

Messenger

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What's Your Response?

As we continue our look at obtaining effective people skills, let's focus our attention on assertion. When you first hear the term 'assertion', some negative connotations come to mind. You may think of assertive people as bossy, pushy, and annoying. In this month's article, we'll look at how assertion during a conversation isn't bad, as long as it's done properly.

There are three ways a person responds to a conversation: submissively, aggressively, and assertively.

Submissive

A submissive person puts other's opinions before her own. While she may tell you her opinion, she often ends it with "... but do whatever your want" or "... but it doesn't really matter to me." By tagging that to the end, she is ensuring that her thoughts won't be taken seriously. Being submissive may look attractive to those who don't like confrontation or who don't want to take the responsibility for a decision. However, being the one who always goes with the flow does have its drawbacks. It can be frustrating over time to never have your opinions matter. You may become resentful and bitter toward those to whom you've submitted.

Aggressive

An aggressive person gives his opinion with no regard to anyone else. He's rude, sarcastic, and abusive. He tends to dominate the conversation

and forces his view on everyone else. He seems to always get his way and is in control of the situation. He uses his power and charisma to get what he wants. While this may seem alluring, the potential "consequences are numerous. They include fear, loss of control, guilt, alienation from people, and ill health" just to name a few. A person may become fearful of losing control, so he tries to take even more. He may also lose respect from those around him.



Assertive

An assertive person uses communication to get her point across. She has learned how to do this without dominating the conversation. By keeping an even temper and sticking to her guns, others will listen and respect what she has to say. An assertive person is often confident in herself without coming across as overbearing. She has less fear and anxiety in situations. While being assertive doesn't guarantee that you'll get your way, it is the preferred method.

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***Too often we . . . enjoy the comfort of
opinion without the discomfort of thought.***

***John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)
35th US President***

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Most of us are naturally submissive or aggressive, so it takes a lot of work to move to be more assertive.

Dr. Bolton has developed a six-step assertion process that I'd like to share with you.

Preparation

Preparing what you want to say is often the difference between success and failure. Writing the message down will allow you to think about what you want to say and how it will come across. Is your message appropriate? Does it convey everything you want to say in a concise manner? You should also think about where you should have the conversation and when it will be. Avoid public places.

Sending the message

Once you have the message prepared, it's time to deliver it. You may want to avoid the beginning small talk and get right down to business. Small talk can unintentionally diminish the importance of the meeting. No matter how much you have planned what you will say, you still must be careful in its delivery. You can say the exact same words, but they can come across submissive, aggressive, or assertive. For example, a co-worker is 45 minutes late for a meeting with no phone call or explanation for the delay. Once she arrives, you say, "When we . . . uh . . . set our meeting for 3:30 and you come at . . . uh . . . 4:15 I feel frustrated because we won't have time to cover everything before the work day is over." Which response does this sound like? Submission? Yep, that's right. Go through your head saying these same words (without the uh's) in an aggressive and assertive style. Can you tell the difference?

Silence

Once you have finished your message, **stop!** Being silent "allows the other to think about what you said or speak whatever is on her mind." It's very likely that the first response is going to be defensive, and that's fine. Let her vent for a little bit. Once this passes, you can normally work together to find an acceptable solution.

Taking the situation mentioned above, once you've said your message assertively, she will more than likely start giving excuses for the delay.



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Example is contagious behavior.

Charles Reade (1814-1884)
Novelist and dramatist

The Mathis Group's Messenger

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Reflective listening to the other's defensive response

During the defensive response, shift gears and put the listening skills we covered last month to work. Actively listen to what she is saying. During this conversation, you may realize that she was late for your meeting because her supervisor came into her office right as she was headed out the door and wanted an unscheduled meeting. She wasn't able to call and came to your office as soon as the supervisor left. If you had reacted aggressively when she first walked in, your whole meeting would've been shot. You would have immediately made you both upset. Once you found out the reason for the tardiness, you can then move forward and reschedule the meeting if needed.

Recycling

Oftentimes, you will have to repeat steps 2 through 4 multiple times. After your first message attempt, the other person was probably defensive enough that he didn't "understand the situation from your point of view." Send the identical message again and follow-up with a period of silence. You may receive a defensive response again, but it will be less than before. Keep repeating this process until you are able to come to a solution. This will require persistence on your part. There will be times when you'll have to recycle the steps so many times, that you will be tempted to just throw in the towel and give in. *Don't give in!* More often than not, your persistence will not be in vain.

Focusing on a solution



Dr. Bolton goes on to say that "one of the reasons assertion messages work so well is that they do not back the other person into a corner." Giving an assertive message doesn't always mean that you have the perfect answer for the situation.

Allow the other person time to think of a solution that meets his needs as well. Be flexible during this, but make sure that it meets your needs as well. This dialogue may need to go back and forth a few times to iron everything out. Once the solution has been reached, paraphrase it back to him to ensure that you're both on the same page. Before the meeting is over, tell him "Thanks" for his work in this. This simple courtesy can go a long way, especially if he's not completely happy about the solution. Finally, arrange a follow-up meeting to see if the solution is working or if adjustments need to be made.

Adapted from *People Skills* by Robert Bolton, Ph.D.



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