

ASSERTIVENESS - SPEAKING UP IN THE LAB AND IN LIFE

Assertiveness is an honest and appropriate expression of your feelings, thoughts, wants and needs. Acting in an assertive way helps you to stand up for your rights. It is a way to communicate what you believe, what you want and need, and what is important to you.

YOUR RIGHTS

You have both a right to be assertive and a choice about when to be assertive.

In this handout we assume that you have the right to

- be treated with respect and dignity,
- have and express your own feelings and opinions even if they differ from those of others,
- be listened to and taken seriously,
- ask for help if you need it,
- ask questions when you're confused, and
- express anger, disappointment, and annoyance appropriately.

LEARNING TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE

Often people associate the concept of assertiveness with standing up for your rights when you feel that someone has taken advantage of you in a negative way. However, it is also useful to consider that being more assertive can also help you to move ahead in a positive way toward your goals.

Assertiveness can help you

- speak up in lab meetings when you want to,
- say "no" when you don't want to do something, or
- express positive goals and request the resources required to make them happen.

Will you get what you want?

Communicating assertively does not guarantee that you will get what you want or need. However, you will have the satisfaction of expressing yourself in a positive, self-advocating way. You will probably feel better about yourself and your communication with others. And you will increase the probability of getting what you need or want, if you can express what that is.

AGGRESSIVE, ASSERTIVE and NON-ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

Aggressive behavior often means standing up for yourself in ways that violate the rights of others. Aggressive behavior can be demanding, hostile, and blaming.

Non-Assertive behavior is often submissive, inhibited, and self-denying.

Assertive behavior involves expressing your wants, needs, thoughts and/or feelings while respecting the rights of others.

What keeps people from speaking up in an assertive way?

- Not being clear about what they want and need
- Fear of displeasing others and of not being liked
- Not believing they have the right to be assertive
- Lacking the skills to effectively express what they want to express

Thoughts and Behavior

Our thoughts affect our behavior. It is important to develop a value and belief system that allows you to assert yourself. Some people have a difficult time believing that assertiveness is good for them. Some of these beliefs relate to cultural and family values and experiences. If you believe that assertiveness is a right that you have, you can learn to communicate in a more assertive way.

FIVE ASSERTIVE TECHNIQUES *

1. I- STATEMENTS

I-Statements can help you focus on and be clear about your own thoughts and feelings and what it is that you want and need. They may also involve an acknowledgement of the thoughts/feelings/goals of the other person. The real focus in I-statements is on the "I feel," "I want", "I think" part of the statement. Identifying your thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants related to a situation will help you to keep from blaming someone else or getting caught up in the emotion of the moment.

I-statements are statements that express our thoughts and/or feelings and wants/needs.

EXAMPLE 1:

"I understand that you don't think I need a vacation. However, I do need a vacation (to spend with my family, etc) I have been working very hard on ...and I would like to take vacation on (specific dates)"

EXAMPLE 2:

"When you didn't clean up your lab space like you said you would, it makes things more disorganized for everyone. I am disappointed with you. Next time, I'd like you to follow through when you agree to clean up each afternoon."

EXAMPLE 3:

"I think I have enough results to present at the XYZ Society meeting in July in Arizona. I think this would really help me move ahead toward my goal of working in academia. Would the lab be able to support my attendance at this meeting?"

Some formulas for I-Statements

Often a 3-part statement is helpful.

For a change in behavior:

- When you do . . . (describe the behavior).
- The effects are . . .(describe how the behavior concretely affects you, how you feel, what you think). . .
- I'd prefer . . . (describe what you want).

For other requests:

- I would like to:... (your goal)
- I know that you are (busy, skeptical, concerned, etc....).. (acknowledge the other person's situation and/or feelings)
- It would help me if you would ...(what you want the other person to do)

2. BROKEN RECORD – persistence

Mimicking a broken record, that is, repeating your request several times is useful to help make sure that your message is considered to be important. It is important to use some of the same words over again in various communications (e-mail, telephone, and in-person) to reinforce your message.

EXAMPLE.

After you have requested that a paper, manuscript, data etc be reviewed and have not had a response, "I understand that you are very busy with.... I value your input and I believe that it is very important to have your comments on my manuscript in the near future so that I can move ahead to finish my dissertation, publication etc".

3. FOGGING – responding in a non-defensive way

When someone criticizes you, he/she may expect you to disagree, to resist what they are saying, and to respond in a defensive way. Fogging is an unexpected response. It is a way of putting critical comments in perspective and still respecting your point of view. You can agree with some part of what was said without being defensive.

The word 'yes' is effective with this technique.

EXAMPLE 1:

Someone says 'Well that was a poor presentation you gave at lab meeting.' You might say, 'Yes, I can see that I have some areas that could be improved.' Or "Yes, I can see that you think that it wasn't a very good presentation "

You are not agreeing that the entire presentation was poor, only that you can see that the other person believes that it was not very good.

