

Assertive or Aggressive?

Do you shy away from addressing a person or situation that frustrates you because you're afraid you'll come across too harshly? Do you sometimes later regret what was said to a colleague in anger? You're not alone. When things get tense, it can be difficult to choose the most effective behavior. We worry that if we come across too strongly we'll offend; too softly and we'll lose ground on an important point. Combined with strong emotions of the moment, we risk choosing less-than-effective behaviors for solving problems.

Success in dealing with frustrating circumstances means acting assertively, not aggressively. So how do you know the difference?

Before you act, identify your motivation



Aggressive behavior is demanding, angry and self-focused. If your impulse is to hurt another's feelings because they hurt yours, withhold information because you're angry, or show others you have control, you're behaving aggressively. Aggression is a response to a perceived attack on our

sense of self: we want to defend our feelings, our status, our ideas or our work. The primary focus when we're thinking aggressively is to get our point across (rather than solve a problem). It is a pressing need to be "right." We might yell, say negative things to others, or act with hostility to those around us. While an aggressive mindset or behavior can be a natural reaction, it is detrimental to relationships and to the workplace. It is important to override aggressive impulses by focusing on a new goal: productive problem-solving.

Assertive behavior is rooted in a desire to solve a specific problem. It is focused on engaging others to create a more positive experience or solution, sharing thoughts to help others (even when those thoughts may be difficult), and communicating with others openly and honestly. Assertive behavior is direct and solution-focused. It requires us to be patient with ourselves and others. If your desire is to diligently discuss ideas and challenges, improve a relationship or workplace, and help others understand the tools, resources or assistance you need to succeed, you are in an assertive frame of mind. An assertive mindset is key to successful problem-solving.

Before responding to a challenging situation, ask yourself: am I motivated by a sincere desire to solve a problem, to build the environment I need to succeed, and to help others? When you can say yes, you're ready to act assertively.

Know what assertiveness looks like

Aggressive behavior is reactive behavior. Assertive behavior, on the other hand, is proactive. It is successful because it is independent of the other person's reaction. Assertiveness is calm, honest and direct. While you may feel



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"Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret."

— Ambrose Bierce



strong emotions, assertive people respect and address the feelings of others as well. When we're being assertive, we use language and behaviors we believe are shared by the other person in an effort to reach understanding. Assertive behavior respects the position, thoughts and efforts of others.

Practice assertive behaviors

The next time you find yourself dealing with a difficult situation, notice your behavior. What is your body language saying? Are you standing with your arms crossed, or open? Are you making eye contact? Do your words sound harsh, or firm but kind? Most importantly, are you using "I" statements? "I" statements let others know how you feel or what you need by stating your perspective and accountability only. For example, "you make me fail when you don't tell me what I need to know," places the responsibility on the other person. Instead, an assertive statement is, "I am frustrated when I don't have the information I need, because I really want to succeed." It states the impact of the situation without placing blame. It allows the other person to understand your perspective without feeling attacked.

Still feeling aggressive? Take a few moments

Often, we want to respond in the moment, to address something head-on. But this can be detrimental if not handled appropriately. Our biological response to anger – and the adrenaline it releases – lasts approximately 90 seconds. We risk our emotions overriding our thoughts



during this time. The next time you notice your emotions taking over, try these things:

- count to ten
- take a walk
- breathe deeply
- pause for a few moments
- ask yourself what your motivation is
- visualize the outcome you want

Once you've had time to pause, allow the emotional reaction to pass, and to think about what you want to gain from your response, you will be much better prepared to respond appropriately and effectively.

The choice to behave assertively does not always come easily to us. But you'll find that it is the only way to build trustworthy relationships with others. When you clearly state what you need, and respect what others need in return, you establish the relationships necessary to work productively. You'll find you are effective – and in turn, successful.

Parenting Consultation

Caregivers of children can receive telephonic consultation with a team of consultants whose expertise includes child development, behavior modification, speech-language, sensory processing, education (both special and gifted), and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) processes. The parenting consultants provide information and guidance in understanding typical and atypical development and suggest strategies and resources to address those concerns.



Examples of what our team of professionals can provide include:

- Information on discipline, sleep issues, reinforcement strategies, potty training and temper tantrums
- Guidance in determining if overall behavior is typical for the child's age and environment
- Assistance in identifying the potential cause(s) of behavior patterns
- Simple, positive parenting strategies that really work
- Information on developmental milestones such as language development, motor skills, sensory perception, and feeding skills
- Guidance and resources to determine when school age children may need an Individualized Education Plan
- Assistance in advocating for special or gifted services for children in daycare and school settings

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