destructive emotions like frustration, guilt or resentment
- protecting your own time so that you feel less stressed
- contributing to an honest, friendly and supportive working environment.

## it takes determination to put assertiveness techniques into practice but the winning results make it worthwhile, writes Judi Geisler

Benefits that come from being perceived differently by others:

- your line manager will see that you have a clear sense of purpose and can remain focused under pressure
- your staff will see you demonstrate leadership qualities which affect them, such as setting clear expectations of them and showing a genuine desire to support them
- your clients will appreciate that you are specific and honest about what they will get from you
- your reputation for honesty and fairness will grow and will affect the attitude of people around you.

Once you are convinced that there are worthwhile benefits from changing your behaviour the final part is to work on how to change.

### using the assertiveness model

Here is a structured approach. Like any skill it needs practice and may feel quite awkward at first but it is definitely worth persevering with. Use sentences that begin with 'I' rather than 'You' in each step as this avoids appearing confrontational or accusatory.

- step 1 – explain the problem clearly from your perspective. When appropriate, empathise with the other person.
- step 2 – express honestly what you think and feel about the situation.
- step 3 – explain what you need the other person to do and what outcome you require.

Let's work through an example. You are trying to explain an important point in a meeting and a more senior manager, Steve, keeps interrupting you.

### step 1

"Steve, I understand that you feel strongly about this issue." Try not to use the word 'but' or 'however' at this point as it tends to negate any empathy that you have expressed for the other person's position.

### step 2

"I'm finding it difficult to get my point across as you keep jumping in." Try to find a word to express how you are feeling. The other person may be unaware of the impact of their behaviour on you unless you explain it to them.

### step 3

"I'd appreciate it if I could explain my point fully without being interrupted and then everyone can consider the alternative actions we could take." Try to use a positive statement rather than ask a question at this stage.

### technique

Using an assertive style means that the words you use are supported by your body language and your tone of voice. It would be very easy to deliver the lines above in a way that sounded sarcastic and would therefore be aggressive.

If the other person does not seem to be listening to you then you should adopt the broken record technique and run through the three steps again.

Being assertive isn't an easy style to use if you have spent years doing something else but it is worth the effort. Just think about it as behaving in a way that is more honest, both to yourself and to the other person. The benefits for both of you can be huge. Good luck. ■

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Looked away	Stared hard at the person
Spoke softly	Raised your voice
Said yes when you meant no	Used sarcasm
Kept quiet when you had wanted to speak	Interrupted and insisted on having your say
Felt resentful	Felt angry