EXAMPLE 2:

A supervisor says, "You haven't been around the lab much; you need to spend more time here." You might say, "Yes, I can see how it might seem that I haven't been in the lab much. However, I have been putting in a lot of time on the weekends and at night when you are not here."

You are acknowledging the supervisor's perspective while assertively expressing your view of the situation.

4. NEGATIVE INQUIRY – prompting criticism

If you can agree with some area of criticism, you may be able to understand what is leading to the criticism. Your response can also allow you to direct the focus of the criticism.

EXAMPLE:

Someone says ‘Well that was a poor presentation you gave at lab meeting.’ You could ask for what can be improved and say, “Actually I could have been clearer. I could improve the slides or handle questions better. What do you think could be improved? The graphics or the discussion?”

5. NEGATIVE ASSERTION - acknowledging weaknesses or mistakes

We all have areas where we can improve or gain more skill. Also, people do make mistakes. We can acknowledge our mistakes and weaknesses without being self-demeaning. Negative assertion can help you to accept your mistakes and faults without having to agree with hostile criticism. This approach may also allow you to view your weaknesses or mistakes without feeling defensive and anxious.

EXAMPLE:

“You didn’t do too well today with ...” “You’re right; I didn’t handle that very well, did I?”

HOW TO SAY WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

Your posture, voice tone, and eye contact can help you be more effective in communication.

- Maintain direct eye contact.
- Keep your posture open and relaxed.
- Be sure your facial expression agrees with the message, e.g., when conveying disappointment or distress, don’t laugh.
- Keep a level, well-modulated tone of voice.
- Choose an appropriate time and place.

LOOK FOR SUPPORT

When trying a new behavior like assertiveness it is important to look for support. Choose to talk with people in your life who you believe will support you in a positive way. They could include lab colleagues, your PI, Training Director, Scientific Director, Branch Chief, former college or university advisors, friends and family, and OITE staff and counselors.

See below about counseling and other resources available through OITE and NIH, including the offices of the Ombudsman and the Employee Assistance Program.

CHOOSING TO BE ASSERTIVE

Ask yourself some questions to assess

- Will it make a difference?
- What really happened here?
- How much does it matter?
- Am I looking for a specific outcome?
- Do I know what I want
- What is the probability of getting what I want?
- What are my options?

When to be assertive

- If the situation is complicated and you have a lot of feelings about it, it may be best to plan a meeting in the future with the person(s) involved.
- Alternatively, meeting at the moment may be best depending on the situation.
- Don't make it a big deal.
- Don't wait too long.
- Select an appropriate time to be assertive; if the conversation could be sensitive, chose a private meeting time and place.

PRACTICE

To become more skilled in communicating assertively it is important to practice. You won't learn how to become a more assertive person just by reading one book or attending one workshop. You can practice with your friends and family. Let them know what you are doing first! Ask for help/feedback on how you're doing.

Start gradually

In the beginning, don't try changing your behavior in the most complex or difficult situations. Practice first in the least risky ones.

Some examples:

- Returning spoiled food to a store for a refund
- Asking your kids/partner/roommate to empty the dishwasher or mow the lawn
- Giving a positive comment about a lab talk to a colleague "I liked your presentation, especially ..."

If you start small to enhance your chances of success, you will experience how it feels to express yourself assertively and it will be easier to move on to more challenging situations.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS ABOUT COMMUNICATING ASSERTIVELY

- It is important to consider what you want and what you need.
- No one can read your mind – focus on expressing and communicating what is important to you at work and in life.
- Sometimes you won't get what you want or need. Consider how you will you cope? What other options do you have? How flexible can you be?

- Some situations may be insurmountable or unhealthy and you just won't be able to or won't choose to try to change them. You may want to seriously consider another path, lab, organization, or career.
- It is important to seek help. Life is not perfect and can be difficult. There are many resources and people to help you.

FOLLOW-UP RESOURCES and SUPPORT

Book

Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in your Life and Relationships, by Robert E. Alberti & Michael Emmons (San Luis Obispo, Impact Publishers, 2008).

OITE Counselors

If you want to talk about assertiveness with a counselor in OITE, please go to:
https://www.training.nih.gov/career_services/appointments

OITE Workshops and Programs

<https://www.training.nih.gov/events/upcoming>

NIH Employee Assistance Program

Provides help for employees and trainees who are dealing with stressful situations that may be affecting their work

<http://www.ors.od.nih.gov/sr/dohs/eap/Pages/index.aspx>
301-496-3164

NIH Office of the Ombudsman

The Office of the Ombudsman is available to employees and staff at every level of the NIH to address workplace conflict.

<http://ombudsman.nih.gov/>
301-594-7231

* 5 assertive techniques adapted from Manuel J. Smith, When I Say No I Feel Guilty, 1975